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# A WORK-IN-PROGRESS

## Behind the *Silenced Gun Violence Series*

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(Fig. 1) Jennie Fleming. Pre-Installation view, for “A Work-in-Progress: Behind the *Silenced Gun Violence Series*”

I was excited to have the opportunity to present a new series of works-in-progress at Digital Frontiers 2019 in the New Media Art Showcase, first because the work had not been seen outside of the studio yet, and second for the opportunity to get feedback from an interdisciplinary audience at a friendly setting— the academic/professional conference. For a traditional panel session, I could prepare a talk and slide presentation, and hopefully get some questions and feedback. The showcase opportunity allowed for more informal interaction and conversation, for return visits, and I looked forward to engagement with people from diverse backgrounds and expertise.



The opportunity was not without its challenges. How would I display finished and unfinished multimedia objects for a few days in a conference space not designed for exhibiting art? How would I travel the work by air safely and without incurring extra baggage fees? Inspiration struck with my recollection of Marcel Duchamp's *La Boîte-en-Valise* — my participation in the conference would be an *atelier-en-valise*, a studio in a suitcase, a traveling studio visit (Fig. 1).

In 1935, Duchamp began making miniature replicas and reproductions of his life's work. The Nazi occupation of Paris in 1940 made it more of an imperative to make his work suitable for travel. Disguised as a cheese merchant, Duchamp smuggled his reproductions in secret compartments of cheese cases through Nazi checkpoints as he traveled from Paris to the unoccupied south of France, and then eventually to New York in May 1942. After World War II, the miniatures and reproductions were housed in boxes that would open as a self-curated portable museum display; a deluxe edition of twenty boxes were stored in a leather carrying case. I had the opportunity to interact with a later edition when I worked at the Baltimore Museum of Art. I was immediately charmed with the box of objects and with what T.J. Demos describes as “the aesthetics of the suitcase” — “mobility, compactness, fragmentation, miniaturization, and the impulses toward nostalgic collection and portable containment” (Demos 2002, 9).

What would be inside my studio-in-a-suitcase? I limited my studio visit to whatever I could fit in a practical, hard-shell carry-on-sized luggage, and what would fit on two eight-foot banquet tables (Fig. 2). It would be a glimpse into the development of a series-in-progress “Silenced” from 2018 onward, consisting of drawings, artist's books, and reproductions of drawings and installations. I highlight a few of the works below.



(Fig. 2) Jennie Fleming. Installation panorama view, for “A Work-in-Progress: Behind the *Silenced* Gun Violence Series”



The display included an introduction to the new series by way of a precursor, a project I created for the 2013 *Contain It!* exhibit at the Dunedin Fine Art Center in Florida. *Do You Know Where Your Guns Are?* was an installation in a storage pod that I fitted with a wooden V-shaped frame and plastered with “missing gun” posters based on news reports of guns stolen from private homes and vehicles (Fig. 3). The stories chronicled thefts committed most commonly by family, neighbors, and friends; of guns known to be in easily accessible locations; and used later to commit crimes. The posters were reminiscent of missing child, pet, or property flyers you might see in neighborhoods, designed with simple document software and printed with a home color printer. There were also color reproductions illustrating the many types of guns that had been stolen. I had two-inch square souvenir cards commercially printed with a QR code linked to a Tumblr blog that archived digital versions of the posters with links to their original news reports, as well as links to organizations with information on gun thefts and prevention. The Digital Frontiers display featured an image of the installation and samples of the posters and the souvenir card.

I moved on to other projects, but the headlines kept coming. More stolen guns, more mass shootings, more incidents of domestic gun violence: “Community members shocked over rare murder-suicide;” “Domestic Shooting Leaves Woman Dead in Shreveport.” I couldn’t let them go and after the Pulse nightclub mass shooting in Orlando in June 2016, I started the research for the new *Silenced* projects.

The news stories led me to statistical research in an attempt to gain insight into actual numbers of deaths and injuries, and what patterns might be emerging in the increasing crisis of incidents. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report one set of data (influenced by the political bias of current administrations) while advocacy groups promoting or opposing gun control measures offer different sets, but few offer a comprehensive look beyond numbers. The non-profit Gun Violence Archive attempts to fill this void, collecting news and police reports in real time for free online public access. While the spreadsheets, charts, and maps are useful, it is the incident reports that provide the most detail with locations, participants, notes, and source links.



(Fig. 3) Jennie Fleming. Left: Installation view, for “A Work-in-Progress: Behind the *Silenced* Gun Violence Series.” Right: *Do You Know Where Your Guns Are?* (2013) mixed media installation, detail image.

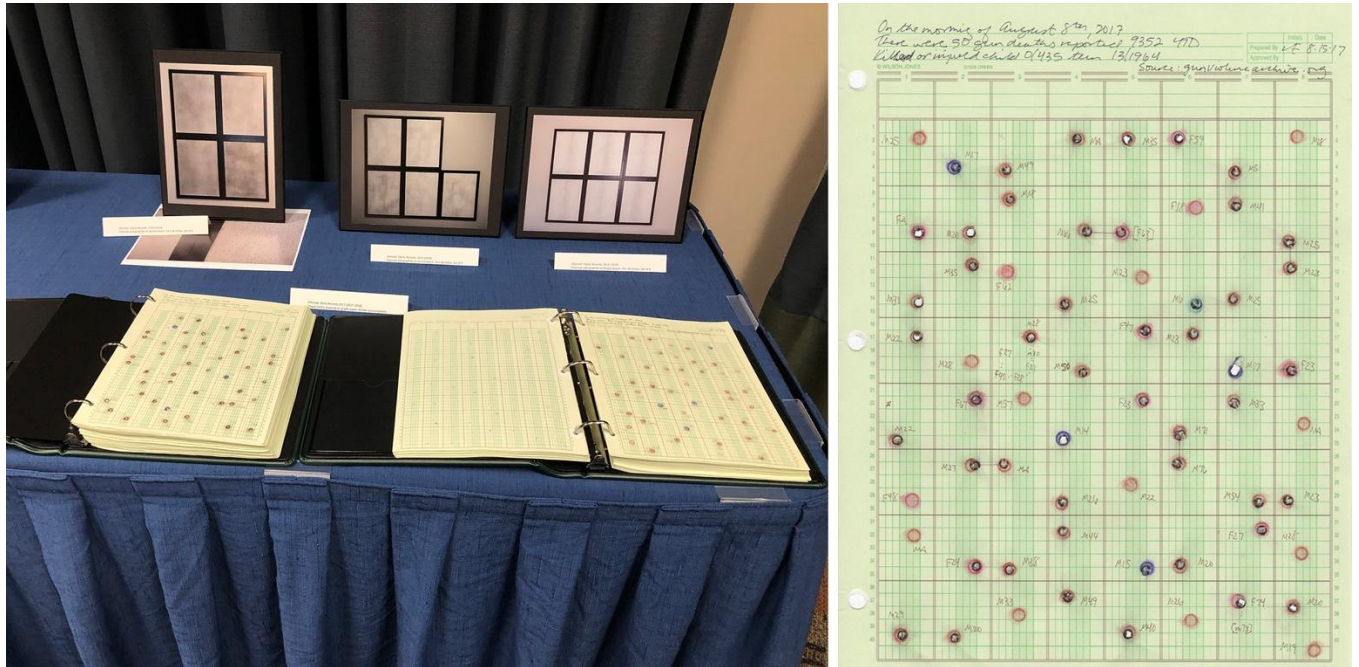


(Fig. 4) Jennie Fleming. *Silenced: Yearly Records 2016 (2019)*. Charcoal and graphite on paper, each 24 x 18 inches.

For the *Silenced: Records* series, I used the Gun Violence Archive (GVA) information to create data portraits in a series of mixed-media drawings. French poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire is often quoted as saying that a portrait is a model complicated by an artist, and in this sense, the drawings are not just data visualization, but presentations of data complicated by personal and cultural perceptions and biases. In *Silenced: Yearly Records 2014-2016 (2018-19)*, charcoal and graphite on paper) thousands of deaths and injuries are recorded in a ritualistic practice of puncturing holes in the paper with graphite and charcoal. They are intentionally performed drawings and not rendered by mechanical means, because I wanted to feel “something” as I recorded the suffering and loss hundreds and thousands of times; my hands would cramp and my arms and back would ache from the hours spent on each work. Graphite and charcoal were chosen for their simple and stark qualities; and for the visual



similarity to gunpowder residue (see images of forensic studies). *Silenced: Yearly Record 2016* is pictured here (Fig. 4) as an installation image of six 24 x 18-inch drawings; the larger, darker holes along the center are reported deaths, the smaller holes that move to the edges are reported injuries. There are two months in each drawing, starting from the top left to right: January/February, March/April, May/June; and from the bottom left to right: July/August, September/October, and November/December. For the conference, I brought photographic reproductions of the *Yearly Records* (Fig. 5).



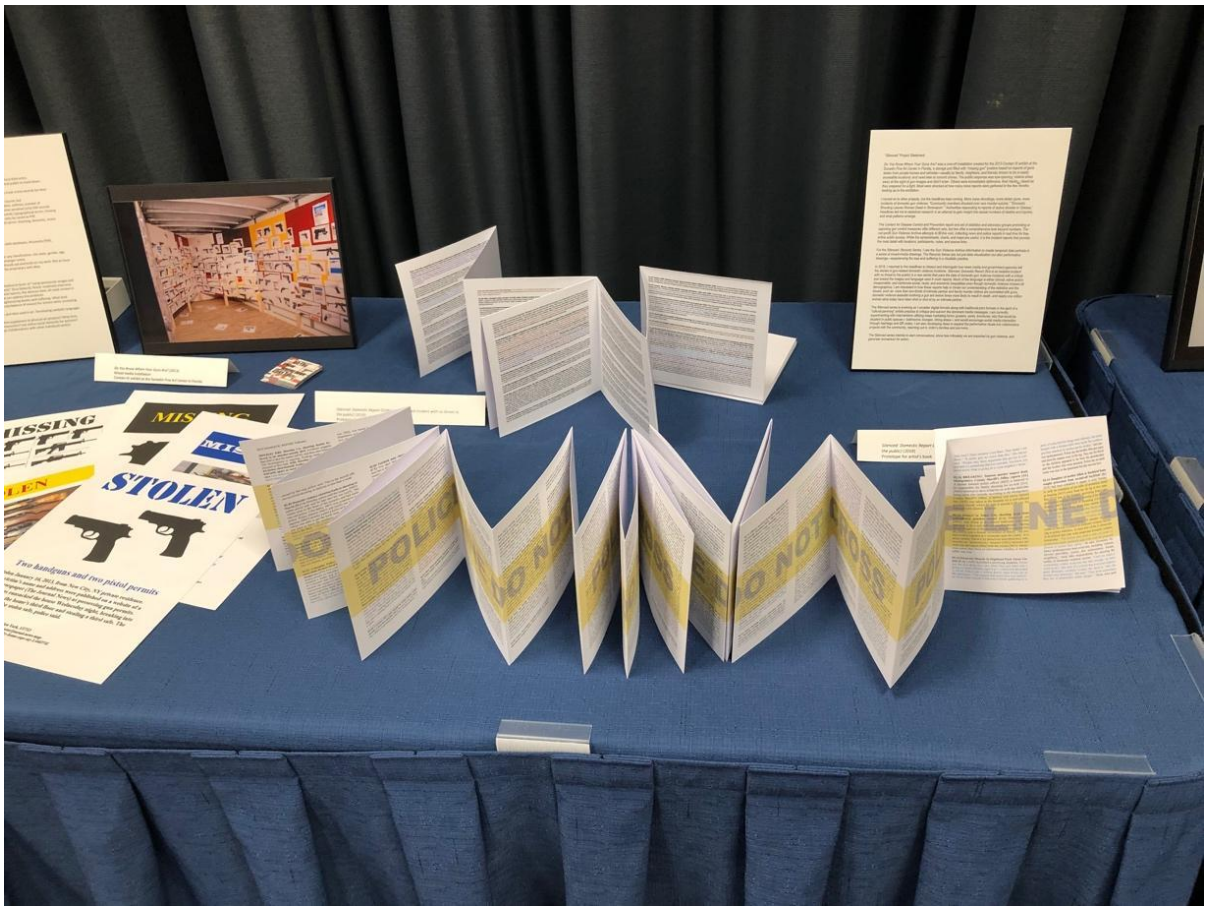
(Fig. 5) Jennie Fleming. Left, front table: *Silenced: Daily Records 2017* (2017-18). Mixed media on ledger paper, each 11 x 8.5 inches (leather binder installation); back table, left to right: photographs of *Silenced: Yearly Records 2014, 2015, 2016*. Right: detail of daily ledger page August 8, 2017.

*Silenced: Daily Records 2017* (2017-18, mixed media on ledger paper, leather binder) is an accounting of all the reported gun deaths for each day in 2017 (Fig. 5, front of table, and detail). This was my first attempt at grappling with the daily accounts of gun violence. When I started the record in January, it was the reported deaths for that day represented with a fabricated “gunshot” mark on the ledger. By February, I was learning more about how the data was collected and kept more detailed records filled in with news reports. I started to work a week behind as I noticed discrepancies for daily counts based on how soon or late incidents were reported. The “gunshots” represented the numbers that were reported by that morning on the GVA Twitter page. With verified news reports, I could provide more information about who died that day: color coded circles indicated reported sex/gender and age group (brown for adult male, red for adult female, purple for teen, light blue for child) along with letters for sex/gender (indicated with M,F,T), and age (for example, M18). Solid lines between circles were connected deaths, and ID information in brackets, for example [M33], indicated the shooter. If there was a death(s) associated with injured shooting victims, the injured were indicated with dotted lines to reported gender and age (ie. - - - F27). In instances where there were differences with the initial reported numbers for that day (the punctured “gunshots”) and the verified data, there would be instances of color circles with letters and numbers and no puncture, or there would be punctured “gunshots” with no identifying data.

The *Silenced: Records* series were my attempts to simultaneously comprehend the big picture— the daily/monthly/yearly numbers of those killed or injured — and the details — who, when, where, and why (the how is known). What are the patterns? What does the data tell us beyond numbers? Drawing was an immediately accessible and intimate way to tackle the days I was overwhelmed with anger and sadness. With some distance now on these first attempts, I see new possibilities for the stories the data has to tell and how I might help tell those stories.

Other works on display addressed some of the stories directly. In 2019, I returned to the headlines to dissect and interrogate how news media and government agencies report gun-related domestic violence incidents. *Silenced: Domestic Report (this is an isolated incident with no threat to the public)* pairs the data of domestic gun violence incidents with a critical eye toward the images and language used in such reports. Much of the language is clinical, biased, and/or irresponsible, and reinforces social, racial, and economic inequalities even though domestic violence crosses all demographics. I am interested in how these news stories help or hinder our understanding of the statistics and the issues, such as domestic violence assaults involving a gun are twelve times more likely to result in death.

For the conference, I brought samples of prototype artist's books featuring collected news stories from each month. *Domestic Report (02.2019)* records the date, headlines and excerpts from each story (Figs. 6, 7). Black text in bold indicates the headlines as written with the state in brackets (for example, [TN]), blue text indicates law enforcement quotes, turquoise indicates quotes from domestic violence experts/organizations, purple for quotes from family, brown for quotes from friends or neighbors, red for quotes from the perpetrators, and green for quotes from the victims (injured or shared posthumously by others). The pages are six inches square, with two columns and fonts reminiscent of a print edition newspaper. The font is tiny out of necessity; currently there are 3-5 excerpted stories per page and a larger font would result in many more pages and thicker books. The accordion book shape was employed here for practical purposes but also for symbolic meanings. The book can be easily transported and stored but will expand as you interact with it. For the February 2019 book, the yellow police line stretches in the background for eighteen feet across hundreds of reports of gun-related intimate partner violence/murder-suicides, and family violence/murder-suicides.



(Fig. 6) Jennie Fleming. Installation view, for “A Work-in-Progress: Behind the *Silenced* Gun Violence Series”



orders of protection or file for divorce against abusers need a safety plan because separation can cause abusers to become angry and violent, experts say. "The threat and danger is real," [Domestic violence spokesperson] said. "And there are people in this community they can reach out to to get help."

**02.17 Man Charged in Death of Wife, Son in Suburban Chicago Home [IL]** A suburban Chicago man [M49] has been charged in the deaths of his wife [F47] and son [M26]. [Police chief] said a "tender age individual" was also at the home when officers arrived, but was not injured. After the shooting, which investigators said was domestic in nature, police identified the [M49] as a "person of interest" in the shooting.

**02.17 Death of two Missouri brothers ruled a murder-suicide [MO]** [News station] reports the brothers' mother called 911 about the initial shooting. Officers found [M42] dead inside a home of a gunshot wound. The other brother, [M33], was found inside another nearby home. The sheriff's department says after surrounding the home, officers heard shots and noticed smoke coming from the home. After the fire was extinguished, they found [M33] dead from a gunshot wound. Investigators believe the two men argued about a gun.

**02.17 San Marcos police investigating 2 deaths Sunday as murder-suicide [TX]** San Marcos police believe a man [M27] who killed himself in Guadalupe County on Sunday might have fatally shot a woman [F23] hours earlier and are investigating the two deaths as a possible murder-suicide, officials said Monday. Officers responded at about 11:23 a.m. to reports of a woman shot in the head by her ex-boyfriend in [address], officials said. Shortly after, police received reports from

Guadalupe County of a man with a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head.

**02.18 Man Jailed In Greenville Shot, Killed Adult Son By Mistake, Family Says [TX]** A sobering reminder that rage and weapons are a volatile mix. A man is jailed facing a murder charge following an overnight domestic dispute. However, relatives say the ultimate victim was not the intended target, telling [news station] the suspect shot and killed his adult son. "It's just crazy, man... It's crazy," said a relative near the scene. "My mom told me that my cousin was gone. It was sad." "I don't think my uncle would do that to his own son," he said. That same cousin told [news station] the accused shooter had gotten into a dispute with his wife. She and her young daughter had already run from the home when he was shot. "He was trying to calm his Pops down," explained the cousin.

**02.18 Victim's brother arrested in connection with Howardwick double homicide [TX]** [MA], the brother of one of the victims, was arrested [...] charged with capital murder. Donley County Sheriff [...] told the [newspaper] that there does not appear to be a clear motive at this time. Authorities found [M34], and [F33], dead in the couple's residence [address] after the Donley County Sheriff's Office received a call regarding shots being fired just after 10 p.m. Monday night.

**02.18 Indy Family warns of domestic violence dangers after woman is murdered by boyfriend [IN]** An Indianapolis family has a word of warning for women everywhere after a murder and attempted suicide on Indy's west side. Police were called to [address] Monday night and found two people shot. Investigators believe a [M51] tried to take his own life after killing his girlfriend [F36]. "I really loved my mother and I'm so mad

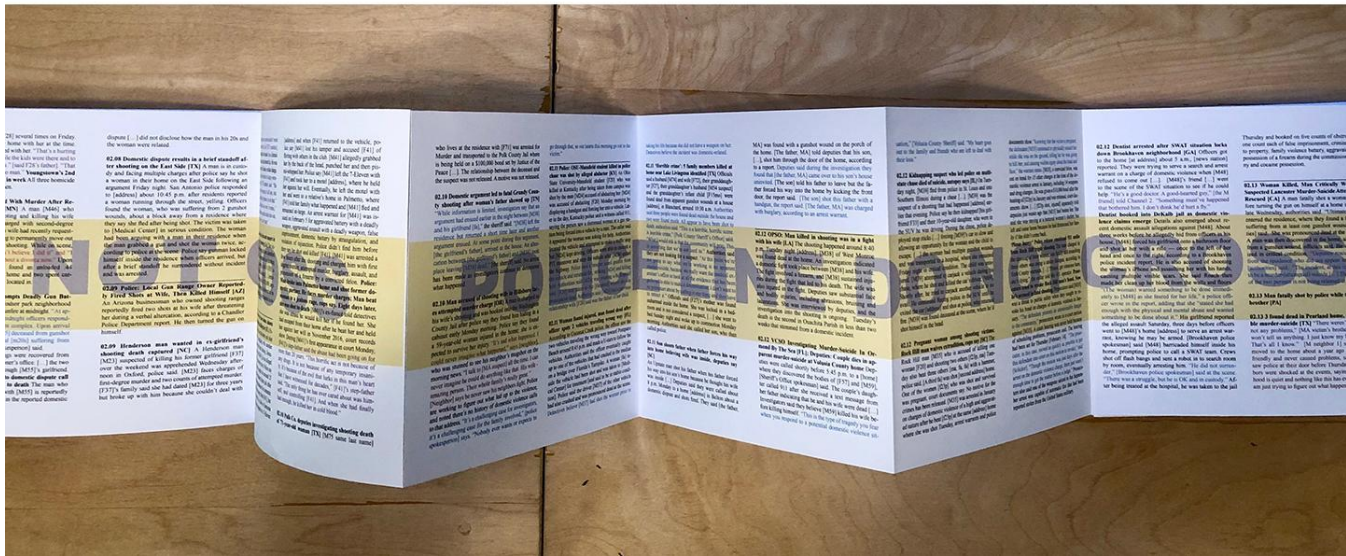
that she's gone," said [F10, F36's youngest child]. She broke down talking about her mother. Family members say [F36] had recently gotten into a relationship with [M51]. The family admits they saw signs of trouble. "He would threaten to kill himself and every time she would say, 'I'm here. I love you. I'm not going anywhere. Don't be like that.' He would stalk her," said [F36's sister]. "Those are all ways that abusers exert control over their victims. Those are warning signs that's it's time to get help," said [Julian Center spokesperson]. The numbers show failing to escape domestic violence can be deadly because a majority of female homicide victims are killed by domestic partners. "It just does escalate," said [Julian Center spokesperson]. "Help is out there. Help is out there in ways that are confidential." "We know the things he was doing, the threats to kill himself. We knew and she would go back," said [F36's sister]. "If you have someone like that, don't let them ruin your life. Don't let them take your life."

**02.18 Sheriff's Official: Suamico Shooting Was Murder-Suicide Case [WI]** Brown County Sheriff's deputies say [F34] was fatally shot by the father [M28] of one of her children who then took his own life. Authorities were called to [address] about 2:30 a.m. Monday where they found [F34] suffering from a gunshot wound. They also found [M28] dead of self-inflicted gunshot wound in the driveway. Sheriff's officials say [F34] and [M28] were involved in a custody dispute over their 14-month-old child. Authorities say [M28] recorded a Facebook message for his son indicating he was, "going to do what's fair." Officials say [M28] went to the home and began shooting at the bedroom of [F34]'s 4-year-old child from a previous relationship. [F34]'s mother who had been staying in the same room with the 4-year-old covered him. Covered up the 4-year-old, [F34] came in the room. Came up to the window,

saw [M28], began yelling at him to stop and she was shot in the head," said [captain of sheriff's office]. Court documents: Man lost custody of child, didn't pay child support before fatal Suamico shooting. The man who police say shot and killed his child's mother, before turning the gun on himself, lost custody of his [14-month-old] son and spent months trying to fight the decision while also not paying child support, court records show.

**02.18 Coroner: Broomfield couple dead in murder, suicide [CO]** Police confirmed the deaths of two people found inside a Broomfield home on Monday was a murder-suicide. Investigators also determined that the case is a "domestic violence situation." [F40] death has been ruled a homicide and [M45] a suicide. "There's a hole in our family now that she's gone," [F40's mother] said Tuesday. "I just don't have words to tell you what it's doing to us."

**02.18 Couple identified in apparent murder-suicide at Sugar Land home, police say [TX]** Parents dead in murder-suicide at Sugar Land home as 16-year-old daughter slept inside Sugar Land police said they responded to the home when someone hung up after calling 911. Officers arrived and found the bodies of [M51], and his wife, [F46]. Officers said [F46] was found with a gunshot wound to her head in the driveway of the home [address]. [M51] was found in the bedroom with a gunshot wound to the chest and a small handgun nearby, police said. Police said a preliminary investigation indicates [M51] shot and killed [F46] and then turned the gun on himself. "A young female came outside and said that her father was still inside the house. Officers went inside and found an adult male apparently had a shot to the chest, self-inflicted apparently," [police chief] said. Police said the couple's 16-year-old daughter



(Fig. 7) Jennie Fleming. *Silenced: Domestic Report* (02.2019). Prototype for artist's book, folded 6 x 6 inches. Detail images.

Presenting works-in-progress can be a risky endeavor. Outside of a studio visit with trusted friends and colleagues, the conference setting is the safest place to be vulnerable. An interdisciplinary event was ideal for this series with feedback possibilities from different perspectives. I also had the opportunity to learn about a variety of projects and research being conducted by people in other disciplines, and what their methods and concerns might be throughout the digital humanities. I found myself energized and inspired from what might seem in passing as unlikely sources.

Since the conference I put the series on hold to reassess where it should go next. The *Silenced* series is evolving as I consider digital formats along with traditional print formats in the spirit of Duchamp's *Boite-en-Valise*; intentionally portable methods of display offer opportunities for maximum exposure. The 1990s era of "cultural jamming" — guerilla tactics, media hacking, and information warfare— also serves as inspiration for this series. Mark Dery wrote about cultural jamming as updating Guy Debord and the Situationist tactic of using spectacular images and language to disrupt dominant media



messages, “where we are citizens actively engaged in civic life and public discourse rather than passive consumers of media myths” (Dery, 47). Cultural jamming, experimenting with cultural forms and subverting expectations, is a descendant of Marcel Duchamp’s work that would blur the lines between original and reproduction, object and concept, and disrupt orthodoxy while offering institutional critique.

I am currently experimenting with interventions using mass marketing forms — posters, cards, brochures — that would be situated in public spaces— bathrooms, lounges, dining areas — and would encourage social media interaction. I would also like to develop relationships with community centers and organizations in hopes of generating collaborative, community-engaged projects.

The *Silenced* series intends to start conversations, show how intimately we are impacted by gun violence, and generate momentum for action. I am grateful for the conversations I had with the Digital Frontiers participants and attendees, and welcome additional conversation from this article.

For more information on the project, visit [www.jenniefleming.com](http://www.jenniefleming.com)

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