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## Mind the Zap



### Mary Coble examines the shocking history of electroconvulsive aversion therapy.

By Kriston Capps

Tubular electrodes, TENS (Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation) units, “violet wands”—there’s a Sears catalog’s worth of appliances that the adventurous can use to give their sex lives a little jolt. But for conflicted and troubled homosexuals, electrical stimulation has long had a different purpose.

“Aversion therapy, reorientation therapy, reconditioning—there’s a myriad of names,” says Mary Coble. “The end result was to make these people not gay.”

For *Aversion*, a performance and installation piece Coble will stage at Conner Contemporary Art, the 28-year-old artist will undergo electroconvulsive aversion therapy—a combination of shock treatment and visual suggestion prescribed to cure homosexuality. She will be shown alternating slides of men and women in various stages of undress; when a woman flashes onscreen, Coble—who is gay—will be zapped via two electrodes connecting her body to an electroshock device. The idea is that the pain will register a negative association with the fairer sex.

“A lot of times they chose to do this on their own,” Coble says of those who have undergone aversion therapy. “They would do anything not to be gay—and this was the cure for it.”

The American Psychiatric Association declassified homosexuality as a mental disorder in 1973; currently both the American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association declare aversion therapy (when used as a treatment for homosexuality) a violation of professional standards. “A doctor could lose a license over it,” Coble says. “[B]ut there are reports of this shock therapy still happening, not supported by psychiatrists or any mental health institution.”

Like much of Coble’s work, *Aversion* is the result of her constant research into the civic identity of gay and transgender people. Her previous works have examined the indifference among organizations tasked with tracking and preventing violence against gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. In *Note to Self* performed at Conner in September 2006, Coble had the names of 400 murdered gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people—the victims of crimes not reported to any central database—inscribed on her back with

an inkless tattoo gun. With *Aversion*, Coble hopes to evoke the psychological manipulation that underscores the physical shock of aversion therapy.

“I want other people to question these things,” Coble says. “For this piece...this is the only way to get it across.”

In addition to the performance, Coble’s piece includes three installed videos. *Session One* and *Session Two* each focus on one of Coble’s hands as she experiences shock treatment. The third, *Aversion (Recounted)*, shows a series of interviews that Coble recorded in 2007; in these narratives, unnamed individuals deliver firsthand accounts of their experiences with electroconvulsive aversion therapy.

“There was no standard,” Coble says of the experiences recounted in the narratives. “Some people were hooked up to their arms; some people, bottom of their feet; some to their genitals.”

One thing that the electroshock treatments did have in common: They didn’t work.

“It didn’t have the outcome which hospitals, doctors, and therapists hoped,” Coble says. “The result it did have was that these people were blamed. They didn’t want to be straight enough, they did something to cause the therapy to fail....A lot of times it did result in suicide, life-long depression, sexual dysfunction.”

Coble doesn’t expect any of those effects—or short-term harm, either: Short of performing a full dress rehearsal, she has thoroughly tested the apparatus. “Absolutely,” she says. “It would be irresponsible to show up at the gallery, hook it up, and crank it up.” Coble won’t know what kind of pain she’s in for until the actual performance, which will run “about 20 to 30 minutes, a typical therapy session.”

Though Coble acknowledges the tragedy and shame often felt by aversion therapy patients, she doesn’t expect that reaction during the performance. Her piece is a gesture of recognition, if one that’s not entirely solemn. “It’s pretty ridiculous, thinking you could shock someone and give them an aversion to being gay,” she says. “It’s absurd, but it’s outweighed by the seriousness of people who had to undergo this.”

*Coble performs Aversion at 7:30 p.m. Friday, May 18; the exhibition is on view from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday, to Saturday, June 30, at Conner Contemporary Art, 1730 Connecticut Ave. NW, 2nd Floor. Free. (202) 588-8750.*