

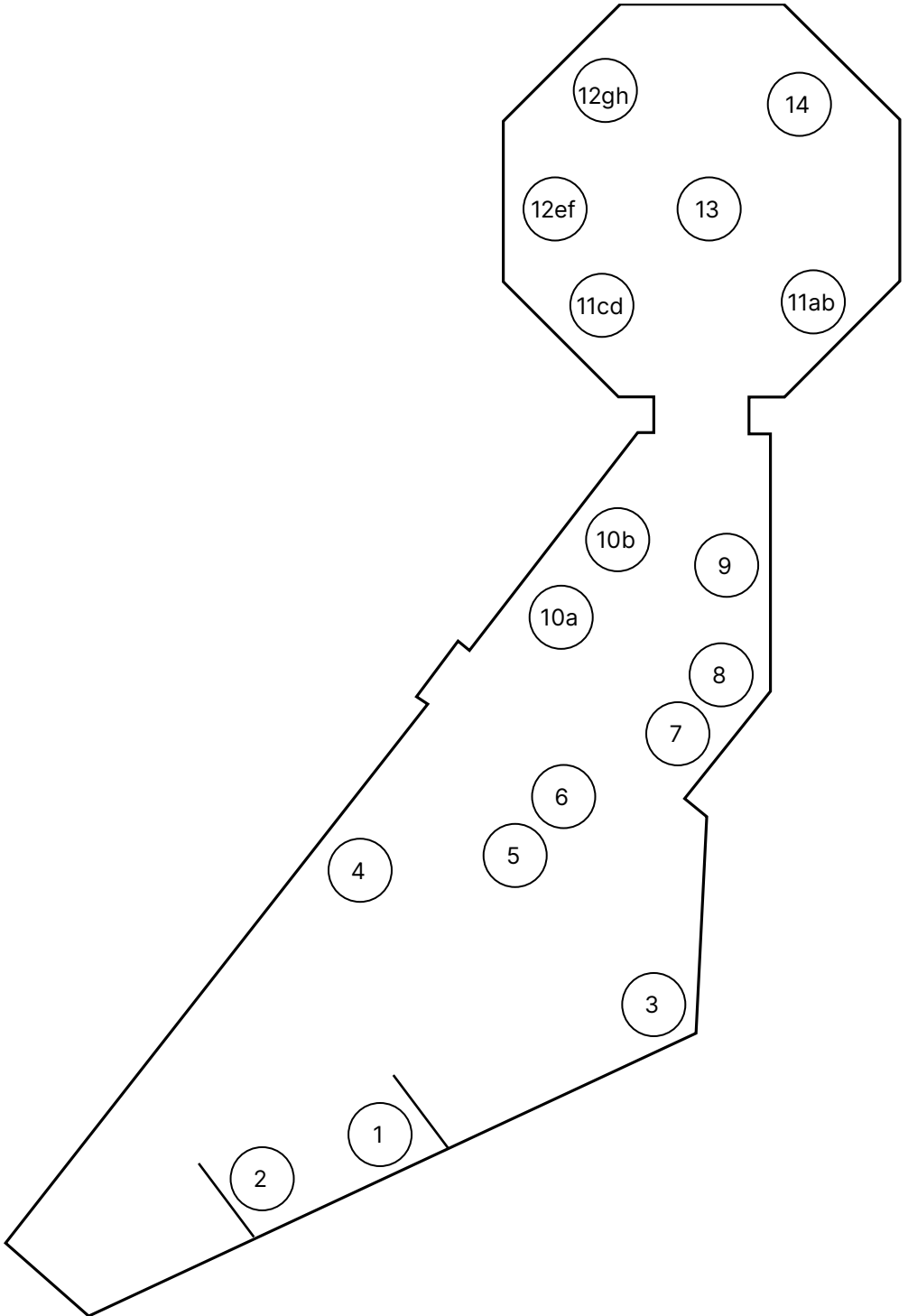
SONJA AHLERS
Classification Crisis

Curated by Godfre Leung

September 9 – November 5, 2023

LEARN ABOUT THE ARTWORKS

ENTRANCE



1. *The Archive* (2014–2023)

In 2014, Sonja Ahlers returned to Victoria to care for her sick mother. After she passed, Ahlers became the caretaker of her belongings. Ahlers has described her mother as bordering on being a hoarder, albeit one with an extremely careful and elegant collecting practice. Sorting through her mother's vast, deliberate collections was an enormous undertaking, both practically and emotionally—akin to Ahlers' description of her own artistic practice as "just trying to make sense of this pile of stuff." After completing this years-long task, Ahlers decided to continue to live in the family home, taking advantage of having the space, for once, to keep all of her own things in one place. What ensued was a continuation of the care work she had returned to Victoria to undertake: having shifted from her mother; to her mother's affairs, possessions, and home; to the custodianship of her own life's work. The Victoria house simultaneously provided Ahlers with a studio and a place to house her archive. This sculpture is a recreation of the archive as it lives in the Ahlers family home.

2. *Murder Wall* (2008/2023)

In 2008, Ahlers left Vancouver and moved to Whitehorse. As she relates: "I moved to the Yukon and got rid of all my stuff. I put some things in storage, parts of what have now become my archive. Then I started making a book up there, inspired by a breakup I'd just

gone through. It took me a long time to realize that it was also about a breakup with the city of Vancouver. Shortly after I got there, I did my usual thing of laying out images using cords strung across the walls of my studio. I saw a clip about Brian De Palma and how he made *Carrie* using index cards pinned to walls. That's how I work: I need to see the work." That book never materialized, but what ensued was more than a decade of work that no one had seen, until some of it was published in 2021 as *Swan Song*. This installation is based on the making of *Swan Song*.

3. *Rabbit-Hole* (2022–2023)

Revisiting her career to prepare her archive resulted in a new work, *Rabbit-Hole*, a 158-page book published to accompany this exhibition. This installation is a spatial adaptation of the book, which Ahlers has described as a story of her career told in reverse, in the hindsight of #MeToo and through the amassing and deciphering of archival documents that she came to treat as "clues": "With age, a person connects more dots and you see things in a whole new light. I see patterns in the work, I get more information. It's like a crime scene. The archive is evidence to me. I can't *not* do something with it, because it exists. It gives me source material that I can't deny. I think of it like mark-making and not wanting to feel like a ghost: leaving a mark and creating evidence."

4. **Toe Shoes** (2013/2023)

Originally created in 2013 for the exhibition *Larger Than Life: Contemporary Art from the Yukon* at the Ottawa Art Gallery, *Toe Shoes* mounts Ahlers' enormous collection of rescued ballet slippers—which she has been collecting since 2005—into a commentary about widespread and omnipresent abuse in the arts.

5. **Swan Song** (2021)

Reflecting on the long gestation of *Swan Song*, the book she began in 2008, Ahlers recounts: "After a while I started putting the work into binders. I just felt like I had no platform—at the time people were not really into zines, they just died off and I couldn't even bring myself to call my books 'zines'—and that went on for years. I've been thinking back to that moment a lot lately, that whole book I made that just got shoved into a binder. It's happened many times but that one stays with me. And for many years it was still going to be a breakup book, until I outgrew the breakup book. The whole city of Vancouver thing, that's another story, because it took me a long time to realize that that's what had happened. It's like, 'If I keep living in this city, it will destroy me.' I just felt like I couldn't function: I no longer had the energy to find another housing situation."

In 2021, Ahlers edited down her many binders of work—accumulated over more than a decade—to the four binders displayed here. This material

later coalesced into her book *Swan Song*, published by Conundrum Press. As Ahlers describes, "*Swan Song* is a goodbye to former selves. I have no interest in fandom anymore or imbalanced power dynamics of any kind. I've come to realize that it's a book about abusive relationships, including my relationship to the art world... whatever that is."

6. **Fatal Distraction** (2004/2023)

Coinciding with the launch of her second book *Fatal Distraction* in 2004, Ahlers exhibited the leftovers of her manuscript as a sculptural installation at Antisocial Skateboard Shop. This is a restaging of that installation using pages from the editing process of the *Rabbit-Hole* manuscript.

7. **Shoeboxes** (2012–2023)

Ahlers describes her conceptualization of her work as working within "containers." Sometimes these containers are book formats; sometimes they are literal containers, including boxes of various kinds; and sometimes they are storage devices, such as photo books or binders filled with plastic sleeves. Often the boundaries between medium, format, and literal container are blurry; for instance, is the container the letter or the envelope? Does a binder clip that holds together five scraps of paper constitute a book? Is a barrister's bookcase an archival collection? When filled, are these containers works of art,

or are they devices to sequence and collect scraps for future works of art?

As part of her 2003 solo exhibition *We Didn't Start the Fire* at Or Gallery in Vancouver, Ahlers exhibited *Stop Cool*, a collection of photographs sequenced in a handheld photobook; the sequence was also available for purchase as a printed multiple in an edition of ten. In a similar vein, this shoebox of little photobooks illustrates both Ahlers' process in composing books and the continuity between collecting and bookmaking within her art practice.

8. ***Fierce Bunnies*** (right to left: 1994, 1995, 2004, 2022)

Since 1994, Ahlers has been handmaking *Fierce Bunnies* out of salvaged angora sweaters. These became an underground sensation in the early aughts, when they appeared in the homes of celebrities such as artist Rita Ackermann and members of the band Sonic Youth, and later in the music video for M83's "Teen Angst" and *The Twilight Saga: New Moon*.

9. ***Yukon Book*** (2008–2014)

For a time when she lived in Whitehorse, Ahlers worked at the Yukon Archives, where she often made extra copies of documents her patrons asked for that she found interesting, collecting them in this binder.

10. ***One-offs***

- a. *The Fur Book* (2004)
- b. *Friends in High Places* (1999–2023)

In addition to the many multiples—zines and published books—Ahlers has made since the early nineties, she has also created dozens of non-circulating, single edition books that she calls "one-offs." In the early aughts, Ahlers transitioned from black-and-white photocopied zines to more idiosyncratic ones, featuring different sizes, textures, colours, and treatments. In many ways, the new possibilities she began to see in the multiple form arose from experiments in the one-offs. Spanning 25 years, the complete body of Ahlers' one-offs is housed in a barrister's bookcase in her Victoria home.

11. ***First generation zines****

- a. *A Wandering Eye* (1995)
- b. *Mercurial* (1995)
- c. *Huge Phone Bill* (1996)
- d. *Dry Socket* (c. 1996)

Beginning in 1992, Ahlers created an incredible body of black-and-white, photocopied half-size zines—with a few exceptions, 4¼ × 5½ inch booklets made from sheets of 8½ × 11 inch letter paper, folded and stapled in the middle. These zines circulated mostly in the mail, through a network of artists, writers, musicians, and scenesters that Ahlers accessed

through the do-it-yourself (DIY) punk rock and Riot Grrrl subcultures. These zines emphasized communication and exchange: the relationship between sender and recipient was not one of seller and buyer, but rather pen pals. “I had a massive pen pal correspondence throughout the nineties,” Ahlers has recounted. “I lived through my PO Box. It was the only way I felt connected to other people. I was unable to connect with the people in my scene in person.” *A Wandering Eye* from 1995 is Ahlers’ earliest surviving zine.

12. “Books” (second generation zines)**

- e. *Just Ducky* (1999)
- f. *Happy Ball* (2000)
- g. *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* (2005)
- h. *Feel Loved* (2007)

After the publication of her first book *Temper, Temper* in 1998, Ahlers began to move away from the quarter-size format in her zines. She also started referring to them less frequently as zines—partially to create some distance from Riot Grrrl and DIY punk rock—and more often as simply, and nebulously, “books.” The subsequent books featured irregular sizes, colour-photocopied images, colour paper stock, inserts of varied textures, and largely played with the distinction between the handmade one-of-a-kind books she made that she called “one-offs” and the inherently reproducible

zine format. *Happy Ball* was made to coincide with Ahlers’ first professional solo art exhibition, *Everything I Own Is in This Room* at Rogue Art in Victoria (now Deluge Contemporary Art). *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* and *Feel Loved* were made within the craft community that coalesced around Blim Gallery in Vancouver in the mid-aughts.

13. *unshown binders* (2008–present)

Beginning in 2008, Ahlers made more than a decade of work that, until the publication of a small amount of its material as *Swan Song* in 2021, almost no one had seen. Using the binder as her medium, she effectively made numerous voluminous books in the total absence of an audience. Partially a reaction to the relentless competition and omnipresent clamouring for visibility in Vancouver’s art world in the aughts, Ahlers’ *unshown binders* dissolved the activities of making and archiving into one another.

14. *Men Explained Things to Me**** (with Godfre Leung)

A mail art edition of 150, *Men Explained Things to Me* is an art project about the emotional economy of mixtapes from boys. This edition is a facsimile of four mixtapes made for Sonja in the nineties by a very famous musician (who will remain unnamed here), and the power dynamics underlying those “gifts.” The music on those mixtapes was “taped over” with recordings by women and

nonbinary artists, many of which touch on themes of marginalization, asymmetrical power relations, exploitation, and abuse in art and music scenes.

The identities of the artists on these tapes will not be made known in any public online communication. Their identities, as well as the names of the songs, will only be listed in the liner notes. This project is partially an experiment to see whether it's possible to create a way for these tapes to find their way to the people who want them by word of mouth, the way Ahlers' zines and her friends' music did back in the

nineties. This project is also a love letter both to the old penpal networks that her zines used to circulate through, and to "whisper networks," defined in Wikipedia as "an informal chain of information passed privately between people, typically women. It consists of gossip about people in a community (frequently a professional community) alleged of being sexual harassers or abusers."

The title of this work was inspired by Rebecca Solnit's 2014 book *Men Explain Things to Me*.

Content Advisories

(*) These zines include language that might not be suitable for all age groups and audiences, including cursing, references to drug use, and ableist language.

A Wandering Eye addresses themes related to sexual assault, domestic abuse, suicidal ideation, and eating disorders. *Mercurial* addresses many of these same themes and is the chronicle of an abortion.

(**) These zines include language that might not be suitable for all age groups and audiences, including cursing, references to drug use, and ableist language.

(***) The recordings on Tape #1 and Side A of Tape #2 contain references to sensitive topics, including sexual assault. Side A of Tape #4 includes references to suicide. These sections also include language that could be considered offensive and may not be suitable for all visitors.

Before playing these tapes, we request that you kindly take into consideration the comfort of your fellow visitors. Thank you.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Carmen Bonzelius, who preserved the first *Fierce Bunny* and graciously let Sonja “borrow” it back; Amy Ching-Yan Lam for allowing the use of her family's couch in this exhibition; and Susan Farmer for many things. The archive photo in the *Murder Wall* is by Geoffrey Tomlin-Hood; the photographs of *Everything I Have Is in This Room* at the edge of *Rabbit-Hole* are by Todd Eacrett. Most of the quotes in this guide originally appeared in an interview with Sonja published by *Relssue* in November 2021.

Richmond Art Gallery and the artist acknowledge the financial support of the Canada Council for the Arts and the BC Arts Council.



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts
du Canada



BRITISH COLUMBIA
ARTS COUNCIL
An agency of the Province of British Columbia



BRITISH COLUMBIA
ARTS COUNCIL
supported by the Province of British Columbia

RAG RICHMOND ART GALLERY



 Richmond

richmondartgallery.org

[#richmondartgallerybc](https://twitter.com/richmondartgallerybc)