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Here You Are-You Are Here

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Here You Are-You Are Here

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
In
Fine Arts

By

Matthew J. Vis

B.F.A. Michigan State University, 1992

May, 2007

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ABSTRACT

The following thesis will address both the work I completed during my Graduate studies at the University of New Orleans (1992-96), as well as the collaborative work I executed in the years that followed. The range of materials used, individual subject matter, and the variations in presentation vary widely, but the development of concept and methodology will be illuminated by the analysis of these works under the central theme of collaboration. The works selected for presentation were chosen in order to exemplify both the thematic similarities and the conceptual dynamics of a body of work inspired by intellectual investigation and intuitive navigation on the landscape of creative possibilities.

INTRODUCTION

I have always been interested in the beginning of it all, “Genesis” if you will-- the moment when all things were created. It is indeed a puzzling and indefinable place in time marked by an event that certainly predates me and everybody and everything I know. I am no scientist, and I am no theologian, but I suspect this is a subject that at least occasionally inspires a personal investigation into a realm of the unknown-- a landscape where we hope to find answers to both purpose and identity. My relationship with time spent flowing in and out of this “landscape” is what I have come to identify as my art. I do not, however, dedicate my efforts to chasing an abstract timeline in reverse, hoping to find some sort of absolute and irrefutable scientific beginning; rather I find my investigation to be more meandering, more intuitive, and more emotional.

Fairly often, I describe myself as having two approaches to life: one powered by an intellectual self; another powered by an emotional self. While my investigation of Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Wittgenstein have inspired a desire to investigate the development of signifiers and their systematic employment in order to create unified constructs, my curiosity to explore the dynamics of shared experience and the nuances of human interaction feels more natural, more tangible. This is merely a statement of preference, however. I feel my intellectual pursuits prepare me for handling the mechanics of life, while they provide me the time to release myself from the drudgery of these everyday demands. In navigating through the mechanics of life, I find there is often fluidity between intellectual and intuitive approaches; so much so that to stop and

identify them (and to heaven forbid separate them) would be to throw a wrench into an otherwise natural system:

“The centipede was happy, quite
Until the toad in fun
Said ‘Pray, which leg goes after which?’
This worked his mind to such a pitch,
He lay distracted in a ditch,
Considering how to run.”¹

Much in the same way that intellect and intuition commingle in the realm of methodology, my work investigates the nature of roles as they shift within an adaptive environment. I feel my role as an artist is to respond to an idea, and then create a physical manifestation upon which to reflect. Whereas I feel that my main role is the author in these endeavors, I sometimes feel more like an employee to the idea. At some point, does the idea somehow tell me what to do? If I need to weld a part of this thing, am I not (at least temporarily) a welder? If it should be painted, am I not then a painter? Roni Horn brings to this concept another issue: “I am, in the making (and existence) of these works primarily a viewer. It is the dialogue of the viewer with the potential view that orders these works.”² I too, enjoy this sharing of roles not just with myself and the work, but also with the “viewer”.

In this environment of creation, observation, and response, the art piece itself becomes a document of sorts--the central figure in a conceptual landscape that creates interaction between itself and those who come in contact with it. This document then gains witness--a witness who naturally seeks some sort of orientation that is gained through observation and/or verbal investigation with other witnesses. The heart of my

¹ Watts, Alan, The Way of Zen, p.27

² Horn, Roni, Things Which Happen Again, p.46

work seems to grow from the interaction spawned from these situations-an environment that inspires collaborative efforts between humans and materials in order to develop a greater understanding of purpose, identity, and meaning.

DOCUMENT + WITNESS

For my thesis show, “Document + Witness”, I divided the UNO Fine Arts Gallery into two spaces. The largest portion of the space was considered the “show”, and the smaller portion was considered “backstage”. There was an editing process, as there is with all art shows, to determine what to display in this exhibition. Some decisions are based on the strength of the individual works, some decisions are based on building themes or congruity, some involve practical issues such as space limitations, and these are all important decisions. Presentation, I believe, is as important as the individual works, and my work relies on the subject of context as much as anything. The division of the gallery into two spaces was intended to illustrate not just context, but to highlight the stages of making and presenting the work in a specific situational dynamic. In these realms, the backstage element satisfied practical and conceptual applications. It was within this small space that I brought nearly all of my artwork, and I used it as a staging area in order to make decisions as to what would be shown in the “show”. The remaining pieces stayed backstage, as sort of understudies to the principle players. They sat in a state of readiness rather than as outcasts in some remote location.

During the preparation of the gallery walls, lighting, etc, this backstage area served as the epicenter for my preparations necessary to compose the show. It remained as such throughout the duration of the exhibition. I also lived and worked in the space, thereby adding a level of performance to the environment. I wanted my exhibition to show that there is an underlying and continued activity to my work, and that I wish to share this experience with the observer. At times I work in solitude, but it is not

my desire to work in complete isolation. In this way I created a forum in which to approach issues of process, roles, and identity.

The “show” space included the installation of selected paintings, sculpture, and video elements that were presented in a way that I came to call an “Activity Installation”. Many of the pieces were situated in the gallery in much the same way a typical show would be and some were not. For example, some of the paintings were hung on the wall, while others were put in their proposed area in a sort of vignette that implied that they were ready to be hung, but frozen in a moment just prior to hanging. The piece itself was still leaning against the wall on the floor, and all the necessary tools to install it were in place—stepladder, level, nails, and a hammer—all ready to be employed. Each element was clearly understood in this context and implied the activity of hanging the artwork without actually doing so. This tactic was used in order to suggest that the final presentation was temporary, and though there was consideration to its placement amongst the other objects in the room, there was not a need to strictly adhere to the traditional system of hanging the work in a neutral environment-- a neutral space devoid of the tools needed to actually hang the work. This style of presentation also suggested that there is always more work to be done; even though one might feel compelled to present it as finished in order to satisfy an imposed criterion. Another facet of this presentation was to introduce the concept of collaboration. In its frozen state between preparation and completion, it was unclear *who* would hang the work. Would it be the artist, or the preparator? Was this intended to be the final presentation, or was it an invitation for the viewer to hang the work? Both propositions point to the inclusion of a collaborator, and that the artist likely does not work alone. Continued investigation into

this situation draws the viewer into the creative process, and involves them in the evaluation of these roles.

The paintings themselves were large pieces of wood or metal that appeared to be distressed and fragmented industrial cast-offs, worn by any number of factory processes (*figs. 1&2*).



figure 1-“Appears Ghost”



figure 2-“Quality Sealed”

The surfaces were battered and splattered by oil and paint--a post-industrial diary of relentless manufacturing stages *sans* the psychological meanderings of Jackson Pollock. As if to give a conceptual title to this forgotten composition, a single word or simple phrase was scrawled on top adding an anonymous signature in a desperate graffito. Less lyrical than Tapiés, and more distilled than Basquiat, these words seem more like an echo than an exclamation. If the frantic intertwining loops and drips of Pollock’s enormous canvases represented the mingling subconscious thoughts and impulses of his creative and sometimes disturbed psyche, what were my industrial relics intended to represent?

The answers seem to be in the relationship between action and response; between discovery and recovery. The “canvas” upon which these issues were to be investigated were found amongst piles of detritus in landscapes of industrial worksites

readily found on the edges of town--places of simultaneous progress and decay. The marks upon their surface were undoubtedly evidence of various methods of construction and destruction but with inconclusive or unresolved success. There seemed to be a subconscious mapping of purpose revealed within these abstract compositions, similar in aesthetic to the canvases of Basquiat and Pollock, but these markings were borne out of entirely different methods and intention.

I would take pieces from these worksites and bring them into my studio, which was filled with other castoffs and my own tools; it became a smaller and somewhat more controlled environment. Here, I would analyze the various marks and use these clues to construct an understanding of the cause and effect of work methods. I would at times take notes on my observations, creating a diaristic journal of observations which I would continue to re-evaluate and revise. This journal would then serve as a map towards personal orientation and inspire some of my own mark making. I would add hammer marks, scrape off paint splotches, burn or spill oil on it, thereby integrating my own mark making into the mix. It would become my work surface for personal projects like making furniture or repairing bicycles. Evidence of these processes would nudge their way into the history of the piece, and inspire the generation of a thematic titling of the piece, its surface to be painted or written upon later.

Unlike the canvases of an abstract painter, these haphazard compositions seemed to lack self-consciousness. It was unlikely that the construction worker was interested in the appearance of these work surfaces, as he had other tasks at hand. His concerns were on the building or painting of other projects, and the evidence on these work surfaces was extraneous. In fact, these materials that became my "canvases"

were employed (and in a sense sacrificed) in order to complete a project that was intended to be devoid of overspill and visual blemishes. Still, they seemed to share visual similarities with so-called Abstract art when brought into a new environment. These freestyle compositions presented evidence of a collaboration between worker and material, but maintained something of a separation from its original environment. And now- in a new method of presentation- the worker, the materials, the methods, and the artist propose an evolutionary context of both collaboration and intent.

Concurrently with these investigations, I developed the need to address issues of shifting roles within collaborative endeavors, as well as validating the work as a document of these explorations. I began to refer to these art pieces as “documents” rather than paintings, sculptures, etc. because I wanted to reinforce the concept that the processes of creation and the tactics of presentation were situational and therefore impermanent points in an evolutionary process; while the objects themselves acted as a more static form of evidence.

To further explain this concept, I will use the example of my theoretical trip to Paris. I have read about the beautiful and romantic experiences of others as they wandered the streets of picturesque Paris. I have seen many photographs and paintings depicting a number of cultural situations that inspire curiosity and wonderment in a world far away. And so, with an inspiration to explore these things, I take a trip in order to experience these things first-hand.

During my time there, I undoubtedly become a part of a very tangible set of experiences under the backdrop of a new landscape. I buy souvenirs and take pictures along the way as one might expect to do on vacation, and I send postcards to friends

before I return home. My experiences then become memories, and the photos and souvenirs become evidence of my experience. The postcards then become an additional narrative element. Not unlike my paintings, these objects then serve as documents of sorts, which furnish evidence of my experiences, and provide some static forms of validation. Using these documents as a starting point, my subsequent observations and discussion lead to an understanding of underlying purpose and intent, identity, and experience. Through reflection and communication, these documents provide a fertile ground on which to gain an understanding of the human condition. But how do we choose what to do, and how should we go about it? Why Paris, and not London? Howard Smagula proposes “no one system, mode of thought, or methodology seems to provide all of the answers to the intricacies of present-day life”³, and I agree. The spirit of my work seems to lie in the moments between reality and fantasy-an investigation sparked by curiosity and propelled by determination-a collection of shared moments that explore the nuances of existence.

The sculpture-and-video pieces in my thesis show are perhaps the best examples of this fantasy/reality subject. During my Masters research at UNO, I got salmonella and was hospitalized for about six weeks. I had a temperature of 104.9 for who knows how long, and I lost 40 pounds. I was in a sleep/coma state for weeks on end and suffered memory loss, some of it permanent and some temporary. I am told it was weeks before I could construct an intelligible sentence other than “I don’t know”. I remember asking for a Sharpie and some typing paper in case I had a thought or a memory I had the wherewithal to jot down. It was not an unsettling time, although it was

³ Smagula, Howard, Currents: Contemporary Directions in the Visual Arts, p.1

a baffling period of reorientation with everyday things and social interaction. The phrase “You are here” was a recurring and comforting statement that came to me during this strange state of nothingness. It was like looking at a map with an “X” amidst indecipherable surrounding information. Just knowing that I was *there* was of comfort; though where that place was amidst everything else was unknown to me. Perhaps some comfort came in thinking that someone else had been there, too, at least long enough to place that “X”.

And so I began drawing simple images on blank pieces of paper in those brief moments of consciousness in a sea of indefinable sleep. This series of drawings and occasional statements served as a logbook documenting my search for a connection between my “dream life” and my “waking life”.

When I returned to graduate school, I continued to consult these images and statements in an attempt to orient myself with them amidst my now very real surroundings. I felt compelled to understand what these ideas were, and I began by figuring out how to build them. This was an exercise in reflection through the discipline of creating a physical manifestation of the idea. I felt like a collaborator with both idea and material as I stumbled through a long series of decision-making processes necessary to build this mysterious thing. Each step of the process had its uncertainties, but provided a growing feeling of connectedness to this unknown. Decisions of material, shape, and size seemed to become easier as time passed, each step providing added clarity and momentum to a still uncertain end. This personal dialogue is not necessarily recognizable to the casual observer, I realized, but as the piece

reached a stage of “completion” I felt that the inclusion of another collaborator would provide additional clarity through perspective.

One such piece was “Roll” (*fig. 3*), a sculpture that began with one of these



Figure 3-“Roll”

drawings and became an 8 foot spoked wheel made of wood and rebar with a 24 foot axel. As a single wheel, unattached to another device, it took on a gyroscopic appearance. As it sat on a field of grass, tilting high overhead, it seemed to have spun or rolled into its place from an unknown place. In order to view it upright, its axel parallel to the ground, it required the efforts of two people. With the help of a friend, we tilted it upright and found the giant wheel situated prominently in the middle of our collaborative social situation. Working together, and in response to what we felt to be a natural activity, we began to roll this giant wheel. It was if we wanted to feel it work, as we were working together. The wheel showed that it indeed does roll with the help of likeminded collaborators, and that it was both a physical and conceptual navigational tool that provided a forum in which to share an experience. My partner and I kept in verbal communication while simultaneously pushing and balancing the wheel from opposite ends of the axel; our efforts needed to be spontaneously orchestrated to maintain equilibrium and momentum. This object, and the activities surrounding its creation and activation, had become both a practical and metaphorical tool for navigation upon a seemingly endless landscape of possibilities.

For presentation in the gallery setting, I was not satisfied with displaying the wheel in a moment of rest, particularly since I had had such an exhilarating series of interactions with the piece as a number of different people and I navigated it in open fields around the Lakefront. But there was one dynamic in presenting it indoors that I did like: it had to be disassembled and reassembled inside the mostly glass enclosure of the gallery; much like a ship in a bottle. Indoors, it took on an even larger presence, and though temporarily trapped, it presented an amplified sense of potential.

The final element in this presentation was the addition of video documentation of it being rolled in a nearby field. The video was displayed as an endless loop on a large television perched atop a media cart typical of classroom presentations, and it was situated next to the giant wheel. The presentation seemed to come “full circle” so to speak, as it presented the piece both at rest and in a state of activation. The views of the open fields of campus were easily observable through the glass gallery walls, and suggested something of an echo to the landscape in the video. Simultaneously, the viewer could have access to the piece at rest, as well as its activation in the video document.

THE TIME IN BETWEEN

I had a rather long hiatus from the graduate program in the period between my thesis show and the drafting of the document before you, and the details regarding why will not be discussed here.

During this time in between, I had continued my investigations in contemporary art, steadily producing work that felt like an unbroken continuance of my work at the university. I have continued to show regularly both nationally and internationally. Additionally, I have been guest speaker at a number of universities, thanks to my preparatory studies at the University of New Orleans.

In my artistic endeavors, I met an artist by the name of Tony Campbell in New York who had many similar experiences and ideas. We had both worked with collaborators, explored similar mediums such as video and photography, and we had both worked in advertising. In 1998, we founded a two-man art team named “Generic Art Solutions”, and we have been working together ever since. The remainder of this thesis will be dedicated to the analysis of the work produced by Generic Art Solutions.

GENERIC ART SOLUTIONS (G.A.S.)

The establishment of the collaborative team Generic Art Solutions came after what may very well have been two years worth of discussions with Tony Campbell. While we both had formal training in a number of media, neither of us felt tethered to any one in particular. We agreed that each medium has its own advantages, like any tool in the shed. He and I have our own specific qualities as well, and we agreed to employ them strategically in whatever way seemed most advantageous.

We treat each other as equals in this team effort; and our presentation reinforces that concept. Whether we are in the studio or in public, we dress alike--often in workmen's uniforms--and equip ourselves with the same tools. We feel strength in this unity—a type of artistic solidarity—and we refer to ourselves as “Brothers in Art”. We share a conceptual affinity for Joseph Beuys' idea that everyone is an artist, and we have a shared respect for the proletariat work ethic. Our approach to making art is a combination of idealism and practicality. New ideas are a worthy starting point, but hard work makes them possible.

The first joint decision we were faced with was “What do we call ourselves?” We agreed that our individual names should be replaced by a single title, like a team name, and we wanted it to live in the realm of product advertisement. I thought it would be a good idea to be the “Mr. Goodwrench” of the art world, and Tony suggested “Generic Art Solutions” (G.A.S.). I expressed my reservation that “generic” products in the U.S. were devoid of style, and that the quality of such products were questionable. Tony maintained that in England (where he was born and raised) “generic” referred to a

streamlined version of popular products that defined contemporary styling. We came to agree that multiple interpretations of this title would be a good thing, as it found application in the entire range of styles of all products. Generic Art Solutions was born.

WORKING TOGETHER

Our first project as Generic Art Solutions came as a response to an invitation to a group show entitled “(Not Your Typical) Still Life”, hosted by a gallery in downtown New Orleans. The title suggested that while the genre was rooted in a formal tradition, but the subject matter and the medium in which it were to be executed were open to the artists’ interpretations. Tony and I felt that this was a fertile ground on which to identify and develop intersecting concepts that we had on the subject. I likened it to the decision of two musicians wanting to work together for the first time. Rather than attempting to compose an original piece together, we should meet in a more neutral setting, such as a song that was familiar to us both. In this territory we could learn to play together while exposing our personal working methods and stylistic approaches within an established construct. This orientation process could provide us the room for personal expression while facilitating the opportunity to exchange multiple interpretations and ideas.

In our initial discussions, we decided first to identify what we considered to be the typical (or “generic”) Still Life works within the context of art history. We wanted to start with a historically recognizable image that spoke strongly of that tradition, but contained traces of Modernist sensibilities. We arrived at the painted works of Cezanne, as his modest arrangements of fruit and wine on a small studio table seemed to be the theme from which he and countless other painters used as a platform from which to practice and develop their personal styles of mark making and composition.

His approach to capturing this type of scene within the artists' studio contained both a rich sense of traditional craft and a provocative subtext. In what could have been a mere exercise of practical techniques, Cezanne found himself inspired also to investigate the issues of perception and perspective. In the course of time necessary to create a pictorial representation of a commonplace scene within the artists' studio, Cezanne also tried to capture the shifting nuances of light throughout the day; and he did so from different viewpoints. His efforts to illustrate the changing dynamics of time, space, and perception held particular interest for us; and we wanted to conduct our own investigation into these adaptive approaches in a contemporized fashion. At the turn of the century when Cezanne worked, photography presented itself as a legitimate way to record realistic settings but he stayed loyal to his craft of painting. There was a skepticism surrounding this imposing new medium, and its fight for legitimacy amongst the more traditional crafts lasted for many years to come.

In today's media-saturated environment, G.A.S. didn't have this sort of craft-oriented issue. Photography, film, video, and the fast-forward intensity of unlimited access to images on the Web provided a ready-made palette of both images and media from which to choose. For this project we used video, which seemed like a natural step in the technological progression of single-frame pictorial representation. This medium would also provide us an opportunity to illustrate the "condition" of the moment-- to present an experience that necessarily exists in time.⁴ We recognized that the cost of video production and the ease of viewing the finished work would keep it accessible to a wide audience, while illuminating a connection between art history and popular culture.

⁴Warhol, Andy, The Philosophy of Andy Warhol, p.144

We wanted to highlight the “Life” in “Still Life” and we felt the best way to do that was to include movement.⁵

We searched for reference photos on the Web. As is typical to web searches, the images that came up first were ranked as the most commonly referenced. And, not surprisingly, they matched our discussions about how they would look and what objects they would contain. Even today, it seems that fruit, bread, and wine are commonly found in artist’s studios. It was this observation that established a link to a facet of the work that lies outside the picture frame: “Aren’t we essentially doing the same things now as artists did a hundred years ago?” Of course, the conditions may change and the approach may differ, but aren’t there a number of similarities in regards to lifestyle? This concept helped us define our approach to making art that is based on historically significant works. We want our work to evoke a sense of familiarity with the original composition, to whatever degree the viewer can, while exploring the facets of activity and condition.

The settings in our video triptych are an *homage* to Cezanne’s still life paintings, and we treated them as a reference rather than utilizing them as a strict compositional blueprint for our videos. Once we gathered similar elements from our kitchens and studios, we created our settings using our memory of his works with the hope that our composition would retain a natural feel. These video vignettes were scripted, so to speak, but the activation of these settings added a dynamic element of collaborative improvisation.

⁵Fulton, Hamish, Thirty-one Horizons, p.9

The first part of the triptych is titled “Supper” (*fig. 4*). This 18-minute video



Figure 4-“Supper” (video still)

vignette is staged in the modest environment of the kitchen in my apartment, and the establishing shot creates a feel quite similar to Cezanne’s studio environment. As the title implies, the activity that is featured is the casual consumption of the bread, wine, and fruit scattered about the table. As this rather simple activity unfolds, we observe a slowly changing composition within the frame, while suggesting that there is more to be seen outside this limited view. Anonymity of the players in this scene is preserved because the shot is tight enough on the composition as to only allow our hands and arms to be seen. This element of anonymity is an extension of our concept of keeping our work somewhat common or generic. It is this approach that presents the idea that the players could be anybody, and consequently preserves the neutrality of the scene.

In addition to illustrating a connection between past and present activities, we wanted to build a bridge between artist and viewer through this commonplace activity. Artist Andy Goldsworthy also engages in simple activities such as the rearrangement of leaves and stones in the vastness of natural surroundings. His work has a sense of distilled immediacy to it that inspires our investigation into “something common and ordinary”⁶

The second vignette is titled “Still Life Action Painting” (*fig. 5*). This setting was



Figure 5-“Still Life Action Painting”(video still)

comprised of various fruits and a rumpled tablecloth, much like “Supper”, but also a cheap ceramic bowl and a flowered ceramic vase that we purchased from Wal-Mart. The table was actually a piece of wood on sawhorses, situated against the backdrop of Tony’s mid-renovation living room wall. This room provided the perfect setting for this

⁶Goldsworthy, Andy, Hand to Earth, Andy Goldsworthy Sculpture 1976-1990, p.54

piece, as it naturally had the look and feel of a typical painters' studio. It also provided an autobiographical back-story to the setting, and the (dis)order of the space made it feel less calculated than an artificial construct would.

This 11-minute activity is more fast-paced than "Supper", and documents the destruction of the still life arrangement while simultaneously creating an "action painting" upon the back wall by firing multi-colored paint balls at it. "Paintball" is a new version of "tag" that has roots in military training. Opposing teams would arm themselves with air guns loaded with grape-sized balls that exploded with a small paint charge upon impact. The strategic and somewhat covert tactics involved in this game translated well to the increasingly systematic approach to the artists' attempt to create something new. There also contained elements of conflict and chance that seem to motivate artists more so now than ever.

Throughout the video, the paintballs slowly destroy the tranquil scene with periodic rapid-fire blasts of miniature paint explosions. The bowl and vase become splattered with colored paint splotches and then get broken, and the back wall begins to look like a neon-colored Pollock canvas.

Metaphorically, this video speaks about the transition of Modernist painting from Impressionism to Abstraction. This illustrated a change in both subject matter and approach to the craft of painting through a rather new non-art activity. This humorous assault on the quietude of a more traditional genre graphically portrayed a struggle to break free of convention, while exploring an interest in the value of chance alongside the development of a new style.

The third video vignette is titled “Juice” (*fig. 6*). This 6-minute piece was also



Figure 6-“Juice”(video still)

performed at my kitchen table and is initially quite similar to “Supper”. Here we added an electric juicer to the setting, and the bulk of the video shows our hands coming in from both sides of the frame as we cut the fruit and process it in the juicer. Illustrating another style of consumption, this activity alludes to the cut-and-paste process of design in contemporary art where artists pick apart resources and separate them from their “core” in order to utilize elements deemed healthy enough for personal use. In this approach, the results are intended to be palatable but become somewhat homogenized.

This methodology runs rampant in advertising, and has an increasingly strong foothold in the contemporary fine arts scene. Similar to the “Juice” video process, the integration of significant art historical imagery into entertainment and advertising blurs

the individual significance of the piece and confuses the issue of authorship. “Juice” has a subtle and humorous approach to this subject, but does not beg the question. The purpose of our work is to create a document on which to reflect and invite discourse, not to denigrate the work of others. Our interest lies in celebrating the similarities of the human condition through a thoughtful and humorous re-examination of common behavior. And though it may be a fine line to walk, we believe this video vignette firmly treads upon that territory in a provocative fashion.

WITHIN THE LANDSCAPE

The 18 months or so following hurricane Katrina have been an exhausting period of reorientation and rebuilding. Our living environment was crushed, washed away, and turned upside-down. In its wake, countless thousands of people along the Gulf Coast have been struggling not only to figure out what to do, but how to do it. Tony and I quickly returned to New Orleans after the storm in order to figure these things out. In order to understand what happened and how to proceed, we felt that we had to live within the landscape.

Among my personal affects that were spared, I found an article written forty years earlier that had a profound sense of connection to our new condition:

“Now the world is neither meaningful nor absurd. It simply is. In place of this universe of “meanings”(psychological, social, functional), one should try to construct a more solid immediate world”⁷.

I had highlighted this quote during art school at Michigan State, and I now found a new connection to it. During my studies of contemporary art following my near fatal illness and again recently, I have used this quote as a mantra of sorts: I should try to construct a more solid immediate world in order to continue.

Within the human condition, instinctual behavior creates an adaptive response. Alongside our efforts to solve this new set of problems regarding basic survival, Generic Art Solutions created a body of work that documented our experiences in this bizarre new environment. For insurance purposes as well as out of sheer curiosity it seemed that nearly everyone became a documentary photographer; and G.A.S. was no

⁷ Alain Robbe-Grillet, in Barbara Rose’s “ABC Art”, Art in America, Oct.-Nov. 1965

exception. John Berger's investigations into perception addressed this condition in relation to the origin of cognition:

"Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak. But there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled."⁸

In this proposal, Berger submits that the orientation process begins with seeing and reaches an impasse on the bridge towards knowing when we try to speak about what we see. A seven-character phrase in Zen Koan study addresses this quandary succinctly:

"The instant you speak about a thing you miss the mark".⁹

It is at this impasse that an artist seeks to express himself visually, in hopes to settle this relation.

G.A.S. created two particular photographs that illustrated both our new lifestyle conditions and our collaborative efforts in our adaptive response. The physical condition of our post-Katrina environment is dominated by destruction, and a lot of artistic responses seem to be rooted in the grim documentation of desperate people in a desperate place. We, on the other hand, wanted our work to originate in the events of daily life still common to the people of New Orleans that speak of hope and resilience. The first of these photographs is a re-creation of Grant Wood's "American Gothic". Titled "New American Gothic" (*fig. 7*), it portrays Tony and me in a similar fashion to the

⁸ Berger, John, Ways of Seeing, pp.7-8

⁹ Miura, Isshu and Fuller, Ruth, The Zen Koan, p.104

original painting, standing in Tony's yard in front of a FEMA trailer instead of a



Figure 7-“New American Gothic”

farmhouse. Though we felt challenged by our significant personal losses, we felt relatively fortunate to have repairable homes. A combination of stoicism, determination, and dependency aided us in our recovery. Of course, our experience was not unique; each and every person was working overtime to bring order to the chaos.

In this photograph, I am holding a rake, and Tony is holding a beer. Strangely enough, both are common tools for smoothing out a loose and disheveled landscape. The expression on my face is one of detachment, much like the couple in Woods' painting. Tony's expression is one of determination tempered by fatigue. We are wearing identical new G.A.S. t-shirts that feature an image of a broken pine tree air freshener labeled as having a “Katrina” scent. This element in the composition was an

attempt to inject humor into tragedy by spoofing the media's myopic commercialized take on the aftermath of the storm.

In regards to the choice to use ourselves in this portrait, we initially discussed the desire to document a slice of life without projecting it onto others. Much like the collaborative duo Gilbert + George, we felt that the repeated use of ourselves in our work would eventually lead to a diffusion of tertiary socio-political issues. Perhaps we could concurrently establish and erase the sense of ego as they have. In a sense, we hope to institute a generic presence as if we were stand-ins in our own art.

We also recognized that as a contemporary male duo, we present ourselves as interchangeable players in the traditional male/female marriage. Within this context, we appear somewhat non-descript and equal in this partnership, while we express the range of emotions in a dramaturgical dyad. Questions regarding the homosexual undertones in our work are not unwelcome, but we wish to neither establish nor deny the issue in our work. Again, we would like to remain a generic presence in our work. This portrait is captured in a brief moment between our sea of endless tasks as modern-day homesteaders who must now reclaim our own homes. Much in the same way as the couple in "American Gothic", we represent the New Orleanian antihero in our humble servitude to the forces of nature.

The additional subtext of New Orleans street culture is referenced by using the new white t-shirts we are wearing, as well as the addition of 20-inch chrome rims to the generic FEMA trailer. These elements are a tribute to the omnipresent hip-hop culture that exclaims no matter how desperate the times, respect on the street demands that

you look “fresh” at all times. There is also a strength and pride in unity that translates as a need to “represent”.

The final piece I want to discuss is our photographic version of Leonardo Da Vinci’s “Last Supper”. As we like to retain a close reference to the original work we re-create, we also titled our version “Last Supper” (*fig. 8*). The original painting is arguably



Figure 8-“Last Supper”

the most recognizable painting in the world. Its historical and religious importance will continue to inspire analysis and passionate discourse among art historians, scientists, and the common man--perhaps until the end of time. As most people are aware, it portrays what may be the most significant event in the history of Christianity. It is thus with all due respect that G.A.S. found an interest in this painting, and chose to re-create it in a contemporary fashion.

We started by discussing our shared idea that this painting was a portrayal of an important event, but was created long after the fact. In actuality, it was an illustration of an idea rather than a document that was created during the event. Upon its completion, however, it seemed to bring an historical event into the present with its spectacular presentation of detail and craft. This painting made the intangible seem more real. At the time, and for many years to come, this was the power of painting.

In an attempt to see this painting objectively, we came to identify it as a portrayal of thirteen men having a dinner party. Before knowing any of the subtext, it was not unlike any other gathering of people at a table to eat, drink, and converse. Throughout history, any one of these similar events can take on a sense of importance, like Thanksgiving or a birthday party. In post-Katrina New Orleans, Tony and I- as well as countless others- came to feel that each gathering was a celebration of significant personal importance. And so, we decided to have a crawfish boil against the backdrop of a FEMA trailer in his yard. In typical New Orleans fashion, this type of event takes on an importance in its celebration of togetherness.

At first, we struggled to decide who would represent which apostle, and who would be Jesus. We once again searched the Web for source images, and found not only thousands of shots of the original, but also hundreds of re-creations. It seemed that in the re-creations people had their particular attachments to their knowledge of the scene, and they carefully chose their stand-ins in order to reveal similarities in personalities. We realized that with the magic of Photoshop, we could use us ourselves as more generic stand-ins and avoid the subtext involved in calculated substitutions.

The employment of Photoshop tools would also create a fantastical composition that would be otherwise impossible in a single-shot photograph.

The setting is unmistakably post-Katrina New Orleans—a FEMA trailer, crawfish, and beer are perhaps the most common elements of a weekend get-together. In this cultural vignette, though, two men are trying to do the work of many. There is a subtle comedy in this *homage*, as we reference our attempt to make the best of the situation with limited resources. There is an undercurrent of fantastical impossibility to our situation as we live within the landscape.

CONCLUSION

It seems that G.A.S. is moving both backward and forward in our work, though in different ways. We find a starting point with something that has already been made such as a painting by Cezanne or Da Vinci by looking backward into the context of art history. This serves as a foundation for our re-creations while concurrently tapping into the minds and memories of the viewer. The “forward” movement is suggested through the use contemporary props and styling as well as the usage of progressive technology such as digital enhancement and reconstruction of photographs and video. But here is where our advancement ends. We are not expanding the reaches of technology, though we are working in a progressive contextual fashion. For example, the contextual interplay between Grant Woods’ “American Gothic” and our “New American Gothic” illustrates the vast difference between historical and contemporary takes on the American farmer through the use of specific situational dynamics and cultural elements of consumerism and style. It is through these re-creations that we hope to explore both the similarities in human behavior and the differences in cultural condition. In collaboration with history, media, and each other we search for an understanding that is both contemplative and humorous.

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Matt Vis was born August 12, 1965 in Quantico, Virginia, just outside what is known as the “Intelligence Triangle”. He earned his B.F.A. in printmaking at Michigan State University in just under a decade, but explains that an N.E.A. grant, his summer studies at University of London, and his research on the subject of sleeping in kept him from graduating on time. His passion for learning and his need to escape the local authorities brought him to University of New Orleans where he earned his M.F.A. in just under *two* decades. He still maintains his beliefs that history is a thing of the past, the future will be figured out tomorrow, and that a boomerang is “some sort of delicious Halloween pie made by ghosts”.