

Thesis

Robert Joseph Anspach

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Sculpture MFA, 2017

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of master of fine arts in the department of sculpture at the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island.

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Abstract:

This is a seemingly didactic account of the nature of the mind, art, and the end of the world. It is probably not very good and the author does not stand by what is stated within it, but has to turn something in in order to graduate. Maybe do not read it.

1. Start: page six
2. The way things are (probably didactic): page nine
3. The end of the world: fourteen
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5. End: 21

thesis

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It is april 2. Two days after I was supposed to turn in this paper. I am sitting on the fake grass outside of my studio. It is sunny. Feels like summer. This is the same fake grass I sat on two days ago to write what is now a thrown out version of my thesis. It was filled with philosophical jargon. I am afraid to sound stupid sometimes. So sometimes I do that. That day- on the fake grass, it was sunny. It felt like summer. A man from the local news station asked if I would tell the camera that I am excited for spring. I told him that I am not the right one for the job. That the weather right now scares me and even when it is nice out now a days it makes me a bit sad because it makes me think of how we are destroying the planet. He understood. He told me that he had worked on a boat and saw pieces of ice the size of Rhode Island break off of the ice caps. We had a good talk about it. And then he said he had to go find some people to say that they were excited for spring because that is what his boss needed. I understood. We shook hands. That was two days ago. Yesterday it snowed. And now I am crying.

I want to say something that I think is very important. So far i have tried to say it in a framework that is my attempt to make my words more palatable for the audience that I think I want to have hear it. That audience has been my idea of what I think the art world is. I don't know a lot about art or the art world I guess. But I seem to think that I know the things that they like to hear. And the ways that they like to hear it. Every time I

try to bend my words or justify what I am saying, it comes off all wrong. I have now put peaceful music in my headphones so that I don't sound preachy or hateful like I did when I wrote a different intro last night. My fear is that if i don't say it right, that I will be dismissed as being too didactic, too self-righteous, too stupid, or too oblivious. And my fear is that if I am dismissed, that the right people might not hear what I am trying to say, and that the thing that I have to share will the world will go unheard.

Of course, I like recognition, I am not denying that- but that is not all there is to this. I have had very deep experiences in this world which have shown me something profound. These experiences have shown me that there is a way of relating to this world that, if everyone could see it, we would all live our lives in a very different way. We would see that what we have is incredibly precious and we would go to great lengths to care for each other and for the planet. And so I don't want to be dismissed.

But at least for this paper, I want to write as if there has been no critique of authenticity. That I am free to not need to adopt an ironic tone or highlight some degree of self-awareness when I start to say something that I actually believe in, just because it might sound a bit too new agey or spiritual or simple or trite.

I am aware that there have been a lot of people who have come along claiming to know the truth. And that some of them have done a lot of harm to a lot of people. And I am aware that there is a tremendous degree of suspicion towards anyone who uses that word. And, I don't know, maybe it is even more problematic if it comes from a privileged white male like myself. Maybe I will never be able to understand what it is going to

sound like so someone who comes from a very different cultural or economic background than myself. But I cannot silence myself just because what I will say will not be so readily received. Because in my opinion, what I am going to try to say might be able to help.

Oh, and one last thing, I suppose that I should say where it comes from. I did not come up with the heart of what I am going to start off by talking about. It comes from a tradition that is 2400 years old. That tradition is Buddhism. But the teachings were not taught as some new ideology. They were used to point towards some things that have always been happening, even before the Buddha was born. These things are very simple, and yet they take some work to see directly. And that is why they were taught. Not so that they could be some new thing for its listeners to cling to. They were offered so that others could have an understanding of what leads to suffering and what leads to freedom so that they may look directly and see for themselves. So that they could become free from a suffering that they did not even know they had.

I do not think that the word Buddhism or the Buddha need to be used to talk about these things, but I think it will be easier for me to talk about them with this understanding, rather than framing them as some truth that I figured out for myself. I am going to speak about them in my own words, how I remember them, and how I think about them. My experience includes nearly a year of doing these practices on silent retreat and two hours a day of sitting meditation practice, but I am, by no means at all, any sort of authority on these things. There are people who are much more qualified than myself

to speak about these things. I have a lot of work to do. Even so... this is what I can say for now.

.the way things are.

Everything is changing all of the time. Nothing stays the same for even a moment. We hold the world together with concepts and so we fail to see the reality of this. We might say that we know that things are changing, but we usually do not see it directly.

Everything that arises into experience is changing. Sights, sounds, sensations, thoughts and emotions- all of these things come and go. And there is no essence behind all of them. Concepts cluster moments of different experiences together, and hold to them as if they were solid. And so the mind thinks that there is some core beneath the change. But there is not. Every single moment, everything is different.

Just as there is no solid, separate, unchanging thing in the world, there is no solid, separate, unchanging thing within the self. We hold to experience and piece these different ideas together to construct a thing that we call our self. What is this made of? It is made of sights, sounds, sensations, thoughts, emotions. All of these are separate from each other. All of them are changing. We think that there is somebody behind them all, watching the show happen. This is a thought. This is a concept. This is not the way

that things are. But we do not see this, and we live in the delusion that there is some separate, unchanged being behind the change that we can call our self. But there is not. There is nobody behind the change. It is just change happening.

Since we do not see that everything is changing and since we think that we are solid and separate from the world, we interact with the world in a way that causes a very deep suffering for ourself. But, based on the nature of this deluded interaction, we do not see that we are suffering. What is this suffering? This suffering is the clinging to that which is changing. Since everything is changing all of the time, there is nothing to hold on to. But we do not see that everything is changing all of the time, so we try to hold on to it. This action causes suffering. It causes dissatisfaction. It causes tension. We try to hold on to pleasant experience. We try to arrange the world to keep us comfortable. But this way of living cannot work. Because everything is changing. So even when we get what we want, we have to continue to try to manipulate the world to keep us feeling okay. We still want just a little bit more, or we at least want it to stay. But it cannot stay. Its very nature is to change. We try to push away unpleasant experience. But it is our very pushing away that makes us uncomfortable. Though we do not see it, because we are too caught up with trying to get experience to be different than how it is.

Everybody just wants to be happy- but they are doing the precise thing that causes them to be unhappy. It is fairly easy to see this on a gross scale. We want success, security, the right people to love us, we want approval, we want pleasant mind states. All of these things come and go. Their existence is precarious at best. And with many of the experiences we spend most of our time trying to get, we can see very

clearly that they do not last. They all end. Even though this is clear, we still do it. We figure that if we can just get things a little bit better next time then we will finally be okay. Or we just don't think about it and we keep trying. While it is easy to see this holding on or pushing away on the gross scale, it is happening on a subtle level all of the time. We just don't see it.

It is as if there is a group of people watching a movie of birds flying by. Each of these people is holding the blade of a knife in their hand. Never has a bird stayed on the screen. It cannot stop there. They all know this. But they love the birds so much and they get so excited when they are there that they do not notice that they are squeezing the knife blade every time that a bird flies by. They just want the birds to stay. They just want more birds to come. If you ask them about it, they will tell you that they love birds and would be happy if only there were constantly birds flying on the screen. They wouldn't even be able to tell you about why their hand is covered in blood. And, in this cinema it is quite unpopular to point out that their hands are all covered with blood. They just want to talk about birds. The simile works in the opposite manner. Let's say, these people don't like airplanes for example. Every time an airplane comes on the screen they get so angry. They can't wait for that airplane to go away. They get so caught up in wanting that airplane to go away that, again, they squeeze the blade of the knife that they don't even know they are holding. They are so caught up in the experience, that they do not even see that it is not the airplanes that are causing their suffering. It is the fact that they are squeezing the blade of a knife.

The suffering that arises due to the clinging to that which is changing is not necessary. It is possible to let go of the knife. The way to stop suffering is to pay attention to the direct experience of the mind. Through paying attention, the mind naturally drops that which causes suffering. The mind that is not caught up in the birds and the planes is able to begin to feel the pain that arises in the hand every time the mind tries to get things to be different than how they are. There is nothing that needs to be fixed or altered. The mind lets go of suffering by paying attention to experience. By doing this again and again, the mind builds momentum. It becomes easier to see when the mind begins to cling. And so the mind naturally rests in a place that does not cause suffering. This is peace. This is what everyone in the world is looking for. They think they want birds and not planes. The birds and the planes can not give them what they truly want. They think that they can. But they can not. Only letting go of that which is changing can lead to true happiness.

One day, someone put on night vision goggles and saw that everyone in the movie theater's hands were covered in blood. They saw that it was the clinging to that which is changing that causes suffering. The person who saw this let go of their knife and found that everything was beautiful. It wasn't the birds or the lack of planes, it was the not holding onto the knife that they had always wanted. They just didn't know until they looked. Until they dropped the knife. This was the exact opposite of what everyone in the theater thought, so when the person without the knife tried to tell the others, they all told the person to shut up because that person was ruining the movie and there were about to be some more birds and they hated when people talked while there were birds

on the screen. They told the person that they didn't want to hear what they were saying because there had been someone in the past who had claimed to have some ideas about how things are and that it didn't go so well. So they figured that anyone who had any idea about how things are must always be wrong and they did not listen. And the person who was not holding the blade of their knife anymore found that they could not get other people to let go of their knives and so they remained silent and enjoyed all of the birds, and all of the planes, and all of the moments when there were no birds, and all of the moments when there were no planes.

Sometimes, every once in a while, someone would go say, hey, what was that thing about the knife, and then they would show them, and then, when they looked, they saw for themselves that it was the clinging to that which is changing that causes suffering, and so they stopped trying to get things to stay the same, and they found that that was what they had actually always been wanting all along but just did not know.

.the end of the world.

Ten years ago I might have thought that the goal should be for the world to see this clearly enough so that we could still live on this planet, without completely destroying it. But it has been suggested by many climate scientists that 2017 is the year in which we needed to undergo a drastic shift in our efforts to lower carbon emission or no matter how hard we try, we will not be able to avoid inevitable and irreversible disaster and will have to put too much of our energy to repairing the damages than to preventing collapse. And since Donald Trump was sworn into office this year, it seems unlikely that human life is going to be able to exist on this planet in the way that we have known it, as the result of the climate alone. Most species will be wiped out. And whole countries will be displaced. The human race could and would still live on under these conditions alone. My fear, however, is that once it starts to get so bad, people in power are going to make even more rash decisions than they already have. It seems to me like there are a great many sequences of events which could end up with the complete annihilation of

the planet. Under these conditions, the human race may live on, though our existence would be much more precarious.

It is easy to point the finger at a few people and say that they are the problem, or to point at a system and say that it is the problem. The problem is not some group of people and the problem is not some system. The deeper delusion that I have been speaking about: the delusion that is wanting this moment to be something other than it is right now- this came before the people that we might point at- this came before the system we might want to blame. The system was a product of this delusion. We are all suffering from this same delusion. While it is essential that we put more compassionate and considerate systems in place which do not oppress or harm individuals or the planet, these systems will not be enough if they are populated by individuals who are still filled with greed and hatred. While it would be good to have kind leaders in positions of authority, as long as we still think that we need this moment to be different in order to be okay, we will continue to put our own well being and the well being of those we love most above the well being of others and we will suffer as we go about doing it. The law is not going to fix us.

Every problem in the world stems from not seeing that everything is changing and from the deluded sense of a self that is created in the holding on to the changing world. It is what produces greed. It is what produces hatred. It is what produces the feelings of being separate from other people. Seeing that the world is changing and allowing it to be how it is does not make someone apathetic or unable to participate in the world. It leads to a deeper understanding of how things are and a better understanding

of why others are suffering. It allows one to see the true nature of the problem and allows them to respond appropriately. The world is ending and unless we can see the true nature of the problem directly, nobody is going to care enough to do anything about it. Because even though people have a pretty good idea that the birds on the screen are not acting normal and that the walls of the theater are closing in- as much as they think they want more birds, deep down, they don't care that it is ending, because deep down, they are tired of bleeding. But seeing it takes a lot of work. It takes time and it takes commitment. I don't know if we have time. And I don't know how willing people are to look directly at their experience. People want to hold on to their ideas. People want to push away people with different ideas. We need a way to see the way things are very quickly or we are going to destroy the world.

.art.

On thursday, I have many small pom poms which will be arriving at my door from China. Six twenty pound boxes to be exact. I will then be working 12 hours a day in my studio, gluing them on to small acrylic half spheres- 30 per sphere. I think there will be about 180000 total pom poms that I will need to glue for this piece. Some of them are 3mm. They are all white. The larger ones will be glued to a 46" square piece of acrylic, and the smaller ones will be glued to a flange that will be coming from a hood. All of these will be back lit with individually addressable RGBW LEDs. I will make two of these. Each one will be made of three sections so that it can fit through a 28" door and each will have an eye tracker inside. Each of the two sections can have one of its three parts removed and can then be attached to the other of the two sections with one of its parts removed. When the two sections combine together, they form a golden rectangle from the side and a square from the back. When the two sections are disconnected from each other and the three parts are reassembled, they will each form a cube. The inside of each cube will face the hood straight at a mirror. The structures will be constructed with wood and flight case hardware. Each will be upholstered with Alcantara. It is the same kind of fabric that is used on the insides of very expensive cars and on very expensive furniture.

When two people have their heads inside, they will be face to face, 17 inches apart. This distance is the easiest distance in which two people can make eye contact in a way that most people do not know how to do. That way is the way that each of the four eyes is looking straight into the eye straight in front of it. The right eye from person one looks at the left eye of person two at the same time that the left eye of person one

looks at the right eye of person two. I don't know if it is a good idea to do this. It makes strange things happen. But even if that is not what this space is for, the 17 inches is also a prime distance to position two people so that they have to consciously try to not look at each other if they wish to not look at each other. The eye trackers will be just below each of the hoods and will be pointed at the opposite hood. Each will track the position of each persons eye(s). The LED matrix that is backlighting all of the pom poms will be activated to be particularly beautiful only upon prolonged eye contact. With the two hoods covered in small pom poms and the backgrounds covered in larger pom poms, the space will appear to flatten when seen from the distance of each hood. This flattening will contradict the viewer's memory of how the space is constructed. The immediate experience of the space will suggest that there is no difference between foreground and background. These concepts which once tied the viewer to the self that they thought that they were before they entered must be suspended if the direct experience is to be received without additional effort to differentiate the space. If there is additional effort, it will become more clear to the viewer. This differentiation, which is happening all of the time outside of the space, will become more clearly a cause of tension while in the space. The space will make it easier to let go of the concepts that separate the world into pieces and therefore will momentarily suspend the illusion of a self that is separated from all else.

Perhaps, one could suggest, this tricking of the mind into reconstructing reality is not helpful, since the individual does not have to adopt a mode of being which would lead to the understanding of this release. Perhaps this is the case. I hope it is not. The

two states are not complete binaries. There is not the perception of the self, and then, all of the sudden, the perception of a changing world that exists without a separate being. There is a movement between these states. And what exists between these two is the beautiful.

beauty is but the beginning of a terror which we can just only begin to bear, but we revere it so, for it softly disdains to destroy us.

-Rilke

The disappearance of the self that leaves the other behind is an injustice to what one might find at the end of the road. I think it is important that the face of the other is in front of you as you disappear. So that we can agree to lose ourselves together. To find something in our departure and in our return. But I am filled with contradictions. So sometimes the face of the other is your own face and it is found in a mirror that you forgot was there.

We think we like birds. So I will give us birds. I will put the expensive fabric on the outside, because that is the same expensive fabric that is on the expensive boats that will float quite nicely when the waters rise. And the same fabric that is used to upholster the furniture in the bomb shelters. And it is eco-friendly, because it doesn't make sense to give up on not destroying our home. But a plan which makes room for multiple futures could not be a bad idea. Elon Musk is single handedly putting the pieces in place that could give the world clean energy transportation and he is simultaneously preparing for its failure with space-x. His cars are upholstered with Alcantara. The first series of cars made enough money to make more and cheaper cars. And those cars made it possible

that next year there will be one which will be affordable to many more people. I don't think everyone needs place for continuous eye contact. Some people just need food. But right now a very small percentage of people hold the power to destroy or save this planet. They are my target audience. And they might make it possible to show a few more people along the way. And if there is nobody behind this mass of change to call my self, then there is no difference between myself and whoever might live on in this dying world. And so my goal: while i still think i am separate from the world- to put the pieces in place that offer the beauty that is the bridge to the disappearance of the self; The disappearance that will allow us to Love. Because wether the goal is to save the planet, to let it go, or to pass the message along to those who will start it over somewhere else: the message is the same. Everything is changing and holding on causes suffering.

I am not sure that any of this is going to make a difference. The 3mm ones especially make me question what I am doing with my life. I am still holding on to my knife. But I don't feel right leaving for some long term meditation retreat to finish the job while the earth is being destroyed. Every time I start to taste the beautiful world that comes with letting go of the words that separate the world, I cant help but think about how I should say something before it's too late. This too is a thought, and this too disappears and leaves in its wake a vivid perception of the world that is indescribably beautiful. On one hand, perhaps my art is the delusion that arises from trying to hold on to that which is changing. Perhaps the eye trackers and the Alcantara are what happen when I cling too tightly to a beauty that cannot be held. Maybe these things don't need to be seen by

the world. But it's the best I have got for now. And so I am going to try until I reach the point of diminishing return. I know beauty is subjective. But nobody likes a knife in their eye. And most people like sex. I think people like music. And there are these lights inside of my head that are quite beautiful when they move with the music. I am going to try to put that into the world on the off chance that it makes it easier for someone else to see the beautiful painting in the back of their head. And then I will leave.