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Navigating the Interim

A Thesis Presented

by

JOSEPH SAPHIRE

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

May 2015

Department of Art

Navigating the Interim

A Thesis Presented

By

JOE SAPHIRE

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## ABSTRACT

### NAVIGATING THE INTERIM

MAY 2015

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M.F.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS

Directed by: Professor Susan Jahoda

*Navigating the Interim* attempts to build a framework for the ways in which visual art, media studies, and forms of social practice might intermingle within a career in the arts, as well as within a thorough art education curriculum. From broad theoretical analysis to the specificity of technical exercises and prompts, this paper serves as a roadmap for the ways in which production, teaching, and organizing might begin to merge into a single holistic practice. The author's projects provide an anchor from which to analyze the various conceptual trajectories of art that have stemmed from modernism throughout the 20th century, as well as to challenge the anti-aesthetic phenomenon that has emerged out of this evolution, which has influenced paradigms within art education and leads to an analysis of the author's own creative impulses, such as media activism, noise-based and appropriative tactics, and concerns about Debordian Spectacle. These self-analyses and reflections are situated within various binary oppositions: object-action, opacity-transparency, deconstruction-enstrangement, replacement-extension, and static-progressive.

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# CHAPTER 1

## FRAMEWORK

### Introduction

What is this interim and why does it need navigating? Or is the interim—the liminal—rather by definition a constant state of navigation, conscious or not? This interim—this *being in between*—and its implication of expectant resolution (or at least progression) is at the core of my work in ways that are both specific and abstract, practical and philosophical. *Navigating the Interim* is a framework that informs three basic elements: the nature of my studio work; the relationships between various artistic and professional practices that I employ; and the specific organizational structure of this paper, which situates my work between various theoretical binary oppositions relevant to my practice. This framework will consider the historical foundation for my work, address the various methods and content of my studio practice, and lay out the potential practical and professional applications for my work moving forward.

### Studio Work<sup>1</sup>

The *interim* speaks to a cultural state of media saturation: everywhere we turn in the Western world we find meaning-making narratives and information fragments that must be organized, parsed out, understood, and responded to. We hold these meanings, whether culturally constructed or individually interpreted, in our minds at all times. We

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper I will refer to work of which I consider myself the primary author as “studio work” or “studio practice” in order to differentiate it from other practices I will address that are more ambiguous in their authored output, such as teaching, collaborating, and organizing.

check our selves, identities, judgments, priorities, and worldviews against what we see and hear transmitted through a ubiquitous and persistent flow of information.

The interim is navigated in my studio work through non-linear and experimental video, immersive and interventionist installation, appropriative and noise-based tactics, and strategies that aim to extend cultural content in order to repurpose its forms, diffuse intended meanings, and construct new dialogical uses. This stems from an interest in Debordian spectacle, within which I would argue the individual is in a constant state of flux between active and passive reception.

Debord's analyses and the following decades of art and theoretical work it spurred seem to position the cultural condition of spectacle as conspiratorial. I argue, rather, it might be more productive to consider it a phenomenon of human nature—not a rational, centralized system of control, but an irrational scatter of impulses and desires, enabled by a capitalist structure that relies on irrationality<sup>2</sup>. Through this randomized scatter—and the collective compliance with “universal separation” over “unification” that results—we come to prefer the sign to the signified (Debord 5).

One might begin to claim personal responsibility for the effects of active-passive spectatorship by identifying the elements of spectacle that are so seductive. My studio work attempts to embrace this broad condition of spectacle—accepts it as a naturally

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<sup>2</sup> This assertion is based on observation of, and participation in, a consumer economy in which products and services must be purchased by the consumer to sustain the health of the economy, and therefore desire for these products and services must be in some way manufactured in order to create competition and maintain the cycle of production-consumption. I am considering this cycle *irrational* in respect to its reliance on impulse and immediacy, in that the consumer must not look too far past the patina of need and find the reality of desire. For example, in a recession, consumers are thought to have *tightened their belts* and saved their money rather than spent. The economy suffers from what might be considered the consumer's rational turn. This paper will occasionally use the above description of consumerism, albeit overly simplistic, in relation to analyses of spectacle, 20th century modernism, and social practice.



occurring phenomenon, rather than simply a style of expression that one can ignore as a matter of taste—in order to gradually dissolve its formulaic structures and pacifying effects. It attempts to co-opt common modes of spectacle and misuse<sup>3</sup> its forms. Misuse, therefore, becomes a tactic of intervention into the intended narratives of spectacle.

I am interested in the immediate recognition of, and association with, culturally ubiquitous imagery and narrative tactics: the seamless editing tricks of popular film, the formulaic production of a baseball game, the seductive narrative of a 30-second advertisement, the spectatorial distance of devastating news footage. I am interested in the psychological toggle between submission and analysis, association and dismissal, in which our culture engages with each passing image.

Our overwhelming taste for these ubiquitous images and narrative tactics betrays a cultural preference for—and desire for—content to follow the path, or narrative, of least resistance. We prefer transparency of media—to get lost in the story—rather than the media opacity<sup>4</sup> that consumer criticality, or producer imprecision, might bring about. Is this preference a symptom of the passivity that spectatorship requires, or is it rather broadly human nature to desire clarity of meaning and progressive narrative structure? As

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<sup>3</sup> My interpretation of the word *misuse* stems from an essay by D. Graham Burnett, professor of History of Science at Princeton University. Burnett positions Henry David Thoreau's interest in the *telegraph harp* (as Thoreau refers to it in his *Journals*) within the context of information theory and noise culture. Burnett's analysis will be addressed in a later section of this paper on "Noise."

<sup>4</sup> This binary, *transparency-opacity*, relates to information theory and cultural studies differently than art. For instance, an *opaque* medium in art (particularly an art form, like one of mine, that attempts to address, or convey, this very argument as critical content) will distract from the very criticality the artist is attempting to bring about. Might it be argued that, if the intention is to *activate criticality* rather than *preserve passivity* (no matter the banality or severity of content), then opacity is a detriment? Therefore, in the realm of information theory and cultural studies, is *transparency* a detriment to understanding the apparatus—the medium? Is this exception for art a kind of moralism and therefore irrelevant to the analysis of the binary? Is *intention* even possible to identify? These definitions, concerns, and questions regarding *transparency-opacity* will be considered in the "Methods" section.

a consumer of spectacles, a cultural producer, and general participant in the dense forest of cultural images, meanings, associations, and products, I accept my own precarious toggle between absorption and repulsion, submission and criticality, passivity and activity. My studio work attempts to commiserate, to empathize, and to grasp for some semblance of control over the *spectacular* scatter of narratives, meanings, and personal associations. It both critiques and embodies, resists and embraces, the perpetual flow of media culture. It attempts to *navigate the interim*.

### **Binaries**

The various binary frames that emerge in this paper are simplistic, and certainly reductive, but extremely useful as writing tactics to contain relevant theoretical debates that inform my work. They are designed as both catalysts for discussion and tactics to situate my own practice within the vague interim between the poles. When Brian Eno<sup>5</sup> describes, for instance, “moving the process of making music much closer to the process of painting,” he considers the potential for musical composition and reception to be thought of as *static*, as opposed to *progressive*, and is therefore calling into question the narrative tendencies of the western classical tradition (“Ambient Music” 95). This binary aids in analyzing cultural tendencies toward linear narrative. The cultural motivations behind appropriation tactics are considered more expansively when analyzed through the framework of *extending* versus *replacing*. This binary opposition implies a wealth of concerns regarding the function of appropriation in a spectatorial culture. Through appropriation tactics, do we aim to *extend*, *embrace*, and *repurpose* ubiquitous cultural

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<sup>5</sup> Eno is of particular importance to this paper for his many contributions to experimental composition and minimalist music. His work will be discussed in later sections for his directorial approach to authorship.

forms, or do we rather aim to *replace*, *resist*, and *reject* them? The binary opposition provides a rich foundation from which to consider appropriation, where the complex degrees of making, orchestrating, repurposing, juxtaposing, referencing, and recontextualizing can be parsed out and explored.

### **Between the Practices**

This paper addresses tangible and applicable outputs for the ways in which my production, collaboration, organizing, design, and teaching intersect. Ultimately, I am seeking to balance the impulse to produce and the desire to create venues for active dialogue.

My gravitation toward teaching stems from the same dialogical motivation that drives my studio, collaborative, and event-based practices. Art-making is a communicative process, and inherently social. It is a negotiation between intention and meaning, technique and experimentation, maker and viewer. It is a living thing, out in the world, increasingly more an ephemeral action than static product. It is my aim that students leave my instruction feeling empowered to apply their experience to various endeavors, that they might invent new audiences, venues, and functionalities as creative entrepreneurs.

Teaching in this way forces me to hold my own work up to the same standards of invention. What might it mean for my studio work to apply to, or be adapted for, various constituencies, platforms, and audiences? That my studio work is rarely object-based and not easily commodifiable is an opportunity to align art-making with orchestration or direction: the framing of conditions for artistic encounters. In this way, forms follow concepts, which manifest as various iterations, versions, and situations. An authored

video work might, for instance, be translated into an assignment prompt for high school students; a site-specific installation might require the expertise of a sculptor, or participation of a performer, to be resolved in its strongest form; an old art product might be considered material for a new one, which in turn might be material for the next. Form, therefore, is a necessary container for the situation of an idea, which is free to be recontextualized and transmitted in various ways. Technical craft, aesthetic form, and conceptual inclinations might have meta-lives—meta-functions—in the service of greater outputs and products.

This freeing of concepts from the rigidity of singular form, true of so many other disciplines and fields outside of the arts, opens the artist up to a collective reservoir of skill sets, devices, and applications. Ralph Waldo Emerson writes in his essay “Quotation and Originality,” “What you owe to me—you will vary the phrase—but I shall still recognize my thought. But what you say from the same idea, will have to me also the expected unexpectedness which belongs to every new work of Nature”<sup>6</sup> (qtd. in Oswald 132). There is in this quote a confidence in thought and trust in the collective receiver to transmit it—*translate* it—through the nuanced originality of the situation and myriad conditions of form. The thought—or concept, idea, creative inclination—is a gift. To develop, test, nurture, and gradually form a concept is a skill, just as is technical mastery and craft of execution. Seen through this lens, it might be considered counterproductive, even egocentric, for a single artist to master (or at least seek mastery of) all facets of the art-making process. Collaboration, in this way, might be considered a regular and

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<sup>6</sup> I originally came across this quote by Emerson in an essay by John Oswald titled, “Bettered by the Borrower: The Ethics of Musical Debt.” I will address Oswald’s essay, as well as his *Plunderphonics* sound pieces, in later sections.

necessary occurrence, whether as abstract as a maker who collaborates with an established industry for the manufacture of his or her tools, or as literal as a collective that shares all resources. Collaborate, so as not to reinvent the wheel.

Could collaboration even, then, be considered a redundant term, as art products and the cultural functions of artists begin to disperse into the broader cultural landscape? Might revisiting this notion of collaboration refine and complicate our understanding of authorship? A filmmaker, after all, while certainly revered as a sort of authority, is not, however, considered the sole author of his or her product. Rather, a kind of collaboration is implied. While a research scientist might be considered a sort of author of a new development in his or her area of specialization, the work is understood to be based on a reservoir of previous work by other people, as well as the direct result of a supportive institution, granting agent, and staff of assistants, colleagues, and participants; in this case, as well, collaboration is implied. Might a cultural complication (and public debate) of authorship and collaboration begin to bring the economics of artistic production more in line with collectivism than capitalistic individuality? Within this increasingly shared cultural climate, such a debate might gradually lead to more sustainable positions for artists, both professionally and economically, as we begin to parse out the complexity and precarity of the broad cultural production industry.

I am interested in aligning creative practices within the visual arts with, for instance, music, where, as in the examples above, collaboration is more closely tethered to the existence of the product in the first place—where it is implied as a necessary means of production and reception. This interest, which positions collaborating as well as teaching as a practice of *negotiation*, is best exemplified by the project PlayLaborPlay, a series of art events that emerge out of collaborations with local artists, musicians, writers,

or anyone with a compelling idea. Events are designed to emphasize balance between content and venue, often situated in unlikely places, like pop-up shows. From a cultural perspective, this project situates the reception of art more as music is received—more as ephemera to be experienced than as objects to be revered. It attempts to exemplify the ways in which art can be local, sustainable, critical, accessible, and dialogical—a culturally integrated, relational art experience. PlayLaborPlay is also a model for what one day could be an organization or production studio: a sustainable structure for teaching workshops, designing events, and producing works that revolve around the confluence of media education and art. Such an organization is a potentially practical application for my work moving forward, and will be explored further in the concluding “Application” chapter.

Aside from alternative organizational structures, such as PlayLaborPlay, there might also be other alternative, sustainable, and immersive formats and outputs worth exploring. Blogs, archives, and other Web-based venues might find greater, more varied audiences for my work than galleries and group exhibitions. Content that takes the form of public interventions or presentations might further explore fluidity of form and the potential virtues of artistic outputs that are *encountered* versus *expected*<sup>7</sup>. Doors might be further opened in the future by designing or pursuing projects I contribute to, direct, or help to produce, as opposed to exclusively author.

Much of the theoretical background for the above concerns regarding relationships between practices relies on Nicolas Bourriaud’s notion of “relational aesthetics.” Bourriaud’s theory, laid out in two essays, “Relational Aesthetics” and

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<sup>7</sup> This binary, *encountered-expected*, will be considered in this paper in relation to interventionist tactics (“Methods”), as well as in the concluding “Application” section regarding the exhibition component to this thesis, titled *The Waiting Room*.

*Postproduction*, serves as a frame through which to sustainably create non-object-based works, and explores the ways in which artists draw from “a catalog of forms”

(*Postproduction* 8). Relational aesthetics will be considered along with Claire Bishop’s analyses, in *Artificial Hells*, of the politics of authorship, collaboration, and immaterial aesthetics within the context of participatory art and social practice, in order to offer a picture of the current theoretical predicament of my work moving forward.

## CHAPTER 2

### REFLECTION

#### Introduction

The job of the artist is a tenuous one. If it can be called a job, it might be the most unstable, historically shifting, culturally disagreed upon (or maybe culturally misunderstood) social position. Artists must situate themselves within a dense historical framework—a history already rife with interpretation, exclusion, and self-referentiality—and at the same time actively find audiences that can, and will, access their crafts, concepts, definitions of, and approaches to art-making. Audiences, therefore, validate the work and satisfy the fact that art-making is a form of communication and societal reflection and therefore must be an attempt to convey *something* to *someone*.

William Deresiewicz in *The Atlantic* eloquently describes the evolving societal designation of the artist over the last four centuries as moving from artisan, to genius, to professional, to entrepreneur. He provides a lucid analysis of this trajectory in his article “The Death of the Artist—and the Birth of the Creative Entrepreneur.” There is simultaneously something grim and liberating about Deresiewicz’s analysis.

To briefly synthesize his distinctions, the *artisan*, prior to the late 18th century, was a craftsman—one who developed a set of skills under the advisement of apprenticeships to eventually, at its highest echelon, become a *master*. The high meaning of “Art,” as it were, had not been invented yet. The age of Romanticism in the late 18th, early 19th centuries, brought about the *genius*. The individualism, revolution, and secularization of this period manifested in artists who threw off the shackles of tradition and paved their own unique way. “As traditional belief became discredited,” Deresiewicz



states, “the arts emerged as the basis of a new creed, the place where people turned to put themselves in touch with higher truths.” *Fine Arts* emerge, the solitary genius the new purveyor of spirituality. Modernist individualism emerges late in this period and carries the academy through the middle of the 20th century (further, truthfully, albeit more subtly, into present time, a judgment that I will come back to). Overlapping throughout the 20th century, Deresiewicz argues, is the distinction of the artist as a *professional*. This is the age of institutionalization. Postwar America, and the age of American world power, influences the arts in the form of support and glorification, and leads to what Deresiewicz calls “an entire bureaucratic apparatus” within which the artist is gradually assimilated and institutionalized. This is the age of MFAs, residencies, artist grants, and academic positions. Finally, Deresiewicz calls the current predicament of the artist, following the viable and at least marginally supported distinction of the professional, that of the *entrepreneur*. This distinction, Deresiewicz argues, is marked by “the removal of the last vestiges of protection and mediation” that the market afforded the previous professional distinction of the artist. The artist is now maker, producer, financier, technician, promoter, salesman, and educator for his or her practice. While this argument is not absolute—there are still available positions in higher education institutions, forms of direct patronage, and collective systems within which to operate—opportunities for artistic practices to be self-sustained are shrinking, changing, or are at least in a state of extreme flux.

I accept this designation. For better or worse, Deresiewicz’s analysis rings true. As a creative entrepreneur, I am concerned with the job of the artist, the ways in which practices might be sustained, and must take this tectonic shift of societal role as an opportunity to carve new niches and expansive definitions within the arts. I will begin to

situate my practice through my own historical analysis by considering the state of art education, with particular attention to the high school level and younger. After all, our cultural attitudes towards art are shaped early on, which affects not only the size of the future artist pool, but also the level of seriousness and support it is awarded by future generations.

### **An Outdated Paradigm**

Although Deresiewicz's genius paradigm (which from now on I will refer to as modernist individualism) was outdated within the institutional art world by the mid-20th century, it lingers even today in our schools. Children develop the judgment at an early age that representational drawing, for instance, is a gift that some magically possess and others don't. It is not a skill to be nurtured, but rather a fact of one's nature. This is a sad truth of art education. It is not to say, however, that everyone is an artist, or that drawing is an unnecessary skill, but only that our culture, by privileging representational image-making as the basic sign of artistry, eliminates a huge number of young people for whom simply shifting the focus might open a world of communicative options; truly, even those students who have a knack for drawing would be better prepared for the road ahead with a simple shift of emphasis.

This is also not to say that it is the fault of schools and teachers. While of course they play a part, it is the culture at large that perpetuates this privilege. For someone only tacitly interested in the arts, it is understandable that the assumed role of the artist is to produce consumable products made to supplement given environments, products which carry in their content some kind of mystery to be appreciated or contemplated. The artist, in this case, to follow Deresiewicz's logic, is purveyor of spirituality, and the consumer is

free to consume whichever type of spiritual remove is best suited. There is nothing inherently wrong with this kind of tacit relationship to the arts, only that it is increasingly at odds with the actual societal application of the arts today. Students will be much better prepared for a life in the arts—one that is entrepreneurial, shape-shifting, dialogical, and broadly adaptable—if they are learning to communicate through their technical skills and artistic endeavors, rather than merely executing them as established form.

Where should this focus be shifted? Although the shift would manifest in various ways depending on the particular situation, in a general sense the focus should shift from *object* to *action*. *Art*, at least at introductory levels of instruction, should be considered in its verb form: something we *do*, versus something we *make*. This is not to say that any technical skill or traditional practice should be eliminated, only that its position in curriculum should be shifted from universal foundation to dialogical tool. To clarify, all forms of art and technique should be held up to the same standards of effective communication and situational relevance. If art is a form of communication, then each artwork is a signpost, which sends the viewer to some other concept, idea, or psychological condition. So where is the viewer being sent? Students are capable of grappling with this question even at a young age. This shift places emphasis on choices (conceptual, technical, or aesthetic), intentions, and discourse: a *dialogical*, versus *spectatorial*, emphasis in art education. *Spectatorial*, in this case, is akin to a kind of viewing closer to the immediacy of entertainment than the subtlety of education, the expectation of awe.

Such a shift would pose problems for schools, which I would argue stems from a need to educate families and communities at large. Art programs must, after all, regularly validate their existence to funding bodies, school boards, and parent communities. The

spectatorial mode of reception is still assumed as the norm for this audience and the work of students must live up to a certain standard of production. Consider this example: a drawing exercise that might open the minds of students about principles of visual perception, and lead to a wealth of connections between psychology, optics, and philosophy, might also look uninteresting (or at least incomplete) on the wall of a high school hallway. The products of the exercise might not be immediately impressive or visually striking. The application of this exercise, however—this mind-expanding *act* of putting pencil to paper and, with care and attention, producing an illusion—might yield a more unique, holistic, innovative creative voice.

### **An Amended Paradigm**

While the residue of modernist individualism, particularly within the culture at large, has a negative influence on the current state of art education, I do not believe it should be wholly replaced. This is not a call for some kind of revolution, which would attempt (and fail) to leave so much history in the dust<sup>8</sup>. Rather, below is a practical, albeit broad, framework for amending the ways in which traditional skills are categorized and taught, which might gradually move art education, and our larger cultural attitudes, toward a more applicable definition of the artist. I have delineated these skill and concept categories as *sight*, *space*, *style*, and *time*.

Introductory-level art students are in the process of developing an awareness of visual space. They are learning that they can translate their experience through various media and methods, and are beginning to shape a creative voice. Drawing, therefore, is

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<sup>8</sup> Later in this section I will discuss the arguably radical tendencies of certain forms of social practice in relation to the Modern individualist paradigm and the institutionalization of social practice.

not merely the act of rendering something on paper, but rather an opportunity for students to look closely at their environment and learn the ways in which their eyes interpret space; they *learn to see*. Students might be asked to reflect on their creative action: *Are you drawing with your eyes or your mind?* Traditional drawing, or drafting, is essentially learning to translate 3-dimensional experience into 2-dimensional form, and as students work on a landscape or a still life, they gradually trust their eyes and draw what they see.

Sculpture, therefore, is not merely the process of making an object, but rather interpreting, utilizing, and manipulating space. To emphasize creative action over static product, students might be asked: *How does your structure interact with the space it's in? How is the viewer confronted with the idea your project represents in an environment? How will it ultimately live?*

Painting, because the hand of the artist is so necessarily present, might be positioned as a traditional skill that emphasizes personal voice and style. It is an opportunity to analyze and manipulate the ways in which our minds interpret color, shape, and composition. Though introductory-level students might still be instructed to *paint what they see* in order to understand the relationships between color, shape, and perception, they are also able to bend their visual reality, to deviate from it in the interest of their ideas and concepts.

To synthesize, traditional art education cultivates awareness of visual experience through learning to see, interpreting and interacting with physical space, and manipulating visual experience in pursuit of a creative voice. Basic elements can be summed up as sight, space, and style. This is not an argument for a change in traditional education—the above distinctions are nothing new—but rather a shift in emphasis, in that

each skill is a conduit to a more dialogical, applicable relationship, as opposed to a self-contained, or self-referential, institutional foundation.

An integral element that is often missing from introductory-level curriculum, however, is *time* or *duration*. Time-based media such as video, animation, performance, audio, and to some extent, installation are missing from traditional art education, at least at the introductory level. Although facilitating time-based projects in studio and introductory-level courses is often technically impossible on account of facilities, the topic of duration must still be addressed in order to prepare students for the broad range of applications at the following levels and in the larger cultural context. This is not to say students must learn how to make videos as an isolated technical skill any more than they must learn to paint in isolation. It is simply to say that the technical and conceptual element of time must be brought into the discussion. If not addressed specifically through time-based media, the element of time can be related to, for instance, space in the context of performance, ephemerality, or site-specificity: simple emphasis on the conditions of time as factors in the reception, lifespan, and conceptual intentions of a work.<sup>9</sup>

To amend the focus of traditional art education and shift emphasis from product to action—noun to verb—is a way to gradually neutralize the modernist individualist tendencies of art education and our cultural perceptions of art. To absorb the discrete product into the continuity of practice, to emphasize versatility over technical mastery, to be resourceful enough to adapt to various formal needs: these are tenets that might help to gradually shape new cultural attitudes toward the job of the artist.

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<sup>9</sup> For tactical examples of this association of the element of *time* with *space* for introductory-level instruction, see my essay “Media Art in Traditional Introductory Arts Practices,” written as part of a Media Arts curriculum guide for the Kingswood Oxford School.

## Forms and Concepts

A brief historical analysis will help establish what I judge to be the artistic departures from modernist individualism throughout the 20th century in order to situate my studio practice in a historical context, as well as to better understand the effects of modernist residue on cultural attitudes towards the societal role of the artist. While projects like PlayLaborPlay attempt to neutralize culturally embedded modernist individualism through tactics of collaboration and intervention and by emphasizing ephemerality over fixed products, I am more concerned here with decidedly studio-based practices, and the ways in which they have evolved since the early 1900s.

What else is motivating this analysis? I want the practice of art to be culturally integrated—rather than an increasingly academic, insular pursuit—just as accessible in its myriad conceptual iterations and intentions as in its aesthetic forms and technical traditions. I want my grandma to connect with, understand, and appreciate my experimental video work as much as she does my representational painting of my brother.

I will begin with abstract painting and relate it to the evolution of conceptualism throughout the 20th century. I will consider this period, for at least the purposes of this paper, the beginning of an era of artists devaluing the art object, which carries particular significance in a market-driven, consumer-based paradigm that still informs cultural attitudes towards the arts. This discussion relies heavily on “Abstraction, 1910-1925: Eight Statements,” a selection of eight short essays published in the journal *October* in response to the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2012-13 exhibition *Inventing Abstraction, 1910-1925*. I will use a few of these essays as frameworks for my observations and analyses.

The overly simplistic, narrowly binary, Greenbergian argument for abstraction as “in opposition to realism,” as laid out by Leah Dickerman in the introductory essay for “Eight Statements,” is complicated by decades of postmodern pastiche, technological and mass media saturation, and the relatively formless (or rather *form de-emphasizing*) contributions of conceptualism, relational aesthetics, participatory art, and social practice. The modernist search for a medium’s “effects exclusive to itself” did much to move the practice of art away from unchecked referentiality, but also left it in a cycle of self-reference that, over time, would prove to be untenable and irrelevant to the constructive functioning of art in society, to its societal applicability (3-4). Concern only for *effects exclusive to itself* might be viewed as escapism, the implied purity of the insular studio rising above the travesties of war and human devastation outside.

But this reversion from representation, and abstraction’s self-criticality, truly opened the door to conceptual thinking and the unfolding of artistic practice into an exploration of process and artistic action. The four models for abstraction put forth by Yve-Alain Bois in his essay for “Eight Statements” are extremely useful for this discussion (7-17). I will briefly sum them up in order to focus particular attention on the last.

The first model for abstraction, *arbitrariness*, speaks to this escapist tendency—a way to apologize for creating without consideration of intention or content: the poetics of making stand for themselves. The second, *iconological*, is abstract in so far as it seeks to represent the unrepresentable, resulting in abstract form. There is a kind of forced logic here—a kind of apology in the title. It is a reverence of the symbolic. A reverence, in a way, of that which is *like*, but never *is*. The third model is *compositional*: a concern that seeks to eliminate content by reducing the image surface to basic formal principles. And



the fourth model is *non-compositional*, which is described as the “programmatically insistence on the non-agency of the artist” (8). This kind of theoretical criticality, exemplified, as Bois points out, by Malevich, leads us to conceptual, rule-based artistic practices in which the artist is beginning to question the nature of the art object, its intrinsic value, and what it is charged with representing. This evolution can be seen particularly clearly in the realm of musical composition, where John Cage, for instance, begins to base notational and orchestral choices on chance operations. Later, Stockhausen, Cardew, and Zorn all commit themselves to producing graphic scores, in which autonomy is given to the musicians to make choices in the composition that result in drastically varied, unrepeatable versions. In these cases, the non-agency of the artist is insisted upon.

For someone like Malevich, who is questioning the validity of his skill-set in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it must have been a surreal experience to see more and more photographic representations of, for instance, villages.<sup>10</sup> Might this mechanical reproducibility have challenged and deflated his attempts at representation, or his motivation to represent at all? Such constructive questioning by Malevich allowed future artists to “operate beyond the simple binary distinction of representational and abstract” (27).

In fact, it seems that technological advancement of both visual and auditory reproducibility led to art as a cognitive, as well as aesthetic, endeavor, even as artists such as Kandinsky sought to transcend “the dreary quotidian world” (28). These explorations

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<sup>10</sup> This is a reference to one of Malevich’s experimental poems cited by Masha Chlenova in her essay for “Eight Statements.” To quote Chlenova, “By hand-writing the word ‘village’ within a rectangular frame, the artist points to the opening up of meaning that occurs once the arbitrariness of the sign is made apparent, see Dickerman et al., p. 20.

either gave rise to or happened simultaneously with philosophical and scientific interests in technology, information, and relativity—further kinds of abstraction in other fields.

The emerging field of media archaeology, a variation of (or maybe deviation from) media and cultural studies, provides useful context for the influence of technological advancement on the arts throughout the 20th century. Media archaeology, arguably stemming from the work of media theorist Friedrich Kittler, is currently being defined by scholars such as Wolfgang Ernst, Jussi Parikka, and Erkki Huhtamo.<sup>11</sup> I will offer a simplistic definition for the purposes of this paper: media archaeology is the study of the techniques and mechanisms of mediation, rather than of the content and narratives that these media carry, for archival and historical purposes. “In the theories surrounding media archaeology,” according to Parikka in his essay titled “Mapping Noise,” “noise, not meaning, is quite often the focus for histories of technical media.” In this way, “Noise becomes an index of archival logic” (256).

Although I will expand on notions of noise and noise-based practices in a later section, it is worth noting that the choice of medium and the blurring of media in general seem to emerge as integral conditions of artistic innovation throughout the late 19th, early 20th centuries. As the media landscape became increasingly dense with information-carrying mechanisms and devices, the traditional delineations began to dissolve and the distinguishing attributes were complicated. The invention of photography had a groundbreaking influence on painting; the gramophone allowed for auditory transmission and reception to be a dislocated, disassociated experience; Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle prompted philosophers and cultural theorists to question the nature of sensory

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<sup>11</sup> For more on media archaeology, see *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications*, edited by Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka.

validation and truth; Muybridge proved that the horses' feet are all four off the ground; Duchamp put a urinal into a gallery; Cage hammered nails into a piano. With each technological development, artists and producers adapted their practices and folded their ideas into the fray. The content of the work became increasingly tethered to the medium of expression: McLuhan, it seems, was spot on.

To illustrate the historical relevance of *noise*—the unintended residue of the medium—over meaning, from a media archaeological perspective, consider the photograph *View from the Window at Le Gras* by Niépce in 1826. The first image to be created using a camera, the grainy, textured information is extremely noisy. Due to this noise, it is much more beautiful (or maybe ugly, mysterious, depressing, depending on your interpretation) than it is specifically informative, or *meaningful*. The historical value of Niépce's image, however, is aligned with the making of the image—the information derived from the experimentations and actions of the photographer—and machine that made it. The photograph holds a place in the history of image-making as a remnant of an action more so than as a record of specific content, the view of the cityscape out the window. Otherwise, the image is relevant on the same scale as a similarly looking expressive charcoal drawing: attending purely to intended content, therefore, becomes a detriment to the potential collective understanding and cultural significance of the image. The noise—the distortions of intended content—provides a common ground on which to understand and discuss the impact of the image. Noise, in this way, becomes fact, a place for agreement outside of the subjective interpretations of the intended narrative. I'll expand on this notion of noise as a kind of liberation from intended narrative in a later section.

Philippe-Alain Michaud's essay in "Eight Abstractions" offers an extremely useful point of departure for my analysis of the artistic trajectories stemming from modernism (Dickerman, et al. 45-48). His focus on photography, and photographic conditions of referentiality, leads us to the decidedly 20th century concern for technological mediation. His argument for Man Ray as an abstract artist, while valuable within the contextual opposition between abstraction and referentiality, is incomplete. I would argue that Man Ray's explorations in photography were not so much alternatives to representation (in regards to his motivation) or "frustrations" of referentiality, but rather that he *arrived at* abstraction as the result of mechanical and material curiosity (48).<sup>12</sup> He seems to have been engaged in a kind of material *bending*, while Malevich, for instance, was still concerned with what his picture *was* or *was not*.

This is an important difference to define: it seems there are two distinct trajectories that stem from early 20th century breaks with modernist individualism, which, while blurring into each other, imply different artistic motivations and priorities. Nam June Paik's 1965 *Magnet TV*, referred to in the Whitney Museum collection catalogue as a "prepared television" is situated between John Cage's prepared piano (1938) and the current movement of glitch art, with roots in the 80s and 90s and spurred on by the technological acceleration of the information age. This is what I will refer to as the *bending* trajectory. The other trajectory is what I will call *conceptual*. The conceptual break with modernist individualism, while arguably extending from Malevich, as

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<sup>12</sup> To briefly expand on this notion of *arriving at*, consider, for instance, Picasso. I would argue that Picasso *arrived at* Cubism through a similar kind of material and conceptual curiosity regarding the relationships between time and perception. A figure, represented from various angles, positions, and points in time, remains a single figure, albeit an *abstracted* one. The image, at least for the purposes this argument, is the result of criticality of perception—the residue of an action, the container for a particular breakthrough in our cultural understanding of perception.

described above, is more clearly argued as Duchampian. Joseph Beuys's belief, for instance, in universal human creativity, exercised through his "social sculptures" and Fluxus "happenings," is situated between Duchamp's notion of "the creative act" and the current form-questioning participatory art and social practice movements (818).

This is not to say that the artistic trajectories of *bending* and *conceptual* are mutually exclusive. Motivations of technological experimentation stem from conceptual, fixed-product-questioning, often political inclinations, just as politically motivated conceptualists often fix their critical analysis on the mechanisms of form and the conventionality of social messages. Cage, for instance, was heavily influenced by Duchamp. The writings and practices of Debord and the Situationists led conceptual artists to experiment with the conditions of everyday life and challenge the conventional routines that were (and arguably still are) latent with political and social implications. Artistic practice was in direct service to political and social criticism and activism. To use a famous example, Duchamp's urinal was, with wit, urgency and irony, situated as an art object: the detritus of the everyday was placed inside the lofty space of the gallery.

While *bending* seems similarly political, it is a more formally aesthetic, nuanced approach to what might be considered an activist practice, as opposed to the more direct, overtly revolutionary *conceptual* trajectory, which often seeks to actively replace social and political constructs with others. The *bending-conceptual* comparison is useful in analyzing aspects of my own artistic practice that consistently rise to the top of my priorities, merge, and act as foundations: particularly aspects of appropriation, noise-based practices, and site-specific interventionist tactics.

The below quote by John Cage is instructive in considering this split in practices that emerged out of modernist individualism. Cage, in a 1973 interview with *Art in*

*America*, states: “A contradiction between Marcel [Duchamp] and myself is that he spoke constantly against the retinal aspects of art, whereas I have insisted upon the physicality of sound and the activity of listening” (qtd. in Roth 80-81). Duchamp, in arguing against artistic preoccupation with visuality—a foundation for art-making and appreciation that he might have considered an ornamental indulgence—, attempts to reduce the conditions that allow for taste as a factor in artistic reception. Cage attempts the same kind of reduction in, famously, his composition *4’33”*, his silent piece, in which a performer, following explicitly scored instructions, sits silently at a piano for four minutes and thirty-three seconds.

While the world of visual art, according to Duchamp, required visual reduction in order to create the conditions for conceptual, cognitive expansion, the world of music, for Cage, required auditory reduction in order to consider the nature of sound itself, the role of the composer as framer, and the mechanical and physiological relationships to its production. This latter concern, the *mechanical and physiological*, signals Cage’s technological interest and solidifies him within the trajectory of *bending*. Duchamp’s *replacing* (rejection of the visual in order to liberate the conceptual), therefore, versus Cage’s *extending* (inclusion of unintended and uncomposed sound in order to expand the definition of music). This binary, *replacing-extending*, will be considered in later sections on appropriation.

### **Aestheticize, Aestheticize Not**

When I consider what drives my motivation as an artist I relate with many of the broad characteristics of the various participatory art and social practice movements. I do not particularly strive for success within the gallery construct, and my work attempts to resist

“art for art’s sake,” at least in the market-driven or autonomous sense, in the interest of taking on sociological and psychological topics that concern the culture at large. As Bourriaud states in his 2002 essay, *Postproduction*, “It is no longer a matter of starting with a *blank slate*, or creating meaning on the basis of virgin material but of finding a means of insertion into the innumerable flows of production” (8). There are simply too many available and enticing topics, concepts, modes of production, and phenomena of communication in the world within which to insert my ideas, criticisms, and aesthetic to be concerned with a single institution, the traditional, market-oriented art world.

I am compelled to address the complex social practice movement in this section in order to position my own work somewhere between it (what I argue is the current manifestation of the *conceptual* trajectory) and the more materialist glitch movement (in my view, the closest manifestation of the *bending* trajectory). Projects such as PlayLaborPlay, the generally dialogical result my studio work hopes to provoke, and the integral place teaching and collaborating hold in my practice, point to the need to address issues of social practice and participation in a thorough analysis of my work. The glitch movement, while not directly related to the appearance of my work, embodies the brand of *misuse* (a term I have mentioned previously and will address in the “Methods” section) that I aim to employ in my work: in short, a brand of appropriation that seeks to *repurpose* rather than *replace*.

Both the glitch and social movements are broad conglomerations of artists, tendencies, and practices and I will not attempt to specifically define them—living, as we are, in the midst of their evolution, iterations, and impact. As Susan McClary states regarding the evolution of popular music in her essay, “Rap, Minimalism, and Structures of Time in Late Twentieth-Century Culture,” “The historian of the future will have the

luxury of looking back on our era, to see what turns out to have been important after all” (296). The tendencies of these two movements are simply the most convenient manifestations of artistic practice in which to frame my own: a straddle position best contextualized through some of Bourriaud’s theoretical contributions. Bourriaud’s theories find a way to de-materialize the art object while maintaining the artist’s aesthetic authority: devaluation of the object without devaluing the artist (a trap that the extremity of the social and participatory practices falls into) and co-option of cultural technologies and forms without succumbing to gadgetry (a trap that the extremity of glitch falls into). In this respect, I do not consider my work in either camp, but rather it attempts to skim from and utilize both.

It is, however, the anti-aesthetic implications of the social and participatory movements, potentially stemming from anti-market motivations which I share, that compels me to engage in a deeper critique than I will of the glitch movement. The tendencies of glitch are already more closely tethered to the trodden and default traditional forms of art and artistic authority. It is, in a sense, the *over*-emphasis of form in glitch tactics that I take issue with, often relying on the sensorial appearance of misuse to satisfy a place within a conceptual practice. In short, I want more intentionality and composition from glitch and more aesthetic nuance from social and participatory forms. It is, however, this *under*-emphasis of form by the latter that requires more attention.

Why the urgency about this under-emphasis? I am concerned about the increasing institutionalization of what is essentially a broad theoretical structure for the situation of art, which might gradually have the effect of mistaking this situational structure—this process—as a new kind of form or style. I will expand on what is potentially at stake here, but in a general sense, I am concerned about age-old self-organizing, uniquely



socializing communities of art—the penchant the art-making process already has for creating community—becoming absorbed into the myopia of genre delineation. Projects like PlayLaborPlay run the risk of being pigeonholed into this false *new* form or *anti-form*—an eventuality that would dilute its ephemeral, interventionist, and inclusionary power.

It is important to make a distinction here between interpretations of these social movements in art, as well as to clarify my particular concerns. There seems to be a clearly discernible split in the definition of social practice between its position as a *way of being* or *artistic behavior* and as a *genre* or *discipline*.<sup>13</sup> The former resists market economies, the latter succumbs to—is absorbed by—them. The distinction, therefore, is like comparing apples and oranges.

It is an odd, however historically repetitive, phenomenon: the avant-garde searches for ways to subvert, or at least circumvent, market pressure only to be gradually assimilated into the commodity system. To follow my previous historical analysis, the artists of the *conceptual* trajectory (Duchamp; Beuys, for instance) resisted, subverted, and circumvented in various ways, only to be institutionalized, as the impacts of their contributions gradually became marketable. The current iteration of social practice, therefore, as a *way of being* is the most recent attempt at this age-old circumvention. It is, therefore, a *behavior* rather than a particular form or aesthetic.

Consideration of the potential form and aesthetic of social practice, the behavioral social practitioner would argue, is where Bourriaud's notion of relational aesthetics comes under fire. For the sake of this argument, his theories paved the way for the

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<sup>13</sup> These distinctions owe enormously to the guidance of my thesis committee chair, Susan Jahoda, and her extensive work with The Pedagogy Group on solidarity economies.

movement's inevitable institutional absorption: a reductionist neutralization of the movement's initial revolutionary impulses. It certainly does not seem to me that this neutralization was Bourriaud's intention, but rather it is, potentially, a naturally occurring by-product of cultural understanding and palatability within a consumer-based structure: digestible cultural products are demanded, and are therefore supplied. With interest and understanding, it seems, comes this natural characteristic of the market's economic process. Bourriaud, it seems, fails to offer a structural alternative to the market.

In a critique of *Relational Aesthetics*, Stewart Martin writes, "What is absent is criticism of what is in many ways most fundamental, . . . a critique of the political economy of social exchange that is implicitly proposed by *Relational Aesthetics*" (271). What is criticized is Bourriaud's omission of market concerns—concerns that are often (somewhat hypocritically) intrinsically tethered to the content and form of the projects he cites. By rendering "discursive and dialogic projects more amenable to museums and galleries," as Claire Bishop states, celebratorily, he ignores this potential hypocrisy, while simultaneously, incidentally, igniting an integral public debate about the artist's job (2). By making discursive projects amenable, as Bishop argues, he paves the way, not only for the movement's inevitable institutionalization (a valid criticism), but also for an integral discussion about the sustainability of artistic practice within a market economy (a valid contribution). Bourriaud offers us new ways to consider appropriation, cultural forms, and tactics of insertion akin to de Certeau's *tactical creativity* (a term I will address in a later section).

Bourriaud's omission of market concerns, however, has posed myriad problems for the designation of social practice as a *way of being*, as opposed to a *genre* (the institutionalization of a *practice* or *behavior*, for instance, a contradiction in terms). It is

this institutionalizing problem that has led to a misrepresentation of social practice as anti-aesthetic. To clarify, the characterization of social practice as a *behavior* rather than a *genre* is entirely beside the point of form. This behavioral social practice is more concerned with the economic forces that structure the arts than with any particular form (or anti-form) for which it might be mistaken. A behavioral social practitioner, for instance, might decide to stop producing art objects as a tactic to resist market pressures, but this decision does not produce a new form; it is rather a political, activist impulse to seek an alternative structure. That artist, theoretically, might continue to participate in artistic production, but might identify his or her own audiences and communities that are outside of the traditional realm of the market.

Herein lies the problem with institutionalization: anti-form (at least in the traditional art-object sense) becomes mistaken for, and glorified as, new form. Deskilling then occurs, as technical craft and formal composition are de-prioritized, even rejected outright. A backlash also occurs: behavioral social practitioners begin to rally against aesthetics and form in resistance to the institution. In both cases—the institutional formalization of anti-form, and the resistance of form as a tactic of activism—a version of anti-aesthetics is unintentionally taking place.

To clarify these terms and my usages, I argue that this anti-aesthetic tendency is no fault or tenet of any one movement or theory, but rather the result of a confluence of factors. The behavioral social practice movement, in that it is more concerned with political and economic structures than genre forms, is not, therefore, the subject of my criticisms of social practice. It is specifically the anti-aesthetic phenomenon that I take issue with and aim to address. It is the institutionalization of social practice, not only in museums and galleries, but also (maybe even more importantly) in universities, that is

increasingly the purveyor of anti-aesthetic deskilling and, as an unfortunate, unintended by-product, the catalyst of art's gradual dissolution and its gradual alienation of the public at large. It is, therefore, a crimp in artists' timeless societal role as expressive communicators, an unintended degradation, in a sense, of art's benevolent power. While Bishop, it would seem from her introduction, sees this institutionalization as expanding the practice, the behavioral social practitioner would rather see it as exploitation.

When I refer to social practice in relation to anti-aesthetics, therefore, I am referring to the movement as an *institutionalized genre*, and not as a *behavioral practice*. For the sake of clarity, I will refer to this genre form as *participatory art*. This usage follows Bishop's logic in her introduction to *Artificial Hells*, in which she lists the many terms that have come to characterize these forms of art. The term *participatory art* is suitable in that it "connotes the involvement of many people . . . and avoids the ambiguities of 'social engagement', which might refer to a wide range of work" (1). The term also suits my usage in that it implies resistance to authored ownership: a complicated, somewhat vague, form of resistance, which I will attempt to address.

A final issue to address regarding usage is to rectify Bourriaud's theoretical contributions (as I have characterized above) with the following criticism of participatory art. If I am using the term *participatory art* to distinguish social practice as an institutional genre versus behavioral practice, then participatory art is, theoretically, aligned with Bourriaud's texts. This would be a reductive, false equivalency: while Rirkrit Tiravanija's offering of free pad thai is reliant on participation, Gabriel Orozco's garden hammock is not, for example. When Bishop sets out to analyze participatory art, she is decidedly not referring to any of Bourriaud's relational artists. There are, rather, two separate tracks of thought here: 1) the institutionalization of Bourriaud's relational

artists has, perhaps, resulted in form being de-emphasized within the institution, and 2) the emergence of participatory art, perhaps in reaction against the former's institutionalization, has also resulted in de-emphasis of form. When I challenge participatory art in regards to anti-aesthetics, therefore, it is not a critique of Bourriaud's relational artists. The residue of relational aesthetics, rather, might be considered an unintended precursor to the anti-aesthetic sentiments of participatory art.

To aestheticize or not? The following are some analyses, concerns, and anxieties about the nature of the artist's skill-set and societal role as cultural producer.

### **The Anti-Aesthetic Phenomenon**

What is the problem with anti-aesthetics if it is in resistance to the institutional art world? The institution, after all, is detrimental to the position of art in society in that it is forced (through factors of supply and demand, the stamp of originality, and the clout of credibility) to overwhelmingly reference, either subtly or overtly, its own historical, methodological, and material trajectory. The insularity of "art for art's sake" is counter to the power of art to communicate with various audiences and constituencies in formally relevant ways, outside of the institutional boundary. The artist's power, therefore, is in being a kind of formal chameleon, able to translate ideas into various formats and outputs—containers for whatever the communicative motivation might be. By way of studio practice, therefore, the artist observes, synthesizes, and responds to the human condition. The artist offers a singular version of our collective cultural construct, rather than a mere product for consumption. The problem with anti-aesthetics, therefore, is in the artist's ambiguous societal future, at the other end of market resistance.

That the artist offers this singular version is an important point, which participatory art misses. Consider, for instance, McClary's closing thoughts, continued from above:

That [future] historian . . . will no doubt yearn to have experienced what it was like to be alive at this very moment, trying to make sense of the bewildering profusion of musical practices and critical opinions. That's why it's so important for us to perform—if only from time to time—an anthropology of ourselves. (296)

Just as Neipce's famous image, for instance, as I've argued in the previous section, is an informative remnant of an action, all artistic practices, techniques, and products are integral to historical understanding of culture. The discrete artwork (to be clear, not necessarily synonymous with the commodifiable art *object*), as I've argued, is a signpost. It is an unsolicited human response and cultural reflection: a gift, therefore, to the culture at large. It is "a vessel," as Deresiewicz concludes, "for our inner life." It is a cultural artifact, just as noise, according to Parikka, is an invaluable artifact of technical media. It seems we must keep following our creative impulses. We must keep making.

Artists, it seems, produce the invaluable noise of cultural history. Art, then, is simply the intermediary: the nuanced form that all information takes when translated through material. It is *between* the materials and the information—the medium and content. It is a kind of cultural *interim*, navigated by intuition, gut feeling, and whatever the limitations or breadth of the artist's techniques happen to be. There is something necessarily human—flawed, emotional, and indirect—about this space between material and information.

The above, admittedly dramatic, interpretation of art is an attempt to find the broadest possible definition in order to distinguish between whatever might be timeless about it, and the various passing movements and circumstances that influence it. We

might look back and consider that the market, after all, as Deresiewicz describes, has not been around forever. We might look ahead and consider what effects the phenomenon of anti-aesthetics might have on artistic practices in the future.

If art is more suitably considered a verb than a noun, then the art object is nothing but a vessel, a carrier of information, even if this information is far-reaching, generalized, abstracted, unresolved, unspecific, often with intangible communicative intentions. And art is, of course, other things also. Sublime, subjective, mind-expanding, discomforting, revolutionary, beautiful things to which a complete definition could never be pinned. Rather than attempt to pin, I will only observe that art can be wrapped in many different criteria for many different reasons. It is enticingly reckless. It seems to employ a timeless language that predates the circumstantial trappings of Capitalism, the commercialization of art objects, and the individualistic tendencies of late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century modernism. Aesthetics, and the subtle seduction of form, might be the clearest way to understand this timeless language. *Someone*, or some *entity*, shaping form, whether it be an image, object, apparatus, experience, or some other psychological, dialogical, or spatial construct yet to be conceived. Content, therefore, may be anything at all, whether a radical liberal agenda, a docile motive, a playful sensibility, or a sensorial experimentation—the form, it seems, is what brings the action, thought, or practice to artistic critique. To use Viktor Shklovsky’s summation in his 1925 essay, “Art as Device,” “Art is a means of experiencing the process of creativity. The artifact itself is quite unimportant” (6).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Shklovsky’s essay, particularly his notion that, “the device of art makes perception long,” will be considered later in this paper.

That *form must be shaped*, at least through the lens of this argument of aesthetics, means that the individual cannot be removed from the art-making process, even as the autonomous art object becomes ephemeral art experience and even as participatory art attempts to remove the individual's trace. The anti-aesthetic tendencies of participatory art seem to equate aesthetics with authorship, and therefore with market acquiescence and political conservatism (or at least tacit endorsement). But, as Bishop states: "Value judgments are necessary, not as a means to reinforce elite culture and police the boundaries of art and non-art, but as a way to understand and clarify our shared values at a given historical moment" (8). Bishop is searching for ways to account for participatory art that "focus[es] on the meaning of what it produces, rather than attending solely to process" (9). Behavioral social practitioners might argue Bishop is trying to secure herself a job: the cultural critic will have nothing to critique without artistic forms and critical structures. Institutionalized social practitioners might be pleased with Bishop's endeavors: her diligent work of contextualization potentially securing them a place in the canon. To offer criticism of both perspectives, the former is arguably an avoidant cop-out, the latter an opportunistic exploitation.

I am by no means on the side of the latter (I have argued previously that the institutionalization of social practice might be the very culprit of the anti-aesthetic phenomenon), but it is still disingenuous to believe that "there can be no failed, unsuccessful, unresolved, or boring works of participatory art" (Bishop 13). It is necessary, it seems, to find some way of separating works of participatory art from similar projects in other realms, such as sociology, political activism, and community organizing, or else, as Bishop states, "we risk discussing these practices solely in positivist terms, that is, by focusing on demonstrable impact" (18). Resistance to



aesthetic criteria and, by extension, authorship, at least when this resistance becomes dogmatic orthodoxy, might signify a troubling diffusion of art—the artist’s timeless job, technical skill-sets, and the invaluable historical index of singular versions of our collective cultural construct—into societal ambiguity.

Might it be that this ambiguity is just the state that participatory art seeks? In that institutionalization must be resisted, even Bishop’s *secondary audience* (the non-present; the non-participant; the distant spectating remainder) might be irrelevant to the work. Mediation, therefore, is irrelevant and, as follows, so is critique, qualification, or canonization. This line of thinking leads back to my designation of behavioral social practice as being more concerned with political and economic structures—art’s way of being in the world—than with genre forms. It leads, in a way, to a kind of un-critiqueable impulse. I’m not being shown the work; the work is not for me. A glorious aesthetic form may well be shared with a very specific constituency to serve a very specific social function, but I will not benefit from it because it will not be mediated. It will be, rather, withheld.

This discussion of form and aesthetics, however, assumes, to some degree, mediation of a work. It assumes that the work is an offering to the public domain: a perspective to be shared, an artifact to contribute. Art, in this context, must be discussed as a form of communication: a naturally occurring human phenomenon (as opposed to market acquiescence) in which something or someone attempts to communicate with something or someone else through some kind of technique of mediation.

Analysis of aesthetics, considering the above context, must imply some kind of individual, choice-making authorship, even if this individual is a director, a directive group, designer, or orchestrator, all of which are more nuanced titles than the singular

authority (the genius, reclusive creator) of modernism. If the artist is a shaper, collaborator, or conductor of something that would not have existed otherwise, he or she is an author to some degree and must be held accountable for his or her choices in the realm of some kind of aesthetics. Aesthetics and form, therefore, defined broadly, may be the only criteria of art—the only condition that separates it from other disciplines.

In this way, the facilitator, the designer, the organizer, and the framer are all artists, whose work might be critiqued based on the form (or various forms) it takes in the world (accepting all of the subjectivity and vagueness that already comes with any kind of artistic critique in the first place). Aesthetics, therefore, are not ornamental, spectatorial, or politically conservative concerns, but rather practical, communicative, and humanistic, in that they accept the art-making process as a nuanced language. Consider Brian Eno's rich, collaborative, and influential status in the realm of music, straddled as he is between popular and classical musics of the late 20th century, quoted here from his liner notes to his 1975 album *Discreet Music*:

Since I have always preferred making plans to executing them, I have gravitated towards situations and systems that, once set into operation, could create music with little or no intervention on my part. That is to say, I tend towards the roles of the planner and programmer, and then become an audience to the results . . .

Issues of authorship and credit aside, what a shame it'd have been for Eno's creative inclinations and contributions to be absorbed into anti-aesthetic, anti-product collectivism. In *Discreet Music*, Eno has given up much of his individual control to technological systems, indeterminate resolutions, and collaborative negotiations. The point, I suppose, is that there is a middle ground.

Bourriaud's interpretation of the author, while in retrospect, arguably, naively traditional, offers vital contributions to this discussion in regards to my previous

designation of art as an action versus product. Given that Bourriaud's relational artists have become institutionalized, their products securely fixed, their initial actions remain valuable examples of insertion into cultural forms. This basic notion holds an integral place within my analyses of the artist's role as mediator of cultural forms and images, as complicator of everyday life. Bourriaud's theories find a way to privilege the artwork and the value of the artist (antithetical to participatory art), while at the same time emphasize "the sphere of human relations as [a new] site for the artwork..." ("Relational Aesthetics" 165) "These artists produce..." Bourriaud continues:

interhuman experiences that try to shake off the constraints of the ideology of mass communications; they are in a sense spaces where we can elaborate alternative forms of sociability, critical models and moments of constructed conviviality. (166)

The artist, for Bourriaud, is indispensable in that he or she produces, elaborates, and constructs. The artist nudges us, through form and aesthetics, toward cultural criticality and anti-spectatorial dialogics. The artist, in a sense, continues to make an offering; to participate in the timeless language of art; to extend definitions of form to include the sphere of human relations, rather than resist form itself. Bourriaud goes on to state that "We no longer try to make progress thanks to conflict and clashes, but by discovering new assemblages, possible relations between distinct units, and by building alliances between different partners" (166). The artist, then, is engaged in a negotiation.

### **What to Make, What to Do, What to Teach**

It would be reductive to believe that artists today are either art world producers of objects working within the collector model or participatory artists teetering precariously on the edge of liberal activism. To reflect on my own path, I was certainly drawn to art through

an activist impulse. From an early age I was interested in mediation of all kinds, and its role in the construction of individual identity, national attitudes, and the shapes of history. As I learned, experimented, and engaged, I judged that our culture should be more actively critical of the ways in which our experience in the world is mediated. Art became the venue for this activist impulse—a method to communicate, criticize, illustrate, and embody ideas about the human condition in ways that strove to be exploratory and nuanced, as opposed to didactic and dictatorial. This is my hesitation, as I've described above, with the anti-aesthetic phenomenon: that we gradually lose the ability to communicate in a nuanced, poetic, open-ended fashion. We lose, therefore, the language of art.

Take, for example, an artist collective whose stated practice is providing and running art programs for local children (Kennedy). While this is a noble and worthy organizational pursuit, it begs a question about what art education is. What does the artist collective teach its students? If it teaches students institutionalized forms of social practice, and not art in some traditional, objective sense, then how is the collective's work differentiated from another community center or service program? How is funding differentiated? If the collective is teaching art in a more traditional sense (which is far more likely), then where does it leave the students who, in the assumed opinion of the collective, would be preparing for an obsolete or exploitative industry?

These questions complicate the virtues of art education and its role in shaping the minds of, say, kindergarteners. Do artists of the future know how to use a hammer, how a camera works, or how to organize a composition? Are these things still relevant to them, or are technical skills gradually farmed out to various trades? In what form do trades exist? Shifting emphasis from object to action, celebrating and teaching skills of

collaboration, situating art making as relational versus autonomous: these pedagogical inclinations maintain aesthetic criteria and educational progress where the deskilling effects of anti-aesthetics hits a wall.

This concern might even be less ideological than I've implied, but rather more logistical: how does one have the time to teach both the foundational skills of drafting as well as the sociological and communitarian tactics of participatory art? How do we categorize and prioritize them within a single curricular mission or funding stream? Might it be more productive to stop treating participatory art as a form of art and rather consider it a structural apparatus, a way of being? If in fact the anti-institutional form of social practice is concerned not with *what* is being made, but *how*, might there be a more suitable venue than the field of art? I pose these rhetorical questions with full understanding that, for the politically motivated social practitioner, the field of art is, in fact, the most important one. It is the battlefield of the anti-market issue surrounding cultural production, a fact that in itself threatens to be its institutionalizing demise. It might be more productive, therefore, to suggest an *extension* of emphasis, rather than a *replacement* of concerns: a studio practice, for instance, that more actively considers its function in the world, outside of its marketability, its function more as a place of meeting than object of production.

A studio practice applied to a social practice, therefore, is an extremely positive prospect. Even if only minimal or supplemental, a studio practice might be thought of as the gateway to a social practice: the avenue to active application of the work to ephemeral, collaborative, or socially engaged projects. A kind of activism, therefore, that is rooted in some form of production. The Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, for instance, would not have engaged with Mike Kelley's work as social practice had it not

been based previously on a practice of production (Kennedy). “Mobile Homestead,” therefore, is a kind of application for Kelley’s work. Theaster Gates’s brand of community building and neighborhood revitalization is built on the back of his traditional ceramics practice (often referred to in his lectures and artist talks as *leverage*). It seems, then, that many, if not most, artists today are engaged with various social, cultural, and political concepts through their work. The work is a conduit to these societal needs, and the artist is increasingly adept at navigating and expanding the limits of institutions and platforms, at *inserting* him or herself into the available forms.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS

#### Introduction

I will begin this discussion of methods by addressing the activist impulse. Duchamp and Cage—and the respective trajectories of *conceptual* and *bending* I’ve attributed to them—continue to provide useful frameworks here. Where the participatory art movement (conceptual/Duchamp) might be rooted in activism, the glitch movement (bending/Cage) might be rooted in experimentation. Where the former relies more heavily on intentionality (maybe even didactically so), the latter relies on indeterminacy. Where the former is moralistic, the latter is observational. Although there are many ways to describe the practices by which our culture straddles the above binaries, Lev Manovich, in his essay “The Practice of Everyday (Media) Life” is eloquent in addressing the dilemma of resisting, versus contributing to, media saturation and capitalistic interest, particularly in relation to Baudrillard’s notion of simulation and de Certeau’s text, *The Practice of Everyday Life*.

When Manovich states that “the logic of tactics has now become the logic of strategies” he argues that this new strategy operates as a hyperreality (38). To reference the work of Baudrillard, the hyperreal is experienced as real, as opposed to a representation of the real, but is actually referential—an indirect, mediated construction, distantly departed from whatever original form it resembles. Deceptive and seductive, it is taken as real. Manovich acknowledges the relevance of the hyperreality phenomenon by noting that “content [referring to user generated content and what he might judge as *lay* production] is . . . driven by social media companies themselves” (36). These

companies, by simulating the tactics of remix culture (or maybe rather directly employing them: a confusing diffusion that is reminiscent of the dilemma of hyperreality itself) have successfully co-opted them. These companies, therefore, have systematized these tactics into a strategy for generating capital.<sup>15</sup>

It is this constant co-option, technology after technology, innovation after innovation, for the purposes of capital that leads me to align my studio practice with what Manovich (using de Certeau's term) calls "tactical creativity." In navigating our mass media culture, I "expect to have to work on things in order to...make them *habitable*" (40). In the spirit of Manovich's remix culture, there is so much material out in the world—so much vague noise and sporadic signal—that must be read, decoded, and demystified. The nuanced language of art and aesthetics might be the most effective tactic to soften the edge of authority; to resist capitalistic interest. Tactical creativity, in this way, is seductive, and free to be indeterminate and experimental.

Maybe, in this way, change simply comes slowly. My own relationship to remix culture, tactics of appropriation and intervention, and media activism as a nuanced (versus direct) pursuit is rooted in a desire to deconstruct: to find the seams, to debunk the illusion. But what makes tactical creativity so effective is that it does not linger in mere deconstruction. Bourriaud's *Postproduction* artists, for instance, go "beyond what we call *the art of appropriation*, which naturally infers an ideology of ownership, and [move] toward a culture of the use of forms..." (4). This *going beyond* signals an important shift in the implication of appropriation: a shift in relevance and intended effect

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<sup>15</sup> Although Manovich leaves these companies mostly unspecified, he refers directly to the phenomenon of fan generated anime music videos (AMVs) and also implies the influence of increasingly accessible and user-friendly Adobe and Mac software.



from replacing cultural structures and forms (a notion more closely attributed to the activist tendencies of the *conceptual* trajectory) to repurposing (more closely attributed to the experimental tendencies of the *bending* trajectory).<sup>16</sup> Remixing, therefore, is in order to generate new productive connections between already existing, pervasive, and increasingly ownerless content and form, to construct new and sustainable strategies for making meaning; for keeping up with the perpetual flow of media culture, for the maintenance of *activity* over *passivity*. Appropriation, therefore, is to deconstruct and demystify, only to reconstruct with a new patina of association and myth, a method of production that is not so much spectatorial submission as dialogical negotiation, a practice concerned less with fixed products than transient versions.

### **The Activist Impulse**

I will return to the topics of noise and appropriation, but first continue with the activist impulse that is in many ways at the root of my studio practice. Among the many influences that are more obviously apparent in my work, as well as more entrenched within the boundaries of art, the arguably non-artist group The Yes Men comes to mind. The Yes Men is a lighthearted activist group that embeds itself into the public eye and *tells the truth* in the guise of the authority on which it is commenting: work that takes the form of simulated websites and press conferences, a brand of satire that works gradually on the minds of the public. This group employs an aesthetic sensitivity akin to the language of art: like a chameleon, it must take on various cultural forms to a degree of

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<sup>16</sup> This binary of *replacing-repurposing* is related to that of *replacing-extending*, described earlier in this paper. The former is simply a more precise way to position the evolving cultural implications of appropriation.

passability and offer alternative positions, associations, and narratives from this simulated place of authority. It intervenes rather than waits for an invitation. It embodies the form it critiques.

I'll briefly summarize a particular case. In November, 2004, The Yes Men finagled an opportunity to represent The Dow Chemical Company on the 20th anniversary of the 1984 Bhopal tragedy, in which 5,000<sup>17</sup> residents were accidentally killed when Union Carbide's (now part of Dow) pesticide plant sprung a leak ("A Legacy Acknowledged"). The Yes Men, having set up a fake, yet entirely believable, alternative Dow website, created a place from which the supposed company would address the Bhopal disaster. Anyone doing an Internet search about the disaster, or even simply about the company itself, would easily stumble upon The Yes Men site and mistake it for Dow's.

In November, the BBC did just that and contacted the alternative site—The Yes Men—to request an interview with a Dow representative on the disaster's 20th anniversary. The Yes Men followed through, sent a representative, and, on the air during the interview, announced that "Dow will accept full responsibility for the Bhopal disaster, and has a \$12 billion dollar plan to compensate the victims and remediate the site" ("A Legacy Acknowledged"). Their announcement generated, at worst, an enormous amount of press attention for the disaster, which had gone relatively ignored in the US, and at most, a deluge of questions and comments for Dow to field, forcing the company to hedge on its supposed promise, its non-action in the wake of the disaster suddenly plain for the public to see. By exploiting common modes of communication and intervening

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<sup>17</sup> Many more followed, stemming from residual effects of the spill.

into established cultural forms, The Yes Men engaged in a nuanced, simulationist, performative tactic of resistance: the language of art applied to activist intentions.

Another example that comes to mind, outside of the realm of art, was a social media sensation in October, 2012. A video, just under three minutes, spread like fire across the Internet. The video depicts Pastor Phil Snider, in August of that year, speaking at a Springfield, MO, City Council public hearing on an amendment that would add LGBT people to the list of minorities protected under a new non-discrimination ordinance. While Snider makes clear at the start of his speech that he is in favor of the ordinance (an immediate break from character that, for instance, The Yes Men would have rather maintained), he goes on to speak from the opposite position and cites various Christian leaders that support the assertion that “any accurate reading of the bible should make it clear that gay rights goes against the plain truth of the word of God.”

But just shy of two minutes into his anti-homosexuality speech, Snider seems to lose his place and stumbles over his words as he *mistakenly* says the phrase, “the right of *segregation*.” This is the point at which Snider’s interventionist tactic begins to take shape. He seems to have “brought the wrong notes” and he apologizes before confessing to the assembly that “what I have been reading you this whole time are direct quotes from white preachers from the 1950s and the 1960s, all in support of racial segregation. All I have done is simply taken out the phrase *racial integration* and substituted it with the phrase *gay rights*.” While there is a direct action taking place here in that Snider is directly appealing to voters of the ordinance, his action takes on a more poetic afterlife. It is the nuance and craft of the performance that carries the content to a larger audience. Snider, in this public hearing, leveraged the credibility of his own position in the community to engage in an act of tactical creativity.

These tactics of media intervention, which are intended to disrupt the spectator's expectations and insert new associations and narratives, bring up an important binary to consider: that of *transparency-opacity*, mentioned earlier in this paper. As information is polished through technological advancement, the mechanism—the mode of communication—becomes more transparent (*transparent* as opposed to, for instance, the *opacity* of Niépce's camera, as discussed previously). What is the consequence of a transparent medium, and how might it lead to manipulation and corruption? If we receive pure content and are not cognizant or critical of the medium, might we be relegated to passive spectator, unequipped to interpret the subjectivity of the information?

Through the lens of tactical creativity, spectators must hold the power of interpretation, appropriation, and active use, able to imagine and, according to de Certeau, “insinuate their countless differences into the dominant text” (xxii). The spectator is, therefore, empowered, activated, and able to contribute to the decidedly subjective problem of communication and to navigate the interim between transparency (absorption in content, pure spectacle) and opacity (criticality of content, dialogical negotiation). I will return to these conditions of absorption and criticality, particularly in relation to time-based and popular media, in a later section on “Content.”

The gradual transparency of media over time is particularly relevant to the motivations of media education. As information is polished through factors such as technological advancement (increasing automation and precision of devices, for instance) or cultural ubiquity of narrative strategies (the pervasive plot formula of a film, the predictable structure of a political debate), dialogical negotiation becomes increasingly difficult and active insertion becomes harder to imagine. To engage with the carrier of information is just as important, if not more so, than the information itself.

Consider, for instance, the importance of the transparency-opacity binary in relation to consumer culture and advertising. *Production Notes: Fast Food For Thought*, a 1986 video piece by Jason Simon, addresses the artist's role in standing between the two poles of medium and content, in employing tactical creativity that stands between activism and artistic production. In *Production Notes*, Simon attempts to elucidate the medium, which had, in the mid-80s, become increasingly transparent through the many strategies of advertising.

Simon shows the viewer various television commercials advertising products such as McDonalds, Colt 45, and Mars Bars. Following each ad he slows the video down and replaces the audio with a recorded reading of the production notes, "sent from the advertising agency to the production company," as Simon explains in the recording. The notes describe the agency's intentions with each scene, actor, and expression, while the viewer analyzes the images in slow motion.

Simon employs opportunistic leverage, similar to Snider and The Yes Men, in that his piece was made possible by his time working for these production companies: a kind of embedded social practice before such intervention was co-opted and on the road to institutionalization. The difference is, of course, that Simon's intervention has generated a fixed product—a kind of activist artifact—while the anti-form tendencies of participatory art, for instance, would likely not have engaged in such spectatorial production. This is also not to claim that Simon's piece has made any kind of direct, tangible impact on the spectatorial consumer culture dilemma, only that, like Snider's intervention, it permeates our cultural consciousness with subtlety (versus confrontation, Bourriaud's "conflict and clashes"), and offers itself as a singular version of our

collective cultural construct, an artifact of resistance through gradual negotiation (“Relational Aesthetics” 166).

Where is this vague line, different maybe for each individual, in which the activist’s moralism shifts from enlighteningly educational to didactically impositional? I will consider this question through the binary *moralistic-observational*, and through a critique of Thom Andersen’s masterful 2003 film, *Los Angeles Plays Itself*.<sup>18</sup>

Incongruous chase scenes; ominous architecture; filmic depictions that run parallel, as odd simulations, to the *real life* political, cultural, and economic states of the city of Los Angeles: Andersen’s ruminations on the city’s landscape and its co-option for the sake of fiction are what grip me for the film’s long three-hour duration. In these respects, *Los Angeles Plays Itself* is a significant work in the discipline of film and cultural criticism.

Andersen is working with popular film—in most cases accessible, as opposed to obscure—in order to support arguments and relationships arrived at through his research: a voiceover essay set to movie scenes. His subtle reframing of context works to great effect, since the viewer rarely gets lost in the original content. Andersen invites us into the images and sounds—we are seduced by their familiarity and glossy production value—only to tip us in particular directions. There is rarely tension between image and voiceover, rarely a contradiction or arbitrary reference. As image and voice develop in relation to each other, the viewer becomes reliant on the voiceover to frame the image—to help the viewer see what is remarkable. What is so impressive about this film is that the image/voice relationship is never didactic, never overtly moralistic, but rather remains

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<sup>18</sup> This brief criticism has been adapted from one written for Young Min Moon’s experimental Visual Culture syllabus on Neo-Realist film, University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

basically observational, *descriptive* in tone, rather than *prescriptive*, until the end, which I will address.

What is it that makes the majority of the film feel more aesthetic and experiential than explanatory and didactic? It certainly toggles delicately between these states but remains mostly on the former side. I would argue it is because Andersen puts a certain amount of trust in his viewer for the majority of the film. He seems to trust, by stating certain facts and by drawing, as a kind of curator, certain relationships between data that his viewer will make certain inferences. There is a trust that the viewer is capable of *insertion* into Andersen's observations and able to consider the virtues of his film: the ways in which the film industry depicts and exploits economic inequalities; the complexities of race relations in the city as well as our culture; the kind of psychic displacement popular film imposes on the physical landscape of Los Angeles and its *actual* inhabitants; the deleterious effects that product placement, archetypal portrayals of gender, and depictions of socio-political and economic norms have on the psyches of viewers and consumers. Throughout the film, Andersen trusts the viewer to read and interpret the hypocrisies of the films and filmic devices he analyzes, and the result is a brilliant education in media literacy. The viewer walks away with an enriched respect for the construction of image and fiction, as well as a keener eye for such construction in future media consumption.

But by the end of the film, I am disappointed to find that Andersen has lost trust in me. He seems to no longer believe that I can draw, through aesthetics and experience, the correct conclusions from his brilliant observations and work of curation, and he begins to proselytize. It is not that he reaches for a point that isn't there—his arguments continue to ring true—but it is that the work does not need them. To end such a thorough

analysis, infused as it is with such sincere investment and personal observation, with a broadly damning tone feels like an empty gesture: a misplaced resentment with no particular culprit or solution. In fact, it seems he should have begun a whole new project to address the half-hearted points on race in his conclusion—points with which he attempts to crystallize the perspectives of his whole film. The film, therefore, in its conclusion tips from an observational tactic (effective in its subtlety and humility) to a moralistic one (patronizing in its directness and condemnation). Veering all too close to a clash, it is, in a way, a broken negotiation.

### **The Misuse Impulse**

To follow the *observational-moralistic* discussion—the effective tactics of observational insertion versus moralistic imposition—it seems that the activist impulse tips into *misuse* and, more specifically, noise-based tactics. A discussion of noise is most productively framed as the residue or byproduct of communication. This frame stems largely from the definition of noise in information theory as oppositional to *signal*. In this way, “a noise is a signal the sender does not want to transmit”<sup>19</sup> (Russo and Warner 48). I will expand the framework, for the purposes of this paper, from the technical mechanisms of communication to include its formulas, structures, and intended meanings. This expansion can be attributed to theorist Jacques Attali’s essay “Noise and Politics,” in which analysis of noise is cultural: “In noise can be read the codes of life, the relationships among men” (7). Even Andersen’s film, therefore, is arguably engaged in a

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<sup>19</sup> Warner and Russo, here quoting Abraham Moles, provide a lucid discussion of noise, in opposition to the information theory framework, as *virtual acoustical noise* within the context of western musical discourse, in which the qualifying distinctions between signal and noise break down when “attack transients [as opposed to *pure tone*]...provide the primary perceptual cues for aural identification,” see p. 49.



noise-based tactic in that it attempts to tease unintended narratives and inferences out of existing material; to dig beneath the intended narratives and unearth new interpretive associations.

The *Journals* of Henry David Thoreau, written as notes during his time at Walden, offer a valuable reference for this definition. Contextualized masterfully in an article for *Cabinet* by D. Graham Burnett, professor of History of Science at Princeton University, Thoreau was captivated by what he called the telegraph harp. Copper wire, freshly installed to facilitate Samuel Morse's telegraph communication system, cut through Walden and created tones when it vibrated in the wind. "This unpredictable and accidental music," writes Burnett, "became, for the wanderer of Concord, a solace, a call, a derangement of the senses" (63). Thoreau, in his writings, fixates on *use* and *misuse* of technology with subversive intentions, underpinned by an activist impulse. The material—the overhanging wire—is an imposition on the landscape and his daily life: an unchosen environmental factor and sonic texture.

While the development of Morse's telegraph system would lead to greater connectivity and clarity of communication, Thoreau points to the invention as a commercial, capitalistic advancement, and not a philosophical one in the grand scheme of human connections. For Thoreau the telegraph harp is sublime—transcendent in ways that the messages carried along the copper lines could never achieve. The beauty, value, and wisdom, for Thoreau, is in the peripheral, authorless noise. As he states, "The high purpose of all things lay in their creative misuse...thus I make my own use of the telegraph" (qtd. in Burnett 65). Of this *use*, Burnett writes:

It is a use reserved, of necessity, to those who do not go to the end of the line, those who do not reside at a node in the network of the modern world. Those who do not go to the office. The truth is for those who are indifferent to ends.

This earth-encompassing web, which embodied on a global scale the ubiquitous urge to get from point A to point B, was at the same time—perfect irony!—a cosmic harp upon which random winds played an endless, subversive symphony. (65)

The necessary *meaninglessness* of noise—in that if noise had hierarchical meaning it would be, rather, content—is for Thoreau a place of interpretation, beauty, and insertion, freed from the specificity of signal. This is arguably the start of media archaeology, discussed earlier in this paper, within which noise becomes a more valuable record than the content the particular device carries. It is through the sublime beauty of the telegraph harp that Thoreau directs our attention to the philosophical dilemmas of technological advancement and its relationship to human connectivity. We are, therefore, indirectly pointed toward Thoreau’s particular content: this *high purpose of all things*. We are pointed by way of aesthetic sensitivity and misuse, our heightened attention brought to the incidental and residual qualities of mediation. As Parikka writes in regards to recorded audio: “The gramophone picks up not only the meaning inherent in human speech, but just as effectively the whispers, the noises of the body, the *extras* of communication, so to speak, that come with every opening of the mouth” (256-57). Within these *extras* lies valuable, expansive information far more fertile for interpretation and insertion than the intended content itself.

But Thoreau’s high purpose still carries a delusion of hierarchy—delusional in that all hierarchy must be in some way dictatorial and, therefore, embedded with some form of dogmatic meaning. Meaning, in this case, is not necessarily the enemy of Thoreau’s implied freedom, but simply an obstacle to interpretation, so fixed as it appears to us within a culturally agreed upon system of thought. “Forget subversion,” writes music theorist Simon Reynolds in his essay “Noise”: “The point is self-subversion,

overthrowing the power structure in your own head. The enemy is the mind's tendency to systematize, sew up experience, place a distance between itself and immediacy" (57).

The "obliteration of meaning," as Reynolds refers to it, is the pleasure of noise—the ecstasy found in "dispersing consciousness" (56-57). The strictures of meaning, it seems, must be alleviated, if only on occasion, to make space in the mind, to make the return to established structures a conscious choice rather than unconscious submission.

Noise, then, is reckless and free, anarchistic and self-subversive. It works gradually against our own need for established form. "Listening to music," explains Attali, "is listening to all noise, realizing that its appropriation and control is a reflection of power, that it is essentially political" (7). Like walking is controlled falling, music is controlled noise; image is framed vision; object is constructed material; form is organized information. The artist—and more specifically the media educator, theorist, cultural producer—must repurpose established form in order to "extract new modes of production from it," new ways of *seeing* it (Bourriaud, *Postproduction* 4). This is Bourriaud's "break with the manipulation of reference and citation . . . through a problematics of the use of cultural artifacts," his "society as a catalog of forms" (7-8).

### **Extend or Replace, Repurpose or Reject**

As the definition of noise expands to encompass the ubiquitous scatter of meanings, narratives, and forms with which our culture grapples daily, a contradiction emerges: can framed noise still be noise, or does its framing—its organizing—turn it into construction? Does Thoreau's *listening* to his telegraph harp differ from his *pointing* to it, and thereby framing it, in his journals? Is noise, once systematized, simply convention? These

questions begin to tip toward the topic of appropriation, in which recontextualization—*re-framing*—is not only expected, but integral to its definition.

To follow Attali's statement, all music (and by extension all form) is appropriated noise (in its various structure-less iterations). If everything is noise until framed, then all framing, at least in the cultural sense of Attali's argument, is appropriative. Attali's notion eloquently precedes Bourriaud's, reiterated here in full:

Artists' intuitive relationship with art history is now going beyond what we call *the art of appropriation*, which naturally infers an ideology of ownership, and moving toward a culture of the use of forms, a culture of constant activity of signs based on a collective ideal: sharing. (*Postproduction* 4)

The term appropriation, therefore, becomes an incomplete designation in this *culture of the use of forms*—this sharing culture—in which no form is singularly sacred. All forms are ripe for recontextualization, to be encountered as new. This is the artist's urge to extend rather than replace, to critique through use (co-optive repurposing) rather than through omission (dismissive rejecting).

Cage's 1952 silent piece comes to mind. *4'33"* is a composition consisting of no sound other than the incidental noises of the audience. The audience's expectation of linear content is co-opted in order to consider the nature of music, noise, spectacle, and collective experience. *4'33"*, though immensely impactful, might also be dismissed as cynical. Why highlight the accidents, inconsequential data, and aspects of communication that cause disconnection? Doesn't this attention drive us deeper into a void of miscommunication and isolation?

I would argue, rather, that Cage's piece is an *extension* of the definition of music to include unintended and uncomposed sound. All he has done is place a frame around the otherwise unstructured, but still sonically present, noise. Cage, therefore, does not

seek to replace traditional linear composition—an action that would carry the implication of revolution reminiscent of the previously described *conceptual* trajectory—but rather to extend it: a repurposing of noise rather than rejection. To imply that noise is to be avoided is to prop hierarchical meaning and specificity of content on too high a pedestal. All composition is, after all, already an appropriation of noise, at least in the context of Attali's argument. The implication is that noise simply exists, that it is ownerless and free.

The thought is liberating: I am free to appreciate the unintended sounds of the room as a kind of sublime composition, to listen to them as music. All forms that pass my eye are fair game, potential fodder for recontextualization and application. How constructive this notion of extension is—how productive! Rather than to rally against established forms, structures, and systems of thought with the vague implication of replacing them, it is more productive to repurpose them in the interest of creating new venues for dialogue and understanding. Our society “as a catalog of forms” has become increasingly appropriative in its own right. As Manovich has argued, tactics of resistance are regularly systematized into strategies for generating capital. Artists—particularly those working appropriatively—aim to find the edge of this system: to fold the edge back into the fray, to smooth it out and diffuse its boundaries, to absorb it into the noisy subjectivity of perception.

The artist's co-option forces the hand of the system: as formulas become apparent (or *opaque*) they lose their effectiveness, their ability to maintain whatever form of control for which they were designed. When we extend these structures, we talk about them. When we analyze the nuanced language of a political speech, the words cease to persuade. When conventions of popular film are made apparent, cultural ideologies cease

to impact our identities and personal opinions. We are no longer lost, therefore, in the spectatorial scatter of seemingly fixed meanings, but rather freed to engage in an active negotiation of meaning, our attention freed to receive the peripheral, the unintended, the residual, the sub-textual, the message that the medium itself carries.

While these are lofty assertions, they serve to illustrate the extremity of this co-optive urge to repurpose. Jason Simon, with *Production Notes*, slows down advertisements in order to analyze their construction. Paul Pfeiffer, through tactics of digital subtraction in various projects, fixes our gaze on the balletic choreography of popular sports. Jon Rafman, in his image archive, *9-Eyes*, mines the mechanized images of Google Street View for slices of sublimity and humanity. William Basinski, with his *Disintegration Loops*, shows how repetition (a single looping melody) can change over time, both as material (tape gradually disintegrating as it turns) and as perception (the effect on the listener). Maybe even more importantly, these artists have set a path for the audience to engage with recognizable material in new, aesthetic, expansive ways.

Basinski's appropriated melodies—snippets from sources that could be Muzak, classical pieces, advertisements, even old personal recordings—do not simply point back to source; that is, they don't exclusively question, criticize, reject, or address their source. His pieces place these snippets in a context all their own: a haunting repetition that seems both neverending and endlessly unique with each revolution of the loop. Basinski puts us through an aesthetic, visceral experience with material we would not have guessed would have affected us in such an emotive way. This is a unique inclusion of source in a subsequent extension, Bourriaud's new modes of production within ubiquitous established forms.

Brian Eno's *Three Variation on the Canon in D Major by Johann Pachelbel*, the B-side to his 1975 album *Discreet Music*, comes to mind. Along with collaborator Gavin Bryars, Eno arranged the famous piece for the Cockpit Ensemble, each member of which was given a brief excerpt of Pachelbel's score to repeat and gradually alter over the course of the recording. The result is a hauntingly mesmerizing, strangely recognizable, unrepeatable version of the piece—an appropriative process that points both back to the nature of source (the classical tradition; the fixed score) and forward as an entirely new, aesthetic product.

This *extending* versus *replacing* binary speaks to a straddle position common in these works, and in the lineage I hope to situate my own work: a general balance between aesthetics and criticality. Eno's notion of becoming, in both *Discreet Music* and the Pachelbel variations, "an audience to the results" of his own plans and programs, sets up a kind of system for sentimentality and aesthetic experimentation. This is Bois's *non-compositional* model for abstraction: the "programmatic insistence on the non-agency of the artist" (Dickerman, et al. 8). Eno seems to create structures in which he can be free, which open doors for him and remove the burden of authored responsibility. There are, in this way, two separate urges—both conceptual and aesthetic—that need to be satisfied for the sake of both the maker and audience. Structure—some semblance of programmatic criticality—is the anchor from which we might truly lose ourselves in aesthetics, an allowance to get lost within conceptually nuanced, stake-holding structures.

Basinski's *Disintegration Loop 1.1* incites similar sentimentality, a further example of the ways in which one's perception of familiar or unremarkable material is transformed through systematic structure. Basinski's piece both incites meditation on technological mediation and is, simultaneously, a moving aesthetic experience.

Basinski's looping melody, if discovered independently before his processing—maybe as Muzak in the supermarket or an excerpt from a film score—would not evoke such sentiment. Is it the suggestion of September 11, 2001? Basinski completed this piece on this date. It played continuously on the roof of his Brooklyn building as he watched the smoke rise. The cultural weight of this context is forever embedded in the piece. Or does this sentimentality stem from generational curiosity about dead and swiftly dying technological formats, gadgets, and entertainment products: a kind of memento mori of communication technologies? For whatever the reasons—perhaps a mixture of nostalgia, cultural comradery, cravings for memorials, interest in the information age, and a desire for ambient sonic texture—Basinski's piece, experienced at the right moment, is more moving than any original score. Fragile information on tape, looped continuously over tape heads, gradually disintegrating, falling apart like ash settling on the ground, the sound blurring, warbling, slowing: a single loop, never once precisely repeated, fading away.

It is *working with the familiar* that I want to emphasize in regards to appropriation as a repurposing method. It is also why I am drawn to working with common spectacles as subject matter: insertion into ubiquitous images and formulas; co-option of entrenched narrative structures; the programmatic misuse of cultural codes and devices; the immediate recognition, and subsequent conditioning, of the familiar.

### **Enstrangement**

Perhaps the greatest argument for *art as action*, for the use of aesthetics to co-opt and expand cultural perception, and for art as a venue for dialogical negotiation of meaning versus habituated spectatorial reception, comes from Russian Formalist Viktor



Shklovsky's influential essay "Art as Device," the first chapter of his 1925 *Theory of Prose*. Shklovsky's theory is based on the premise that "when we examine the general laws of perception, we see that as it becomes habitual, it also becomes automatic" (4-5). He goes on to compare this automatization to algebraic thought, in which "objects are replaced by symbols":

By means of this algebraic method of thinking, objects are grasped spatially, in the blink of an eye. We do not see them, we merely recognize them by their primary characteristics. The object passes before us, as if it were prepackaged. We know that it exists because of its position in space, but we see only its surface. . . . In the process of algebrizing, of automatizing the object, the greatest economy of perceptual effort takes place. Objects are represented either by one single characteristic (for example, by number), or else by a formula that never even rises to the level of consciousness. (5)

What is Shklovsky's antidote to this abstracting, algebrizing, generalizing tendency of human perception? The creative device—the creative act—of *enstrangement* of the familiar.

This is not a misspelling. Shklovsky's term has been translated from Russian in a few different ways. The term *enstrangement* was coined by translator Benjamin Sher in an attempt to most closely resemble Shklovsky's use in Russian, which is already an intentional misuse of the native term. Sher, in the introduction to his translation, describes the need for a new English term—reasoning which is integral to my own use of *enstrangement*. Sher compares his term to two other translations: *estrangement* and *defamiliarization*, neither of which fully encompasses Shklovsky's intention. Both terms carry an incorrect negative connotation. To *defamiliarize* or *estrangle* something implies a departure from the familiar without any trail back, diffusion of a familiar thing without the thing having been imbued with any sort of new condition, without, in a sense, a *new familiarization*. Sher summarizes:

It is not a transition from the ‘familiar’ to the ‘unknown’ (implicitly). On the contrary, it proceeds from the cognitively known . . . to the familiarly known, that is, to real knowledge that expands and ‘complicates’ our perceptual process. (xix)

Sher’s *enstrangement*, therefore, implies complication of perception, as opposed to mere diffusion. His term *extends* perception of a thing to include complicated ways of understanding it—seeing it—rather than simply *replacing* immediate perception with defamiliarized ambiguity. *Enstrangement*, rather, is a device through which perception is imbued with new connotations: having been made strange, the familiar is then made new.

Enstrangement, therefore, is a term that perfectly straddles the complicated goals of appropriation that I have discussed: the co-option of familiar, entrenched, ubiquitous cultural forms for the purpose of complicating them, folding them back, as mentioned previously, into the noisy subjectivity of perception in order to *extract new modes of production* from them, as in Bourriaud’s context.

To exemplify this device, Shklovsky points to the work of Tolstoy. By doing so, he provides a unique, seemingly paradoxical, opportunity to view Tolstoy’s work—arguably the greatest *products* of literature—as artifacts of artistic *action*. “The devices by which Tolstoy enstranges his material,” Shklovsky writes, may be attributed to the fact that “he does not call a thing by its name, that is, he describes it as if it were perceived for the first time” (6). Shklovsky goes on to explain, for instance, the ways in which Tolstoy describes an account of flogging without ever using the word itself, a word which would bring with it a world of algebraic abstraction and thereby soften the perceptual impact of the activity—the true nature of the tortuous punishment. According to Shklovsky, “flogging is enstranged by a description that changes its form without changing its essence” (6).

It is this basic notion of enstrangement that increasingly summarizes my every artistic motivation. Within it can be derived an impulse for activism, in that it implies urgency for a more heightened, active perceptual consciousness. It acknowledges the complexity of, and potential danger in, entrenched meaning. It requires aesthetic and formal sensitivity: a relationship with the material. It seeks to expand cultural understanding of ubiquitous forms and invent new associations and uses. It asks, in short, that one truly *look* at a thing; to practice *active* looking. Enstrangement embodies the notion of art as dialogical negotiation: a tactic through which we might engage in negotiated meaning. With the powerful influence of the device of enstrangement, I will move on to address issues of content.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONTENT

#### Introduction

The last Shklovsky quote I provided is particularly important to the ways in which *enstrangement* relates to the content of my work. Shklovsky describes Tolstoy as having changed the form of flogging without having changed its essence, as a literary tactic. I am interested in the ways in which a simple flip of terms might relate to the recontextualization of visual and auditory cultural forms. What might it mean, therefore, to change the essence of, say, a baseball game without changing its form? To expand on this question I'll consider John Oswald's influential tactic of *Plunderphonics* through his 1993 *Plexure* sound pieces.

As I listen to Oswald's pieces, the fact of appropriation is the most immediately apparent element; his material—pop music—is immediately recognizable. The sound seems concretely visual—an image in the mind—due to this immediate recognition. A snippet of sound, therefore, is perceived “with the greatest economy of perceptual effort” (Shklovsky 5). As the recognizable layers of sound tick by, I watch them rise and fall, meld into each other, and transform. The repetitions and cacophonous layers total an entirely new sound: an effect which gradually pulls the structural, analytical, and archival attributes of Oswald's work out of the experience. The sonic experience *extends out from* the structural framework that is at the root of Oswald's conceptual intentions. The economy of perceptual effort, therefore, is complicated by Oswald's compositional, technical, and aesthetic choices. The sonic ebb and flow, and the transformation of recognizable material, becomes intoxicating as I listen, as I am perceptually awakened by

the “obliteration of meaning,” by each passing liberation from the intended narratives of the original sources (Reynolds 56).

While Oswald has changed the form of his material insofar as he has inserted it into a new composition, he has more specifically changed its essence. The snippets of individual sound retain their essential form, even though they are extracted from their original contexts. Even as my perception of each appropriated snippet changes, it remains concrete as a discernible part: a puzzle piece in an increasingly complicated recontextualization. It is rather my association with the parts that has changed: their effect on my sonic experience, their nature, their essence has changed. And with this change I perceive them as entirely new sonic bits of information and cultural detritus. The parts are liberated, in a sense, from the seemingly fixed meanings of their original contexts.

Oswald, in his essay, “Bettered by the Borrower: The Ethics of Musical Debt,” offers a summary of his intentions:

All popular music is (as is all folk music by definition) essentially, if not legally, existing in a public domain. Listening to pop music isn’t a matter of choice. Asked-for or not, we’re bombarded by it. In its most insidious state, filtered to an incessant bassline, it seeps through apartment walls and out of the heads of Walkpeople. . . . Difficult to ignore, pointlessly redundant to imitate: how does one not become a passive recipient? (137)

It is this bombardment, this seeping through walls, which calls for the (tactically) creative act of estrangement. Not to replace or reject the incessant, unasked-for bombardment of popular culture, but to complicate and expand it, to impose new meanings and uses onto its ubiquitous formulas. The tactic, therefore, is a way out of passive spectatorship, a path to a negotiated, complicated dialogue, an *extension* (often literally, as I will address) into new perceptual orientations of spectacle.

### A Place of Meeting

Spectacle, therefore, if we accept that it is transient—able to be complicated or estranged—rather than inherently fixed, describes a state of constant flux between active and passive reception. It describes a psychological toggle between submission and criticality, a form of individual or personal negotiation that occurs parallel to a collective cultural one. The most available material, therefore, might be considered the most fertile for collective understanding, to relate the individual, psychological human condition to that of the larger body. Spectacle, in this way, is a collective location, a place of meeting.

The prologue to Don DeLillo's novel *Underworld*, titled "The Triumph of Death" (also published previously as a short story under the title "Pafko at the Wall"), exemplifies this notion of spectacle as a fertile place of meeting, a location in which the familiar is estranged. Like Tolstoy, DeLillo creates fictional and descriptive context around a specific, ubiquitous, abstracted event: a famous baseball game. The story is an account, from various perspectives, of a game on October 3, 1951 in which the New York Giants beat the Brooklyn Dodgers to win the playoffs, thanks to a famous home run called the "Shot Heard 'Round the World." Images of this game became ingrained in the psyche of America: the ball leaving the bat; Pafko, the outfielder, looking up over the wall; the crowd pouncing on the ball as it leaves the field (11-60).

By choosing this game, and specifically this moment, as his subject, DeLillo co-opts his reader's own interpretation and memory of this event in order to address the other events, politics, and emotions that are on the periphery: the *noise* of the event. The spectacle, as a culturally accepted fact and collective location, allows him to highlight, invent, and fictionalize various contexts surrounding the game and complicate the nature of the moment.

DeLillo, for instance, describes iconic members of the crowd, such as Frank Sinatra and J. Edgar Hoover, and gives them fictional internal monologues. (The iconic characters he chose to depict, he later discovered, were likely actually present at the game in 1951.) DeLillo, therefore, engages us in a meta-relationship with spectacle in which iconic characters (*perceived with the greatest economy of perceptual effort*) are subject to their own perceptual toggle between critical awareness (*dialogical negotiation*) and submissive absorption (*pure spectacle*) of the game.<sup>20</sup> The phenomenon of spectacle is explored as a human condition in which all sensory experience is at once *habituated abstraction* and *complicated extension*. The spectacle is *defamiliarized* only to be *refamiliarized*; made new by the tactic of enstrangement.

DeLillo used material such as the announcement audio from the game, images and anecdotal accounts, as well as the front page of the *New York Times* from the following day, October 4, 1951, as research for his story. The *Times*' competing headline, alongside that of the game, reads, "Soviet's second atom blast in 2 years revealed by U.S., details are kept secret" ("Prologue – The Triumph of Death"). DeLillo, through use of this peripheral information, taps into a collective unconscious and constructs a dramatization of an actual event. The noise—the random information, the thoughts of individuals in the crowd, the interactions of various types of people—is infused into the experience of spectacle; the random scatter of individual perceptions, interpretations, and impulses hover around a fixed point of attention. DeLillo, in the final paragraph, describes a celebrating fan running and jumping on the field after the game:

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<sup>20</sup> These associative terms (*critical awareness*, *dialogical negotiation*, as opposed to *submissive absorption*, *pure spectacle*) have been used previously in this paper in relation to the *opacity-transparency* binary.

All the fragments of the afternoon collect around his airborne body. Shouts, bat-cracks, full bladders and stray yawns, the sand-grain manyness of things that can't be counted. It is all falling indelibly into the past. (60)

Through the vague ambiguity of perception and experience, our collective attention intermittently rests on these spectacles—these airborne bodies, these baseball games, these ubiquitous cultural forms.

A flip of Shklovsky's terms, as in Oswald's pieces, therefore changes the essence of something without changing its form. This flip carries with it implications of misuse, a term discussed previously in regards to appropriative, noise-based, and activist tactics. Although communitarian concerns only subtly underlie these three tactics (at least in the ways I've contextualized them) the true communitarian urge to work with cultural forms is best summarized in an excerpt from the story "Accounts of a Move." This short story is a fictionalized travel log, which acts as a long statement for the artistic practices and philosophical curiosities of my 20s. The main character, Funes, named for a Jorge Luis Borges character, embarks on a cross-country trip and considers the psychology of *moving*. He grapples with his impending anxiety—"the imperceptible toggle between anxiety and inspiration"—which is embodied by a cloud of fog that seems to follow and address him as his trip winds to a close.

The following excerpt depicts the main character reflecting on his own attraction to, misuse of, and consequent comfort in common cultural forms. Additionally, the excerpt addresses the dilemma of spectacle: the toggle of perception between criticality and absorption, and the degrees of alienation and connection such a toggle engenders. Although the main character's perspective is alienated at the time of his reflection, he also seems to understand that collective attention often rests on spectacle, that engaging and grappling with its formulas might lead to greater cultural dialogue and connectivity.



The alienation in the company of his childhood friend Bachelard that he recalls, for instance, is a feeling worth working with, worth exploring and communicating. Funes's trip is almost complete as he heads eastward on a train to an ambiguous future:

*The next afternoon Funes changes trains in Chicago and begins to head for Washington D.C., then Hartford the following evening. Time, he realizes, is running out. He sits in the observation car as the train passes somewhere near Toledo and watches an old, classic baseball game that is playing on a wall-mounted monitor. The common practice of watching a television feels somehow comforting to him, and he begins to mentally deconstruct the imagery. He watches the pitcher, the batter's expression, the cut to the nervous manager in the dugout, then back again to the batter, then again to the pitcher. He watches the shortstop bobble the ball and miss a play, then the instant replay in slow motion, which painfully describes the mistake, then the cut back to the shortstop, in real time, anguished, embarrassed, looking up at the sun, down at the dirt, anything to divert attention. The replay, Funes realizes, is like a filmic memory—a flashback. For a fleeting moment as the slow motion scene unravels, the viewer is inside the head of the character, knowing his shame, understanding his psychology. Funes gathers these shots and separates them, stores them in his memory as he analyzes the dramatic narrative of the game—the ways in which the camera angles and production decisions weave together the story, invent the story.*

*He remembers watching sitcoms with Bachelard when they were young. He remembers analyzing the details, the lighting, the timing, and the uniformity of the laugh track. He remembers watching the actors instead of the characters, and the ways in which this tendency alienated him from Bachelard and their other friends. Funes had*

*laughed when he was not supposed to and missed the joke when others laughed. He had been unable to explain this. He could never articulate this tendency to deconstruct, which seemed to ruin their shared experience. He had had so much trouble giving himself over to the situation. He was crippled by the details—by his desire to find the seams, to understand the mechanisms that acted upon his experience . . .*

This passage exemplifies a pivotal point in my creative process. The main character’s impulse to deconstruct (to replace or reject) is just beginning to transform into an impulse to estrange (to extend or repurpose).

### **From Deconstruction to Estrangement**

The impulse behind my studio work has evolved from deconstruction to estrangement in various ways, which I will highlight by analyzing a few recent projects. This evolution has involved questions about source material, rule-based processes, site-specificity, collaboration, and the construction of narrative media. It can be summarized as a move from didactic intentionality to experimental indeterminacy. This is not to say that all current work is openly indeterminate and the older fixedly intentional because I don’t think either would be true. Only that I increasingly find my studio practice to be about asking questions rather than explaining arguments, experimenting versus pointing. I find myself increasingly an “audience to the results” of my programmatic experiments with narrative media and cultural forms.

First I will briefly qualify my usage of the term *deconstruction*. Although it is my intention to tacitly reference deconstructionism as an established school of thought, my use of the term is intended to be more literal: an impulse to directly intervene into cultural

material, to break it apart. This is, in a sense, what Derrida does, in his theory of deconstruction, to the notion of *meaning* in that it can be dismantled into a sequence of signs, each piece a negation of the possibility of a pure presence. But Derrida's theory, it seems, is more complicated than that. According to Susan Jahoda, in a lecture on visual culture, Derrida's usage,

was an attempt at dismantling the logic behind systems of thought, political structures and social institutions. He was not seeking to deny the existence of relative truths and historical continuities but rather to see things as an effect of a deeper history. He was looking to reveal the unconscious languages of social institutions and practices.

In Derrida's *looking to reveal* can be found an analogue to my usage of enstrangement: a desire, from the foundational process of deconstructive dismantling, to find a *deeper history*; in a sense, an *enstranged refamiliarization*.

Within the Yale School of Deconstruction, however, "deconstruction was positioned as invulnerable and unaccountable," according to Jahoda, "an apolitical position that emphasized a decontextualized relativity—if all positions are fictional and relative they must be value free." It seems, upon greater reflection, that this latter designation of deconstruction—as apolitical and value-free—is closer to my usage in this paper, in its differentiation from enstrangement. Jahoda's criticality of the Yale School's usage also serves as a critique of my own within the context of this section: the Yale School's arguably nihilistic or cynical impulse to deconstruct versus Derrida's revelatory or hopeful one. The evolution in my work that I am referencing acknowledges that the work has progressed (it is my hope, or maybe aspiration) from deconstruction (the impulse to dismantle its own self-evident validation) to enstrangement (once dismantled, *made new; imbued* with a condition). The former a kind of *pointing*, the latter a *composing*.

The following analysis of my studio work is considered through the lens of these terms. The above passage from “Accounts of a Move” is directly related to *At the Wall*, a 6-channel video, 3-channel audio installation, titled as an homage to Delillo’s story. This project is a division of a famous baseball game (a fan famously reaching out and stealing a home run) into shot types. The divisions, each their own unique version, force a non-linear reading of the game and its climactic events. Replays begin to look like filmic flashbacks, close-ups like introspective portraits. Ideally designed for public spaces—to be encountered in a state of liminality—this installation attempts to change the essence of the culturally ubiquitous imagery without changing its form, while simultaneously functioning as a critique of spectacle. As Jeffrey, an eleven-year-old fan, reaches over the wall he instantly transitions from spectator (one of eleven million either present or watching on television) to object of spectacle. The audio and video versions set the stage for this transition and accentuate the methods used in the original broadcast to construct dramatic narrative.

*At the Wall*, however, remains deconstructionist at its core. Although I would argue that the recontextualized material might be estranged in that each version is a new way of considering the intended narrative, the project remains more knowingly explanatory than curiously experimental. This is not to directly align estrangement with experimentation or indeterminacy, but rather to acknowledge that Shklovsky’s term requires a degree of *unknowing* in order to *re-know*, a complication of the known so that it might be imbued with new understanding. Thom Andersen’s film, discussed earlier in this paper, in that it veers from observational description of popular film to moralistic explanation, might relate to this analysis of *At the Wall*. Andersen, it seems, is no longer posing questions to himself or his viewers by the end of the film, but is rather explaining

(knowing) a specific position. To follow this example, might the act of enstrangement entail imparting a degree of trust to the viewer? As mentioned earlier, Andersen seems to have lost trust in his audience by the end of the film: the tone of his voiceover essay more damning, its juxtaposition with the images less nuanced. In short, I wonder what questions I was posing to myself in making *At the Wall*, with what new meaning or familiarization my subject might have been imbued through my hand. The project might, therefore, remain on the side of deconstruction. While not directly damning or pessimistic, it reflects a previously mentioned tendency to *find the seams*: to diffuse the trail of intended narrative without attempting to blaze a new one.

Inspired by Harun Farocki's *Deep Play*, and various works by Paul Pfeiffer (namely *The Long Count III* and *The Rules of Basketball* series), in addition to DeLillo's story, *At the Wall* is a foundational piece in the evolution between deconstruction and enstrangement. For the sake of this discussion I will place *Deep Play* on the side of deconstruction and Pfeiffer's work on the side of enstrangement. This is by no means a clean analogy, but rather a tactic to describe the respective powers of didactic versus experimental tendencies. The power of Farocki's work, at least to some degree, resides in his ability as an essayist, researcher, and cultural critic; Pfeiffer's, in his curiosity as an artist engaging in craft.

While *Deep Play* remains comfortably within the realm of art experience and installation ephemera, it is heavily deconstructionist, as it offers the viewer twelve perspectives (clean feed camera angles, statistical graphics, the exterior of the stadium) of a soccer game (the 2006 World Cup final) ("Deep Play"). The linear narrative of the game is broken into these various ways of understanding the experience: an organizational action that privileges the complexities of mediation over the specificity of

constructed meaning. The narrative of the game, therefore, is less important than its mediation. I would not argue that Farocki's action is moralistic or didactic, rather only that it does not seem to pose any particular questions: the acquisition, contextualization, and presentation of source material (as in, for instance, the methods of a documentarian) seem far more important than the material's manipulation, transformation, and composition. Where Oswald's *Plunderphonics* pieces, as discussed previously, *extend out from* a place of structured criticality, *Deep Play* remains within critical knowledge and awareness of source. Might it be that Farocki's relationship to material and craft is simply different—more analytical, less physical—than Oswald's? The artist's relationship to material, therefore, seems an important condition to consider.

I will align Pfeiffer's work, at least for the sake of this argument, with Oswald's and therefore on the side of estrangement: extending out from what might be a deconstructionist impulse to engage in a more formally aesthetic relationship with material. Pfeiffer betrays this deconstructionist foundation in acknowledging that:

There is something seductive about predigested images. . . . There is a huge infrastructure that undergirds every individual image we see on T.V. For me, it is very hard to dissociate the single image from that entire network. So the question always comes up, 'Who's using whom?' Is the image making us, or do we make images?"

There is an urgency in Pfeiffer's language, arguably even an activist impulse, as discussed regarding Oswald's urge to co-opt the bombardment of pop music. For Pfeiffer, like Oswald, the ubiquitous presence of cultural forms in the public domain is a call for insertion. Not simply deconstruction, but rather extension out from deconstruction into new realms of creative misuse, of estranged cultural forms. It seems that this extension requires a certain relationship with the material, a certain transformation of the material's *essence* through some form of technical craft.

I believe I have challenged the virtues of the discrete art-object exhaustively enough in this paper for this emphasis on craft not to be confused with art-object fetishization. It is rather important to emphasize the role that technical craft plays in the facilitation of dialogue. While technical craft can easily be fetishized, as I have discussed in relation to the modernist individualist tendencies that still pervade our collective cultural understanding of art, it is more significantly positioned as a dialogical tool (this is the shift of emphasis I have discussed in relation to art education). It is this positioning of craft that has led me to find more experimental, nuanced approaches to my work. It has begun to lead me, it seems, out from mere deconstruction into the realm of estrangement, into a trust with my audience that the work retains a foundation in structured criticality even as it increasingly transforms, experiments, and indulges in technical craft.

For Pfeiffer, craft is the process of “building a relationship to the material—discovering the things that it will do, despite your will, that may end up being more interesting than what you were trying to will the material to do.” There are implied questions within Pfeiffer’s practice: unknown results waiting to be discovered. The critique, therefore, is in the source material, the program, the rule-based process, the conceptual framework; the critique is in the action itself, thereby freeing the artist to experiment, indeterminately, formally, even playfully, with the material.

Delillo, Farocki, and Pfeiffer might all be motivated by the seduction of predigested images, which has led them to the spectacle of sports. It is certainly what has led me to it: the sheer number of eyes on a single event—a shared experience—seems validation enough to engage with the material. Amateur storm footage (*Watching Storms*), Iraq war protest imagery (*Travels in Hypernostalgia*), and prescription drug

advertisements (*Sense of Self*) also represent engagement with spectacle as a type of shared experience. While these video and sound installations attempt to make ubiquitous cultural forms new, like *At the Wall*, they remain deconstructionist: they complicate their subjects, but generally leave them in a state of ambiguous diffusion. The attempted tactics, however, are valiant efforts: composing storm footage into a rhythmic, trance-like composition; recontextualizing personal videos of protests to consider forms of cultural nostalgia; isolating and collaging characters and landscapes from drug ads to create new associations and narratives. But these efforts, it seems, leave too clear a trail back to the overt intentionality of deconstruction: the artist, if I am to be truly self-critical, has laid out his plans too neatly from the start, and the results, for the sake of this argument, do not facilitate dialogue in an articulate way. The viewer, rather, is left with the pieces of deconstructed material, with, in a sense, defamiliarized, ambiguated cultural form.

A particular attribute of *Sense of Self*, however, is pivotal to this evolution in my work from deconstruction to enstrangement that I am describing. The inclination to extend scenes from prescription drug ads—extract characters, gestures, and expressions from their instantaneous, almost subliminal original contexts—began, as I worked on the project, to yield unexpected relationships with the material. Which camera angles worked and which didn't? On which type of action could a frame be seamlessly looped and on which would it become too mechanical? As I worked on this project, the characters became live actors, each with their own temperaments and nuanced needs, with their own thresholds for life-like presence. At which point would the character lose his or her humanity, the device of editing too harsh or visible? This was Pfeiffer's craft: experimenting with material more than executing a plan; what the material would do, *despite my will*.



## A Reservoir

Composer and jazz musician Anthony Braxton, in his introduction to his *Catalog of Works*, writes that structural material and fragmentary form “becomes a reservoir of structural and conceptual possibilities” (203). This contextualization of one’s method of artistic production—the building of themes, forms, and versions versus emphasis on fixed, discrete objects—speaks directly to notions of art as a dialogical tool. Forms, techniques, and previous compositions, therefore, may be drawn from the artist’s reservoir to be applied and engaged in new ways.

A newfound impulse to experiment with cultural forms rather than merely deconstruct them has led to the *Fugues*. This ongoing series of short videos has become a meditation on time, narrative expectation, and technical craft. It is a repository for various inclinations—a frame through which to indulge, resolve, and compile quickly passing impulses with time-based material. The videos are, therefore, both finished thoughts, as well as recyclable pieces of a larger puzzle. I think of them as self-contained, distributable gems, built on the back of the previous multi-channel installation work that might prove to be unsustainable—impractical—in the future, if my practice is truly intended serve a dialogical purpose. I am more interested now in gathering—in building the reservoir—so that each passing impulse, having been given form, may be called upon to inform, support, and contextualize new and ever-evolving versions of my ongoing engagement with media culture.

The binary of *versions* versus *fixed products* relates to various topics addressed previously in this paper. The notion of form as part of a reservoir relates to discussions of media archaeology: the impulse, given a form, becomes a type of indexical artifact that

may be recontextualized. It relates to tactics of appropriation as repurposing form: allowing form and its intended meaning to be transient. It relates to the notion of art as an action: the active positioning of form versus object revery. There is a kind of self-curation implied here, a kind of self-appropriation. To emphasize versions is to accept some degree of indeterminacy: to offer one's forms to the greater collective catalogue. Form, in this way, is a translatable, recontextualizable dialogical tool.

Christian Marclay's *Record Without a Cover* comes to mind. An album of his live DJ sets, the record came with no jacket or cover; only instructions that read, "do not store in a protective package." By allowing each copy of the record to be smudged, scratched, and warped in unrepeatably ways, Marclay facilitated various versions of a single form, "not a document of a performance," he says, "but a record that could change with time" (Young).

While *Record Without a Cover* is a singular conceptual gesture, and therefore arguably a *fixed product* in its own right, the *Fugues* are designed to be open-ended versions of various conceptual impulses, which may be executed and resolved in different ways using different materials. (I will address these open-ended intentions in relation to education in the concluding section titled "Application"). Here are a few examples of the impulses that inform the *Fugues*.

*Fugue #6*, the only exception to the short length of the video series, is a 40-minute piece that uses a rule-based tactic. The structure stems from interest in John Zorn's *Game Pieces*, in which musicians make free decisions based on a series of coded signals administered by Zorn. While my video is not a live, unrepeatably version, it relates to Zorn's pieces in that the programmatic apparatus behind the action is not visible to the viewer; like Zorn's pieces, the audience does not have immediate access to the structure,

but rather simply experiences the results. The video takes one continuous shot (butterflies flying in a sanctuary), cuts it, and repeats the shot from the beginning for each sequential cut in an episode of *Survivor*, the American reality TV program. Because the editing in these kinds of programs is so rapid (no shot rests on screen for longer than about 10 seconds), the shot of the butterflies never progresses very far.

While the structure for this video stems from Zorn's pieces, the concept stems from interest in the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation's *slow TV* programs. A 7-hour train trip, a 5-day boat ride, 8-hours of a live fireplace, 12-hours of live knitting—like a Warholian slow movie, taken up by the masses and receiving wide Norwegian viewership. The juxtaposition of two cultural versions of reality television, both remarkably popular, is too tempting to pass up. The extended shot of the butterflies is continuously frustrated by seemingly random cuts, which are dictated by the production of the American reality television show. *Fugue #6*, carried out for the 40-minute duration of *Survivor*, becomes both a viscerally droning, strangely mesmerizing aesthetic image, as well as a critique of the psychologically jarring production tactic of quick cuts.

*Fugue #4 (1-2-3-4, 2-3-4-5)* is a response to the experimental music compositions of Frederic Rzewski and Steve Reich. Rzewski's *Les Moutons de Panurge* is a musical score that is dictated by an algorithm: musicians are asked to follow a sequence of notes as best they can for as long as they can, the composition accounting for their gradual falling out of synch and resulting in a unique diffusion of sound. Reich's phase pattern technique—gradually shifting synched audio material to create abstracted versions—is a similar search for an indeterminate sonic result: an experimental search for what the material will do based on a simple structure. *Fugue #4* imposes an algorithmic structure onto a small piece of appropriated footage—a blurry, full-frame shot of a distant cheering

crowd. Following a simple step process, the image gradually, mechanically progresses: four frames forward, three frames back, then four frames forward, three frames back; a programmatic imposition allowed to play out.

*Fugue #7 (Sky Sports)* is a simple gesture imposed onto a broadcast of a golf tournament. It is a systematic extraction and compilation of every shot of the sky the camera captures as it tracks a ball driven into the air. The cuts are made just after the shot tilts up beyond the trees and just before it tilts back down onto the course. Edited sequentially and without break, the motion of the tilt shot gradually seems to rest on the endlessly soaring golf ball, the viewer's perception given no visual reference but the sky, clouds, and ball. The result is both viscerally aesthetic and conceptually rich, as I grow to appreciate the constant, repetitive work of the broadcast production team, and the tedious difficulty of centering a shot on the tiny white ball soaring through the sky. In what other context could we find such a shot, its extraction from context yielding such a strange and unique image?

*Fugue #1 (Furniture Music)*, *#11 ([Dis]continuity)*, and the newest project, *One Day's Dialogue*, relate more directly to narrative construction. These pieces consider tactics of linear media, such as establishment shots, cross-cutting, and continuity of action, in ways that attempt to both complicate structural expectations, as well as imbue them with new associations. *#1*, for instance, employs two separate conceptions of time, cut between each other to create a dissociative viewing experience. Three kayakers enter a seascape image from the left and eventually exit on the right, their progression across the frame, however, disrupted by establishment shots that describe the interior of an ocean-front home. Each time the image of the kayakers returns, their progression picks

up from where it left off, disregarding the duration of the establishment shots in between: an appropriation of, and then break from, traditional narrative formula.

### Extension

The evolution of my studio work from deconstruction to enstrangement, notions of the work as an ongoing reservoir, and the particular narrative impulses of the *Fugues* all involve some kind of consideration of time, not only as a necessary formal element of the material, but also as a perceptual and psychological concern. The Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation found popular appeal in single subjects, often static shots, over hours, even days, of time. What happens to our expectations of linear information when we stay with it, when it is extended, when we are immersed in it? In regards to sonic experiences, what are the virtues of minimal or drone compositions versus narrative or climactic ones? How might time simultaneously function as formal element and subject of concern?

*All the Time in the World* is an attempt at this latter question regarding simultaneity. This project is a feature-length remixed version of George Pal's 1960 film, *The Time Machine*, based on the 1895 dystopian novel by H.G. Wells. Screen split into two channels, the left is a reverse edit of the film (last shot first, first shot last) and the right is the original cut. Audio is a mix of the two soundtracks, creating serendipitous syncs and convoluted dissonance as the linear narrative cycles back into itself. A story about time travel, *All the Time in the World* is concerned with the construction of the filmic narrative and the ways in which my intervention might complicate the viewer's perception of narrative progress. Viewers, in a sense, must time travel along with the main character, holding scenes, dialogues, and events in their heads in order to maintain a

degree of continuity. What results are seemingly random juxtapositions of images and sounds from the film, which place both the main character and the viewer in a state of constant subjectivity—the only notably *climactic* moment occurring at the exact middle of the film when the reverse edit and the original cut arrive at the same shot. For this fleeting moment in time, *All the Time in the World* maintains a sense of narrative order, otherwise diffused into a viewing experience that is more static than progressive.

While *All the Time in the World* was an arduous labor to make, which has resulted in my feeling strangely sentimental about it, to follow the discussion of the last section, it remains more deconstruction than enstrangement. Although the programmatic structure yielded indeterminate results, the conceptual impact of the work was still, arguably, a foregone conclusion; the finished work, as I mentioned regarding *At the Wall*, might amount to little more than defamiliarized, ambiguated cultural form. That the labor of making has led to a kind of sentimentality is born out of a relationship with the material, an appreciation for well-crafted construction and the arduous work of popular film editors, for whom the illusion of narrative seamlessness is imperative and integral to their success. The viewer must get lost in the narrative, as true in popular film as in prescription drug ads and baseball games. There is a kind of tyranny in the intended narrative, an insistence upon its own progression. It was through these deconstructed pieces that I began to truly appreciate how advanced the mechanisms of meaning are—how transparent the medium can become, how crystallized the narrative can seem.

This newfound appreciation (and respect) for craft led me to consider other depictions of time through narrative, time-based media. The following is a brief critical analysis of Chris Marker's 1962 film, *La Jetée*, inserted here in order to contextualize the precarity of perception in time-based media, particularly in relation to time as both

subject and form; a precarity that is very different from that which tactics of deconstruction might engender. By embracing linear narrative form, rather than diffusing it, Marker is able to provoke a more complicated perception of time, a perception that is made new—enstranged—by respecting, co-opting, and employing linear narrative tactics.

As I watched Chris Marker's *La Jetée*, alone at home late at night while my wife worked and my daughter slept, I felt transported, like the main character, in a way that mystified my familiar surroundings. On my familiar couch in my familiar living room—a muslin scarf draped over the lamp to dim the light—I hesitated to lift my head from the screen, maybe for subconscious fear of seeing these familiar things differently, of seeing them abstracted, transformed, or simply complicated.

I tend to become entirely absorbed when a filmmaker attempts to address the topic of time, as moving picture is both a logical and impossible medium with which to explore its complexity. Narrative film already plays so heavily on viewers' memory—their ability to draw progressive relationships between the images shown—that when a filmmaker exploits, accentuates, or breaks the filmic formula the viewing experience is set off kilter. The resulting film, if effective, both *is transportive* (in the internal sense) as well as being *about transportation* through time (in the narrative and external sense). I resisted glancing up at my familiar room because I was being transported by Marker's film—concerned, maybe, that the room would be changed, or missing altogether.

There are a number of tactics Marker uses to facilitate this visceral feeling. One that comes to mind is the image of the experimenter: a knowing, ominous face that leans over my first-person perspective—the main character's viewpoint looking up from what is established as his real-time predicament—the strange hammock bed in the

experimentation room. The cuts to this face are startling, even when one comes to expect them, as they lurch the viewer out of the comfortable third-person views of the sweet, idyllic past.

The topic of time travel has been expressed and experimented with through so many different stories, films, techniques and strategies—it is an old problem with no clear answer. But consistent with all, it seems, is the necessity to complicate something that is familiar or expected. Without such a reference the viewer would be lost in a kind of untethered abstraction, able to divorce the emotion or meaning from his or her own experience, which would render the consequence of time travel irrelevant. Maybe this is what draws us to dreams, memories, the subconscious, or science-fiction: that through expressive forms we are asked—or rather moved—to consider and re-consider the familiar, the mundane, and the simultaneous magnitude and triviality of the everyday, that we learn to become more cognizant of the things we take for granted and moments in which we lose ourselves.

From a technical standpoint, I found myself wondering about the nature of Marker's still images. Considering such a small number of frames would come to express an entire narrative, my first thought was that each would be more iconic, packed and cleanly structured. But while the images were extremely purposeful, their compositions more closely resembled snapshots, like Robert Frank compositions (*The Americans* having been released in France four years earlier). The tense urgency of Marker's framing strongly supported the tone of the film and encouraged a feeling of candid unease, as opposed to theatrical remove. This unease was complemented by the cryptic voice of the narrator, whose tone toggled between removedly explanatory and expressively illustrative. The sound of raised whispers, for instance—the experimenters



conferring as the main character emerges from delusion—particularly when experienced through headphones, made my hair stand on end.

While Marker employs linear narrative tactics to tell his story, others disrupt by extending it. What happens to our expectations of linear information when it is extended? Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho* comes to mind: the arduous extension of an iconic film to the point at which its climactic narrative is diffused by simply drawing it out; by offering it as ubiquitous culture form rendered almost static. Shots in which Hitchcock has already rested our gaze—the long, slow zoom out from the woman's eye at the end of the famous shower scene, for instance—may as well, through Gordon's hand, be still images.

This notion of extending cultural form is brought to a more refined resolution by Leif Inge in his sound piece, *9 Beet Stretch*. Beethoven's 9th Symphony extended to 24 hours long, the piece is billed less as a conceptual program, more as a visceral sonic experience. Although I have never experienced Inge's piece, and am therefore referencing it in a way he might dislike, I am captivated by the technical and aesthetic attention he has brought to the concept. Beethoven's symphony is stretched, according to Inge, "with no pitch distortions." He continues, in an interview at AV Festival 12:

In technical terms, *9 Beet Stretch* is not stretched, it is granulation, which means that it is cut in very, very small segments, overlapping just a tiny little bit, and then reassembled. This is why the pitch is kept, because it is never changed. . . . This is also why you hear the instrumentation so perfectly clear.

Duration, Inge goes on to insist, is all that has changed, thanks to the sensitivity of this granulation process. "Just by changing the measure of time," Inge states, "you change things so radically." Even the listener changes: "It slows thinking; it slows attention to

things around you.” While honoring the timelessness of Beethoven’s work, Inge is also disrupting the expectations and effects of linear narrative structure, of the climactic, spectatorial ebb and flow of the original piece. Inge, therefore, is folding the cultural form back into the fray, absorbing it into the noisy subjectivity of perception, and making it new. Though some semblance of form—as in duration—has changed, it is truly the essence of Beethoven’s piece that has changed, continuing to follow this flip of Shklovsky’s terms, it has truly been estranged.

Inge’s contribution to the notion of extension leads to concerns regarding the virtues of minimal or drone compositions versus narrative or climactic ones. Why must narrative structure be called into question; what is its detriment? This question is considered throughout this paper, in relation to, for instance, spectatorial submission and noise-based tactics. Shklovsky’s notion of our senses being dulled by abstractions that employ *the greatest economy of perceptual effort* relates directly to the seamless formulas of narrative structure, the beckoning of narrative media to become absorbed in its content. Narrative structure is not inherently detrimental. I am employing narrative formula as I structure this very paper. It is more an issue of quantity, in a sense, than quality. It is more the issue of Oswald’s *bombardment* than any notion that narrative structure is detrimental, en masse. Maybe it is more the incessance—the constant confrontation with intended meanings in our culture—that begins to feel like a kind of tyranny.

To return briefly to the topic of sound, consider the minimalist composer Tony Conrad’s criticism of narrative progression in Western music, in relation to the ways in which he was influenced by Indian musical traditions:

Western music, with its ever-present investment in progression, animates a sense of absence—of suspension or expectation. This irresolution corresponds to the conflict that provides a forward impetus in narrative story telling. Indian music also conveys feelings of suspension and resolution, but much differently—and always in the presence of its object. Its operative figure is balance, or repetition, but not absence and conflict. (314)

By characterizing narrative structure as animating *a sense of absence*, Conrad is speaking directly to this tyranny. It is in the absence and conflict of intended narrative that we become absorbed, in which we find an enticing avenue of psychological escape. Every instantaneous absorption of intended narrative, for the sake of this extreme argument, is a submissive choice; an acquiescence to the imposed progression. The drone, it seems, is a more open-ended form, a venue in which one is more easily in control of one's own sense of awareness—of one's own toggle between absorption and criticality. The intended narrative, so intriguingly seductive, might be too exhausting a force to resist, and so we succumb.

Narrative, in this way, is a kind of *giving up on awareness*. This is the extremity of the argument, but it is also an indulgence I succumb to all the time. As I have characterized, this succumbing is a choice. In a culture of narrative forms and intended meanings, it is a constant choice to either write your own story for your awareness, or embrace those of others. The choice is not, therefore, to *reject* intended narratives for the sake of minimalist, non-linear, or non-spectatorial forms of expression, but rather to *extend out from* a basic understanding of—negotiation with—narrative formulas. Like my character of Funes in “Accounts of a Move,” there are times in which I cannot maintain continuity within an intended narrative, when the insistence of the structure is too imposing, the mechanisms too visible. In times like these I feel almost incapable of thought—incapable of holding the dictates, subtleties, and reasoning of the story in my

mind—because “to think is to forget a difference, to generalize, to abstract.” This preoccupation with the details, if only on occasion, must be relieved through engagement with the non-linear, the indeterminate, the unexpected, the complicated, the estranged. My mind, in these moments, seems to be calling for quiet—fewer details to manage, no expectations to be thwarted or satisfied, smaller hills to navigate across the open expanse of time.

And at the same time, these occasional moments of discord are opportunities for misuse, opportunities to serve the cultural need (the *job*, perhaps) to smooth out the edges of Shklovsky’s *habituated perception* and complicate the familiar. While estrangement, as I have mentioned, increasingly summarizes the methods of my studio practice, it is this tyranny of intended narrative that summarizes its content. The moving image, and the devices that make it possible, has evolved parallel to our culture, both sides inventing new ways to construct narrative, compartmentalize time, and establish standards. It remains the most fertile, visceral, and accessible medium of expression for our culture. The persuasive force of narrative structure—its mechanisms, negotiations, and psychological underpinnings—is, for me, endlessly captivating fodder for a sustained studio practice, and a career in media arts and education.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **APPLICATION**

#### **Introduction**

How does this all apply to a career in the arts, to a lifelong studio practice? Where does the work live out in the world; how might it function as a dialogical tool? For whom is the practice sustained and in what venues or forms? I would like to address some of these concerns in this concluding section, and I will begin with a logical topic: this paper itself.

This paper is broken up into sections on personal and historical reflection, methodology, the content of the work, and prospective applications for my practice. It is structured in this way in an attempt to begin a holistic framework for the ways in which visual art, media studies, and forms of social practice might intermingle within a thorough curriculum. I am interested in using this paper as a basis from which to build various versions, essays, and prompts to suit the needs of various kinds of institutions, schools, and levels of instruction. From broad theoretical analysis to the specificity of technical exercises and prompts, this document might serve as a foundation for my commitment to education. Each section, therefore, might be distilled into presentations for high school artists, programmatic proposals, Web-based portals, or event-based installations. This paper has become a roadmap for me, a place to organize the various concerns and influences that drive my career, as well as a place to be self-critical. It has challenged me to call my own creative impulses into question and hold them up to the same applicable, dialogical, conscientious standards with which I hold my teaching practice. It has, in a sense, brought all practices to the line and attempted to funnel them all through the same pedagogical framework. The paper, in this way, has been an attempt

to carve a niche out of the dense forest of cultural images and forms, as well as that of academia. It has been an attempt to find a position.

I can't say for certain that I have found this position. I will still conclude this paper and thesis exhibition without a direct application for the work I have done and will continue to do. This is, of course, both exciting and nerve-wracking.

### **The Waiting Room**

*The Waiting Room*, the title of my thesis exhibition, is another place to consider the application of my work. Situated on the ground floor of the Eastworks building, Easthampton, MA, this show is an attempt to embody the tenuous straddle position of my work that I have discussed throughout this paper: the constant toggle between absorption and repulsion, submission and criticality, passivity and activity in the realm of cultural forms, spectacles, and contexts. The work, therefore, both *is* and *is about* this toggle, an attempt to embody the tension of cultural participation.

The situation of *The Waiting Room*, directly off of a main public lobby and across from the Massachusetts RMV, is an ideal location to enact this toggle. Not quite a waiting room, not quite an exhibition, it is an attempt to find the interim space between. Each individual work, therefore, draws, to varying degrees, relationships with other kinds of public viewing: banner displays, screens in sports bars and airports, gallery installations, abstract prints in doctor's offices, for example. Contextual information for these works is not present alongside the object in order to engage the viewer more directly, as one would encounter any number of other forms of cultural stimuli in public places. This information is still available in booklet form, only not immediately imposing itself on the initial encounter. My intention is that the situation of *The Waiting Room* will

attract various types of viewers, those who are interested in art and those who are not, but that most will be, through the circumstances of their presence in this business-like public setting, in some state of liminality—some state of *waiting*. This state of liminality—this captive, pregnant openness, between states of intentional progress; between one’s request for a new license and its eventual issuing, for instance—is ripe for the device of enstrangement, for engagement in newfound negotiated meanings of ubiquitous cultural forms.

While this hope for engagement—for negotiation—might occur psychologically, individually, and privately within each user of *The Waiting Room*, I also hope for the work to serve a directly dialogical, potentially even indeterminate, function. Included with each information booklet (titled *The Waiting Room User’s Manual*) is also a set of prompts: variously loose, poetic, technical, and specific prospective exercises that offer a non-traditional context for the individual work.<sup>21</sup> Rather than use the information booklet as a place to explain, dictate, or prescribe specific ways to interpret and contextualize the work (*pointing backward*), it is used to offer ways in which the user might produce new versions of the basic concept (*looking forward*). The *User’s Manual*, therefore, is an offering: a way in which to consider the discrete art object as a transient version of a creative impulse—a particular *act*—rather than a fixed, immovable product. The prompts are ways to facilitate dialogue, to place my particular art action into the realm of negotiated meaning. It is also, in a sense, the first adapted *version* of this paper, as the prompts will no doubt double in the coming years as assignments for high school media artists.

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<sup>21</sup> The idea for *The Waiting Room User’s Manual* is inspired by Philip Perkis’s experimental book of assignments, titled, *Teaching Photography: Notes Assembled*, see Perkis.

## **PlayLaborPlay**

The installation of *The Waiting Room* employs tactics used in constructing the collaborative, event-based practice, PlayLaborPlay. These one-night events have increasingly become reactions to site-specific conditions: fewer and fewer shows have emerged from this practice that require neutral, gallery-type conditions. The events we have pursued and constructed, rather, have found success in responding to the needs of the venue, the architecture, the past-life of the space. PlayLaborPlay has increasingly become a project of insertion, a placement of a creative condition onto the space's character, a negotiation between space and intervention. This was the opportunity I found in inserting my studio work into such a public, transient space: I have gradually found that I am serving the needs of the unique event more than the display of objects, and this has been an exciting development. Exciting because PlayLaborPlay increasingly satisfies a holistic wealth of my creative concerns and motivations. Not all motivations, certainly, but most. It is, therefore, the ongoing artistic structure to which I am most committed as I move forward in my career. I think it is because of the endless possibilities that it offers; the lifelong practice of collaboration, negotiation, and compromise is of ever-present value to the intellectual, expressive, and communicative health of the individual.

This judgement, I believe, is peppered throughout this paper, but what is not yet fully addressed is the potential *economic* value—the economic reality—of an event-based project like PlayLaborPlay. While I am committed to a career in some form of education, I am not yet committed to one institution, or even the idea of finding one. My involvement in structure, pedagogy, curriculum development, and programmatic design betray a quiet desire to build my own organization. This organization could run



workshops, facilitate discussions and presentations, host site-specific events, act as a production house, and generally become a central location for the confluence of production, media education, and event design. Again, this paper might prove to be a valuable foundation for this goal. What continues to rise to the surface of my career motivations is the confluence of studio practice, teaching, and event-based design; the ways in which these three elements intermingle, merge, and potentially even evolve into a single practice. *The Waiting Room* is beginning to address this evolution: installation choices made in the manner of PlayLaborPlay, the display and juxtaposition of works as representative of my studio practice, and *The User's Manual* a direct application as a dialogical (teaching) tool. I am interested in the potential for a structured organization to encompass, and be the framework for, this evolution.

How might this happen? I still don't know. Membership models seem strenuous to maintain, and one must give up a certain degree of autonomy as well. While PlayLaborPlay celebrates collaboration in the form of discrete projects, such collectivism might water down the pedagogical mission of the prospective organization. It is also unclear what members would receive for their contributions, other than community, which they could no doubt find for free in their neighborhoods, creative circles, and daily lives.

The non-profit model is enticing, but seems also to be a constant struggle for survival, as grant writers must search incessantly for the next funding stream. A more practical approach is to find an existing organization to pitch a program to. This method just requires that one exists, is local, and is viable enough to absorb a new program.

Another option would be to provide a marketable service, such as tuition-based workshops or distributable products. While seeming to be common and accessible

enough, this option comes with all the trappings of the consumer-based model, dictated by supply and demand. It is of course nice to think that my services might be demanded, but the rat-race of true economic viability within this system would be difficult to sustain. As happens, the most sellable products of the organization would need to be prioritized for the sake of sustainability, which might conflict with the prospective mission of the organization as a confluence of various practices. It seems that some organizations like this find ways to survive by selling coffee or other small, tangential products, but this revenue stream often must be supplemented with others.

Organizations like Creative Capital might present the opportunity to receive funding in the form of a granted award. This organization accepts proposals and selects artists to help on the way to sustainability. Such a program might be a way to navigate the above possibilities with regards to the most suitable model, in that their approach is inspired by venture-capital principles.

Whether a collective, a non-profit entity, or a for-profit enterprise, it still seems best to err on the side of need, to investigate what a constituency might need and how it might be served. As I have described in sections on education, there truly seems to be a need, at basic levels of art instruction, to align the cultural functions of the artist with the ways in which the artist is nurtured. If artists are increasingly entrepreneurs, operating within a system that asks them to be flexible and adaptable, while maintaining high levels of specialized technical craft, then we should be shifting our curricular structures to follow suit. The most immediate and attainable application for my work, therefore, is in the schools, where I am asked to adapt my program to the unique needs of the institution. This paper, my body of work, my archive of past events, my syllabi, therefore, all amount

to a singular *modus operandi*. Inserting this M.O. into various applications is a delicate craft, perhaps the most valuable service I can offer a constituency.

### **Credentials, Vocations, and Communities**

There are problems with this logic, of course. Alison Gerber, in a presentation of her sociological doctorate work on the economics of art, would call my above justification *credentialing*: the maintenance of a studio practice for the sake of keeping professional credit within academia. While I am not so cynical in my true motivations (art-making, as I have characterized, is a *timeless language*), I understand the sentiment here: that a studio practice, if not directly participating in the market, becomes a precarious, ambiguous affair. What, then, motivates it? Gerber offers many suggestions, two of which I will emphasize: *vocationalism* and *communitarianism*.

Vocationalism, according to Gerber, is driven by a kind of high purpose in art, a pursuit for which market validation is a trivial concern. These artists, Gerber suggests, are committed to this high purpose and the freedoms—as opposed to the market’s strictures—it facilitates. “Market work,” Gerber states in regards to this vocational perspective:

often disallows the integrity and autonomy that artistic practice encourages, market work is incompatible with the artist’s self identity, and market work, because it is beholden to forces that are alien to artists and their surroundings, disallows the specificity and depth of accomplishment that is possible in artistic practice.

This last statement regarding specificity and depth speaks directly to the hurdles I sometimes foresee in my career. How do we justify artistic behavior—often idiosyncratic without serving any immediate function—when no one is directly requesting it? There is a kind of faith at work here, a gut feeling that the task must be carried out. This seems to

get at the core of artistic expression: if I don't follow my impulse and carry out my idea or resolve my video project, no one else will. That particular *singular version* of our collective cultural construct, as I have mentioned, would be lost forever: a potential artifact, withheld from the index of history. This is not to say, with grandiosity, that history needs my unique artifact, only that the prospect of withholding it is a bleak vision. These concerns, it seems, are quintessentially vocational.

Gerber's second designation, which describes artistic motivation outside of the market, is communitarianism. "Artists work to create community," Gerber states:

because they build the community they want feedback from. In many cases, that type of community doesn't exist before artists conjure it. Through investments in their own artistic practice, they feed forward to build the community from which they hope for feedback.

Vocational artists, it seems, must build a community that supports—emotionally, if not economically—the idiosyncratic specificity of their artistic practice, to create an audience to receive, critique, enjoy, and discuss the various artistic gestures that are so important to sustain. This impulse, again, sounds like a kind of cultural offering, a singular response to the human condition. It is the community, then, that nurtures these offerings: a kind of concept-development sharing, formalized as manifestos, organizational structures, and artworks, not necessarily *authorless*, but certainly not *individualist* either.

This communitarian impulse is directly related to PlayLaborPlay and its motivation to create venues for active dialogue, to create places of meeting. Part of the appeal of these events, it seems, is the ephemeral quality—the resistance of object revery. Rather it is always the object's orientation—its place within a greater context—that is of value. PlayLaborPlay events are not art opening, theatrical performances, or parties, but rather something in between: the fleeting nature of the one-night event, the meeting in an

unlikely place, the negotiation between construction and happenstance, the slippery space between ownership and collaboration—these are the elements that seem captivating. A PlayLaborPlay event is simply a place to be, a place to engage with the fruits of a constantly vacillating artist community. No past event could have happened without the long, inspiring process of dialogical negotiation.

### **A Place to Be**

But still, given Gerber's powerful analyses, I am faced with the brass tacks of my next move: teaching photography and media arts to high school students. Given the wealth of complication and academic insight I have absorbed through discussions, critiques, arguments, research, experimentations, and collaborations in the past three years, I am inspired to rethink high school level curriculum and programmatic structure. While I don't see a clear answer to the changing role of the artist in society, I have gained a better understanding of the complexity of the question through work like Gerber's, as well as through research into the concerns of social practice. The potential opportunities that Deresiewicz's *entrepreneurial* designation might yield in the coming decades are exciting to consider, a sort of new frontier of the artist's societal role. As I move on to future endeavors I hope to make productive, programmatic, and pedagogical contributions to this evolution.

The decision to pursue an MFA degree, at least subconsciously, was certainly a credentialing choice. It might also have stemmed from trust in professionalism, albeit a thing of the past in regards to Deresiewicz's analysis. But, aside from its increasingly precarious professional value, its pursuit has enormously expanded my understanding of the state of art, academia, and the artist's role in the historical and cultural landscape. It

has refined my studio work and encouraged me to consider my variously scattered practices through the lens of a more holistic, integrated creative motivation: a *way to be* in the world, as an artist, teacher, and organizer. I do not, after all of these pages, have the answers to my own placement within the art historical context, but I can say with certainty that I am honored to share the floor with all of those with whom I have worked: with whom I have navigated this indeterminate, inspiring, often treacherous, often enlightening state of interim.

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