

Compassion in Action

Alfred University, NY
Curated by Maureen Weiss



Compassion in Action

Sharon Kagan

Solo Exhibition at Alfred University

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Resume

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Compassion in Action

Compassion in Action is a journey of discovery and understanding.

I believe that each of us can choose to initiate a profound healing process to alleviate the trauma and devastation experienced by our families and our ancestors such as the American Indigenous peoples and the American settlers that perpetrated genocide, Holocaust survivors and the Nazis who murdered millions, or the descendants of Black slaves and White slave owners. It only takes one person to begin the process of freeing themselves from a painful legacy to begin the process of change for all generations.

My work has focused on becoming free of the generational trauma of antisemitism and the Holocaust. As the daughter of Holocaust survivors I have wrestled with the subject of forgiveness, often coming to the conclusion that I cannot forgive an act that was not committed against me. I now realize that although the acts were not done to me personally, I have lived with their consequences my entire life. So how do we forgive something so enormous? What is it to forgive? What is it to be forgiven?

Compassion in Action is composed of three works:

Release Me, a 5-day durational performance

The Red Lotus: To Witness, To Release; a participatory sculpture





Release Me

A 5-day durational performance of the artist knitting a metaphorical cocoon/prison of cotton and silk/mohair yarns and then breaking free from her imprisonment. The sound designer, Jason Mullen, weaves moving voice overs of the artist and her parents telling their stories, sounds of nature and music are played in between as the artist knits.

The backdrop to the performance is an image of a German Hunting tower. The artist sits in a rocking chair which is tied to another chair by yarn. Visitors are invited to engage with the artist by sitting in the second chair and sharing stories, asking questions or quietly knitting.

The performance is designed to be live-streamed so that people from around the world can watch and ask questions of the artist.



Day 1



Day 2

Day 3



THEATRE/
CHANGE
ROOMS





Day 4



Day 5

Shana Nys Dambrot , Los Angeles based writer and critic

With a long career that has encompassed practices from performance art, to radical knitting, installation, photography, painting, and video, Sharon Kagan's meta motif is the pursuit of a kind of craft-based conceptualism, in which both experience and idea are given equal prominence in her vibrant, fractal aesthetic.

Richard Vine, Senior Editor, *Art in America*

When Kagan's mother died in 2003, the artist took up the older woman's interest in knitting, both as a way of soothing her grief and as a physical expression of human continuity and connectedness. Knitting and nets became the basis for numerous sculptures that preceded her current work.



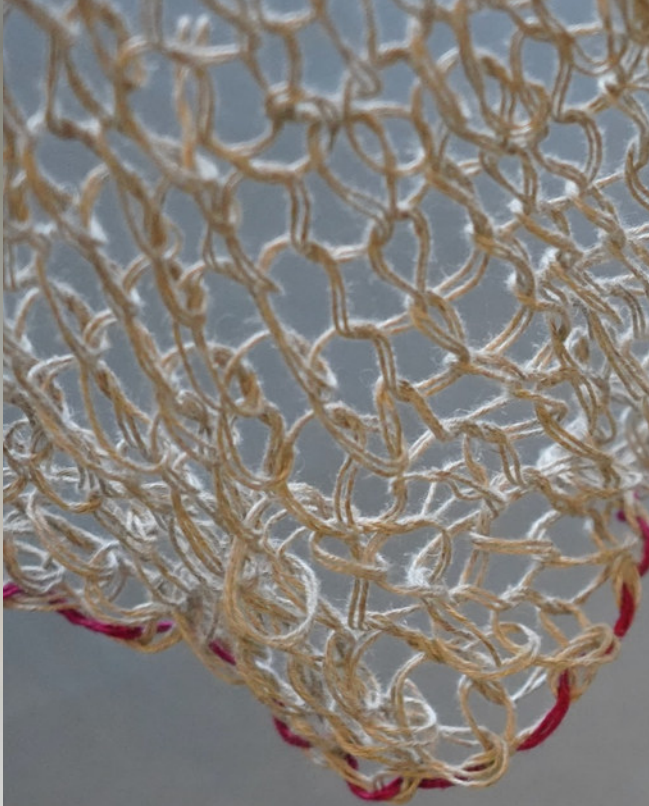


The Red Lotus: To Witness, To Release

Two chairs sit inside of a loosely knit spiral of hemp yarn that hangs from the ceiling. Visitors are invited to enter and sit back-to-back in the enclosing. One serves as The Speaker and the other as The Silent Listener. The Speaker is able to say anything, think aloud, or share a secret without censorship. The Silent Listener does not reply in response to what they hear; they are a compassionate witness free of judgment. The Listener is asked to silently repeat the Buddhist Metta practice, “May you know peace, may you be happy, may you be free from all pain and suffering.”









The Undoing: Forgiveness

This video/performance records the artist's hands knitting and unraveling sticky waxed hemp twine accompanied by anonymous, audio stories revealing a wrong experienced and the desire to forgive the wrongs committed. While listening the artist recites the Buddhist Metta meditation, "May you be happy, may you be well, may you be safe and free of all suffering, may you be peaceful and at ease."

Waxed hemp is the metaphor Kagan's chosen to represent the wrongdoings. Waxed hemp twine sticks to everything and knitting it is like wrestling a demon into submission. Yet, hemp has other important properties. It is known to have environmental healing properties; it removes metals from the soil, is self-hydrating, and restores land that was made toxic or over planted into healthy usable soil.

Waxed hemp is exhausting to knit with. "My hands become red from the effort of getting a needle through a stitch, twisting the yarn and pulling it through. My hands burn and the action requires tremendous strength." The twine says forgiveness can falsely appear to be an easy process, it is often sticky, unruly, and knotted with emotions and painful memories. We may often lose our way in finding the end of the thread and finding a path to forgiveness.



Sharon Kagan—The Undoing: Forgiveness

Everyone knows that COVID has changed the world we inhabit. But no one is certain about the details of that transformation, particularly in terms of the ways people behave toward one another, as well as the ways we interact with our own feelings, which include our expectations and assumptions, memories and regrets, dreams and ideals. One difference I've noticed between behavior before and after the pandemic has to do with the ways we communicate.

Just before COVID struck, one of the dominant forms of public discourse was the confessional. Celebrities and comedians, politicians and athletes, civic leaders and other citizens who had run amok confessed their misadventures publicly, just like St. Augustine did almost two thousand years ago, but more quickly and less poetically than the Christian saint, who needed three years and 13 volumes to recount—and redeem himself from—his youthful transgressions. Like Augustine, some modern confessors seemed truly sorry: contrite and repentant and interested in being forgiven. Others not so much. A good number appeared to be going through the motions, following the scripts of apologies carefully crafted by publicists, corporate boards, and damage-control consultants. The most egregiously self-serving confessions, in my opinion, were those that began with the disgraced speakers paying lip service to whatever misdeeds they had committed only to turn their monologue into a defense of their selfishly misbegotten actions, which should have embarrassed them deeply, but instead became part of a proud explanation of their supposed specialness, a bit of manipulative autobiography wrapped in the garb of the-rules-do-not-apply-to-me privilege. Such self-serving story telling was doubly cynical: It turned

what could have been a moment of honest assessment of shortcomings shared by many into a moment of one person treating their own moral shortcomings as what makes them better than the rest of us—unique and distinct and supposedly worthy of our attention, no matter how diminished its span.

Now that COVID has been with us for two years and running, people no longer seem to be interested in following the format that Augustine established so long ago to tell stories about themselves—or to listen to others tell stories about themselves. In terms of public discourse, confessing one's sins has fallen by the wayside, a victim of the pandemic or, more precisely, a victim of the way COVID has affected the ways we communicate with others and, equally important, converse with ourselves: telling stories, putting feelings to words, explaining why we are the way we are, and, most important, coming to understand just what that might be. Today, much of what passes as public discourse begins with a sense of being aggrieved. Not mildly disappointed, in ourselves or our surroundings, nor philosophically opposed to thoughtfully articulated ideas or propositions, but deeply, profoundly, and intractably pissed off: angry, to the core, and seething with resentment about an injustice or series of injustices that have been done and continue to be done and will continue to be done unless we make the damage they have caused and continue to cause known, as loudly and dramatically and as unambiguously as possible.

Make no mistake, there's plenty to be angry about. A short list includes economic exploitation, racism, patriarchy, global warming, and the inequities—of gender, religion, and ethnicity—seemingly built into the social structure of every nation on the globe. But when it comes to the loudest pronouncements based in aggrievement, it seems that the goal is not to resolve or rectify a problem, but to blow off steam, to vent, to rant and rage, the more aggressively the better. That superficially passionate activity is accompanied by the cynical conviction that it's too late to make any real changes and all one can do is register their disgust, their resentment, their disdain for their fellow citizens, which they turn into enemies. Public figures and politicians have perfected such theatricalized versions of feeling aggrieved, parading their resentment for being unfairly treated by playing victim only to shore up their power, their positions, their privilege.

In a sense, what they do is the opposite of a real confession, which originates in self-reflection and an acknowledgement of one's faults. In another sense, what they do isn't all that different from what the fake confessors did pre-pandemic: flaunt their shortcomings as their strengths, turn weaknesses into fraudulent virtues, and pretend that they are their best selves when they follow the path of least resistance. Such short-sighted monologues and self-serving diatribes transform the give-and-take of real conversation into pay-attention-to-me temper tantrums, stage-managed reenactments of perceived grievances that, locked in a

closed circle of repetition, bury the possibility of discovery, of growth, of truth.

This is the context—or background—out of which Sharon Kagan’s brilliant little video emerges. Without fanfare or theatrics, and with none of the visual tricks or digital bells and whistles that characterize so many big-budget Hollywood productions, her straight-to-the-point piece of DIY videography subscribes to the belief that remaining calm, cool, and collected is the best way for any of us to communicate with anyone else—and that the best chance we have for gleaning insights into our own selves also involves patience and the capacity to slow down and wait, passively but not impassively. Without sitting still and shutting up, for listening to what others are really saying and being equally attentive to the silent voice of our own inner beings, nothing worthwhile will be discovered. So that’s what Kagan asks of us—to listen attentively for thirty minutes to the stories a handful of individuals recount as they bear witness to the internal journeys they have taken and are continuing to take. What these ordinary people have to say is compelling because they do not pretend to be know-it-all authorities or performers acting out scripted roles in order to manipulate audiences, but because they come off as individuals struggling honestly and openly and earnestly to come to some kind of understanding of how their experiences have shaped them and what they might do about that today.

That moves me. Their mixture of everyday pragmatism and hope-for-a-better-life idealism matches the way I approach the world. The distinctness of their life experiences resonates with my own not because their realities mirror mine, but because they are different and distant from mine and, in that difference and distance, invite me to see my own world differently: more fully and deeply and honestly—neither as a string of random happenstances nor as a sequence of preordained occurrences, but as events and experiences still open to interpretation, perhaps intrinsic to my identity or maybe incidental to it (despite what I have assumed for years, even decades). Kagan’s genius is to show that the future is filled with possibility because the past, although it has passed, is not over and done with, but open to transformation—and that that transformation is a matter of our capacity to understand it differently. In her hands, transformed perceptions generate transformed realities. Perspective matters, more than we usually acknowledge. And each of us is in the best position to change our perspectives, our assumptions about their roles in our lives, our default settings, as it were. No one can do that for you. Nor take away your capacity to do it for yourself.

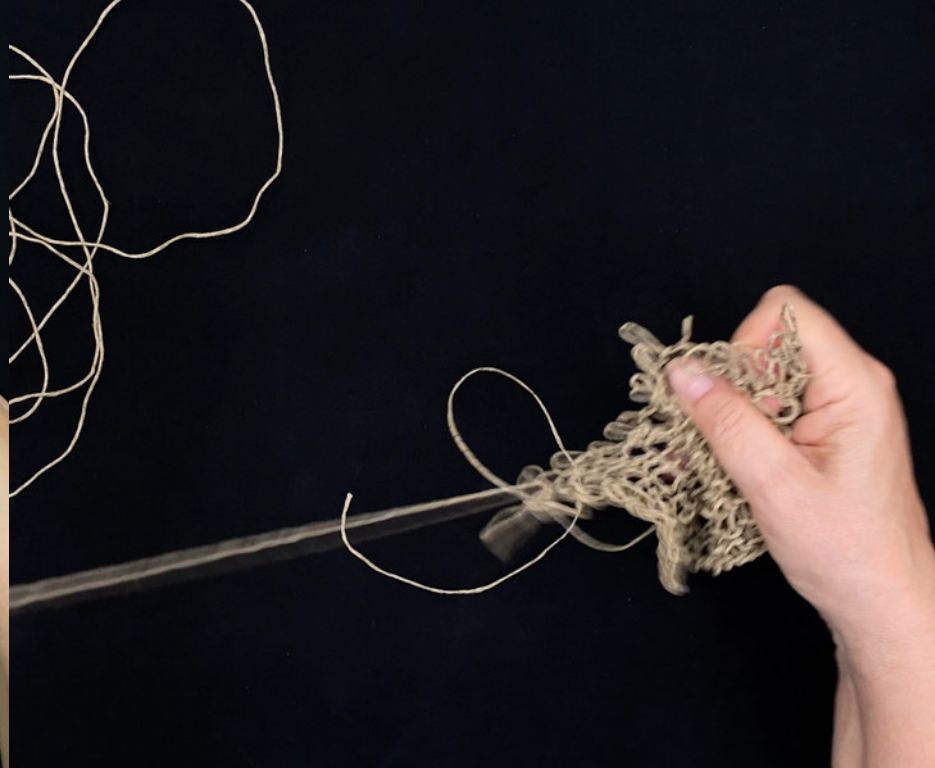
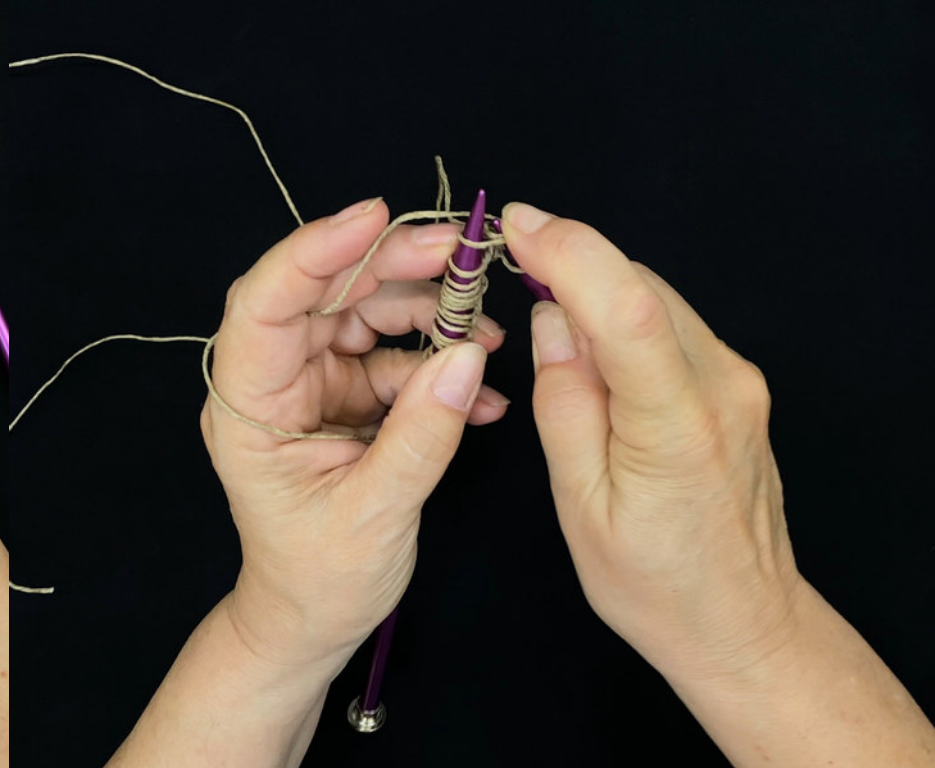
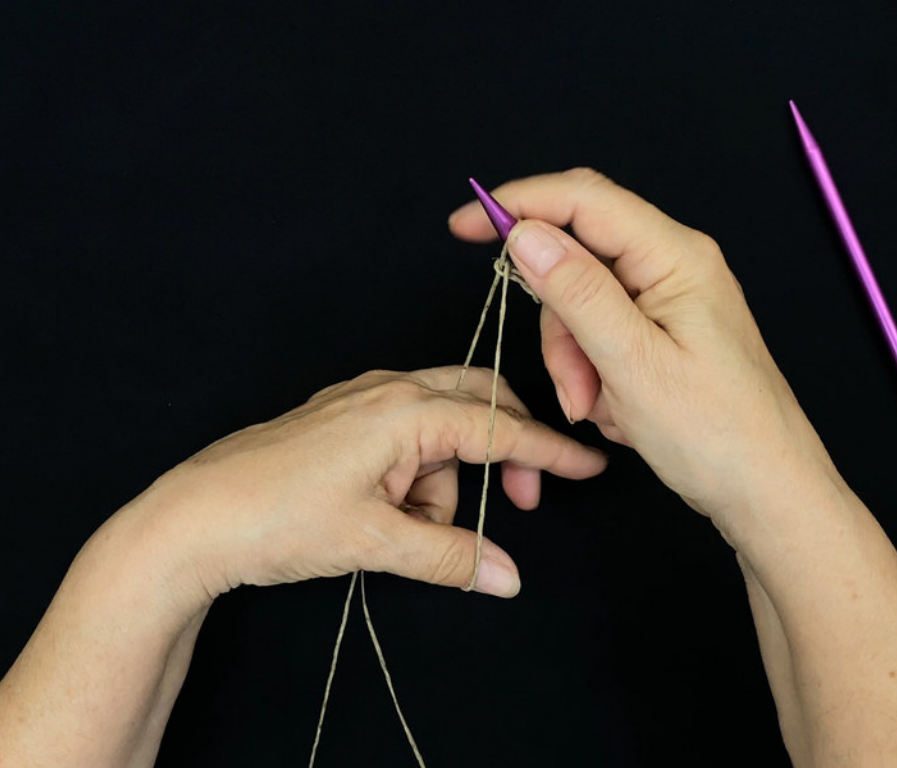
Kagan’s multi-source, fixed camera meditation cuts through all sorts of nonsense to give viewers a glimpse of what it looks like when otherwise anonymous and perfectly ordinary individuals slow down, think deeply, and do three things: 1.) honestly mull over how the circumstances in which they have found themselves have shaped them; 2.) fearlessly ponder how their initial, generally unreflective responses to those situations trapped them in a cycle that perpetuated some of their most damaging features; and, 3.) come to understand that they have the power to escape the confining cycle of repetition, freeing themselves of its needless burden

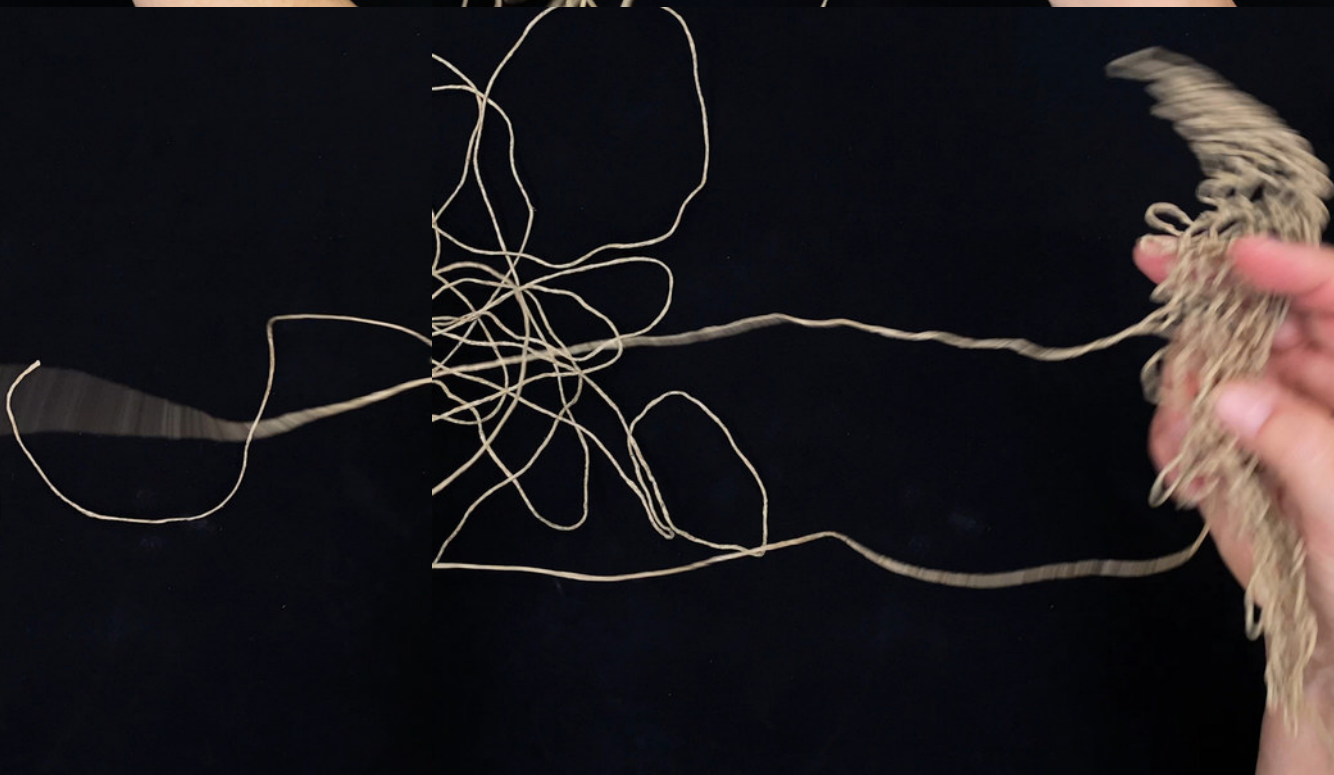
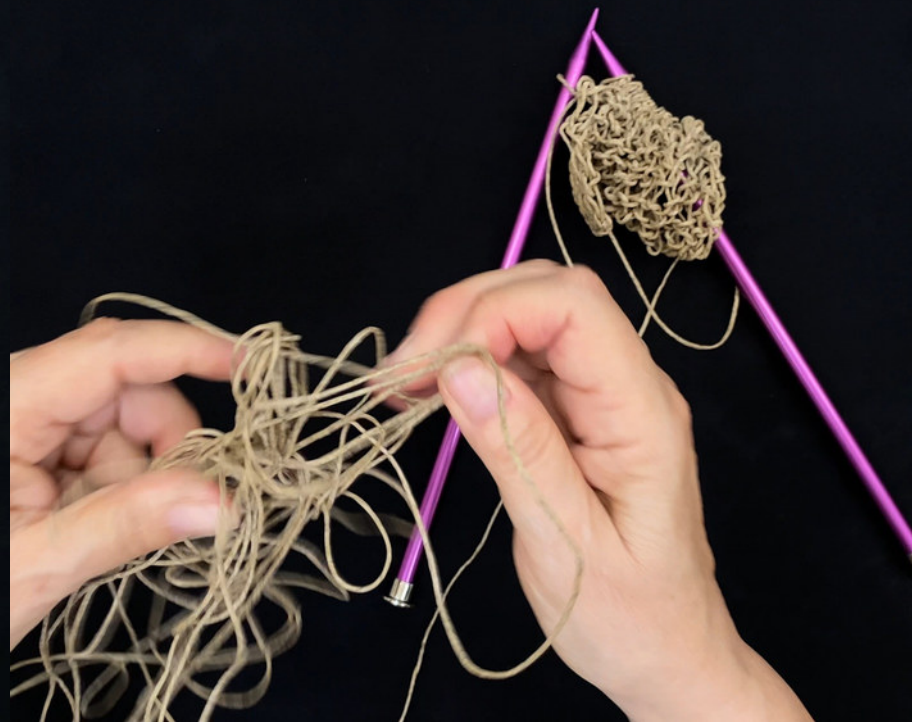
and being able to enter the moment unencumbered by the past: filled with the possibilities real innocence presents. Neither confessing their missteps nor publicizing their grievances, they articulate, in their own words, how they have worked, and continue to work, to forgive people who have hurt them.

The most significant difference between what transpires in Kagan's *The Undoing: Forgiveness* and what predominates in the confessions and grievances of public discourse is that her endeavor begins with forgiveness. That's radical. It's an idea or an action entirely absent from the other types of conversation that have dominated public speech. One reason Kagan's video is so different is because it is intimate. The people in it are brave enough to be vulnerable. What they do has nothing to do with the false bravado of so many public figures nor the faux confessions of narcissistic internetters. In contrast, her work gives individuals the time and space to talk about experiences important to them, and then invites viewers to listen in. It's clear that Kagan's collaborators trust her, otherwise they would not have revealed so much about themselves. It's also clear that Kagan trusts us viewers, both to treat her people's stories with the respect they deserve and to come to our own understandings of what those stories mean to each of us. Neither a micro-manager nor a control freak, she behaves as she believes: that without the freedom to interpret words and tones as we see fit, those words and tones ring hollow. Conversations with no back-and-forth are not conversations: They are monologues or declarations or pronouncements. As an artist, and as a human being, Kagan is uninterested in such authoritarian modes of communication.

Another reason her video is so powerful is because it insists that social relations are essential to individual subjectivity. The forgiveness the speakers in her video enact always takes place between at least two people—an individual and someone else. That relationship, in the world created by Kagan's art, is foundational. It's distinct from confessionals, which focus, almost exclusively, on the self. It's also distinct from the rants of aggrieved parties, which include others only to blame them for everything bad that has ever happened, absolving the aggrieved speaker of any and all responsibility. That is the opposite of what *The Undoing: Forgives* does: show people taking responsibility not only for their own actions but for the ways other people's actions have affected them. With impressive, often inspiring strength, the people in Kagan's video show us what it looks like to overcome trauma and suffering to make room for something different, something as yet unrealized, something like love.

David Pagel, Art Critic, Curator and Professor of Art Theory & History at Claremont Graduate University.





THE UNDOING: FORGIVENESS

***An invitation to participate in a new community-sourced performance/video project
by Sharon Kagan 2021***

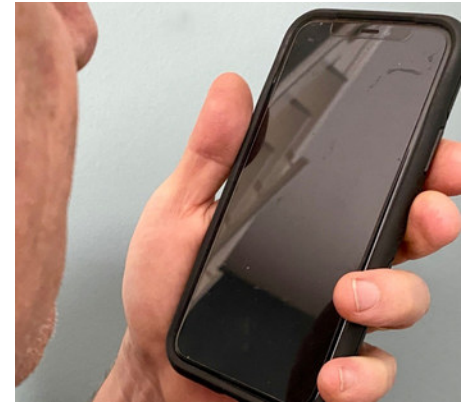
If you are interested in a serious inquiry into forgiveness, I am looking for your story. Please share a short 3 minute audio story of a wrong that you have experienced followed by how you would benefit from forgiving and releasing the pain of this situation. Possible subjects include personal story, historical story, political story, or a story of self-wrongdoing as examples.

These powerful stories will be included in a video/performance of my hands knitting and unraveling waxed hemp while reciting a Buddhist Metta loving-kindness meditation. “May you be happy, may you know peace, may you be free from all harm and suffering.”

This invitation is extended to a diverse community. Participants will be anonymous, and all recordings submitted may be used in production and promotion of the video performance. If you have a story, please consider helping others on a path of healing.

Please share your short 3-minute audio story and what impact it had on you.

Use your phone to record your story - Record the memory several times, choosing the one you feel is best, and email your recording to me personally.



Sharon Kagan: Dropped Stitches

Forgiveness has a quality of paradox. We're told it's a moral and spiritual journey; wellness psychology says it's about your own wellbeing and peace. The wounded human heart often has other ideas. Letting go can feel like letting them get away with it. You may feel that your tormentor or perpetrator of injury or injustice is not deserving of this grace, or that it is not your place or in your power to forgive their trespasses. The daughter of Holocaust survivors, Sharon Kagan has contemplated this paradox since forever, and much of her practice as an artist has sought to resolve it.

“The Undoing: Forgiveness” is both a work of performance and of video, accessing Kagan’s practice of interdisciplinary narrative metaphor. With her own background in performance art and its documentation, and through a triple lens of feminism, Jewishness, and community, Kagan has been working in a liminal space between private and public soul-searching. In the video she enacts a ritualized knitting practice — creating then unraveling a pattern using sticky waxed hemp, all of it a metaphor for the challenges of the act of forgiveness and interconnectedness.



In its emotional complexity and straightforward aesthetic the work has echoes of the Shoah Project videos and ceremonial readings of religious texts. Its quiet power recalls the profound directness of the movement and video artists in the 1980's who explored the contours of an emerging medium as well as cultural trauma centered on their own bodies — in this case, Kagan's own hands. The mesmerizing rhythm of her movements are augmented by audio segments in which anonymous speakers testify as to episodes of harm done to them and their path toward forgiving their aggressors (friends, parents, civic institutions).

As Kagan repeats a Buddhist meditation on peace, freedom, love and joy in response to each canto, the idea dawns that unraveling is a good thing, actually. The labor of knitting was generating a knotty, sticky trap; dismantling it is freedom.

**—Shana Nys Dambrot, Arts Editor,
LA Weekly, Flaunt, Art & Cake, Artillery**

The Audience

The most important component to *Compassion in Action* is audience engagement.

During *Release Me*, audience members sit across from the artist taking in the intimate stories being shared, asking the artist questions, sharing personal stories of how they relate to generational trauma, and interacting with the yarn beside them.

In *The Red Lotus: To Witness, To Release*, visitors are asked to either open themselves up to a stranger or friend and share their private thoughts or to be a loving presence and listen with compassion.

While experiencing the exhibition, audience members wrote poems, drew pictures, and left comments on post it notes that would then flow on the walls surrounding the performance.

- Joy Honey Bees and Stories
were interesting how knitting can be
muscle memory - Alfred. C

the story of you learning to knit
through watching tears - your mother has
moved me to down in my lovely family
been passed and it's truly lovely to
as well and hold my beautiful memories
create and ones my beautiful work
of loved ones.

- June T. ☺

You have made such a comforting space
Even with the story being very difficult
to listen to at times there is
such a warm feeling. Thank you

So beautiful, thank you for sharing

I needed this, thank you.

~~~~~♥ angus

- An amazing way to engage an audience.  
Thank you for letting me experience this.  
- Shavira

interesting

This was beautiful, thank you.

Thank you for this moment  
of reflection I wish you  
all the peace peace & happiness



Good morning! Working away!  
Keep up the good work!

XOL

- Linda V.

Cathartic. Moving.

At times, also quiet  
and lovely

Enveloping. Embracing.

All being.

Looking forward to spending  
some time with you today  
on your courageous, beautiful  
journey. ♡

- Lisa K.

The heart and the  
mind united

Soul at rest

Foggy morning chill  
and a warm cup clasped  
in hands, skin and bone  
memory and love

You are Seen (heard)

Known

at last.

Remarkable work!

Congratulations!

- Lesley K.

The background photo looks  
Great!

Congrats! Well deserved!

The artist at work...

Beautiful!!!

- Linda V.

Great Song!

You Go Girl!

- Danielle

The heart and the  
mind united

Soul at rest

Foggy morning chill  
and a warm cup clasped  
in hands, skin and bone  
memory and love

You are Seen (heard)

Known

at last.

So Calming and  
beautiful ♡

♡ sending all  
Love ♡

Sitting across from  
Sharon is a truly  
Peaceful feeling

I really Love

How the SPACE  
HAS CHANGED.

每个人都能早日回家!

Soft & full  
time stands still  
loose & tight combine  
fine lines.

Sometimes life gets  
hard... And it feels lonely.  
Just know it gets  
better.  
You got this.

So beautiful and  
powerful.

Congratulations

- Suzanne B.

The space reminded me  
of a home I didn't  
have. It was odd and  
wonderful

Cookie  
♡♡♡  
HAVE that  
Cookie♡

Passing through, passing on,  
letting be, letting time  
melt & change.  
This is timelessness &  
totally in this moment.

Silence is so powerful.  
So are words.

Both are important for  
peace.

Very calming environment

Make you feel fully immersed

Thank you

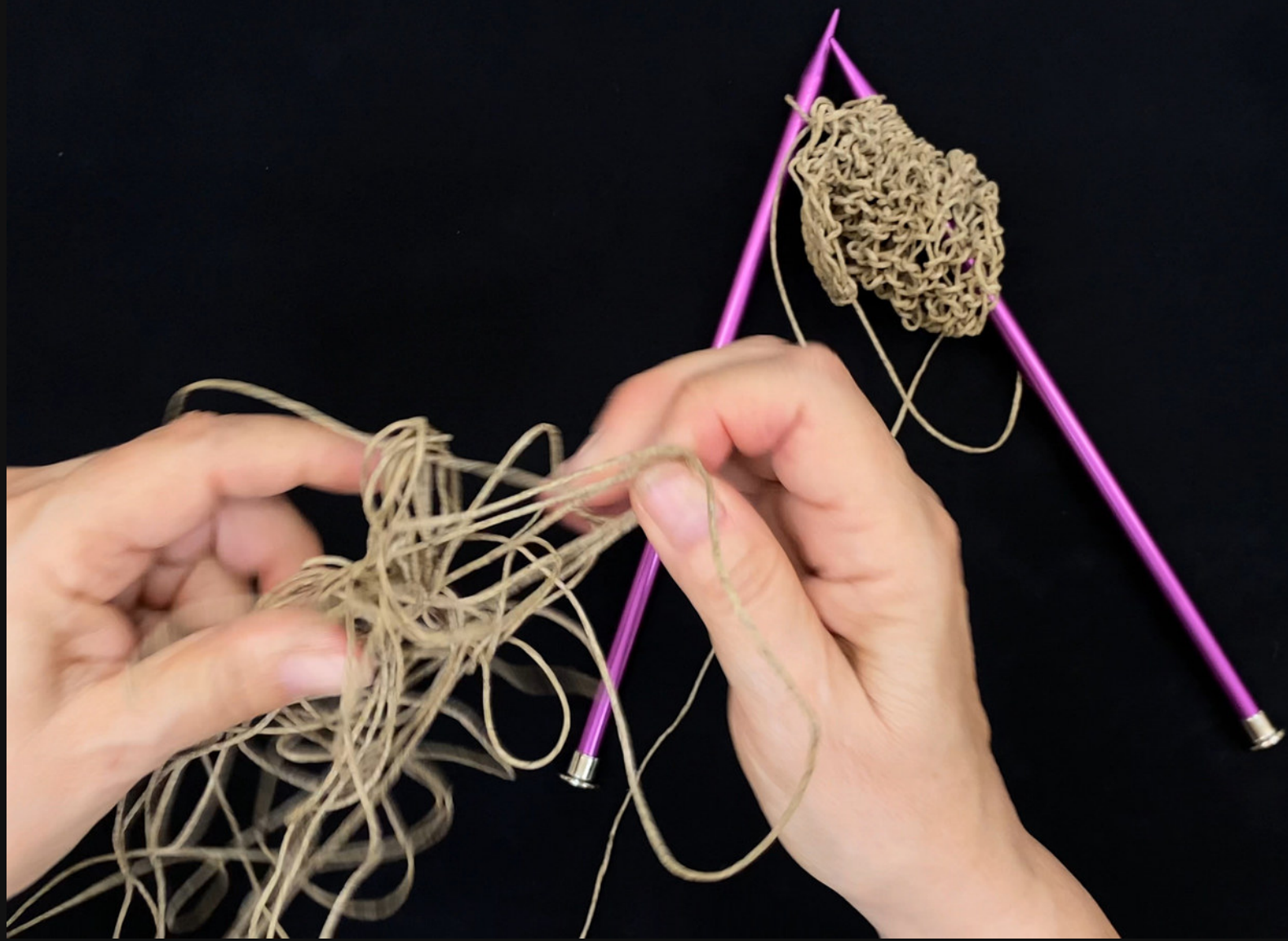
I wish nothing more than  
peace and joy, both internally  
and externally, may everything  
be alright, and may your  
journey take you where you  
need to be

WE HAVE TO  
BE CAREFUL  
OF OUR  
COMFORT ♡♡♡

Strength isn't what  
you show it's who you  
are. - Alfred.C

- Love your Life

Very calming  
experience. Hard to  
hear the words but  
nice to hear her  
voice. Thank you ♡



## **BIO**

*Sharon Kagan's multimedia work focuses on socio-political issues providing multiple entry points for the viewer to imagine a more just, diverse, and inclusive world.*

***Compassion in Action** is meant to expand the feminist tenet surrounding liberation and environmentalism into an intersectional, multidimensional conversation about diversity and justice. She states, "When there is ambiguity, there is the possibility for multiple interpretations inviting meaningful dialogue, exchange, and change."*

*Kagan received the WORD Artist Grant: The Bruce Geller Memorial Prize from the American Jewish University in 2021. Recent solo exhibitions include **Compassion in Action**, Alfred University, Alfred, NY, **The Politics of Color**, Show Gallery, Hollywood, CA and **String Theory**, Herrett Center for Arts and Science, Jean B. King Gallery, College of Southern Idaho, Twin Falls, ID (2020-2021); **Sharon Kagan**, Hardin Center for Cultural Arts, Gadsden, AL and **String Theory**, Yellowstone Art Museum, Billings, MT (2019); and **Sharon Kagan**, Charles MacNider Art Museum, Mason City, IA and **Sharon Kagan**, Northern State University, Aberdeen, SD (2018).*



# SHARON KAGAN

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## Education

M.F.A. 1979 Sculpture/Performance, Otis Art Institute

B.A. 1976 Fine Art (cum laude), UCLA

## Grants/Fellowships/Awards

2021 - WORD Artist Grant: The Bruce Geller Memorial Prize, AJU

2019 - CCI Quick Grant Awardee

1989-1990 - National State County Partnership II Matching

Grant we declined due to fiscal problems with our non-profit partner

1985 -1986 - Brody Arts Fund Fellowship Award, Individual fellowship in performance art

1985 - California Arts Council, Artist in Residence sponsored by Artsreach

## Professional and Volunteer Affiliations

2020-2019 Kipaipai Fellow, artist professional development program

2017 Pico Union Project, Artist in Residence

2005-2007 PiNK (into Pins, Needles & Knives) Collaborative Artist Group

1999 Barbara T. Smith archive, registrar

1986 Performance Director, Suzanne Lacy's *The Dark Madonna*, UCLA Sculpture Garden

1977- 79 Judy Chicago, Dinner Party, apprentice

## Selected Exhibitions

2022

*Compassion in Action* (solo exhibition), Alfred University, Alfred, NY

2020-2021

*The Politics of Color* (solo exhibition), Show Gallery, Hollywood, CA

The Street & The Shop, Neue House, The Bradbury Building. Curated by Michael Slenske

*String Theory* (solo exhibition), Herrett Center for Arts and Science, Jean B. King Gallery, College of Southern Idaho, Twin Falls, ID



Maiden LA, SOS.Siren, Los Angeles, CA  
2019

Sharon Kagan, Hardin Center for Cultural Arts (solo exhibition) Gadsden, AL  
String Theory (solo exhibition), Yellowstone Art Museum, Billings, MT

2018

Ping Pong Miami, Miami, FL

Sharon Kagan, Charles MacNider Art Museum (solo exhibition), Mason City, IA

Ping Pong Basel, Basel, Switzerland

Sharon Kagan, Northern State University (solo exhibition), Aberdeen, SD

2017

Free Form Five, Elga Wimmer, NY, NY

### **Selected Performances**

2022

Release Me, a 5-day durational performance, Alfred University, Alfred, NY

2000

An Intimate Conversation, a performance/installation. Upstairs at the Market Gallery,  
Los Angeles, CA

1999

Bone Kaddish, Santa Monica Airport, Santa Monica, CA

A Husband/A Wife collaboration with Terry Holzgreen, Santa Monica Airport,  
Santa Monica, CA

### **Selected Bibliography**

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“5 New Exhibitions to Check Out”, Angeleno Magazine, Claire Harper, October 2020

“Free, Form, Five”, CultureCatch.com, Mary Hrbacek, October 16, 2017

“FREEFORM 5, ArtQuips, 5, David Gibson, October 17, 2017

“Free Form Five”, Huffington Post, D. Dominick Lombardi, September 29, 2017

“Sharon Kagan: Microcosmic”, Huffington Post, Shana Nys Dambrot, March 16, 2017



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