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Hello. Thank you so much for joining us for this talk with our current artist in residence, Melissa Ferrari. Melissa is actually the first project space resident of this new 2024/2025 cohort. And we are so excited to have her here, and we are thankful to her for sharing more about her practice and the work she's making while at VSW.

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I'm Hernease Davis. I'm a photo based artist and assistant curator here at the Visual Studies Workshop. It is my pleasure to introduce Melissa Ferrari. Melissa is an experimental nonfiction animator, magic lanternist and educator. Originally from Virginia, Melissa is now based in Los Angeles, where she received an experimental animation MFA at Cal Arts. Her films and magic lantern performances have been shown internationally in venues such as Hot Dogs, The Exploratorium, UnionDocs, Hauser and Wirth Los Angeles, the Ottawa International Animation Festival, and the Ann Arbor Film Festival.

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Melissa's recent awards include the 2023 Dick Balzer Award and the 2020 Science Sandbox Symbiosis Award. As an educator, Melissa specializes in teaching nonfiction and experimental animation. She has lectured at CalArts, Whittier College, Queens College, and Cal State LA. Without further ado, Melissa Ferrari.

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Hello. Thank you so much. I'm very grateful to be here at VSW view. It's really been a dream to be in a space where the magic lantern is so present. But also, there's just such fascinating thoughts and people working in such a long trajectory of media archeology. And so I'm really excited with how much I've learned here.

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I'm going to spend some time talking about my background and my artistic trajectory and what brought me to working with magic lanterns. And then I'll talk a bit about the project that I'm working on here. So to start, I always like to talk a bit about my commissioned or commercial work because I do consider it a part of my greatest practice, and it's really inspired a lot of my work and questions around working with animation.

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So early on when I started working with animation, I quickly fell in love with the form of animated documentary. This is partially because

I just love true stories, and I love information, and I love educational film. And I was really excited by the way, that animation could be used in an experimental documentary format where you could, look at stories based in history or in nonfiction, which often, for me, hold the same kind of weight and sense of wonder as fictional stories.

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But you can do some really sort of, different experimental things when you're using animation. And so early on, I worked at an animated documentary studio called Dusty Studio, which is led by an artist named as Cinderella. And he specializes in making animation with pastels on antique chalkboards. And so I worked for him, creating some independent documentary work with him, but also commissions for a variety of different places.

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Typically the subjects that we were looking at either had to deal with social issues or maybe visualizing scientific principles. But using handmade animation to do that. And I really learned a lot about, of course, just like the professional production pipelines that documentary entails. But also how to work really quickly. And primarily we were working creating an animation for feature length live action documentaries.

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So I was always kind of fascinated to see where animation would fit in. Whether it was something where they didn't have footage and they needed a way to visualize something, or maybe it was a piece of history that, you know, is really sensitive, and they needed a way to make something more evocative. And so animation is a really great tool for that.

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And so in my own work doing commissioned animated documentary, I often also specialize in doing hand-drawn pastel animation. Usually using a technique called palimpsest where you're animating into the same drawing. I sometimes I work with paint on glass as well. So here's just a few examples of my typical messy studio setup. Using what's called a multi plane, where you can use layers of glass to create more depth for the hand-drawn animated image.

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Here's a few samples of so my independent commission work that I've done and that I still continue to do. The piece on the lower left

here, I'll be talking about later on, because it really inspired the work I'm doing here at VW. But independently, outside of my commissioned work, I quickly became interested in the subject of cryptozoology.

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And so I've created a large body of work around this, and it's essentially a pseudoscience that is the study of creatures that some people think exist and some people think do not exist. And there's a lot that I could say about cryptozoology, but, I was really fascinated in thinking about the use of documentary to engage with the topic of cryptozoology.

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And while the study of monsters has been happening for centuries, cryptozoology specifically is considered something only in the past. 100 years. So I started making a series of experimental animations that were visualizing certain theories within cryptozoology. Some of this was, instances where maybe historically, a community came up with a story for something that they found.

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So it was really kind of a contemporary science at the time, but it's something that we now view as mythology. And vice versa. I'm interested in the idea of looking at modern science as a, as a form of mythology. As well. And I specifically made one film called Photo Texas that was about, a particular monster within cryptozoology or a cryptid, as they call it.

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And that was the creature that's known as the Mothman. And so this is my local cryptid where I grew up on the border of Virginia and West Virginia. It was a creature that was said to be seen in the 1960s in West Virginia. That was essentially a mothman to a hybrid mass human creature. And it's one of the pivotal histories in ufology as well.

00;07;04;16 - 00;07;28;16

Where some people think that the Mothman was an alien. There's all kinds of different scientific explanations for what people may have seen, whether it be an owl or crane that they misidentified as Mothman. But within cryptozoology, I'm really less interested in, like, debunking or believing. I'm more interested just in the cultural phenomena that surrounds cryptozoology.

00;07;28;18 - 00;07;54;25

And the way it connects to things like, belief and also religious ideology. And, so specifically with this film, I was looking at comparing the lore around the Mothman to, writings in Narcotics Anonymous and how things like magical thinking and, faith play a huge role. And so this film is available online if anyone is interested in watching it.

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So from that experience, making my own independent work, looking at cryptozoology and also working commercially for animated documentary, I became really interested in the idea of the animator as a researcher and how you have a research based practice within animation. For instance, if you're drawing something and you're saying that it's a true image, what is your process for getting to a place where you feel the image is true?

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Like, are you looking at references or you're reading texts that are informing how you're rendering something? And I was also really interested that the history of animated documentary commercially is over 100 years old, but it's really only in the past decade or two that the documentary establishment has started accepting animation as a legitimate form of documentary. And so within that, I also was interested in the relationship between, like an expert on a topic or the expert on the subject of the documentary and the animator, because I found that often when you're working on a piece as the animator or as a documentarian, you are not an expert in the subject that you're asked

00;09;05;25 - 00;09;45;07

to represent. But it really kind of depends on the production model, whether you're giving a budget to research or whether you're given access to access to experts who know what they're talking about and can help you create an ethical documentary image. And I often was in situations where I was making animation for a place that is considered, you know, a legitimate, truthful publishing station like some of the big TV channels that show scientific programming and that would be asked to draw things in a way that I felt was unethical or wasn't true, or didn't have the research behind it.

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So these were just kind of ideas swirling around my head. And, It led me to really think about the canon of fake cryptozoology documentaries that are on scientific television. So there's a lot of, they're primarily feature length documentary. Some of them are series where

they create a documentary about a certain creature. So a really famous example is the film mermaids.

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That came out in 2012, and they made another one in 2013. And this is a situation where it's a combination of live action talking heads, but also CGI animation. And so animation often plays a really big role in these documentaries, where they're visualizing creatures and saying that they were real. So specifically with mermaids. It's kind of a conspiracy driven theory that there is humans on land, and then humans also evolved in the ocean.

00;10;43;14 - 00;11;09;04

And so they have representatives from, NOAA on the documentary saying that the government is covering up evidence of mermaids, and it's all kind of silly. But when it came out, a lot of people thought it was a real documentary because it aired on the Discovery Channel on Animal Planet, and it was released as a documentary. I'll share a little clip with some of the news coverage of it.

00;11;09;06 - 00;11;34;16

" You're smart. You know, a fake mermaid when you see one, right? (Song) 'Life under the sea. Is better than anything they got up there...' You know that the little Mermaid is an animation and that Sharknado and Sharktopus, they were fake. But what about this footage of alleged mermaids that recently aired on Animal Planet? Or this image of a seemingly enormous shark fin on the Discovery Channel?

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Those were packaged in documentaries on channels known for documentaries, for facts. But they were not." So I, was really fascinated by this phenomenon. And I also, was in my past, duped by one of these documentaries. Thinking was real until part of the way through, and while they seem kind of trivial and silly, I was also fascinated by one the fact that the idea of fake news was it was kind of the ghost of that everybody was talking about truth in the media.

00;12;10;16 - 00;12;42;28

And, you know, what channels can we believe? What images do we believe? And then I also was reading things about how, for example, certain like Finding Bigfoot style TV shows were funded by evangelical Christians who were trying to undermine narratives of Western science. And, so that all of that was kind of swirling in my head and, particularly the role of animation in, in visualizing these creatures and thinking about, like, the truth of a hand-drawn image versus a CGI

image.

00;12;43;00 - 00;13;07;27

And how you perceive hoax videos of CGI animation versus how you perceive animated scientific visualization and how that can actually sometimes seem more truthful than a hoax video, because it's in this language of scientific authority. And so around the time I was thinking about all this, I was planning on making an animated documentary about this kind of phenomenon.

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But, you know, especially in the United States, media world. And, I went to an animation conference in Padua in Italy, and one of the keynote speakers there, ran a present of a museum, and she had been a magic lantern host for decades. And she gave this presentation where she talked about many different histories of the magic lantern.

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But particularly the history of phantasmagoria really stuck out to me. So I'll just take a brief minute to describe a magic lantern and the history of creativity. Not familiar. You can see one behind me back here, but there's also a few examples on the screen and magic lanterns that are essentially large slide projectors. And they were first invented in the 17th century in Europe, but they quickly spread throughout the world, and they use large glass, hand-painted and later photographic slides, to create a projected image.

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But I was really fascinated by them as an animator because some of the slides are mechanized to create animated motion. So magic lanterns were the first way that audiences could watch a project. Did animated moving image before the invention of film. And so there's two histories that have been really influential on me in my own artistic practice.

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One is the role of the magic lantern in scientific education, where, like in, in Europe and lanterns were first invented quickly, scientists realized that they were really great tool to visualize science lectures and to visualize scientific principles. Here's an example of one of my antique, astronomy lantern slides that would have been used in a astronomy lecture to show how the planets move around the sun.

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And, this really had a lot to do with creating free, accessible science education, on a large public scale. And there's also some really amazing lantern slide designs that came out of this tradition, including, what are called tank slides. So essentially miniature aquariums where you would project live specimen. Not always the most ethical, but in some ways, I think it was okay.

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But phantasmagoria, like I mentioned, was the history that really drew me to the magic lantern. And this was a type of magic lantern performance that was invented at the end of the 18th century, where hidden magic lanterns were used to create projected images of the supernatural. So it was typically ghosts, or monsters or witches. And a lot of these slides were animated to create a slightly animated creature.

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While this was invented in Europe, it spread around the world. And Japan particularly developed a really unique type of phantasmagoria show, where they would use handheld magic lanterns to project the creatures. But the things that really stuck out to me about the phantasmagoria show, were, for one thing, the idea of hiding the technology so the audience didn't know what was creating the images.

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So you can see in this picture, the type of lantern used was something called a phantom scope, where you could put the magic lantern on wheels to move it closer to the screen and away from the screen as a way of creating the illusion that the creature is actually flying at you. They would often fill the room with smoke when they were projecting, which would add a new level of physicality to have the apparitions really drift towards you on the screen.

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Here's a few examples of two hand painted lantern slides that are in the phantasmagoria tradition. And it was really immersive horror. So the venue in which this show took place is really important. They would usually hold them like in a cemetery, or famously, there was a significant show in the basement of an abandoned convent. And they would have live immersive sound.

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All kinds of details that really made it immersive. Expanded cinema. But the thing that really drew me to it was, the role of science and

belief in the phantasmagoria show. So for one thing, in what's now considered one of the most famous phantasmagoria shows, which was created by a Lantern artist named Robertson, when he brought people into the show, he would first bring them into something called the Physics parlor or the salon de physic, which you see visualized in the top image.

00;17;49;05 – 00;18;20;02

And so this was like a really bright space where audiences could see a bunch of scientific experiments. And so it was really the age where science and the supernatural. The line between them was kind of blurry. And so in this space, you would see, like, optical illusions, physics based experiments. Displays of natural specimen. Famously, they would always do a galvanism experiment because Galvanism was like a hot new science at the time.

00;18;20;02 – 00;18;43;03

So they would electrocute a dead frog to bring it back to life. And so the point of that room was really to get people into the headspace of, okay, what is real? What is science? What is magic? What do I believe in? Before they entered the dark phantasmagoria chamber where they would see these apparitions appear. But there's also different.

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Some are maybe apocryphal. Some are definitely truthful accounts of how the audiences perceived the phantasmagoria. So, like you see in this image here, you had people who were scared of the phantasmagoria in the same way we might be afraid in a horror movie. There was also skeptics who thought, okay, this isn't a real conjuring. There's not real ghosts in this room that we're in.

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There must be some hidden technology creating the projections. And so there's multiple accounts of the audience is actually rushing the screen and tearing it down to reveal the hidden magic lanterns. But there's also theories from people like scholars like Mervin Herd who talk about the kind of political context for when some of these early phantasmagoria were held in the late 1700s and early 1800s.

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Where in some of the places, they would be displayed, it was sometimes illegal or at least frowned upon to indulge in the supernatural. So there are some accounts of the phantasmagoria artists being arrested and charged with witchcraft for conjuring. There's also history, many stories about, the the threat of them bringing back to life people



who, were recently killed.

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Politicians like King Louis, who, you know, local governments didn't want to be resurrected through this kind of science, technology. And there were accounts where the artists would find out who recently died in the town they were performing in and actually paint lantern slides in the likeness of the recently dead to bring them back to life. And at some shows you could request seeing a depth of one.

00;20;27;03 - 00;20;53;02

Describe them, pay extra money and they would make slides, so that you could talk with your dead someone as a projected apparition. And so this idea of the phantasmagoria show as a seance, led some of the early phantasmagoria artists to kind of debunk their own shows where when they were about to perform them, they would say, okay, I'm not here to deceive you.

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We're not really going to see ghosts tonight. This is a new technology that we're using to, think about death and think about life. Kind of like a memento mori art form. And so they would, you know, really contextualize their performance as fake. But even so, there were still accounts of people going in and believing that they were truly seeing the real demons or real ghosts in the room with them.

00;21;19;20 - 00;21;49;17

And that may partially be because they had this logic of, if they say that the performance is genuine, then they're going to get arrested and charged with witchcraft or, you know, the threat of resurrecting the wrong dead. And so even though they were told the performances were fake, some audiences still believed. And that kind of never live of audiences really projecting their own belief system on these animated creatures.

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To me really resonated with what was happening in cryptozoology media. And so I thought it would be interesting to kind of compare these two very distinct animated forms and look at the themes of belief and religion within the monsters. And then, and so I decided to start experimenting with magic lanterns and I thought that I would be making animated films just using magic lantern projections.

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But once I actually purchased a little lantern and started figuring out how to make it project, I realized how important it is to be in the room with the physical projector. And there's there is this kind of magic that comes with, like, witnessing this antique technology. And, I've been really astounded with how effective the very simple animated images still are to audiences today.

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And so I'll just quickly mention a few different types of animated slides. Before I show you my own. So some of the techniques that I've been working with include the dissolving view. We are using two projected images dissolving on top of each other to create a passage of time or a transformation. You have flip sides where, you're, you have like, a series of mattes that are creating a really simple animated image between 2 or 3 frames, and these are all antique sides of your writing.

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And then panning sides where you're panning, creating a panning motion across the screen. Often used for transportation or just, you know, people walking across. So when I make my own slides, I've developed a technique where I laser cut wood based on the historical mechanisms. It's important to me to keep that visual language of the original animated magic lantern slides.

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I'm less interested in creating new types of illusions with them. But then I adapt the actual subject matter of the images to contemporary subjects. So I create my own drawings, and then I have them printed in large format slide film, and then I mount them in acrylic. Historically they would be mounted in glass, but I sometimes drop my slides while I'm performing and that acrylic doesn't break as easily.

00;24;12;27 - 00;24;39;07

It's also later to travel with. It's just a few more examples. And so I began with trying to recreate traditional phantasmagoria shows and making the kinds of animated images or subject matters that you would see in a historical, traditional phantasmagoria as a way to kind of learn the technology and learn how to make an effective performance, because I did not have a background in performance.

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And so here's just a few images from some early phantasmagoria that I did. And then I eventually completed the piece that brought me to Magic lanterns, which I've been showing over the past year or two,

called Relative Phantasmagoria. And so I consider it an experimental documentary performed with antique magic lanterns, handmade slides, and also some digitally projected hand-drawn animation.

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So I'll just show a little two minute teaser of that to give you an idea of it.

00;25;10;19 – 00;25;27;15

Over the past hundred years, thousands of intriguing human interest items have appeared in newspapers all over the world describing incredible encounters with awesome creatures to science. Can all these items be hoaxes and journalistic jokes? Can we believe

00;25;27;15 – 00;25;41;09

that the major wire services, its very existence depends on their reliability? Employ men to concoct and circulate irresponsible tales about hairy giants.

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Okay, let's, Coyotes are really going off. Yeah, I hear them. Yeah. Yeah. We're going to be talking about unicorns, dragons, Leviathan and stuff like that, and we'll kind of just discuss. And as far as, like what we believe they are, because there's there's animals. We know that they're the real animal because they're in the Bible.

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Okay. Keep staring at us. It was way too big to be a deer. So I was just wait to see the big move to get some movement so I can identify what it was. The rise of pseudoscience. In the 21st century is a very worrying development. You know, if someone believes in Bigfoot and you try to say, well, you know, from a evolutionary biology standpoint, these things can't exist.

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Yeah, but I still believe them anyway. I don't believe in science. Okay. It's not a big deal. But with things like climate denial and the anti-vaccination, you know, government officials are saying one thing. It's sort of.

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so I've turned out the lights now to avoid the glare behind me. But that was a little clip of relict. So it features a lot of different

kinds of documentary audio, some archival audio from old cryptozoology documentaries. An interview I did with historian of science doctor Brian Reagle. An excerpt of a, sermon from an evangelical minister.

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And and more. And then the images, are some of them are adaptations of scenes from cryptozoology documentaries. He's that clip in there. An excerpt from Finding Bigfoot, the TV show. And so I was really interested in kind of adapting the esthetics that we associate with documentary truth to this very simplistic magic lantern language, to just kind of think about the documentary image.

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So since finishing that piece, I really fell in love with magic lanterns, and I found that a lot of the subjects I'm interested in exploring anyways usually have to do with history, or the history of science, or the history of animated documentary. And so the Magic Lantern is really a great vessel to explore that type of thing.

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And there's a lot of different kinds of sides that you can make. And so I've continued making collaborations with, you know, historians or musicians to make sort of a body of magically turned documentaries. And that brings me to the piece I'm working on here, the Visual Studies Workshop, which is a new experimental documentary performed with magic lanterns.

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And so this new piece will be, about the history of abortion medication. And here you see an image of my studio here. And so I this piece will include steel hand-painted lantern slides that I will make in hand drawn lantern slides. But, when I first started working with lanterns, I was really intimidated by antique lantern sides.

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Partially because I didn't want to put my own hand-drawn images next to them and performing because they're so beautiful, and I was intimidated to show my slides next to them. And also, it took me a while to start collecting antique lantern slides and slowly develop a collection of historic images that were relevant to the subjects. I was looking at.

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But especially with this piece, I am really interested in using

antique slides, and in conversation with my own handmade slides, and then just kind of experiment with more abstract lantern slide techniques as well. And so in this piece, I'll just briefly talk about some of the things I'm thinking about with it. I'm really in the early stages of of writing the script.

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Figuring out what documentary idea will be in it. But overall, I'm, I'm interested in the history of specifically medication abortion. So this goes back thousands of years. Where there are written recipes, essentially for what medicine you can take in order to have an abortion across cultures around the world. And then also, abortion pills have a longer history than I do.

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And so I'm really interested in kind of sharing that history with people. So kind of thinking of it as a magic lantern lecture. But also just thinking about a lot of the different small histories within that history and also how relevant it still is today. And so my interest in abortion pills came when I started working, making educational animated videos for an organization called plan C, which is the primary resource in the United States for how to get abortion pills in the mail.

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So they have this really great website I recommend everybody know about called [plan C pills.org](http://planCpills.org), where you can choose the state that you're in in the United States, and they will give you resources for how to get abortion pills in the middle, legally or illegally. And they provide other resources like, if you need funding, how can you use telehealth funding to get your pills for free?

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If you're worried about legal, you know, the legal implications based on your state. They have resources for lawyers. They also have, like, community care resources and things like abortion doulas. And just to clarify, I'm talking about abortion pills. So these are, two pills that you can use to in order to have an abortion. There are different than birth control, and they're different than plan B, and they're very safe and very effective.

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But they're heavily, you know, criminalized in our country. In the US, around the world. They're very commonly used. And so this performance will kind of go into the history of the pills as well. Which is just

from the past few decades. And so what I've been doing here at the workshop, is more research into the history.

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And so here's just a few images and sketches, that I've done for kind of pre-production and that I made just to start thinking about how these histories come together. And so one thing I've been doing is making a really big compilation of recipes that I'm finding. And one thing that I'm fascinated by is that some of the historic recipes are very, like, poetic.

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So, you know, they might say, like, you use this mixture of plants. And then, like, have a glass of wine under the moon and, like, have and this is how you can take care of this thing that you need to do. And it'll be like a 500 year old recipe. And to me, it has a lot of kind of there's like a synchronicity with the way that people talk about abortion care today, where there's an emphasis on how can we make it less clinical and more, like a ritual and, or, you know, just thinking about the emotional care that should go into that kind of process, especially if you're left

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to do it on your own because you're in a country where it's illegal to do it. With more support. And then using the magic lantern, I'm particularly interested in, looking at the history of Victorian abortion pills, which are something I didn't know that much about. But, in the mid to late 1800s, there was like a pretty vibrant industry of pills that were typically made out of both different kinds of botanicals, like pennyroyal, that you could order in the mail.

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And a lot of these companies are based in either New York or the northeast. The most famous abortionist and provider was someone named Adam Crystal. And so you find these little ads in the newspapers? Sometimes they're like very kind of cover. So, you know the name Pennyroyal Pills. You might not know what they do, but if you needed them, you would know what you want, and you would know that pennyroyal would allow you to have an abortion.

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And one thing that I think is interesting is that, like, I have an example here of a pill box. Of this brand, which is chai Chester's pennyroyal pills. And so these are marketed as abortion pills in the mid 1800s that you could order in the mail for \$2. But the government

ended up finding out that these pills actually have no pennyroyal in them.

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They were fraudulent pills. And so this was also common where a company would send you sugar pills and they wouldn't work, but they were just profiting off of people in need of an abortion. And that's the same thing you see today, after Roe versus Wade was overturned, there's been a lot more fake abortion providers or, sorry, fake abortion pill providers where you can order them online, you get them in the mail, you pay a few hundred dollars and they don't work.

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But they're really kind of exploiting the fact that there's not a legal, safe channel to get abortion pills and a lot of areas in the country. And then one last thing I'll say about this is that Anthony Comstock, who was pictured there, he really went after, abortion providers and many other things he considered obscene, like pornography, all different kinds of laws in the mid 1800s.

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And so he created a set of laws that made it illegal to send abortion pills by mail. And so once Rose overturned his law, the Comstock Law came back into effect in a lot of states. And so the state that is regulating abortion pills by mail, is this Victorian era law from the time of magic lanterns. And so I'm kind of interested in exploring that history.

00;35;50;28 - 00;36;11;23

So what I've been doing here is going into the amazing lantern slide archive and finding images that are relevant to the history, and a lot of the images in the archive here that are relevant are photographic images of plants that have been used as abortion medicine. And so I'm there's just a few examples. And having these printed on side of film.

00;36;11;24 - 00;36;39;05

So to make replicas pretty much so that I can perform with them in this piece. And. There's a lot I could say of that how fascinated I am with these images. I'm also really new to photography. And so like the physical weight of the presence of these plants and how they're composed, and a lot of the slides to me is very, like, effective and very their presence is really large.

00;36;39;07 - 00;37;12;22

So a few more examples. I thought, these are really striking chrysanthemums. And then another technique I'm working with is a technique that was invented called by Carol Duane, called photography, where you soak plants in a combination of vitamin C and washing soda, and then you apply the plants to film. And it creates a physical and kind of impression in the chemistry of the film, from the interaction of the phenols in a plant and the film chemistry.

00;37;12;24 - 00;37;36;06

And so I'm using this to make a series of lantern slides that will be used in this performance that are kind of that. Here's some examples of how they're coming out. And to me, they have like, I, I like that they feel when I see them, I feel the like physical chemical presence of the plant. And so all the plants that I'm using have historically been used as abortion medicine.

00;37;36;08 - 00;37;55;14

So here you have cyclamen and red cedar. So a few more examples. And this is a process I learned through, I don't know where a workshop at women in a lot of media. But I really haven't had a chance to explore it in a lantern capacity.

00;37;55;17 - 00;38;02;17

More examples.

00;38;02;20 - 00;38;23;06

And then here's just some really crude, captures from when I was trying out the textures and I. Magic lantern last week. And so these are all be panoramic painting slides. These aren't matted, but.

00;38;23;08 - 00;38;56;14

And so these textures will be overlaid with more representational images and text. And then what I'm also continuing to do here is, transitioning to making some drawings, but also making side designs for slides that will be in the performance. So some of them will be really just like text visualizations of the recipes used historically, but then also things like, making abortion to live as a projected image using a tank slide.

00;38;56;16 - 00;39;18;14

And I was really inspired by the lantern slide archive here to start learning hand tinting for lantern slides as well. So using black and white slide film. So the work in progress. Still experimenting, but a huge thanks to all of you for giving me that time and space to start



figuring out this performance.

00;39;18;14 - 00;40;04;11

Thank you so much, Melissa. I've learned so much about lantern light history from you, and it's specifically, animation and and, and how I, I don't think I ever even really imagined that lantern slides could be animated before reading about your work and before getting your application for the residency. And, of course, you know, we were all really excited to read your proposal because it was, something that really embodies what we have been trying to do with our archives, where we want artists to use archive to contextualize them, to bring life to them, to help explain them, to explain them to us so we can learn from artists.

00;40;04;14 - 00;40;47;13

And so I feel like that's something that you it's almost like too perfect. And this is what you do. And, and and especially for me, my introduction to lantern slides was via. So, this is, this is just been really wonderful. I so I have, I have a question about your I just want to hear more about your thoughts, because hearing about the work that you're making here and seeing how that technique is, coming across, but also about the history of plan C or abortion pills, just because something that has come up, of course, there's just so many things that we can talk about in terms of, how politically

00;40;47;13 - 00;41;11;07

poignant that is, and also the the echoes back and forth between the history that you're working with. But but one thing that sticks out is the, I'll say the I think what you said was a ritual as being have it being ritualistic rather than is it medical? Would that be the, I said clinical? Okay. Okay.

00;41;11;07 - 00;41;35;23

Yes, yes. I feel like that's way more appropriate than clinical. I mean, than medical because I I'll just say that I was there is a new podcast that is following, OBGYNs who perform abortions or, I would say, who formerly performed abortions in Texas. Do you know about this podcast? You know, I would love to know about it, though.

00;41;35;24 - 00;42;01;03

Okay. I just found out about it, so I can I can share it with you. But one of the the first episode follows a, a woman who is going through, a pregnancy and then finds out from her doctor that the the baby is not developing their brain, essentially. But they aren't able to perform an abortion, because they're in Texas.

00;42;01;03 - 00;42;24;28

And so she does her research and figures out she can go to South Carolina. And it had all these things that you would never really think about that goes into leaving the state. Because you're thinking about appointments like, when can you get an appointment? How other things kind of sync up with your personal life? Who can watch your kids, what is affordable?

00;42;25;01 - 00;42;40;26

But one of the things that was really, that really stood out and also kind of came to mind in your presentation, is that there are so many forms to fill out before the procedure. And for this procedure, she had to be put under. So of course, there at the procedures are like just in case you die.

00;42;40;26 - 00;43;04;15

But then there are also the procedures of what to do with, with the fetus. And so one of the questions was, what was what is your relationship to the, you know, or to the essentially to the aborted fetus? Right. And she, the woman who was being interviewed said that she she broke down, she couldn't continue filling up the papers.

00;43;04;15 - 00;43;26;28

And there was a resident there who came around and just swipe the papers from her and just said, don't worry about this. I'll I'll take care of it. But I kind of thought about the that's a clinical experience, where there are these forms and, and not even just like legal yet legalities. But the, the legality is within this thing that is quickly becoming illegal.

00;43;27;00 - 00;44;03;12

And, the lack of care in health care, and so, so, so that so listening to some of these, like a recipe including care where it's like, yeah, take this and then go outside and have a glass of wine underneath the moon. The poetics of it in a way, that it's not frivolous. It's something that is missing from or I found to be missing from this experience of this woman who, after all of this before she's put under anesthesia, has, like, kind of a breakdown because the forms she's filling out are so careless.

00;44;03;15 - 00;44;48;22

Right, right. Yeah. That's something I'm learning a lot about. And when the history that I'm interested in that I've been discovering in

this program process is, kind of the divide between the pharmaceutical and the herbalists. And so the histories are really interesting where and I won't say too concretely, because I don't have my I need to fact check myself more, but I know that some of the historically and around the world, sometimes the laws that criminalize abortion are motivated by doctors who don't want like typically women doctors or herbalists or like, trained doctors to be providing care and taking away from their profit where they could be charging money to give people

00;44;48;22 - 00;45;14;21

an abortion. And historically, it was such a, kind of like a whisper network phenomenon where it's like, oh, you need this done. You talk to this person or like, oh, my sister knows how to do that here. Like, we can help you. And so just the ideas of, like, something happening through the doctor or versus through a healer, like a community healer.

00;45;14;23 - 00;45;53;10

That history made me interested in some of the things I was reading with, like, modern takes on abortion medicine, where, like, I think abortion pills are amazing. Like, I think they're miraculous scientific development. But there's also, of course, many things to say about the pharmaceutical industry, and there's all kinds of complex issues around that. But I was also interested to see, like research papers coming out from scientists who are saying, hey, like around the world, people use plants for abortions and it's there's a stigma against them because they can be really dangerous.

00;45;53;12 - 00;46;25;20

And when Roe got overturned in the US, like the Google searches for like plant abortions skyrocketed. And there's like all kinds of bad information out there that is, getting kill people who are trying to self-medicate. But if we did more research, like in a scientific way that was compatible with, like, I don't know, it's also like a decolonizing approach to science of like listening to communities about their medicines and testing them and finding the right doses, like, why aren't we doing that?

00;46;25;27 - 00;47;03;17

And so I sort of, I mean, I don't know, I, I'm a non-scientist reading scientific papers on the internet. So it's just something I've been stumbling upon and I'm like, wow, that's like a very fascinating to me approach for them to be taking. So that's one response to what you're saying. But I also do think, working for Plan C specifically I was really, interested in like the scene with what is available to people in the U.S when they need to get abortion pills by mail by themselves.

00;47;03;20 - 00;47;28;14

That like evolving community care approaches to understanding legal implications. But also just like there's just there's such a need to be conscious, like on plans, his website now, for example, I don't think they used to have this, but they have a quick exit button now where you can look the first thing at the top that you see is quick exit, and if you click it, it goes to weather.com and erases.

00;47;28;14 - 00;47;50;18

You can't go back. But also there's like a digital privacy thing that you need to read before anything else because and so many states, they're now doing things like looking at your internet history, did you look up abortion recipes? Because if you did and you had a miscarriage, we're going to charge you with whatever crime. Or, did you Facebook message somebody because we are going to look at that too.

00;47;50;18 - 00;48;28;18

And so I like those to me, even though they're different than like emotional care, I've been really inspired by what some of these communities like activist organizations are doing, where it's like such a thoughtful thing to include. But yeah, it also heartbreaking. But yeah, there's a there's some rambling thoughts. Yeah. No, I it's interesting to hear that because it well, you know, these are the actual experiences that, you know, kind of get out of the, the clinical ness of laws, the clinical ness of even politics and wellness of, of medicine, pharmaceutical things.

00;48;28;21 - 00;48;51;18

And it's something also that comes to mind of just sort of the arena for, for your work in all of this. So in terms of lantern slides and my limited experience with lantern slides, it's in the context of our collection. So in our collection, we have inherited lantern slides that were historically used in an educational context.

00;48;51;18 - 00;49;25;22

So sort of as slide projections in a class about, you know, I don't know, art history. So, so something that is, for educational and for instruction, in a pretty formal setting, I would assume. And, and so but thinking about your work and also what it's doing with, animation with still production and also this immersive experience and your interest in phantasmagoria.

00;49;25;25 - 00;50;19;21

And am I pronouncing correctly phantasmagoria or Gloria?  
Phantasmagoria. It's two like a gathering of like, it's like I feel like I left out a syllable. Okay. All right. Phantasmagoria. That there is this, there is, I will say, like a witchy ness about the experience. And, and also this as a witness, ritualistic ness. And I'll say, very, very, how do I say, like, maybe like folk ways of, of knowledge that are integrated into one another, even with the experience of phantasmagoria, I think it's really a it's, it's I think it's endlessly fascinating that we can have such an emotional response to that kind of phenomenon, even if you know

00;50;19;21 - 00;50;47;18

that it's not real, that there's just something emotional about the experience that you're in, that provokes people that run towards the front and tear down so that, but I'm kind of wondering about. So thinking about, like the, the educational history of, of lantern slides, these other ways of knowing these, this like, the switching isn't even sort of the, the richness of your work.

00;50;47;20 - 00;51;16;25

Can you can. And that's how I'm characterizing. If you would like to characterize in a different way. Yeah. Can you kind of talk about, how you see your work as a part of, of knowledge and in education and also the experience of, of, well, experiencing this history? Yeah, yeah, that is a good question. So this piece specifically, I was thinking a lot about,

00;51;16;27 - 00;51;36;27

Like I mentioned, like, lantern lectures. And because I am kind of thinking of this as being a little more didactic, but again, like my definition of documentary is so broad and so it's like, I guess nonfiction is a better word, but, I was also thinking a lot about here are the names of any of the groups now.

00;51;36;29 - 00;52;24;15

But like in, in the past century in the US, there's been amazing, like abortion activists where kind of their practices performed education. So, for example, there was a group who went around and they would just give, kind of performances demonstrating how to give yourself a manual abortion. And there's just all these different kinds of histories where, like one thing I thought was interesting was, in some kind of recently published writing I've been reading, I've been, writing, I've been reading about, like, the post-roe abortion landscape.

00;52;24;20 - 00;52;51;29

There's this kind of problem where, like, these groups want the information to be accessible to people, how to access things, but they don't want them to be so widely published that they become targets for conservative groups. And so that kind of balance of like they need to go into physical spaces and share information by word of mouth, which can also like leads to being more supportive of is something that I'm really fascinated by.

00;52;52;01 - 00;53;19;00

And I think the magic lantern I'm interested in, in engaging, like this idea of histories of abortion storytelling, that come with maybe archeology or like using an antique side projector. And one thing I've been trying to research and find is whether there are any lantern slides regarding this history specifically, like there were advertising lantern slides. Did any of these pennyroyal pills have lantern slide advertisements?

00;53;19;02 - 00;53;43;18

I think maybe it needed to be more overt. But also there are histories of activist lantern shows like, there were what's the word when you don't want people to drink? Temperance, the temperance movement. There's a temperance movement. Lantern shows where people would go. And one of the dissolving view shows that slides I showed where it's the woman turning into a skeleton holding a jug of wine.

00;53;43;20 - 00;54;09;14

That's for a temperance show where they're like, look, alcohol's evil. Don't drink the, the flesh off of your body. So. Yeah. Yeah, so I am. So there is a tradition for that. And one thing I've been thinking about with this piece is like, you know, there's certain magic lantern scholars and historians in general who write about, histories that happened but weren't written or didn't have.

00;54;09;15 - 00;54;36;02

We don't have documentation of them. And like, recreating those histories. And I tend to, like, be a little allergic to that in my own work, where I like, really want to show things that actually happened or like show the indexical image or, but it's like a question for me in this piece where I'm like, oh. I don't know, what were the conversations happening in, like, the magic lanterns play a part in this history?

00;54;36;02 - 00;55;09;00

Or like, should I think of my show as if this existed? This is what it

would have looked like. Or I don't know, these are just questions swirling around in my head. But one last thing to respond to the witchy aspect of it. That is another part of worship history where there's like, I'm still learning how much of this is actually factual, because I'm finding in a lot of like, writing about abortion medicine, some of it's a little bit romanticized to the point of not being true.

00;55;09;02 – 00;55;38;21

So, I mean, that happens, but there were histories where there were healers and herbalists who provided abortion medication, among other medication. But there are some historians who say that was partially what fueled, like the witch hunting epidemic in Europe, where it was governments who wanted the population to grow. They didn't want abortions happening. They wanted to demonize the people providing abortion medication.

00;55;38;21 – 00;56;03;12

And so the lore of, like, the witch eating the child maybe came from the witch giving you an abortion, that kind of thing. And so some of the antique sites I have that I collected for this show are of witches, and I think so, I think which is an appropriate word because there is like there's also a lot, a lot of like reclaiming of witchcraft, of course, which I have mixed opinions on.

00;56;03;15 – 00;56;33;24

Everybody does. But like one thing I want to include in the show, just cause I think it's culturally interesting, is a place like the Satanic Temple in the US, and you're familiar with them, but they're a political organization. They have an abortion pill ritual where it's like, clearly written out in this very, like, loving way that foregrounds autonomy and like, you're doing this for yourself and it's all connected to that kind of, I don't know, it's like twisting the history of witchcraft and I don't know, there's a lot more.

00;56;33;26 – 00;57;04;02

So maybe if you like to say more about that. No, no, no, no, that's okay. Yeah. No, I think that's, that is really, really fascinating. Also I and I would just assume and if you want to go any further because you did touch on sort of the ethics of documentary or your practice and even your history with working and in ways where you were asked to do things that you saw as being unethical.

00;57;04;04 – 00;57;29;15

I don't know. Can you say more about that or how that kind of ties into your I would say, is it ambivalence to describe it about whether

or not to do like kind of speculation around lantern slides or not? Yeah, that's a good question. Part of what I'm thinking about is especially when you're using archival images, it's like and it's a topic like abortion.

00;57;29;15 - 00;58;01;09

I've been like, I'm a person who tries to just talk about abortion like it's not a problem to anybody. Yeah, but of course it is. And even with people who support abortion, it can be really sensitive. You don't know what people are dealing with. And so similarly, like I'm interested in the question around using archival lantern slides for this topic where I don't know, even if I'm just using images of plants like some of the archival images, like you can see people's houses in the background or like it's like their garden.

00;58;01;09 - 00;58;43;19

And I'm, I'm interested in this idea of gardens as like a structure, maybe a formal structure within the performance. And so it's just something I think about where you have this like very kind of sensitive topic. Like, what does it mean to use other people's images in service of that? But yeah, I, and I would also kind of came to mind is your, I mean, I, I admit I really don't watch the Discovery Channel, or much sci fi channel either, but, I do listen to a lot of podcasts.

00;58;43;20 - 00;59;31;21

And another podcast I listen to is, spoke a lot about cryptids, which I've, I never really heard these kind of like the Loch Ness Monster or Bigfoot or the Mothman being described as cryptid. I didn't really know that there was a term to describe that. But there is. But it's interesting, this lively debate over whether or not these things are real and also just sort of where we are right now in our history with conspiracy and, I would say skepticism around media that, and also, I'll say the echo chamber of social media that there are lots of things that kind of get riled up.

00;59;31;24 - 01;00;03;00

And so as you're speaking, I'm just kind of wondering also if you want to be careful as well, in that environment, especially since you were, as you say, duped by one of these documentaries. Yeah. That it's, I can see that as being something that's important to be careful about, especially using antique and archival images or, or even approximating something, especially since you can make your own lantern slides.

01;00;03;02 - 01;00;08;26



Yeah. Yeah, yeah. And.

01;00;08;29 - 01;00;29;11

Yeah. Even like finding the in some of the recipes, it's very unclear what kind of a certain plant was used. So I'll find like the right plant, but then I'm not sure if it's exactly the right one. So that's one of my many ethical dilemmas I've been having downstairs in the archive where I'm like, is this relevant? But also like, truly doesn't matter sometimes.

01;00;29;11 - 01;01;05;25

Like sometimes just the idea of a plant. I don't know either things that I'm thinking about, but I am also interested in, like, I mean, I'm new in learning about this kind of like, eco photography developing movement happening and like not and these ways of using plants to make an image. And I'm interested in like the kind of similarity between just the idea of plant recipes and like so I like the idea of processing the images using, the abortion recipe as the chemistry for the photography.

01;01;05;27 - 01;01;24;03

And so I think some of what I'm continuing to do is making my own photographs that are inspired by the lantern slide archive, but, you know, of the pill box. And so it's also been helpful just to like, see that some of the formal strategies used in the lantern slides to kind of think about and inspire. Yeah. What I'm doing.

01;01;24;05 - 01;01;41;12

Yeah, yeah. Is there anything else you want to share about your future plans for the work that you're making right now? Have you said you.

01;01;41;14 - 01;01;46;16

I think.

01;01;46;18 - 01;02;09;20

I think that's it. I'm excited to see where it goes. One thing I struggled with, like, making the animations for plan C, is that sometimes the information changes so quickly with the like access landscape to abortion. So it'd be like we'd animate one thing and then all of a sudden it's not true. And, I've also had people questioning whether it'll be legal to do this performance in certain states in the country.

01;02;09;22 - 01;02;43;05

Some interesting to see how that plays out in the next administration. And yeah. Yeah, well make it exciting. But yeah, but no, just that I'm really grateful to the ACLU for giving me the confidence to pursue this project. And to say that, yeah, yeah, it's it's really amazing. It's been amazing having you here. And thank you so much for sharing about your work and your, the background and your, your future plans for, for this work.

01;02;43;07 - 01;03;06;15

We will be keeping in touch even after you leave here. I'm very interested in in how, this progresses. I would like to see one. Yeah, I'll bring it back when it's time. Yes, yes. That would that would just. Absolutely. You know, that would be amazing and incredibly appropriate given our collection and your work. It's just really, really wonderful.

01;03;06;17 - 01;03;31;27

Well, thank you so much, Melissa. And, thank you all who are out there in the ether watching us. If you have any questions. Please feel free to get in touch with me. Ernest Davis. All of my information is on the website and also with, some links provided on this page. I encourage you to look deeper into Melissa Ferrari's work.

01;03;32;00 - 01;03;54;10

We have links to her work on this page as well. And, yeah, I think that's that's about all. So with that, we'll say goodbye and, keep in touch with us and keep in touch with us as we keep in touch with Melissa. All right. Bye bye.