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Silly Trip Wires

A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Art and Design

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements of the degree

Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art

by

Jonathan Ross Byrd

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Vanessa Mayoraz, Chair

Travis Graves

Scott Koterbay

Keywords: experience, trauma, understanding, installation

ABSTRACT

Silly Trip Wires

by

Jonathan Ross Byrd

The artist discusses the work in *Silly Trip Wires*, 2020 his Master of Fine Arts exhibition. The exhibition includes an installation, Silly Trips Wires, and documentation of a smaller site-specific version of the work.

The Artist discusses the process of transition from military to civilian, and the potential effects that mental trauma from combat deployments can have on this process. This is tied to an analysis of how communicating the experience of veterans to civilians, through artwork, functions to bring about understanding.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The thesis exhibit *Silly Trip Wires* (fig. 9-11) is directly connected to my time in the military and deployment to Afghanistan. I came back from Afghanistan in 2012, as part of a route clearance company responsible for finding and disposing of improvised explosive devices. In 2017, after five years of telling myself that my deployment had not affected me negatively in any way, I began speaking to a counselor at the VA who diagnosed me with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. I realized that I hadn't talked to anyone about what happened in Afghanistan. Other soldiers I deployed with had not talked about what they experienced either. Although my company suffered no casualties while deployed, two soldiers committed suicide within 90 days of our return. Often when I talked to family and friends who were not deployed, it was a one sided conversation. The civilians I have spoken with struggle to understand the experience. Speaking with someone is helpful, however being understood is considerably better.

One of the main goals of my thesis exhibit, *Silly Trip Wires*, is to communicate. I decided to create the artwork as an installation because of the forms ability to effectively communicate information through physical interaction. Installations allow for the artist to construct an immersive environment that may alter a viewer's perspective of a space, and how they interact with it.

Silly Trip Wires consists of a structure with one corridor and several larger spaces along the corridor. It is constructed in a manner similar to structures found in Afghanistan and Iraq with trip wires placed through out the installation. Trip wires are hidden trigger

mechanism that are designed to activate some kind of a trap or alarm by the line being pulled to release a switch. The audience is asked to enter the structure and use silly string to reveal the wires. This technique was used in Iraq and Afghanistan by US forces, to great effect, in order to locate of trip wires. The work is inspired by Leo Tolstoy's (1828-1910) theory of art. The basic idea is that an audience can understand the emotions that the artist had by experiencing the artwork. *Silly Trip Wires* not only visually describes the experience, it encourages the viewer to become enveloped in the work, and interact with it. *Silly Trip Wires* allows individuals that have not shared the experiences that veterans have had to understand the emotions of soldiers in combat situations. Not every soldier had the experience of searching for trip wires while clearing out a structure, however all worry about things that they cannot see before it is too late. Snipers, IEDs, suicide bombers, and trip wires are more worrisome than the enemy coming straight at you with an assault rifle, which they rarely do. Understanding experiences soldiers had may help to better understand the mental trauma and the resulting afflictions of the trauma.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORICAL INFLUENCES

Art history is full of works that are based around the glorification and brutality of events on the battlefield of various wars. Evidence of the effects of war on soldiers is present in the history of art, but rarely depicted until the modern period. Otto Dix (1891-1969) and Fernand Léger (1881-1955) both served on the front line during the First World War. Even though *Silly Trip Wires* is an installation that engages the audience in active participation both painters are still influential to the work. Both Dix, Léger composed works that provide insight into their personal experiences. *Silly Trip Wires* provides insight into my experience while deployed and reintegrating into civilian society, just in a different format.

Otto Dix was a German machine gunner that served a great deal of his time in the front line trenches. While some of his work, like *The Trench* (fig. 1) show the horrors of active battle, while several of his works concern themselves with the aftermath of war. Of particular interest is the painting *War Cripples* (fig. 2), which painting is of four veterans with physical disabilities that were the result of their service. Dix makes it evident that they are veterans because he depicts them wearing their uniforms.



Figure 1. Dix, Otto, *The Trench*, 1920-1923. Oil on canvas.



Figure 2. Dix, Otto, *War Cripples*, 1920. Dry point.

“Dix himself was wounded five times during his four year stint in the German Army” (Crockett 72). To be injured in war is one thing, however to be injured and sent back to serve in active battle four times is quite another. It is possible that he would have felt more like a tool of the army or a mechanical device that is repaired well enough to function. Then abruptly sent back out with no regard for his physical or mental well being. *War Cripples*, influenced my work because it was the perspective of another veteran on the aftermath of war. Dix did not glorify the fighting; he showed the lasting effects on the individual soldier. *War Cripples* also perhaps revealed how people, that did not understand what the veterans had been through, viewed them.

War Cripples show four veterans traversing down a sidewalk. All of them are disfigured and, with the exception of the individual in the wheel chair, all of them have the missing parts replaced with wooden or metal substitute. They do not seem to be in mental or physical pain, but he did render the figures in a grotesque manner. The reason for his grotesque depiction of these veterans is three fold. With his work “Dix was attacking the military for butchering his generation, the public for its fascination with these pathetic, reconstructed veterans, and the cripples themselves for their undiminished national pride” (Crockett 72).

Dix did not want to play into the political game of supporting a country that he and many others had given so much. A country that he felt did little in return for the soldiers that returned home. He wanted to show the ugliness that did not end with the fighting, rather the ugliness transformed into another kind. Dix also had returned home to find it in upheaval. Many in Germany were dissatisfied with the constitutional monarchy. “The sociopolitical goals of the revolutionaries of 1918 were democracy, social justice,

and federalism, not the Bolshevism and dictatorship of the proletariat” (Orlow 193). The revolution ended in 1919 with the formation of the Weimar Republic. Dix had come home and was a veteran of a side that had lost and the institutional government of the country that he had fought for dissolved. Most veterans look forward to coming home because of the stability. This must have been terrible jarring for Dix to return home only to find more chaos.

During the war “trauma was experienced on the battlefield, along with its consequences were manifested in the onset of symptoms against which the individual must fight in order to maintain self-control. However, this struggle was likely to occur not in the front line, but elsewhere in the cycle of events” (Fox 260).

Until the soldier returns home, much of the trauma, physical or mental, that is experienced during war is not evident. How soldiers behave in combat zones becomes natural during that time. These behaviors do not simply turn off once they return home. Just as an amputated leg does not grow back, the anxiety or hyperawareness that is necessary, even beneficial in a combat zone, does not immediately dissipate. For soldiers seeing someone with a missing limb, or someone that goes to the ground because of a loud noise, is not uncommon. Outside of a combat zone or military installation this sight is less common and not understood by many. The mental trauma is more difficult to distinguish than the physical. In military culture talking about anxiety or mental anguish is not looked upon kindly. There is an expectation of demonstrating resolve and mental toughness through a stoic almost robotic persona.

Fernand Léger’s *Soldiers Playing Cards* (fig. 3) depicts a group of machine-like individuals participating in a card game. This painting inspired my work to take account

of the emotions that are often hidden by soldiers. Soldiers that are willing to talk about the experience of combat are less willing to discuss how they feel about these experiences. Interestingly Léger depicts soldiers during their down time as mechanical beings. Down time is a period to relax and be slightly less formal. Yet Léger has depicted them as beings that would not have emotion. The absence of pain or emotion that could cause them to hesitate or waiver in completing their objective would come in handy during battle, however it is during stressful or dangerous times that emotions are more prevalent. During leisure those deeper emotions are turned off. This allows the soldier to put what they have experienced, and what they may have to do in future missions, out of their mind for a little while.



Figure 3. Léger, Fernand, *Soldiers Playing Cards*, 1917. Oil on canvas.

During the war Léger wrote “We no longer have the exquisite modulations of a forest through which filters the fine gold of the sun, but the metallic reflection on a rhythmic mass of rods and pistons in the hospital lighting. It is at once a cry of rage

against the war imposing on men the terrible uniformity of Robots” (Marwick 511).

Léger along with his comrades were forced to mentally operate like robots because of the situation they were in. Sometimes the easiest way to get through certain situations is to turn off unwanted or unacceptable emotions. Unacceptable emotions in the military are uncontrolled fear and angst. These emotions are thought to be cowardly, so they are met with great disdain.

Like *War Cripples* and *Soldiers Playing Cards*, *Silly Trip Wires* gives accounts of trauma that may take place in combat zones. Dix’s and Léger’s work looks at the veterans’ physical trauma, while my work looks at the experiences that may have led to mental trauma. This is my personal perspective on the reasons mental issues may persist or come to light after Veterans return to civilian life. Although there is a questionnaire and processes to screen for PTSD, many soldiers go through this process like Léger’s robotic soldiers. They answer no and yes accordingly disregarding the truth. Many of the medical and mental evaluation processes are preceded with the advice, if you want to go home as soon as possible then you know how to answer.

War has changed in many aspects from the time that Dix and Léger served. Technology has made trench warfare and the front line almost obsolete concepts. More wounds are now survivable, but with surviving comes living. The soldiers that live through these experiences must learn how to cope with what they have done and seen. They must also find some balance of relative normalcy, because most of them will need to reenter a society that does not understand their experiences.

War Cripples and *Soldiers Playing Cards* rely on communicating emotions through only visual means. *Silly Trip Wires* engages the viewer on a physical level to

effectively communicate its content. While the form has changed from the paintings of Dix and Léger, very much like how warfare has changed, veterans desire to express personal opinion about war persists. While Dix's *War Cripples* and Léger's *Soldiers Playing Cards* focuses on the physical disabilities in the aftermath of war, *Silly Trip Wires* concentrates on the events during combat that can lead to mental trauma.

CHAPTER 3

CONTEMPORARY INFLUENCES

There are numerous artists that have influenced my current body of work, but the two that stand out the most are Kara Walker (1969-present), and Do Ho Suh (1962-present). Kara Walker's manner of visual communication, particularly in *Endless Conundrum, An African Anonymous Adventuress* (fig. 4), is of particular interest to my research. Her simplified silhouettes compile a complex narrative of deconstructing antiquated African American stereotypes. Do Ho Suh's, *Paratrooper V* (fig. 5) was influential to my work because it discusses themes and concepts that I am concerned with in my own work. Paratroopers have to quickly adapt to a new environment they are dropped into. This reminds me of the abrupt transition from active military to civilian.

Endless Conundrum, An African Anonymous Adventuress is a group of vignettes installed in a circular room that surrounds the viewer with story stills that captured a particular moment. The images are graphic tales of murder, rape, and rebellion popularized by whites in the Antebellum South. Most of the moments are cringe worthy because she “employs the visual tropes of Africa and imperialism as they are ubiquitously articulated throughout Western popular and elite cultural forms” (Wall 281).

Endless Conundrum, An African Anonymous Adventuress communicates the complicity of everyone, past and present, in regard to perpetuating stereotypes about African Americans. The stereotypes Walker is discussing were based in unethical pseudo science. The ideas about Africans in the Antebellum South possessing uncontrollable

carnal urges of sex and violence are akin to some of today's stereotypes about African Americans predilection to crime, drugs, and poverty.



Figure 4. Walker, Kara, *Endless Conundrum, An African Anonymous Adventuress*, 2001. Paper.

After considering all that Walker's work communicates, the viewer is able better understand the hardships that can come when a minority group is misjudged and unfairly labeled by a society. The misconceptions about African Americans by other social and ethnic groups are similar to civilian incorrect beliefs about soldiers. This is not implying that veterans face the same kind of discrimination that African American have. *Endless Conundrum, An African Anonymous Adventuress* is used to give a comparison of how another artist discusses the negative impact stereotypes on a minority group. Walker's work often tells a story about the unjust treatment of African American in the past so the

viewer can relate how the marginalization of present day African Americans can be seen as product of long time discrimination.

Soldiers that enlist, particularly during a time of war, are often thought of as having a predilection towards violence. Soldiers that have been diagnosed with PTSD are often considered to be more prone to physical violence directed towards others. This is not normally the case as more often soldiers diagnosed with PTSD are more prone to anxiety, depression, and violence towards themselves. The installation *Silly Trip Wires* allows the viewer to interact with and consider a scenario that many Veterans with PTSD experience while deployed. These events continue to affect them long after they leave the theater of combat.

Do Ho Suh's *Paratrooper V*, is of particular interest because of the meaning behind the paratrooper itself. "The paratrooper is a metaphor for being dropped into and surviving with in a new environment similar to a person traveling to a new society and experiencing culture shock" (Caruso 2). This is the case for many Veterans returning from combat zones.

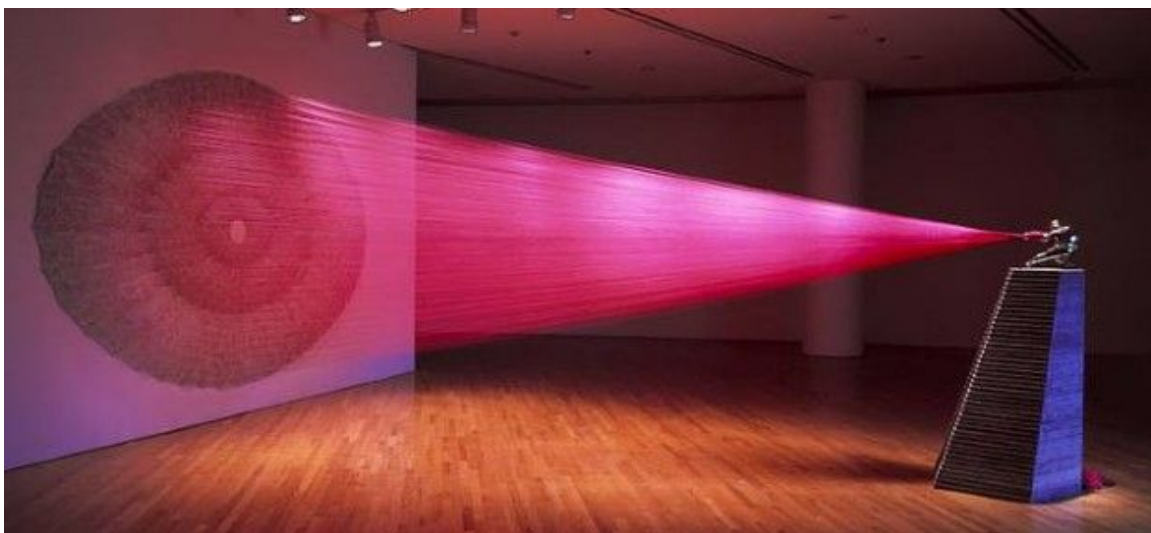


Figure 5. Suh, Do Ho, *Paratrooper V*, 2005. Linen, stainless steel, and thread.

Consider that soldiers that perform tasks such as clearing structures, and bomb disposal do that particular activity for one year, at least 5 days out of every week. They are always aware of what they should be doing. Even when things go awry, they are aware of a standard order of procedures. Everyone is on the same page due to relentless training and cross training. Soldiers can rely on their comrades to do their job and pick up slack when necessary. When they return home, or when they leave the military, it can often seem chaotic. Much like a Paratrooper being dropped into a war zone in a foreign country. Soldiers that experience problems adapting to civilian life are often unsure of what to do to mitigate issues that arise, absent of their typical team and command structure.

Another element of *Paratrooper V* is the thread in the paratrooper's grasp. The hundreds of individual threads are connected to a piece of linen and each one connects to one signature that is connected to many more signatures. The signatures are arranged to make a drawing of a parachute. The signatures were collected from many different people who come from different walks of lives. "The starting point was more of a personal need to figure out identity. But you don't exist outside of a context. So it was natural that this range of concerns and cultural issues came into the work. It's not separable, it's all mixed: you cannot separate the individual from the large picture" (Dhorak 3).

This is the reason that communication is the goal of *Silly Trip Wires*. The issues that veterans are facing due to their time in combat and the difficulty with transitioning into civilian life are not veteran only problems. Suicide, PTSD, and stereotypes are problems that plague the veteran community, but also affect everyone living in the United States. Veterans do not live secluded from the rest of society. They work, live, and

interact with everyone on a regular basis. Veterans are inseparable from the society that they came from and transition back to. The issues that veterans face affect everyone directly or indirectly due to the interconnectivity of societies.

While neither of the works discussed rely on the audience to physically engage with the work, both deal with communicating ideas. Walker and Suh offer an opportunity for the audience to consider the emotional content of the work that may be foreign to them. *Endless Conundrum*, *An African Anonymous Adventuress* and *Paratrooper I* offer an alternative perspective of an environment and culture. While many may consider a social environment to possess little fault, to those that it is foreign to, or groups that are judged unfairly, the environment can be perceived differently. *Endless Conundrum*, *An African Anonymous Adventuress* and *Paratrooper I* and *Silly Trip Wires* communicate varying perspectives to make the viewer consider another point of view though the embedded emotional content that is inseparable from the aesthetics of the artwork.

CHAPTER 4

INTRODUCTION TO SUBJECT MATTER

Mental Trauma

One of the oldest issues for returning soldiers is finding where they fit into civilian society. Determining where they fit into their family, finding employment, and relearning how to interact with civilians can be challenging for some veterans. The article, *A Constructive Program for the Rehabilitation of the Returning Soldiers*, written in 1918 by Fredric C. Howe shows that finding ways for soldiers to be constructive members of society has been a concern for the United States for a considerable time.

“The problems of reconstruction and the redistribution of millions of men and women to immediate profitable employment of the termination of the war are as colossal a problem as the mobilization of the army” (Howe 150). Soldiers that return home to no job, along with skills that are of little use outside the military, often struggle to find employment that offers a comparable wage. The benefits their civilian employers offer are often a shadow of what they received in the military. Another possibility is that they may have been in a position of authority or one of prestige that they find lacking in the civilian world, or may be forced to settle for employment that is less fulfilling.

The prevalence of PTSD depression among service members is of some debate. This is because of the questions and standards of various tests along with the honesty of the service members taking the test. “The Post Deployment Health Assessment or PDHA is a questionnaire that is given to service members within two weeks of returning home and has been in use since 2003” (Ramchand 43). The test found that “twelve percent of

Active service members and thirteen percent of Reservist tested positive for PTSD” (Ramchand 44). The problem with these assessments is that many will not know that they are experiencing any issues until they get over the initial shock of being home. They are also concerned that their answers may affect their career or how fast they can return to their families and friends.

There is some debate over the accuracy of the PDHA. The problem is that the entities that would be responsible for paying out compensation for PTSD were the one setting the standards and making the assessments. “In 2007 a study conducted two evaluations of 88,235 veterans, one right after deployment and another 3 to 6 months after their deployment” (Kean 1227). This is a study of great interest because for the Reservist they are usually on a M day status. This means that they are not in a military setting everyday. Reservist and National Guard soldiers only train with their unit one weekend every month and two weeks during the summer. Some may go to military schools while others may be full time reservist on active state or federal duty, but it is a small percentage. The study “found a significant jump over that period in overall risk for mental health problems among both active service members (17.0% to 27.1%) and reservists (17.5% to 35.5%)” (Kean 1227). The difference in the percentages increases notably over time in this assessment. The initial percentage for soldiers with PTSD is higher as well. This is due to the factors previously discussed that were compounded overtime. Another reason for the increase is the threshold for diagnosing a veteran with PTSD were less stringent than the PDHA.

It is true that many of the reasons for these mental disorders in veterans are brought on by violence that is either against them or witnessed, however violence is not

the primary reaction to stressors when they return home. Ducking, running, or other quick reactions that veterans may have to loud or surprising noises or being caught off guard may be perceived as violent because of their language or the force and speed of their reactions. The reason for this is that reaction speed and decisiveness of action is necessary in a combat environment to ensure their own safety, and the safety of the people around them.

Philosophical Reasoning

Silly Trip Wires aims to communicate the reasons for mental trauma and why many veterans' mindset differs from their civilian counterparts. The exhibition does not present a unique personal experience of deployment, but an experience that has been shared by many veterans. Veterans are a small part of the population that regularly interact with everyone else in various settings. We receive many "thank yous" and are occasionally questioned about our time overseas. The majority of the population is not aware of the experiences of soldiers. Most of what they do know comes from various media outlets, films, games, or books. Many civilians are not sure how to ask questions, or what questions are appropriate. Some veterans are more willing to talk than others, but most are not willing to talk about everything. How can this work bring about a conversation that lends itself to the audience gaining a better understanding of the issues and why they exist?

A conversation can take place between a work of art and the viewer. Leo Tolstoy's concept that art could be a form of communication between that artist and the viewer without the artist being present lends itself to the concept for this thesis exhibit.

Wartenburg writes, “to defend art as a social enterprise, Tolstoy offers a definition: Through the use of such devices as color, sound, and movement art communicates to its audience a feeling or emotion that the artist has previously experienced” (Wartenburg 98). *Silly Trip Wires* provides the audience an opportunity, not to live the experience that veterans have, but perhaps to understand them. They have a chance to imitate what soldiers do in a much safer and controlled environment. The information provided by the work may allow the viewer, by way of empathy, to understand the emotions that these experiences may provoke.

Through viewing work that results from these experiences and pondering the effects that they can have, one can experience similar emotions by relating to experiences that they may have had. If one was in a situation where they feared for their well being or life, perhaps they could think of what it would be like to go through the rest of their life with the fear that they felt in that moment. A detailed analysis of *Silly Trip Wire* will demonstrate how Tolstoy’s concept can be applied.

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS OF THE WORK

Silly Trip Wires (fig. 8-11) is the result of learning from the shortcomings of previous work. It alters a given space by transforming it into a different environment and involves viewer interaction, which transforms the work into something aesthetically interesting, but also allows them to participate in similar activities to soldiers in a combat zone. By creating an “impersonation of a specific life situation” (Rosenthal 47) and asking viewers to repeat an activity done by soldiers in this environment there is an opportunity for communication. The experience of combat results in certain emotions. These experiences sometime result in short or long term mental trauma depending on how severely the veteran was affected. While *Silly Trip Wires* cannot reproduce the exact circumstances of this experience, however it can imitate the environment and activities preformed. Through viewer participation the installation can communicate the emotional experience as well as provide insight into the lasting emotional effects.

As previously stated, this work will be analyzed using Tolstoy’s theory of art and what is art. Some discussion of previous research in the form of earlier work will be discussed to provide a framework so I may show the compounding of ideas that led to the installation *Silly Trip Wire*.

The first work I would like to discuss is *Time in a Hooch* (fig. 6). This work was an installation that included a small room with a cot and floor constructed of parachute fabric. Viewers were asked lay on the cot and flip a switch beside the cot that would activate a blower fan. That caused the floor to inflate around the viewer. The floor didn’t

always work as planned. The floor also took several minutes to inflate and deflate. The resulting tight space also made some wary of the work so they were not willing to experience it. Due to the clumsiness inflation and the trepidation some have about enclosed spaces, communicating ideas about the anxiety felt while lying in your cot at night while because of rocket attacks was.



Figure 6. Byrd, J. Ross, *Time in a Hooch*, 2019. Wood, plastic, parachute fabric, blower fan, cot, and metal.

Another work that was more successful in communicating an idea, but not emotion was *Moving Out and On* (fig. 7). It was a video, shot in first person, showing the taking off and turning in of military issued clothing and the picking up of civilian clothing as well as identification. There were 18 stations through out the woods that were

marked on a map. The video showed an individual locating the stations on the map. Each station was marked with a number. The first nine had a sign telling the person what military issued item to leave at that particular station. The last nine had civilian items to be picked up. It was shot in the woods after a snow and the video showed that the person performing the task was at time without shoes. This gave the idea that they were nude for a time. It successfully communicated the discomfort of shedding one identity for another through the conditions, but without the ability for the viewer to physically take part in the process it is not as strong as *Time in a Hooch* could have been in theory.



Figure 7. Byrd, J. Ross, *Moving Out and On* (still shots), 2019. Video.

A Perfectly Normal Walk (fig. 8) was a video, shot in first person, projected into a tray of water that appeared bottomless. The video was of a person walking down a city street, obviously in the United States, in military boots and pants. The construction purposely forced the viewer to come close to the water to clearly see the image. Under the tray of water was a subwoofer. At the end of the video the bass from the explosion would cause the image to ripple making it indistinguishable. It was more realized because the viewer could not only see the video but could actually feel the vibrations from the



Figure 8. Byrd, J. Ross, *A Perfectly Normal Walk* (still shots before and during distortion), 2019. Video.



Figure 9. Byrd, J. Ross, *Silly Trip Wires*, 2020. Wood, metal, monofilament.

sound, however it still lacked the participation aspect which would have added to the engagement and understanding of the viewer. silly string

Silly Trip Wires was inspired by the use of silly string to detect trip wires in Iraq. Although I did not deploy to Iraq, I was aware of this tactic. My company was tasked with finding and disposing of improvised explosive devices that targeted coalition personnel. In comparison, IEDs are not unlike trip wires for combat units tasked with clearing structures used by enemy combatants. Both tasks must take account of hidden things that are designed to slow down or kill platoons.

Upon entering the installation viewers are faced with a narrow hallway. Some trip wires will be placed through the hallway at different levels forcing the participant to find them with the silly string and maneuver around them. The close quarters compounded with trip wires will make the viewer aware of their body and how they move it. Soldiers must be aware of where they are moving at all time while they are clearing structures. This task seems to be simple, however when wearing full combat gear soldiers can add 30 to 60 pounds to their body weight and several inches in diameter. This process is similar to navigating the transition process. There are many obstacles to overcome. Some may be physical, but many are also social and mental. They are not always apparent at first, and some are difficult to maneuver through.

Silly Trip Wires will also incorporate white noise. White noise, from radios that are essential for communication, is a constant for soldiers. Most soldiers become fairly accustomed to wearing a headset most of the time while on missions. If they do not have a headset they or someone on their team will have a hand radio. The noise, however slight, that is transmitted from the devices can be annoying, but is also a comforting sound. The

white noise occasionally, disrupted by sharp cracks assures soldiers that they can communicate with they rest of their unit. Even after mission, when soldiers can remove their headsets, the sounds from the radios can still resonate in their ears for a while.

Because the trip wires were such a thin gauge wire, they were nearly invisible inside the structures due to limited lighting. “The silly string was sprayed into the room and would drape over the wires making them visible. It was also quick to use and light enough to not trigger the device connected to the wire” (Associated Press 2). The tactic saved lives because it made the process of clearing structures much faster and safer.



Figure 10. Byrd, J. Ross, *Silly Trip Wires*, 2020. Wood, metal, monofilament line, silly string (hallway with trip wire emplaced).

For my installation I use a clear upholstery thread to mimic the trip wires. Roofing tin and rough timbers are used to frame the structure, not unlike the crudely built structure in parts of Iraq and Afghanistan. Dimming the lighting in the back half of the gallery will simulate the lighting condition in the dilapidated structures. These elements help to transport the viewer, allowing them to gain a better understanding of the type of environment that soldiers operated in. Viewers are able to use silly string to reveal the trip wires, giving them a better understanding of how easy it is to hide trip wires and the dangers of clearing structures in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The last room of *Silly Trip Wires*, 2020 is a cleared room with a collection of trip wires in the corner. The space will be very open and the trip wires will be difficult to see. The viewers will spray the last of their silly string onto the structure. The silly string will be left on this part, allowing it to build up. It will grow in volume and mass with the participation of each viewer, providing a more clearly defined structure. This represents how the experiences along with the individuals that I interacted with during my time in the military helped me grow and develop. When I initially left the service I was unsure what to do with all that I had learned. My skill set did not directly apply to many civilian jobs. Eventually I realized that the knowledge I had accumulated from the variety of experiences applied to every facet of life. Realizing how to assimilate the information I had gained greatly aided in my transition process.



Figure 11. Byrd, J. Ross, *Silly Trip Wires*, 2020. Wood, metal, monofilament line, silly string.

Silly Trip Wires is not intended to be considered or judged “by the degree of its realism, or by the accuracy of the details” (Tolstoy 111) that recreates the environment of the building that soldiers operated in. The act of spraying the silly string is not a request to repeat an act just for the sake of repeating something that many have done before. Tolstoy states “as thought product is only then real thought product when it transmits new conceptions and thoughts, and does not merely repeat what was known before, so also an art product is only then a genuine art product when it brings a new feeling into the current of human life” (Tolstoy 73). With *Silly Trip Wires* I am looking to encourage civilians to

think about why soldiers have PTSD. While looking at a situation from someone else's perspective is not a new concept, it is something that most people do not think about as often as they should. *Silly Trip Wires* not only provides visual and literary information, but a practical exercise in a mimicked environment similar to what soldiers experienced in combat zones. This provides a more detailed way of introducing simulated experiences that offer new information about soldier's experiences to people that have not and may not have those experiences.

Tolstoy was also interested in art's ability to educate in regards to morality. One of his predecessors that Tolstoy writes about is Johann Georg Sulzer 1720-1779. Using Sulzer's theory about the aim of humanity Tolstoy applies it to art. "According to his theory, the aim of the whole of humanity is welfare in social life. This is attained by the education of moral feelings, to which end art should be subservient" (Tolstoy 21). Gaining understanding of someone else's emotions or mindset by understanding their experiences is a kind of education. Empathy is considered to be a moral feeling that allows individuals to understand how someone else feels. In this way *Silly Trip Wires*, 2020 fits the moral education component of Tolstoy's theory because it is designed to educate civilians about the experience of soldiers so that there can be a better understanding between two groups of people.

Without first hand experience, no one can understand having to look for trip wires, or to accept that everyday there are people all around you that are trying to think of ways to end your life. By situating the work and the viewers in a mimicked combat zone "it makes accessible the feelings of other humans," (Wartenburg 98) In the case of *Silly Trip Wires* the accessible emotions belong to soldiers who undertook clearing structures

in Iraq and Afghanistan. “This is vital to human solidarity, because it allows one access to the felt experience of those in circumstances other than one’s own” (Wartenburg 98). Making the feelings of soldiers accessible to civilians allows for an understanding of the experience that they had during combat deployments. It is also possible that they gain a better understanding of why some come back with mental trauma from these experiences. It is not meant to encourage feelings of pity, but rather to foster an understanding or conversation between two groups that interact on a regular basis but often experience frustration with the other, due to a lack of understanding.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Silly Trip Wires utilizes art to communicate emotions resulting from personal experiences and the experiences of other soldiers to individuals that have not had these experiences or the accompanying emotions. This is not to say that they have not experienced traumatic events or fear. It is actually necessary for the viewers to have experienced these emotions so that they may empathize with the experiences of veterans.

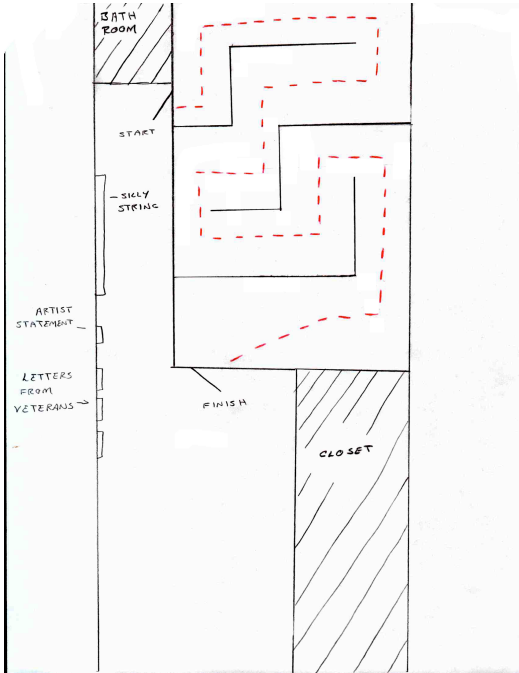
As an artist in 2020 I feel that it is important to make artwork that fosters understanding between groups. It helps to dispel stereotypes that are part of social constructs. Veterans of today are subjected to far less discrimination than 50 years ago. They are generally well received, however there are still the unconscious and sometimes conscious beliefs that they are less intelligent and more prone to violence than their civilian counterparts. Veterans with PTSD are often thought to be unstable individuals, but their reactions to events are not violent as many believe, but a reaction of self-preservation that is ingrained in their mindset due to events that happened during combat deployments.

While each and every individual can perceive every experience differently, the main points of experiences are usually agreed upon. Events that are traumatic or being in a high stress environment for a prolonged period of time impacts all people. The degree to which they affect one person to another will vary, due to multiple factors. Every soldier that comes home goes through a period of transition. Many go through a time

where they don't know where they fit in and don't understand their new environment.

Silly Trip Wires provides an opportunity to understand a little bit of why that might be.

CATALOG OF EXHIBITION



Silly Trip Wires, 2020. Proposed Layout for Tipton Gallery.



Silly Trip Wires, 2020. Wood, metal, monofilament line, silly string.



Silly Trip Wires, 2020. Wood, metal, monofilament line, silly string.



Silly Trip Wires, 2020. Wood, metal, monofilament line, silly string.



Silly Trip Wires, 2020. Wood, metal, monofilament line, silly string.



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Silly Trip Wires, 2020. Wood, metal, monofilament line, silly string.



Silly Trip Wires, 2020. Wood, metal, monofilament line, silly string.

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MFA Group Exhibition – *15 years vs. 1*
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