My Limitation

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There are several definitions of the word *limit*. It can be related to proportions or contour, specificity, or even mathematics. However, the most commonly thought of definition, and the idea that I chose to explore, is the idea of personal boundaries, lines drawn by the individual in order to protect one's self. Without these self-proclaimed boundaries, we are left feeling vulnerable and unsafe, far outside of our comfort zones. They serve as a layer of protection warding away harm and unwanted circumstances. Though limits vary from person to person, the concept stays the same. A limit is a line that cannot be crossed or is extremely difficult to cross.

My personal exploration for my final project started after I settled on the topic of limitations. I created several mind maps centering on the word and came to the realization that there are countless factors that can hold a person back. A preliminary list that I created included a few of the following: social expectations, class system, ethnicity, age, lack of experience, too much experience, memories, money, and emotions. With this list in mind, I thought of making a survey that asked the subject whether or not they believed the limitation could be defied. I would then present the results through a series of paintings and sculptures.

After mulling over this idea for a couple of days and after a few discussions with peers and advisors, I realized that I needed to make my project much more personal. I needed to be more involved, rather than separating myself from the subject in the way that the survey did. I reviewed my list of brainstormed limitations that I believed hindered the individual. As a white, middle class, female not many of them pertained to me in a way that was really limiting. The one idea that did stand out, however, was *emotions*.

I determine whether or not I should do something based on the prediction of how I will feel after the fact. If I believe that I will feel happy, calm, satisfied, and/or excited, I will follow through with the action. On the other hand, if I predict feeling sad, angry, anxious, nervous, or vulnerable, I won't. *Vulnerable*. Above all things, I do everything in my power to avoid this feeling. In an attempt to avoid it, I will not participate in some activities with friends, I will not volunteer an opinion if I'm not completely sure I understand the topic, and I won't put myself in an entirely new situation unless I have a handle on what is going to happen. It is for these reasons that I used this fear of vulnerability and explored what makes me feel most vulnerable. This is when I created my essential question: Can one of my own personal limits be defied? Extensive journaling and reflecting on the theories of well-known psychologists—Abraham Maslow, B.F. Skinner, and Lev Semyonovick Vygotsky—helped me to explore my discomfort with parts of my body as well as the reasons I have such an awareness of my body… my limitation.

B.F. Skinner created a theory based on several lab experiments he conducted using lab rats. A rat's cage has a pedal on one wall, which when pressed, causes a small mechanism to release a food pellet into the cage for the rat to eat. Skinner observed that after accidentally hitting the pedal a couple of times, the rat learned that its behavior (the action of hitting the pedal) resulted in the prize of a food pellet. With this understanding, the rat continued to hit the pedal knowing that the consequences were good. Skinner dubbed this the *reinforcing stimulus* (Boeree 2).

In contrast, Skinner also realized the *aversive stimulus*. An *aversive stimulus* stems from the punishment or an unwanted consequence of an action causing the subject to be unwilling to repeat the behavior. In the case of another rat experiment, if a rat receives a shock of electricity when it touches a bar or pedal, it will learn to never touch the bar again in an effort to avoid the electric shock.

I, as well as many other women, have an unwillingness to expose certain parts of my body. For me, it's my lower body—specifically my thighs. After studying Skinner's behavioral

theory, I wondered if there was a punishing situation when I did expose my body… nothing came to mind immediately, but then I remembered the discomfort that I sometimes feel when wearing a bathing suit or short skirts. I feel like people are watching me and passing judgments, and I feel an urgency to put on shorts, get in the pool, or lie down on the lounge chair. Why do I feel like someone other than myself is judging me? I have never had anyone directly tell me that my body isn't good enough, but according to Skinner, I must have experienced a situation that involved an *aversive stimulus*. After contemplation, I have come to the conclusion that the *aversive stimulus* did not follow an experience that I was involved in directly, but rather an experience of observation.

It's difficult to not start comparing and worrying about my figure when it's being suggested by big print and bold colors that anything other than thin isn't pretty. My lack of comfort with my body is the result of an *aversive stimulus* that came from the observation of our culture. It is from this observation that I concluded that thinner women are more beautiful—a message to young women sent by the media.

Year round—but especially during the spring—it's impossible to walk by a newsstand or stand in line at a cash register without being bombarded with the bold lettering of magazines like *People, US, In Touch,* etc. pointing out the beach bodies of major celebrities. On the cover, an unflattering picture of a woman in a bathing suit is circled with arrows pointing out cellulite on her thighs or extra fat on her tummy. According to the magazine, it's shocking, embarrassing, and, in a sense, repulsing if a woman's body is carrying extra fat.

The psychologist Lev Semyonovick Vygotsky created a behavioral theory that directly correlates with this idea of culture. "This theory suggests that the social interaction leads to continuous step-by-step changes in children's thought and behavior that can vary from culture to culture" (Gallagher 1). Vygotsky formulated that the behavior of an individual is nurtured in childhood when development depends on the interaction between the child, others, and the tools that culture provides to help the child form his/her values.

My experience with this theory is similar to that of the theory created by B.F. Skinner. We live in a society that is quick to criticize being anything other than slender. It is in this society that I have grown up, and as a result, this is how I have learned to think.

In one commercial break, it is likely that I will see advertisements for dozens of diet plans and weight loss pills. Off of the top of my head Weight Watchers, Jenny Craig, Lean Cuisine, Nivea cream for the reduction of cellulite, workout machines, etc. It is a never-ending stream of messages that suggest women need to have firm bodies like the touched-up models and celebrities—the people that society idolizes—selling the merchandise.

Our society strives to be thin when it comes to body image. We are taught to be cruel to ourselves and criticize our bodies when we look in the mirror. I don't think I'm alone when I say that I can recall conversations with friends revolving around our bodies: "Ah! I'm so fat!" "My legs are gross!" "Look at this flab!" we say as we pinch ourselves and rotate our torsos to get a better look. Unfortunately this is our culture. This is what our society has come to value. This is the community that I have grown up in and in which I have been taught to think.

Admitting to myself that I felt most uncomfortable with my body was difficult. I have always been aware of the feeling but writing it down honestly, without joking, as if I were talking to friends, was a difficult step to take. I think it goes along with my aversion to vulnerability. Admitting my limitation makes it something that cannot be backed away from. It's no longer something in which I fake confidence.

After making my confession, I began brainstorming various art projects that would force me to break my limitation of body image and force me to be in a situation of vulnerablity in an effort to defy my limitation. My first idea followed soon after my realization of my limitation. With the artist Chris Burden in mind, I tried to create an uncomfortable situation that would be documented. Unlike Chris Burden, I didn't plan on putting myself through extreme physical pain to prove myself an artist, but rather a situation that challenged me mentally and emotionally. I planned to document, through video and digital photography, fellow classmates painting on my body over the course of one to two hours. During this time, my whole body would be exposed except for a sheet wrapped around my chest and groin as I sat on a table.

In the beginning, this idea seemed like a promising one. It would, without a doubt, push me and it would be an interesting process offering me a lot of opportunity for reflection and journaling. The more I thought about it and the more I was sure it was the right thing to do, however, the more uncomfortable I became. I had a hard time falling asleep because I was thinking about the project. The first thing I thought about when I woke up was the project, and even though it was invading my mind, I was not able to find the courage to talk about it. It wasn't that I was afraid of being told that it was inappropriate, or that it wasn't a realistic project, it's that I couldn't physically tell anyone why I wanted to do it. I didn't want them to listen to me and certainly didn't want to enter into a conversation about people interacting with my body.

I began to talk myself out of the project and tried formulating new projects that would push my limits in the same way. I thought of using castings of my whole body, but I still felt uncomfortable with the fact that I would have to be completely naked to create the castings and that people would be able to see my body as if I were naked. It was a spiral of vulnerability that I couldn't escape and a limit that I realized was more difficult to cross than I originally thought.

It was at this part of brainstorming that I came to an epiphany: I realized that I had found the answer to my essential question. Can one of my own personal limits be defied? I ended up creating a project that did include a casting of my torso, but I wasn't ready to do a casting of my whole body. No, I didn't follow through with the project that involved other people painting on me, but I have had more conversations about my body with my peers and advisors than I ever have in my life. So my answer is, "yes". My limit, as far as I can expose myself and feel vulnerable, can be broken, but not all at once, and not all right now. I've taken steps to break down the barrier and cross the line, but I need to maintain a feeling of safety.

Abraham Maslow created a behavioral theory involving the hierarchy of needs. After the base needs are fulfilled—these include the physiological needs such as oxygen, water, protein, vitamins, etc.—, the safety needs must be fulfilled. "When the physiological needs are largely taken care of, this second layer of needs comes into play. You will become increasingly interested in finding safe circumstances, stability, and protection. You might develop a need for structure, for order, some limits," (Boeree 2). Without the achievement of stability and safety, you cannot move on to fulfill other needs and ultimately reach the point of self-actualization. You need limits and boundaries to stay in a mindset in which you can function. Being uncomfortable and vulnerable all of the time isn't realistic and isn't productive if you want to live fully.

I realize that it is important to feel safe and stable, but I also believe that some limitations and limits aren't healthy. I think that my personal insecurities are one of these limitations, and it is important for me to eventually overcome them. Though it will not be easy to defy, because of the ideas that our culture has come to value, I need to take the small steps, like I have during this project, to erase the line that is holding me back.

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