

MICHELLE HANDELMAN

**THESE UNRULY AND
UNGOVERNABLE SELVES**

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DARK MATTER

Emily Goretski

As your vision adjusts to the enveloping blackness of the gallery, a haunting image of two eyes slowly materializes on the wall in front of you. After squinting, you recognize the eyes as human. But they are static, unblinking, and eerily artificial. The longer you stare, the more you question your intuition. Uncertainty and discomfort escalate until you're jolted by the realization that the dark pupils staring back at you are painted onto the eyelids of the stranger, possibly postmortem.

Soft, billowy eyelashes frame the colorless irises, dominating the face with their dramatic artifice and exaggerated scale. Your body tenses with uneasiness, but curiosity takes over. What can they see through closed eyes? Is this supernatural image a symbol of self-reflection, a representation of the transcendent third eye, or are we being called to face

death itself? The mysterious visage acts as a threshold—a doorway leading into Michelle Handelman's world.

The exhibition *Michelle Handelman: These Unruly and Ungovernable Selves* includes *Candyland* (2000) and *Irma Vep, The Last Breath* (2013), in addition to a virtual presentation of *The Pandemic Series*, the artist's new video trilogy comprised of *These Unruly and Ungovernable Selves* (2020), *Solitude is an Artifact of the Struggle Against Oppression* (2020), and *Claiming the Liminal Space* (2021). Taken together, this exhibition touches on themes central to Handelman's artistic practice and invites viewers to engage in a shared discourse about identity, sexuality, morality, discomfort, and death. The following compilation of essays sheds light on the ways in which Handelman, through her art, addresses these often avoided



and otherwise stigmatized topics.

The themes addressed in this publication are inspired by Michelle Handelman, a New York-based artist whose work in photography, video, and live performance spans several decades. Expertly

Irma Vep, The Last Breath (production still) 2013/2015, HD video installation with sound, 33:13 min

cover and previous spread, *Irma Vep, The Last Breath* (production still) 2013/2015, HD video installation with sound, 33:13 min



Irma Vep, The Last Breath (production still) 2013/2015, HD video installation with sound, 33:13 min, photograph by Laure Leber

combining striking visuals with emotionally resonant characters, Handelman is known for creating confrontational art that pushes against the boundaries of gender, race, and sexuality. Writing about her practice in *Filmmaker Magazine*, she stated her artistic intention is to deal with “transgressive material on the margins of social acceptability.” Indeed, her videos command attention and catalyze feelings of intrigue, discomfort, and deep reflection. The subjects exemplified in her work are paramount as tools for understanding and challenging

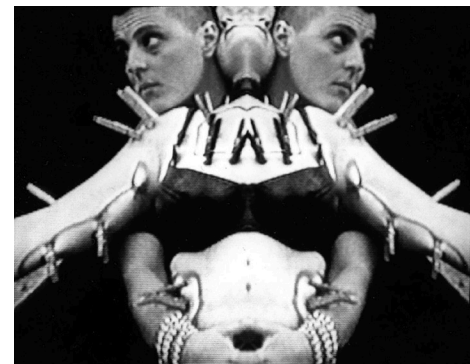
the world around us and the human condition.

Handelman employs a creative use of various mediums to create confrontational art that pushes against the boundaries of gender, race, and sexuality. Her style is characterized by lush colors, sensual imagery, and futuristic and fetish elements, all of which come together to articulate a radically feminist body of work. Her pieces explore ways of looking at the forbidden, revealing the dark and subconscious layers of outsider agency, and challenging societal norms and individual comfort. Functioning as an expression of the artist herself, Handelman’s work has evolved in concert with her own creative progressions. Her themes, nevertheless, have remained consistent. In a *Filmmaker Magazine* article, Handelman noted, “Over the years, my work has shifted from single-channel experimental films, to documentary, to performance, to large-scale multichannel installations, but the content remains the same—exploring

the complicated terrain of sexuality and queerness.” Handelman has also maintained a collaborative practice throughout her career, working closely with other creatives to provide a platform that encourages freedom of expression and storytelling on countless levels. She has worked with such queer legends as Zackary Drucker, Mother Flawless Sabrina, John Kelly, Shannon Funchess, and Viva Ruiz.

HUSTLERS OF THE WORLD EARLY WORK

Handelman’s career began in San Francisco, where she set the tone for her early works with the documentary *BloodSisters: Leather, Dykes and Sadoomasochism* (1995). This piece amplified the ostracized but dynamic lesbian BDSM and leather scene in San Francisco in the mid-1990’s. The film gave an overview of relevant terminology and followed self-identifying leatherdykes as they marched in the 1993 March on Washington for



BloodSisters: Leather, Dykes and Sadoomasochism (production still) 1995, Hi-8 video, 69:00 minutes

Lesbian, Gay and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation, the San Francisco International Ms. Leather Pageant, and the New York City Pride March. The piece served as an alternative archive that could be used to raise awareness and spark more complex conversations about private and public elements of sexuality, trans identity, and gender fluidity. In *Filmmaker Magazine*, Handelman said, “It represented a fierce group of feminists whose stories were being presented on screen for the first time, and for that reason, it was important.” *Bloodsisters* was an influential piece that

sparked controversy and uncovered the captivating history and reality of a largely misunderstood community. The film brought her attention, and Handelman further describes that she found herself on the receiving end of journalists' questions like, "What are you? What should I call you? Are you an artist, a filmmaker, or a writer? Do you make documentary or experimental? I need a label to give to my editor!" But Handelman identified as a poly-hyphenate, an outsider, a multidisciplinary artist, filmmaker and writer who would not be confined to one label, one method, and so many rules. Her work truly defies categorization; she continues, "I was fighting for representation, having to consistently define who I was." *Bloodsisters* is a particularly important film to reference because it helped to launch the trajectory of Handelman's future work, a selection of which is presented in the exhibition that accompanies this publication.

SEXUALITY AND (IM)MORTALITY ARTISTIC THEMES

The works included in the exhibition demonstrate the many ways Handelman's work has evolved over time—from her own performance in *Candyland*, to her direction of *Irma Vep*, *The Last Breath*, and the recent recutting and recontextualization of her other works in *These Unruly and Ungovernable Selves*, *Solitude is an Artifact of the Struggle Against Oppression*, and *Claiming the Liminal Space*. These pieces all delve into essential motifs that explore and challenge how the viewer understands identity, sexuality, and death. Much like a compelling debate that prompts deeper contemplation, Handelman's art offers a counter-argument to traditional views surrounding sexuality and the human condition. In an interview for the University of Washington's Henry Art Gallery, she asserted, "... it's my job to problematize the hetero-normative position ... to voice what I believe is 'unsayable.'" In doing so, she challenges viewers to

question their assumptions about the world and each other.

Many of the themes present in Handelman's work are born from her connection to people who suffered (or who continue to suffer) in the ongoing HIV/AIDS crisis, and to individuals who society attempts to silence. By giving space and power to these underrepresented stories, the artist actively broadens our collective understanding of what it means to be human. This philosophy is often tied to one's understanding of their self or identity - a theme Handelman wields in harmony with the discomfort of introspection as well as the experience of identifying as queer. Handelman stated in an interview with *BOMB* magazine that her work "...acknowledges the importance of struggle, the belief that change that's worthwhile must be hard-won and can happen within one's lifetime—if you're lucky." Indeed the conversations surrounding queer identity and rights have changed over the past 30 years, but are of

no less importance now than they were then. Handelman's activism shines through her work because it is an essential component that is built into who she is as an artist and a person. She continues to forge her own path in both the film and art worlds, confronting harmful taboos that permeate society and suppress growth. In an interview with *The Broad*



Irma Vep, *The Last Breath* (production still) 2013/2015, HD video installation with sound, 33:13 min, photograph by Laure Leber

Museum, Handelman noted that, “Society and religion enforce the taboo to keep people from achieving their own personal zenith. Taboos are just a form of control.”

IRMA VEP

INTERVIEW WITH A VAMP

A poignant example of Handelman’s themes coalescing is delivered through her short film, *IrmaVep*, *The Last Breath*. An anagram for Vampire, *Irma Vep* delves into the psyche of the titular character, revolving around a conversation between Irma and an anonymous therapist (voiced by Handelman herself) that shares space with the voyeuristic audience. Psychotherapy is a form of conversation that gives meaning to and seeks to analyze a person’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. The audience bears witness to the catsuit-clad Irma as she sits and sprawls on a glowing white leather couch, slinks across rooftops, and eventually reconnects with a manifestation of her future self. In just 36 minutes, Irma and

her therapist broach topics like the thrill of terrorizing the upper class, redistribution of wealth, the detriment of consumerist culture, and the multi-layered identities and desires that exist simultaneously within a person. The viewer gets the opportunity to listen to Irma speak honestly and directly from her perspective as she references criminality, validation, relationships, and vulnerability—issues to which Handelman has personal connections. In an interview published in *Rhizome*, Handelman acknowledged, “as I started to work on the project and dig deeper ... I really tried to figure out why I was so attracted to her ... I realized it was because in a way, I was Irma Vep.” Additionally, Handelman has said, “We all live undercover to some degree, but some of us are doing it more consciously.” This artistic symbolism and character bonding can be expressed through the idea that we are more than our physical selves. This concept is further explored in the piece when Irma asks,

We’re all transcendental beings, aren’t we? I mean this body is just a shell, a carcass.

But it’s Handelman’s provocation as well. She is asking us to expand our understanding of the self, and to recognize her art as an extension of her self. The idea of transcendence involves going beyond or relating to a nonphysical realm. This state could be achieved by transcending one’s past, one’s fears, the opinions of others, or societal stigmas and dichotomies. People who reach this pinnacle of being are mystical, spatial, self-aware, and innately connected to others, nature, and the universe. As Irma explains,

The inside of my soul is dark matter...it’s imperceptible.

In a Henry Art Gallery interview, Handelman expressed her interest in fictional characters existing outside of their “narrative text”, which drives the candor of Irma’s introspection and pulls the audience uncomfortably close to the leather-clad jewel thief. Irma

struggles with morality and “...unresolved questions of identity...”, two hallmarks in Handelman’s work. Shadows and darkness permeate the film, lending to the disquiet apparent within Irma’s subconscious. Later in the piece we observe an older version of Irma living alone, working in the box office at a movie theater. This is an homage to the actress who originally played Irma Vep in the 1915 French silent film *Les Vampires*, Jeanne Roques, professionally known as Musidora. In the later years of her life she sold tickets to the films she had starred in without ever being recognized. When Handelman’s Irmas finally meet, their deafening silence fuels the film’s turbulent climax. Her true identity is finally revealed in a revelry of self acceptance in violent delights. The film closes with Mother Flawless Sabrina serenading the audience in French. Handelman shared in the Henry Art Gallery interview that the performers’ “...life experiences are integral to the project.” Zackary Drucker is a trans woman and



installation view, *Michelle Handelman: These Unruly and Ungovernable Selves*

Flawless Sabrina was an iconic drag queen. Both are queer activists and performers who experienced living undercover, and they exemplify the voices that Handelman's work seeks to amplify. In a studio visit with UW-Madison students, Handelman shared that much of Drucker's dialogue was improvised and came extemporaneously from her own experiences and using her vernacular.

Many of Handelman's videos are multi-channel, immersive experiences that are designed to surround and engage the viewer on an atmospheric level. In *Irma Vep*, the synthesis of inherently dark but intentionally illuminated visuals and suspenseful atmospheric sounds creates a cinematic experience in which the viewer immediately becomes part of the world she's created. The driving, echoing tones elicit feelings of

impending darkness, anxiety, and uncertainty. Moments of auditory respite allow time for reflection and curiosity for what might come next.

FIN

As you sit with these selections from Michelle Handelman's body of work, take time to recognize the thoughts and emotions they bring to the surface, contemplate the conversations being had by the characters within the pieces, as well as the conversations Handelman initiates with her audience through the lens of her camera. What is the significance of shadows, color, light, sound, and surfaces? How might they symbolize and personify themes of identity, sexuality, morality, discomfort, and death? What can a character's dialog reveal about the artist's own life? In a *Rhizome* interview Handelman said, "Conceptually it's always been about sex and death. From the beginning I've made work that's highly personal, a

pouring out of my own existential questioning. Working from a place of pain and pleasure. I don't feel I've resolved anything, I just keep getting deeper and unlocking, revealing that which resides under the surface." Self-reflection is a tool meant for both the creator and the observer. In this exhibition, Handelman skillfully guides us in thinking about critically important but challenging contemporary issues, opening up space for conversations to take place that we might not otherwise risk having.

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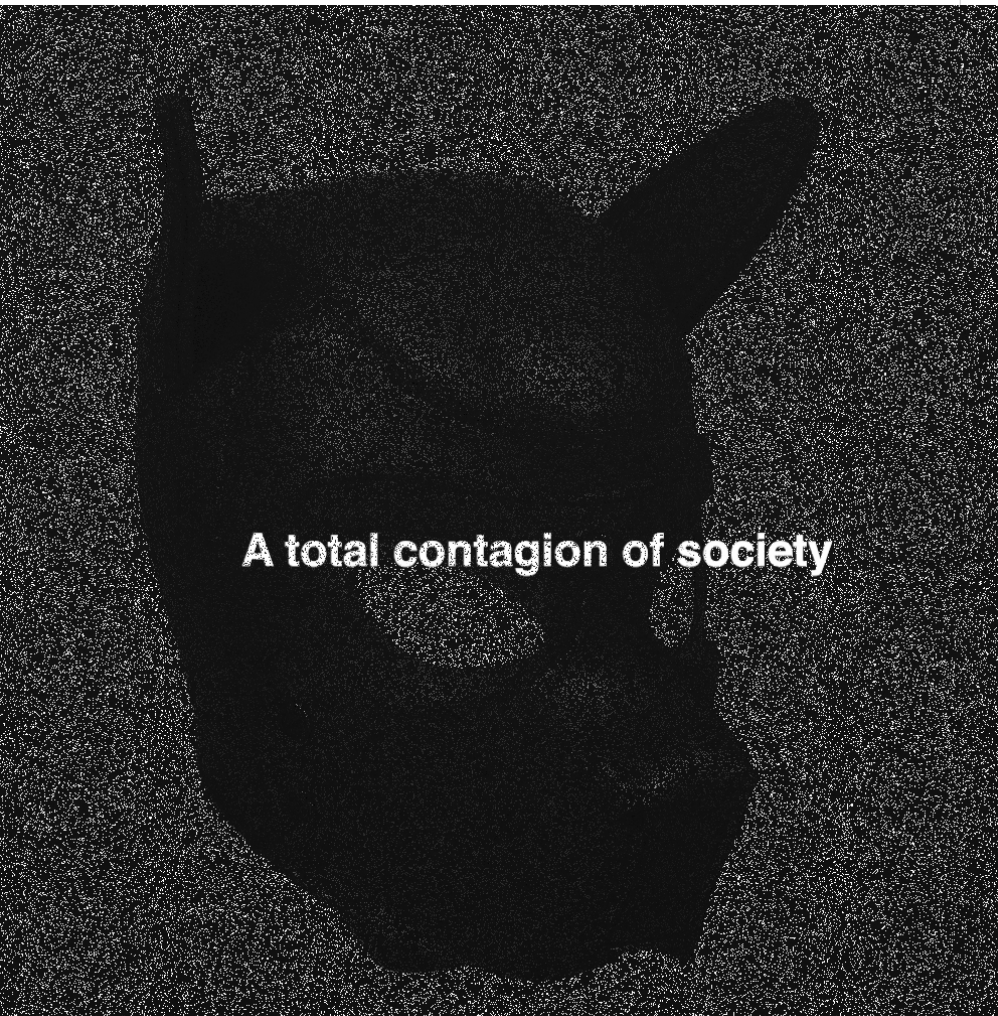
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I'm not looking for consolation



These Unruly and Ungovernable Selves (production still), 2020 from *The Pandemic Series*, single-channel video with sound, 6:00 min

previous spread, *Solitude is an Artifact of the Struggle Against Oppression* (production still) 2020, from *The Pandemic Series*, single-channel video with sound, 4:00 min

THE PANDEMIC SERIES: IDENTITY IN ISOLATION

Clare Dowd

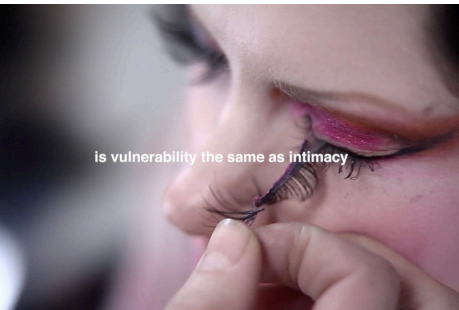
Michelle Handelman's *Pandemic Series* reworks previous video art and installations – *Dorian, A Cinematic Perfume* (2009/12), *Irma Vep, The Last Breath* (2013/15) and *Hustlers & Empires* (2018/20) – to create new video for the conditions of quarantine. Much of Handelman's focus on identity carries over in this new series in which she investigates unexplored narratives driven by the pandemic.

A core theme in Handelman's original work is the portrayal of characters grappling with their identity. *Dorian, A Cinematic Perfume* is based on the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde. The classic story narrates a man's struggle with his own image and identity; in Handelman's version, the main character faces similar struggles, confronting increasingly grotesque circumstances. *Irma Vep,*

The Last Breath is inspired by the classic French film series *Les Vampires*, and reinterprets Vep's criminal persona, showing her in conversation with her therapist, discussing everything from relationships. to female identity, self-esteem, and perception by others. Finally, Handelman's *Hustlers & Empires* follows characters based on Iceberg Slim's *Pimp* (1967), Marguerite Duras's *The Lover* (1984), and Federico Fellini's *Toby Dammit*, who according to Handelman "each find themselves pushed out of their own game and forced back to confront what their lives have become" while considering "how identity is formed in resistance to oppressive forces."

These Unruly and Ungovernable Selves, the first of three works in Handelman's *Pandemic Series*, begins with two flashing texts: *states of*

separation and boredom is a harrowing path, followed by an intense montage of images. Emphasizing the audience's isolation through these stark statements on a black background, we are primed for emotive revelations and contemplation in a time of isolation. The question *is vulnerability the same as intimacy* appears on the screen over a video clip of someone removing Dorian's false eyelashes. This question invites the audience to think about how identity is inherently connected to other people and their perceptions. Another phrase Handelman employs is *fear of evolution*, an especially poignant



These Unruly and Ungovernable Selves (production still), 2020, from *The Pandemic Series*, single-channel video with sound, 6:00 min

thought during a pandemic when many things are shifting and changing completely out of our control. Following a glimpse of Irma Vep in her sleek, black costume, the phrase *traumatic time works its own line* flashes on the screen. The phrase relates to Vep's therapy sessions, taking on a new meaning in the context of isolation, referencing how it takes time to overcome trauma and how this timeline may not be linear, but filled with loops and doubling back. The text *daring to enter the realm of the unknown* appears after a clip of the hustlers passed out; this could be a reference to how when stripped of everything you know, you must search uncharted territory within.

Solitude is an Artifact of the Struggle Against Oppression, the next piece in *The Pandemic Series*, features "The Actor" from *Hustlers & Empires*. The black and white video, focused on solitude, encourages us to *read the fuck out of this moment* and *claim the liminal space*. This use of text is a

new development for *The Pandemic Series*. Handelman offers context for these blunt and often confrontational statements and questions in a 2013 interview with *Rhizome*, "There are things that cannot be expressed through words, and there are things that can only be expressed through words. It all depends on what part of the brain I want to access."

Michelle Handelman's *Pandemic Series* examines how being alone and isolated can affect the formation of and relationship with one's identity, and gives viewers space to contemplate what changes they may have gone through over the course of the pandemic.

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traumatic time works its own line

These Unruly and Ungovernable Selves (production still), 2020 (*Pandemic Series*), single-channel video with sound, 6:00 min

A fashion studio set featuring a large, dark, polka-dot garment, possibly a jacket or dress, displayed on a table. A mannequin wearing a patterned top and dark pants is positioned to the left. The scene is illuminated by studio lights, including a large overhead light fixture and several bright, vertical light tubes. The overall atmosphere is dramatic and professional.

a refusal to consume

DISCOMFORT: A QUEER EXPRESSION

Micaiah Severe

Michelle Handelman produced *Candyland* in 2019 as part of her larger *Cannibal Gardens* series (1998-2000), a body of work that examines, in the artist's words, "constructed identity as it mutates through digital space ... In an act of autoeroticism, contamination is contained within the lens." *Candyland* begins with a nude performer, wearing only a blue wig, crawling across the floor towards a pile of colorful crystals. With saliva dripping from her mouth and onto the floor, she consumes the crystals without restraint—a display of autoerotic self-indulgence. The performer is Handelman herself. Through her performance for the camera, she intimately engages in the construction of an identity using identifiably queer-coded images. For example, the inclusion of her blue wig introduces a campy aesthetic associated with drag. She also incorporates imagery

that is exterior to typical queer images, but that still work against a normative and straight narrative. Handelman crawling on all fours and consuming the crystals without using her hands, for example, is animalistic in nature. Combining animalistic expression with queer expression opens up a conversation about queer sexuality while also resisting the standard definitions on which many conversations about identity and queerness rely. Handelman's approach to exploring queerness recalls the work of artist Juliana Huxtable. In her photographic series titled *ZOOSEXUALITY* (2019), Huxtable presented images of "furries" and trans-speciesism to discuss what she calls an "anarchy of identity." By embracing and celebrating "the outrageous" in their depictions of queerness, both Handelman and Huxtable challenge the straight, normative



perception of queer identities as being so different that they are unnatural or incomprehensible.

The experience Handelman creates in *Candyland* is intensely visual and psychological, driven by themes of desire and

Candyland (production still), 1998-2000 from the *Cannibal Garden Series*, single-channel video, 5:36 min

previous spread, *These Unruly and Ungovernable Selves* (production still), 2020 from *The Pandemic Series*, single-channel video with sound, 6:00 min



Candyland (production still), 1998-2000 from the *Cannibal Garden Series*, single-channel video, 5:36 min

consumption that are intentionally mobilized to discomfort the viewer. The soundtrack for the piece, for example, is repetitive and chant-like, conjuring associations with an unfamiliar sexual ritual. The placement of the camera on the floor and the circular lens reminiscent of a peephole add voyeuristic implications to the film. Handelman's performance in the film is also unsettling—from the animalistic way she crawls across the floor, to her suggestive consumption of the crystals, to the paradoxical combination of sexuality and vulnerability expressed by her naked body. For Handelman,

discomfort is an essential tool for communicating with her audiences because it is a feeling that implores viewers to engage in self-inquiry. She wants viewers to investigate why they are uncomfortable by the film and where that discomfort manifests itself in their own experiences.

BloodSisters: Leather Dykes and Sodomasochism (1995) offers another example of how Handelman confronts our society's uneasiness with sexuality, particularly queer sexuality, by broadening discussions around private expressions of eroticism and their political implications. The documentary film focuses on self-identified "leatherdykes" who in the mid 1990s were active in San Francisco's BDSM scene. When the film was released, the leather subculture it documented was a completely taboo topic, as demonstrated by the controversy the project drew from many groups. The American Family Association, for instance, saw the film project's radical take on sexuality and lesbianism as unacceptable. While some

people's attitudes have since shifted, the apprehension that still exists in many corners of society continues to thwart more open and honest conversations about the full spectrum of sex and sexuality. *BloodSisters* reveals an important part of Michelle Handelman's practice: confronting societal aversions to the sexual by creating an open space for the discussion of taboo and specifically queer issues.

The discomfort surrounding queerness often stems from the misperception that sexual difference does not belong in society—that this type of difference should be hidden or overlooked and feared. In part, this fear is derived from the link between queerness and desires in excess of procreative and reproductive imperatives. In *Candyland*, Handelman's consumption of the brightly colored crystals offers a parallel to expressions of queer desire. The broad spectrum encompassing queer desire and pleasure implies that any act from which pleasure can be derived—including



Candyland (production still), 1998-2000 from the *Cannibal Garden Series*, single-channel video, 5:36 min

the performer's apparent consumption of crystals—cannot be excluded from queer sexual interpretation. Even as a viewer, or perhaps more appropriately as a voyeur, watching *Candyland* can be interpreted as a queer sexual act. This implication is at the root of what can make a viewer uncomfortable. *Candyland* immerses and infiltrates the viewer, and it forces questions about where desire comes from and the ways in which it can manifest itself. It also forces viewers to ask where queerness and desire can and should exist. The idea of queerness manifesting in a



Candyland (production still), 1998-2000 from the *Cannibal Garden Series*, single-channel video, 5:36 min

following spread, *These Unruly and Ungovernable Selves* (production still), 2020, from *The Pandemic Series*, single-channel video with sound, 6:00 min

public space, such a museum, challenges the expectations and restrictions that limit expressions of queerness to private spaces.

Handelman's embrace of sex and excess are key to her work. She situates her practice in a space that makes no

attempt to comfort her viewer. By opening up space to have conversations about often taboo subjects, especially sexuality, Handelman's work confronts audiences in sites where they may not otherwise encounter queer expression.

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production is not the same as living

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Design Thinking for Exhibitions developed *Michelle Handelman: These Unruly and Ungovernable Selves* over the course of the 2021 academic spring semester, using MMoCA as a critical training ground for hands-on application. Stemming from a shared interest in utilizing museum spaces for direct learning, this cross-institutional venture cultivated the next generation of museum professionals by introducing participants to the practical and theoretical matters of curation. The resulting exhibition opened in the museum's Imprint Gallery on April 24th and is on view through August 15th, 2021. For this course, classroom-based learning with Professor Campbell employed the strategies of design thinking—a human-centered approach to understanding and solving real-world problems.

All images courtesy of the artist.

following spread, *Irma Vep, The Last Breath* (production still) 2013/2015, HD video installation with sound, 33:13 min



