

AIRPLANES ARE ALWAYS GIRLS

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## ABSTRACT

Airplanes Are Always Girls

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My work arises from the process of extracting content from real events. I reassemble this content and transform it into the components comprising my installation, entitled I Can See Your House From Up Here. The subject for my thesis is centered on a continuing atrocity that occurs beyond my immediate proximity, specifically the American invasion of Iraq beginning in 1990 during the Persian Gulf War. My experience of the war is mediated and incomplete; it is constructed from partial narratives and a distorted picture of ostensibly real events. I am removed from this atrocity as a result of geographical distance and political circumstance. Using the imagery from magazines, newspapers, internet search engines, propaganda material, military documents, surveillance footage, and published satellite imagery of the surface of Iraq, I attempt to reconstruct yet another incomplete narrative of imagined events in an attempt to explore social constructs relating to gender militarization. My personal experiences

relating to oppressive and uncontrollable events are manifested in the form of an installation. I Can See Your House From Up Here was composed using a variety of salvaged materials including paper, wire, and cardboard.



## INTRODUCTION

Empathy is a subtle blurring of distinctions between self and other. It is the operational strategy by which I can express humanizing social qualities in my work. Qualities—such as caring, interdependence, and mutual understanding—that are otherwise discouraged by dominant power structures and prescribed social norms in our consumerist society. My installation is an attempt to relate to inaccessible events in the Iraq war. I have chosen Baghdad, a city that is located far beyond my physical proximity, as my focal point. I am removed from real events as they unfold in another time and place. I am blocked from any experiential knowledge or suffering of individuals who inhabit that space. Empathy is enacted in the process of my work in two ways—replication and imagining. That is, by my attempted close adherence to original events and my subjective imaginary projections onto this attempted adherence. Thus, distinctions are blurred, and the self and other are brought into a closer relationship. The installation and this procedure ultimately comprise a metaphor for my own relationship to power structures that are beyond my control.

My paper is structured as follows. First, I will describe my installation in detail. Then, I will give a theoretical description of my relationship to content that is extracted from real events, and the process of miniaturization that occurs when real events are converted into information. Post-modern French theorist Jean Baudrillard's concept of the simulacrum will inform this discussion. Next, I will explain the theoretical underpinnings of empathy as it relates to my work and as a response to simulacrum. I will relate to Joseph Beuys, who created installations that consisted of disparate items

that were also a response to war. Finally, I will draw connections between my installation and the work of Lynda Benglis, whose work has been associated with both the Pattern and Decoration movement and minimalism. I will also relate the visual decorations that appear in my installation to practices of the P&D movement. I will then discuss how repetition and visual decoration serve to draw parallels between feminine and mechanical processes, thus relating to my experience as both a woman and a member of modern Western society. In the end, I empathetically transpose the imagery of war into a total installation that exhibits the feminine.

## A FIGHTER JET'S NIGHT TERROR



Figure 1, Courtney Chappell, I Can See Your House From Up Here (detail), 2011.

Mixed media, dimensions variable.

I visually depict my own experiences related to violence, oppression and domination in an immersive installation. I am mirroring secondary content that is related to the Iraq war to create a metaphorical illustration of my relationship to internalized notions of power and identity. I Can See Your House From Up Here, depicts the aftermath of a plane crash in a staged tableau setting. Forms made up of wire, paper and cardboard are decorated with graphite, charcoal, ink, watercolors, acrylic paint, chalk and markers surround the viewer and create an enclosed space.

Artist and critic, Ilya Kabakov describes an installation as, “a three-dimensional invention, and one of its features is a claim to totality, to a connection with universals [...]. An attempt is being made to encompass all the levels of the world, all of its corners, to describe everything that happens in it” (63). I attempt to create a total environment that signifies an interior world. I surround and overwhelm the viewer to communicate my own feelings of confusion and disorientation. Kabakov explains that in an immersive environment, the viewer retains his subjective associations and recollections as he enters the space (63). Thus, the installation is an appeal for the viewer’s subjective participation to bring an imaginary world to life. The static nature of the environment allows the viewer to project these associations onto aspects of the installation.

I have chosen the ongoing invasion of Iraq as a subject for my installation because the event marks the first time that I was aware of the present possibility of war. It was no longer a thing of the past or simply the premise of a video game. I learned about the invasion of the first Gulf War when I was still in grade school. Many of my friends watched the televised coverage in their classrooms on Channel One. I was simply told that the US was at war with Iraq. When I arrived home from school I watched reruns of grainy night vision footage of the first air strikes. I remember the sun shining in through the window as I sat on the carpet listening to Dan Rather. The disconnection between the electric war that was flashing on the pixelated TV screen and my own experience was paralyzing. The images were so cold and removed, I could very well have been watching one of my friends playing an already obsolete Atari game. I tried to imagine what it would be like if it were nighttime and I could hear missiles falling and feel the ground



shake in order to make the images real. I became aware, for the first time that terrible things could happen in the world.

In an attempt to block overwhelming feelings of powerlessness and fear, I began to search for strategies that would block my emotional responses to visual signs. Many of these strategies were already being staged by institutions such as the media and the school I attended. By subjecting myself to repeated images relating to war, I became removed from an experiential response. I became numb. I forgot to wonder what it would be like to imagine another person's pain. The images on television became merely a signifier for some abstract notion of war. I began to echo the practices of institutions and structures that are the cause of suffering by becoming disassociated and unfeeling. In this installation, I am attempting to revive the part of myself that was able to feel empathy in order to counteract the numb, mechanical qualities I have internalized as an adult.

I represent this attempt at restoration in a metaphorical narrative. This narrative depicts the dream of a Fairchild Republic A-10 Thunderbolt, a type of American jet (Figure 2). This jet has magically come to life and is suddenly overwhelmed by all the traumatic events she has witnessed or been forced to enact. In this imaginary world, I have taken on the character of a malfunctioning war machine; spitting out coordinates from some central command station. The airplane, in an act of defiance, has decided to crash into a fictional war room that contains vital information. This information consists of my personal and invented iconography related to the war including drawings, maps, letters from middle school friends about the war, miniature buildings, and drawings of missing Iraqi civilians. In the aftermath of the crash, piles of paper have been strewn

about and clouds of smoke rise up from the jet's wing. The smoke is also made of paper and contains decorative drawings of aerial satellite imagery. It circles the space and encloses the viewer (Figure 3). In this enclosed environment, scale is altered. The viewer's experience of the space oscillates between the perspectives of the jet flying over an imaginary landscape and hurtling toward the ground and the perspective of the central command inhabitants who are stunned, wandering through a disorienting aftermath (Figure 7).

My installation is comprised of disparate components that combine to form this single narrative. These components are constructed using salvaged materials, the refuse of everyday consumption, which are gathered from the roadside in my neighborhood. They arrive in the mailbox everyday in the form of junk mail and advertisements, and I generate plenty with the throwaway scraps of debris from check stubs, receipts, official notifications, food wrappers, etc. Each artifact is extracted from its original purpose, which is to advertise, to be filed away, to remind, to contain, and is reconstituted as a symbol of the terrain, characters, and objects of an imagined war zone. I inscribe these materials with an iconography that depicts aspects of the narrative of war and airplanes and a far away city (Figure 8). A form letter may be transformed into a military target in a residential neighborhood. A produce box is transformed into a Baghdad hotel (Figure 6). Silver gum wrappers become the iridescence of laser guided missiles across the night sky. These components, constructed from salvaged materials, undergo a reduction in scale and become representations of something other than what they are. They appear in the form of written information, drawings and fabricated objects. These objects are miniature replications of something larger and more complete.

Each item is individually constructed by hand and inscribed with an imaginary iconography, rendering a uniqueness to every aspect of the installation. The resulting representations exhibit an incomplete picture of a world that is just beyond the reach of my comprehension. I use consumer waste to fabricate handmade machines, juxtaposing craft and manufacturing techniques. I use decoration and repetition to draw connections between military imaging systems and sensuous pattern making. I display expressionistic tendencies despite an attempt at restraint and calculated perfection.

The individual pieces that comprise the installation have been filtered through my approximation of the viewpoint of the war machines. I am trying to comprehend the devices, the computer images, and the coordinates and satellite feeds that are beyond my comprehension. However, this project ultimately fails and a new narrative emerges. With my hands, I imperfectly render the perfect digitized and pixilated image. These imperfections are an indication of the soft, organic qualities that persist in human nature (Figure 4).

By taking this approach, I am adding another layer of content to the real war and the available existing visual documentation: that of my own experience. Thus, the art installation is a further distortion of the original event, beyond even the distortion of news. Sontag famously describes the interpretation of meaning from art, not as the extraction of something hidden, but as the addition of a subjective narrative. By creating my own symbolic code with the icons of airplanes, targets, buildings, and maps, I am adding artistic content to the interpretation of real events.

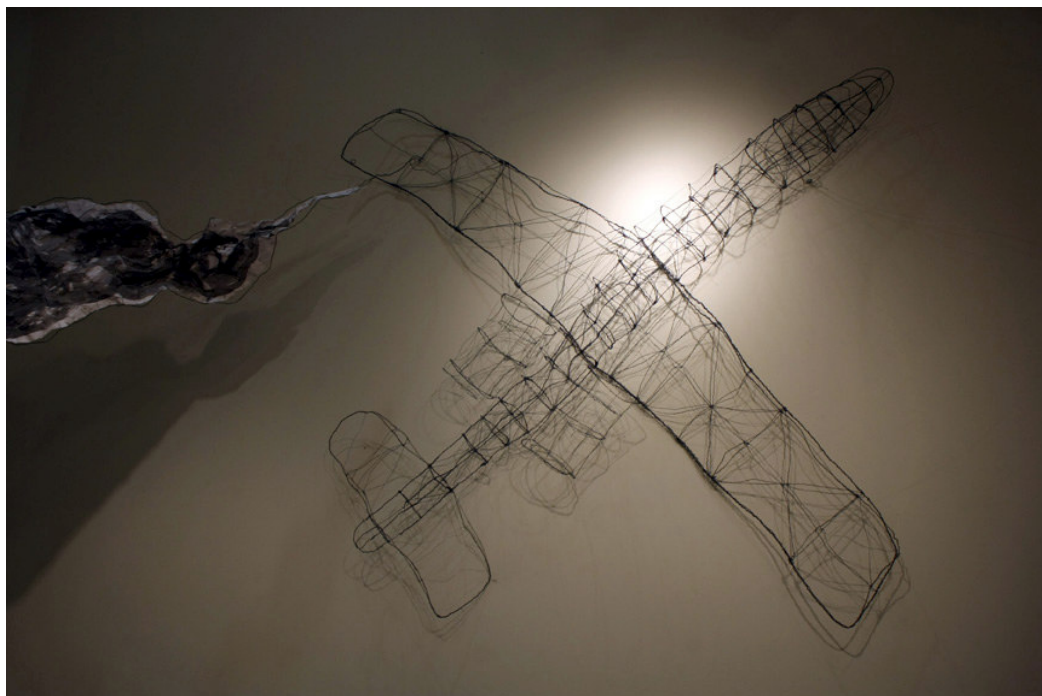


Figure 2, Courtney Chappell, I Can See Your House From Up Here (detail), 2011.

Mixed media, dimensions variable.



Figure 3, Courtney Chappell, I Can See Your House From Up Here (detail), 2011.

Mixed media, dimensions variable





Figure 4, Courtney Chappell, I Can See Your House From Up Here (detail), 2011.

Mixed media, dimensions variable



Figure 5, Courtney Chappell, I Can See Your House From Up Here (detail), 2011.

Mixed media, dimensions variable.





Figure 6, Courtney Chappell, I Can See Your House From Up Here (detail), 2011.

Mixed media, dimensions variable.



Figure 7, Courtney Chappell, I Can See Your House From Up Here (installation view),

2011. Mixed media, dimensions variable.



Figure 8, Courtney Chappell, I Can See Your House From Up Here (detail), 2011.

Mixed media, dimensions variable.

## REMOVAL

In order to understand my relationship to power, I am investigating the distance between real events and their media portrayal. In Susan Sontag's essay "Against Interpretation", she critiques Plato's theory of mimesis. According to Plato, all material objects are mimetic, which is to say that they are imperfect imitations of transcendent forms or structures. Representational art objects are merely artifacts that have been twice removed from an original form; a work of art is an imitation of an imitation. It is, therefore, neither useful nor honest, and it becomes necessary to posit a justification for art's existence at all (2- 6).

Sontag argues that Plato's theory of mimesis or representation has infected all Western consciousness regarding art. Mimesis, which gave rise to empirical thought and categorization, is nothing more than the act of division. It is like a fissure that branches and bifurcates into subdivisions. This division is the very schism that separates subject from object. There is no hope for repair or a return to wholeness once the break occurs. As Sontag proclaims, "None of us can ever retrieve that innocence before all theory when art knew no need to justify itself, when one did not ask a work of art what it said because one knew (or thought one knew) what it *did*" (Against Interpretation, 5). Since there is no hope for wholeness, we must justify an object's existence by strengthening a particular facet of the division. According to Sontag, the defense of art gives rise to the notion of "content" that is separated from "form". This well-intentioned attempt to justify art creates a hierarchical structure where content is essential and form accessory (4). This



act constitutes what Sontag refers to as an “overemphasis on the idea of content” that demands a never-ending project of interpretation.

I locate my art within the spectrum of representation by applying the Greek theory of mimesis to real events. According to this theory, there is a division between *war* as a transcendental form and the actual event of the Gulf War in Iraq. The Gulf War is mimetic, that is, an imitation of an ideal form. Content is extracted from these real events, adding another layer of removal. This content is in turn, interpreted by media structures. As a consumer of global media, I am presented with an imitation of an imitation of an imitation. In a struggle to access real events, I am compelled to add an additional layer of interpretation to the scattered, heavily filtered information I receive from media sources. This results in another layer of removal from idealized form. Baudrillard amplifies this notion of removal in his theory of the simulacra, a copy without an original.

## IMAGINARY TERRITORY

Jean Baudrillard invokes a Borges fable about cartographers that draw a map so detailed it supplants an entire territory. He uses this metaphor to describe a present day phenomenon wherein signs no longer reference the real, but become the real (Baudrillard 1). He posits that representation is related to the equivalence of the sign and the real or tangible thing being signified. In successive phases, simulation moves away from this equivalence by negating the value of the sign, which masks reality. Subsequently, the sign is said to mask an absence of reality until, finally it no longer possesses any relationship with reality whatsoever (2). He calls this absence of the real, the simulacrum. "It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts that are no longer those of the Empire, but ours" (Baudrillard 6).

The metaphor of the map and the original territory signifies a false hope of coextensivity between two differentiated forms, the real and the representation. The mirroring of being and appearances is no longer possible. Rather we fabricate the real through miniaturization. He claims that, "the real is produced from miniaturized cells, matrices, and memory banks, models of control and it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times from these" (Baudrillard 2). However, it is no longer real because there is no boundary between the real and the concept representing it.

According to Baudrillard, the war that I am depicting is imagined. It never occurred. I contend that despite my modern day removal from the real, I still enact ancient social and cognitive functions, however injured or repressed they may be. One of these functions is empathy. According to Vittorio Gallese's research on the

neurobiological aspects of empathy, the capacity to understand others is, “exclusively dependent on mentalistic/linguistic abilities...grounded in the rational nature of our interactions with the world” (171). He explains that when we enter in relation to others, there is a multiplicity of states or implicit certainties we share, such as emotions, our body schema or somatic sensations such as pain, which constitute our notions of “shared manifold intersubjectivity” (Gallese 177). He explains that this intersubjectivity allows us to recognize human beings as similar to us. (172).

The work of Edith Stein and Merleau-Ponty indicate that empathy is not confined to a simple grasp of other’s emotions. Empathy arises from an appreciation of similarity. For example, we can all recognize hands despite spatial distortions or an absence of visual information. “Indeed, even if all we can see are just moving light-dot displays of people’s behavior, we are...capable of recognizing a walking person...or if the walking person is cheerful or depressed and sad” (Gallese176). Therefore, we enact empathy not only when interfacing with other beings, but also when interfacing with representations of beings. We apply our shared manifold intersubjectivity with all of its associated emotions and somatic sensations, to signs, however devoid of content they may be. In other words, although I inhabit a society that, according to Baudrillard, is removed from reality, I still enact social tendencies and attempt to connect with inanimate objects, signs, and people I’ve never met. It is the disruption of these relational responses that constitutes major psychoses such as schizophrenia (173).

Despite the fact that I am presented with only “an experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence...” I am still relating to these signifiers empathically (Jameson 119). Empathy

is a later English translation of the German word, *emfuhlung* that refers to the relationship between the artwork and the observer, who projects himself/herself onto the contemplated objects. It was introduced by Robert Vischer to account for our capacity to symbolize the inanimate objects of nature and art (Gallese 175). My identification with signifiers, images, strangers, and inanimate objects, reveals subjective experiences that constitute my own constructions of a shared intersubjectivity.

The attempt to relate to mediated events requires imagination. I must imagine what it would feel like to walk down a city street and feel the heat rising up from the pavement. I can only imagine what it would be like to feel the impact of a missile striking only a few blocks away. When I imagine, I fabricate a subjective manifestation of events. I am only able to know that the city streets are hot because I have learned that Baghdad is hot through second-hand sources, such as news reports. I relate the heat of the desert to the humidity of Georgia summers that I have experienced. I can only imagine events that take place outside of my proximity, but in doing so I am accessing personal, experiential content.

The pathos that motivates the expression of collective suffering and confrontation with dominant power structures is enacted in the creation of another simulacrum, another simulated environment. It is necessarily artificial; as are most of the objects I interface with on a daily basis. An artificial cell that contains an expression of my own experiential memories is built out of the very materials that comprise my simulated existence, namely residues of physical consumption.



Figure 9, Courtney Chappell, I Can See Your House From Up Here (detail), 2011.

Mixed media, dimensions variable.



Figure 10, Courtney Chappell, I Can See Your House From Up Here (detail), 2011.

Mixed media, dimensions variable.



Figure 11, Courtney Chappell, I Can See Your House From Up Here (detail), 2011.

Mixed media, dimensions variable.



## MINIATURIZATION

*The cleverer I am at miniaturizing the world, the better I possess it. But in doing this, it must be understood that values become condensed and enriched in miniature. Platonic dialectics of large and small do not suffice for us to become cognizant of the dynamic virtues of miniature thinking. One must go beyond logic in order to experience what is large in what is small* (Bachelard 150).

By miniaturizing certain aspects of my installation, I establish an immersive environment where an interior narrative may take place. Gaston Bachelard marks the literary miniature as a sort of “threshold of absurdity” by which the reader enters an imaginary world. Logic is displaced by representation, which becomes, “nothing but a body of expressions with which to communicate our own images to others” (150).

Likewise, I produce the illusion of having traversed some boundary that leads to another realm of existence. This boundary defines a realm that encourages sensory immersion, and displaces the confines of rational, logical constructs, all of which seem to fall apart during violent, military enactments. The miniature marks a version of history that is protected and uncontaminated (Stewart 69). This space is also enclosed with a permeable “haze” of cloud-like debris. I create cityscapes and artifacts that are physically small in order to establish an environment that consists of representations or signs that stand for something other than what they are (57).

This parallel world is initiated with my use of inanimate objects. Susan Stewart writes that;

"[...] in its tableaulike form, the miniature is a world of arrested time; its stillness emphasizes the activity that is outside its borders. And this effect is reciprocal, for once we attend to the miniature world, the outside world stops and is lost to us. In this it resemble other fantasy structures: The return from Oz, Narnia, or even sleep" (67).

She claims that children's toys are the physical embodiment of fiction and mark the beginning of a narrative (56). These stationary objects in my installation take on a life of their own according to the daydreams and musings that are projected onto them (Figure 12).

The world that I am creating has some of the characteristics of an amusement park in that it contains miniature representations of historical events. Amusement parks attempt to bring history to life for the purpose of display. This simulation actually erases history. It is another enactment of nostalgia for an ideal that is removed from any embodied reality (Stewart 60). "The miniature, linked to nostalgic version of childhood and history, presents a diminutive, and thereby manipulatable, version of experience [...]" (Stewart).

Both my source material and the objects they inspire undergo a process of miniaturization. This miniaturization serves various functions. The distillation of events into media entails a process of signification. This discussion of meaning and reference in art criticism has foundations in the works of linguistic theorists, Saussure and Lacan (Krauss 24). According to their theories, linguistic signs are comprised of two components, the signifier and signified. The signifier, a material component such as the phonic elements of speech or a text refers to the concept or idea it signifies (33). Thus it



is a process whereby material objects, words and texts are transfigured into meaning (Jameson 118-119). This process is linked to the act of miniaturization in several ways.

Miniaturization mirrors the act of fragmentation and distortion that occurs when meaning is extracted from the signifier. There is a certain fracturing that occurs when ideas are transferred into text. This same divide is present when entire continents are depicted on paper in the form of shapes and lines and coordinates. In the media, real events are cut into bits and pieces, sound bites and captions. Experiential complexity is reduced to a synopsis. Details are rendered extraneous. My maps are overly simplified depictions of complex terrain, just as houses become pixilated when I press the 'zoom' command on Google Earth.

Miniaturization is also linked to signification because it is a byproduct of the physical exchange of ideas; it is necessitated by temporal and material constraints. Signs contain reduced and simplified elements. Written words are made to be perceived by the human eye and exchanged with human hands. The function of miniaturization is to increase the efficiency of meaning transferal. The ultimate expedience of transference is manifest in digital technology that distills the signified into binary notation, itself a reflection of the binary process of signification.

The information I receive about the war in Iraq arrives in miniature. Most of the time it is encrypted and encased within the frame of my computer monitor. The narrative unravels along columns of text that include links to pictorial slideshows wherein frozen moments of real events are looped sequentially fading from one to another cinematically via flash technology. There are passing glimpses of televised coverage that I encounter while getting my oil changed or eating at a restaurant. There are the covers of newspapers

behind glass outside the grocery stores. Virtually every piece of information I receive about Iraq is accompanied by some photographic image. These images become recognizable through repetition.

Bachelard claims that miniature worlds are dominated worlds. When we enter the imaginary region of the miniature, we are able to conceive of a simplified realm where trees and houses as well as values and concepts have been reduced and contained. This generates a sense of “world consciousness” while inhibiting an experience of engulfment and dissolution (161). By reducing the scale of war, I am able to conceive of it. My miniature buildings are examples of this reduction in scale (Figure 11). They are tiny structures that house imaginary lives. They contain a miniature universe, a microscopic exhibition of a macrocosm (Stewart 63). My tiny cardboard houses are flimsy and provide minimal protection for their imaginary inhabitants. Their smallness and delicacy is contrasted with the ephemeral and commonplace qualities of the materials I use in their making. Likewise, the maps are small and intricate. They serve as both an imaginary landscape, and a cartographic representation of territory. When an object is reduced in size, the amount of detail and significance placed on the object increases (59).

I have chosen to express myself through a process of miniaturization because it lends itself to intimacy in the realm of communication. I invoke smallness to sooth the viewer. In discussing Charles Nodier’s novel in which a man finds himself in a miniature fairy house Bachelard notes that rather than being alarmed, the man finds that, “...he feels at home there, and settles down. Happy at being in a small space, he realizes an experience of topophilia (149). I am creating a small scene of catastrophe, but its

delicacy compels the viewer respond with tenderness and empathy. Nuance requires sustained observation, and care must be taken to handle fragile objects.

There is also an ergonomic aspect of miniaturization that lends itself to domination. By creating objects that are easily manipulated, I am able to exert control over objects' positions in space. Shrinking objects allows them to be manipulated and transported. The small structures possess toy-like characteristics; they could be used as a setting for imaginary enactments and pretend games involving vehicles. During my the process of making maps, I draw neighborhoods and imagine that there are real people walking the streets. In these microcosmic worlds, I am able to change history. I can minimize damage and make repairs. I can render every tiny automobile that circles Tahir Square. I cannot cease the command of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles and turn them back from their missions, but I can create my own miniature radar readings of a land that doesn't exist. Thus miniaturization allows for an exertion of physical control over symbolic forms.



Figure 11, Courtney Chappell, I Can See Your House From Up Here (detail), 2011.

Mixed media, dimensions variable.



Figure 12, Courtney Chappell, I Can See Your House From Up Here (detail), 2011.

Mixed media, dimensions variable.



Figure 13, Courtney Chappell, I Can See Your House From Up Here (detail), 2011.

Mixed media, dimensions variable.

## SLEDGE HOUNDS AND WARTHOGS

Joseph Beuys created objects, or artifacts that were connected to a personal experience of the war. Beuys' performances often contained invisible enemies and fruitless battles, like the boxing match he wages against a large static-filled television set in his performance, *FILZ TV* (1975). His sculptures were made from forgotten or discarded materials. In his performance, "How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare", Beuys cradles a dead hare lovingly in his arms for three hours, walking it around and showing his drawings to it while explaining them in bouts of inaudible murmuring. "It is the style of left-over, broken, dated objects, distressed and discarded...And Beuys uses them for the expressiveness of their fallen usefulness" (Danto xvi).

Benjamin Buchloh, among others, criticized him for decontextualizing the historical functions of aesthetic production and replacing them with mythical constructs and unconscious processes (44- 45). He criticized his disregard for historical constructions of meaning associated with visual signs and accuses him of trying to establish historical continuity with German romanticism (Roundtable 53). This signaled an attempt to establish a unifying narrative that dispelled individual experiences of historical events. In a roundtable discussion in 1997, Buchloh argues that Beuys' tendencies toward fabricated myth continue the project of the surrealists by emphasizing the role of the subjective and the unconscious. However, his objects and actions are fragmented and pathetic. His persona is often self-defeating. I agree with Jean-Francois Chevrier that the totalizing project ultimately fails, "...by the very force of the romantic reference, and in reality it culminates in extraordinary fragmentary invention" (321). I

believe that Beuys work is powerful precisely because it is subjective and incomplete. Although he invented an iconography that ascribed metaphysical meaning to various objects, the absurd process of recontextualizing these objects served as a concrete depiction of what it means to contend with the past. The failure of these objects to convey a particular, singular meaning allows for fractured and democratic interpretations of meaning.

Conversely, Irit Rogoff believes the Beuys work forms an allusion rather than a set of specific references. She points out that he invokes collective memory as a form of entry into a discourse of history. These attempts are subjective and do indeed refer to the unconscious and as a result, they allow for an alternative form of historical narrative. Alternately, his work does not possess a coherent narrative, and rather requires a prolonged process of evaluation and reconstitution. She refers to his proposal for a juried competition for the Auschwitz memorial in 1957, which became part of the vitrine titled "Auschwitz Demonstration" (which was arranged by the artist in 1968) to illustrate this point. Beuys produced over two-dozen sketches and reworked photographs, two wooden models and one pewter and zinc model, in the process of developing his proposal (Ray 60). The proposed sculpture contained wires and electrodes, bits of blood sausage, maps of railroad tracks, drawings of young emaciated women, and silver bowl-forms (Ray 60, Rogoff 278). "Unlike any conventional commemoration, this is not heroic, monumental, present or possessed of a coherent narrative, rather it is a testament to absence, being small, fragmented, humble and requiring a prolong process of reading and reconstituting" (Rogoff 279). By evoking absence, it is a commemoration of what cannot be recuperated in direct historical narrative (279).



Beuys' process of recontextualizing discarded, often familiar objects and materials mimics the process of reconstructing the past. For example, the honey that was used to affix the gold leaf to his face possesses various literary references that include energy and sustenance (Thistlewood 15). However, in the mediated realm of film and early video where images are rendered in black and white, the gold leaf and honey affixed to Beuys' face appears charred rather than iridescent. The effect is reminiscent of journalistic photographs depicting victims of nuclear and chemical weapons (Beuys and The Body 2). In his installation, The Pack, twenty sledges emerge from the back of a VW van. Each sledge is equipped with a kit made up of felt, for warmth, a navigation torch and a lump of animal fat. They appear as creatures or animals and display determined loyalty. The unmoving objects are composed to seem as though they were racing to rescue someone. The installation conveys a sense of benevolent urgency, as the creatures determinately rush on a mission to ensure survival.

He uses modern-day artifacts such as flashlights, that emphasize the impossibility of the sacred. In his attempt to infuse manufactured objects with magic he illustrates the very impossibility of doing so. Inanimate objects that simulate consciousness and agency seem all the more lifeless and mechanical when put on display. The historical context of the objects are not discarded or distorted. Their historical context is illuminated.

I am inspired by Beuys' utilization of inert, discarded materials to express simultaneously personal and collective narratives. His experiences regarding war are subtly retold in his use of humble materials, namely felt and fat, that were allegedly used by tartan nomads to aid in his recovery from a plane crash in the Crimea. Although this incident may have been fabricated, it is a narrative that denotes kindness, sacrifice and



empathy. I share Beuys' concern for grand constructs such as war and empathy, and I attempt to convey the same fractured, subjective responses that allow for multiple interpretations in my work.

Beuys often uses inanimate objects to represent living beings and ascribes animal traits to man made artifacts. In I Can See Your House From Up Here, I anthropomorphize inanimate objects to demonstrate my desire to relate to whatever material forms exist in my proximity. These objects serve purposes contrary to their functions; they become something beyond their material form. The A-10 Thunderbolt (also known as a "tank-buster" or "warthog" because of its snout-like Gatling cannon) is designed to provide close air support to armed forces by attacking personnel and ground targets (Figure 2). It was used in combat for the first time during the Gulf War in 1991, destroying more than 4,000 tanks, military vehicles and artillery pieces. I have fabricated a replica of the jet's basic structure out of wire. However, my object is a hollow rendition of its original form and looks more like charred remains. I am also referencing the surrogate "mothers" made of wire that Harry Harlow used on infant monkeys during his experiments on infant attachment and isolation. Thus, I am animating my objects and transforming them into sentient creatures. Like the sledges in The Pack, my airplane possesses an active consciousness. She lays injured and defeated on the floor. All of the things she's ever laid eyes on spread out all around her. The smoke rising from her wing illustrates her spiraling descent. By animating objects, I am freeing manufactured objects from their original purpose in an attempt to breath life back into consumerist materials.

QuickTime™ and a  
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.

Figure 14, Joseph Beuys, The Pack, 1969.

Installation with Volkswagen bus and 20 Sledges, each carrying felt, fat, and a flashlight.

## HYBRID MOMENTS

Lynda Benglis sculptural works contain narratives that develop in relation to the materials she uses. Her sculptures have been associated with both the bright color and lush ornamentation of Pattern and Decoration movement and the austere, simplicity of minimalism. Her material processes illustrate her negotiations with identity and social structures that are at once, “deeply personal and profoundly social” (Csaszar 42). Some of her early works in the sixties were known as “fallen” paintings. She created them by pouring latex paint directly onto the floor. These works evolved into organic formations that extended off the gallery walls.

In Phantom, five iridescent, liquid forms pour from the walls in a darkened gallery (Figure 15). They surge over nothing, and extend along a surface that has been erased. This removed surface is steeply sloping, but the substance never touches the ground. Her pours are portrayals of interrupted motion. They stand in arrested stillness; their lush cascade is paralyzed, captured and contained for the viewers gaze. These objects relate to natural forms, and appear to be romantically reminiscent of gently flowing streams.

However, their consistency is molten and congealed. They contain dissolved mass and seem to be made up of the residue of some more solid, stable form that has disintegrated or melted. Nonetheless, the substances perform as a liquid form obeying the laws of gravity, coagulating and descending. They conform according to their material surrounding, seeking out a path of least resistance. They sprawl along the contours of an imitative geographical surface. However, their path is frozen and they

solidify before they can return to the earth. Each hardened form is isolated. Its trajectory is contained and exhibited. The green, glowing substance is mimicry of nature.

These objects illustrate domination and control of natural forces for the purpose of display. I am reminded of the theatrical trance rituals of Franz Anton Mesmer who theorized that disease was caused by an imbalance of the “universal fluid” that flowed between an individual and the cosmos. He enacted demonstrations wherein he would drape his female patients in lavender-colored robes and send them into a trance or hypnotic sleep by touching them with his hands or a magnetized wand (Schapira 44). The practice of hypnosis has gendered implications. It was first used as a treatment for hysteria (45). These languid objects in the darkness are frozen in an altered state. They are molding to the contours of some invisible support, revealing the structure of something no one else can see. They are enacting the trance-like affect of physiological immobility in a voyeuristic setting. These works exhibit cybernetic characteristics by blurring the distinctions between physical and nonphysical entities. Artificial beings exist without origin or gender. By using synthetic materials to mimic nature, Benglis is combining gender inscriptions in biomorphic, hybrid forms.

Her fluid material narrative is echoed in the organic structuring of my installation. My sculptural rendition of an A-10 thunderbolt jet is made out of malleable aluminum, steel and nickel wire, all of which are used in aircraft production. Although wires are used in industrial processes, conducting electricity or containing mechanical loads, they are also associated with decorative projects such as filigree and jewelry making. The structure of the plane is hurriedly woven to construct a partial form that is similar to a line drawing. The form is held together with compulsively reinforced knots like a barbed

fence that is repeatedly mended and destroyed. I am demonstrating both the bendable, resilient properties of the materials while referencing its capacity to puncture and contain. By downsizing the airplane to a more human scale, I am creating a hybridized surrogate that serves as a stand-in for my own physical presence.

I am also echoing the horizontal, "fallen" appearance of her pours, as every component of my installation seems destined to succumb to gravity. The streams of the clouds spill out onto the ground and crystallize into piles. I also emulate the layering techniques she employs in some of her wax relief sculptures that are built up over time. I pile layers, upon layers of paper scraps onto the floor to mimic organic processes of deterioration and accumulation. I am demonstrating what happens when structure and organization falls apart and nature takes over.

QuickTime™ and a  
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.

Figure 15, Lynda Benglis, Phantom, 1971.

Polyurethane foam with phosphorescent pigments, 8 1/2 x 35 x 8.



Figure 16, Courtney Chappell, I Can See Your House From Up Here (detail), 2011.

Mixed media, dimensions variable.

## PAISLY CANNONS

Decorative arts refer to a range of activities involving ornamental and functional works in a range of materials. I use decorative processes to exhibit a juxtaposition of the pleasurable aspects of repetition with neurotic compulsivity. The handmade elements of my installation display both the qualities of meticulous patience and masochistic, frustration. The obsessive mark making is a demonstration of futility. Industrial processes are characterized by repetition rather than skill, and exist in opposition to handmade processes that are unique and authentic (Stewart 68). Decoration is a means for me to simulate and embody mechanical activities while asserting my feminine identity.

Decorative arts have often been coded in opposition to fine art, and relegated to a lower status. This predominantly negative view of decoration is predominantly specific to non-Western cultures. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Pattern and Decoration movement embraced an art of repetitive patterns and exuberant colors in a reaction against minimalism (Swartz 18). The artists of this movement, such as Miriam Schapiro and Joyce Kozloff engaged in the cultural shift toward plurality by embracing devalued materials and techniques as weaving, wallpaper and mosaics (34). I relate the P&D movement to my installation because of its association with women's activities and its appropriation of non-western cultural forms, namely Islamic art.

Amy Goldin, articulated a concept of decorative art that was profoundly influential and provided an intellectual framework that would define the formal aspects decoration. She determined three characteristics of decoration as flat, expansive and with subject matter subordinated to the overall visual experience (Swartz 25). Although my

installation contains a focal point and a narrative, the individual components of my installation possess many decorative characteristics. Many of the hanging clouds and the maps that cover the floor contain patterns on both sides. The patterns are sometimes imagined but often they are replications of aerial photographs. When these miniature components are piled on top of one another over an expanse, they become visually overwhelming.

Golden utilized Islamic art as the basis of her assertion that the enjoyment of patterns, so often linked to magic and religion, would remove visual hierarchies and provide a new way of viewing work. Although the artists associated with this movement embraced Islamic art, much of their work was deemed low-brow or associated with kitsch. This brought on the charge of cultural imperialism and cooptation that is associated with P&D (27). Although historical patterning is usually related to celestial, religious or biological systems, P&D's appropriation of these images have added another layer of historical reference (Perreault 51-52). I signal the cooptation that occurs when content is reinterpreted by emulating some of the practices of the P&D movement.

The patterns that appear in my work reference appropriation and reconstruction. I encounter decorative motifs when I recreate elements of Islamic architecture in miniature. I have no knowledge of the meanings behind these elements, but I roughly staple together some imitative structure out of coca-cola boxes (Figure 17- 18). My shoddy buildings are displays of superficiality and defective construction. The consumer packages that provide their structure are the remnants of nonessential objects. Their hurried and repetitious assemblage is evidence of acquisitiveness and insatiability and the process of their making is indicative of appropriation. Likewise, these objects are obviously linked



to my own culture, just as the works of P&D artists were informed by the day-glow colors of modern paint pigments. I hope to make my cultural identity as an American consumer obvious as I imitate original content.

The Pattern and Decoration movement is also linked to “women’s work”, feminine imagery, and the domestic realm. Beauty and pleasure were, “subversive elements that valorized lush and complicated patterns in a response to the cool Puritanism of minimalism” (Balducci 54). My use of decoration indicates my identity as a woman and my relationship with activities that reinforce gender constructs. I have constructed a vocabulary that is related to feminine principals; bright colors and sensual patterns. I use them when approaching subject matter that is associated with masculine operations such as warfare.



Figure 17, Courtney Chappell, I Can See Your House From Up Here (detail), 2011.

Mixed media, dimensions variable.



Figure 18, Courtney Chappell, I Can See Your House From Up Here (detail), 2011.

Mixed media, dimensions variable.



Figure 19, Courtney Chappell, I Can See Your House From Up Here (detail), 2011.

Mixed media, dimensions variable.

## MECHANICAL MALFUNCTIONS

I have combined feminine and decorative practices with militaristic and mechanical depictions in my thesis exhibition to express a cybernetic experience. Donna Haraway describes a cyborg as, “a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality...” (149). This coupling between organism and machine is exhibited in reconstituted manufactured items that are decorated. Cloud forms are decoratively constructed out of rolls of damaged and discarded paper (Figure 19). Geographical surfaces are simplified and condensed and transformed into pattern (Figure 17). Papers that were once bleached and compressed into neat piles take on softer forms laying crumpled on the ground.

The feminine connotations of the work are simultaneously distorted and carried to an extreme. I am expressing confrontational energy that is redirected toward the stifling inertia of busywork, decoration and distraction. My artistic practices can be viewed as nervous habits that are associated with doodling. Often these acts are carried out while watching the news. Televised global events are unfolding before me in miniature while I perform automatic activities in a private, domestic realm. I am reminded of my grandmother who did needlepoint by the light of the television. I have inherited none of her patience. Although my busy works sometimes display precise renderings, the lines trail off and disintegrate as boredom and anxiety take hold. My patterns are inscribed with simultaneously lazy and frustrated marks. I strive for some internalized notion of perfection that is related to both industrial processes and feminine ideals.

When I attempt to duplicate computer-generated images. I imagine what it might be like to be a war machine driven by coordinates and sensor readouts. In my attempt to fabricate accurate representations, I am expressing the internalization of mechanization and disembodiment. By compulsively reiterating a single image, such as an airplane or an explosion I am simulating a malfunction that occurs in machinery while displaying masochistic tendencies associated with repetitive tasks that are often ascribed to female bodies (Figure 20).

But, unlike a machine that can endlessly and perfectly replicate an image, I am fraught with subjectivities and biological limitations that inhibit perfection. Time and transport wear away at the materials. The perfect silhouette of an airplane is smeared with excess paint. Maps are ripped in half. This display of malfunction as repetition is a metaphor for trauma that is enacted repeatedly until it is resolved. The malfunction that breaks the spell of perfection is also evidence of humanity, or an impossible return to the real. Baudrillard notes that the map of the Borges fable ends by being confused with the real through aging (Simulacra 1).

This malfunction, the crash landing, the mess and the stray marks on my drawings are like cracks in a cruel system of internalized warfare (Figure 21). My attempt to understand institutionalized violence and domination has resulted in confusion about my own identity as both victim and perpetrator. By using a feminine language to describe military adventure, I am blurring the distinctions of male and female activities in order to reveal and erode sexual differentiations and boundaries. By using my own hands to reinscribe materials with new forms, I am able transform my physical reality.





Figure 20, Courtney Chappell, I Can See Your House From Up Here (detail), 2011.

Mixed media, dimensions variable.



Figure 21, Courtney Chappell, I Can See Your House From Up Here (detail), 2011.

Mixed media, dimensions variable.

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## APPENDIX

## List of Thesis Images on Compact Disc

1. I Can See Your House From Up Here, mixed media installation, 2011, dimensions variable.
2. I Can See Your House From Up Here, mixed media installation, 2011, dimensions variable.
3. I Can See Your House From Up Here, mixed media installation, 2011, dimensions variable.
4. I Can See Your House From Up Here, mixed media installation, 2011, dimensions variable.
5. I Can See Your House From Up Here, mixed media installation, 2011, dimensions variable.
6. I Can See Your House From Up Here, mixed media installation, 2011, dimensions variable.
7. I Can See Your House From Up Here, mixed media installation, 2011, dimensions variable.
8. I Can See Your House From Up Here, mixed media installation, 2011, dimensions variable.
9. I Can See Your House From Up Here, mixed media installation, 2011, dimensions variable.
10. I Can See Your House From Up Here, mixed media installation, 2011, dimensions variable.
11. I Can See Your House From Up Here, mixed media installation, 2011, dimensions variable.
12. I Can See Your House From Up Here, mixed media installation, 2011, dimensions variable.