

PRESERVATION of a SPECIES

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SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF ARCHITECTURE IN PARTIAL
FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF SCIENCE IN VISUAL STUDIES
at the
MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

SEPTEMBER 2011

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*Submitted to the Department of Architecture in partial fulfillment
of the Degree of Master of Science in Visual Studies at the
Massachusetts Institute of Technology*

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ABSTRACT

To put it simply, humans are going extinct. I identify the source of the problem as an imperceptible societal trend to eliminate the experience that authenticates us as a living species: failure. We've unanimously designated its unattainable opposite as the standard of success: perfection. This quality is a requisite of our accelerated culture, the achievement manifested in an exponentially growing inventory of artifacts that are "faster, sleeker, better." And humans are becoming some of them. In the search for ever-increasing modes of efficiency and precision, humans have adapted their posture to the rigidity of architecture and adopted proliferate technological mediators as prosthetics. The overwhelming pressure to occupy a flawless state of being is a symptom of society, generated by the ego and aggravated by our continual exposure to environments that boast aesthetic and functional attributes exceeding our own. In a competitive fashion, we've subjected ourselves to a mechanical and agitated lifestyle that demands instantaneous reaction, shaping us into receivers and transmitters that function at impeccable and unsustainable speeds.

My artistic practice is a critical investigation of human behavior as it is informed and manipulated by the prescriptive streamlined circumstances we've constructed and similarly inhabit in our digitally saturated culture. Instinctual impulses and organic chaos are suppressed in the automatic and regulated state incited by our techn-utopian environments. I use performance to explore three general interfaces that I've located as antagonistic towards natural human behavior: architecture, technology and codes of regulation. Primarily employing myself as a subject, I design situations in which I contend with the three aforementioned interfaces, and subsequently have developed a catalogue of responses that strive to mitigate the external forces governing human behavior.

PRESERVATION **of a SPECIES**

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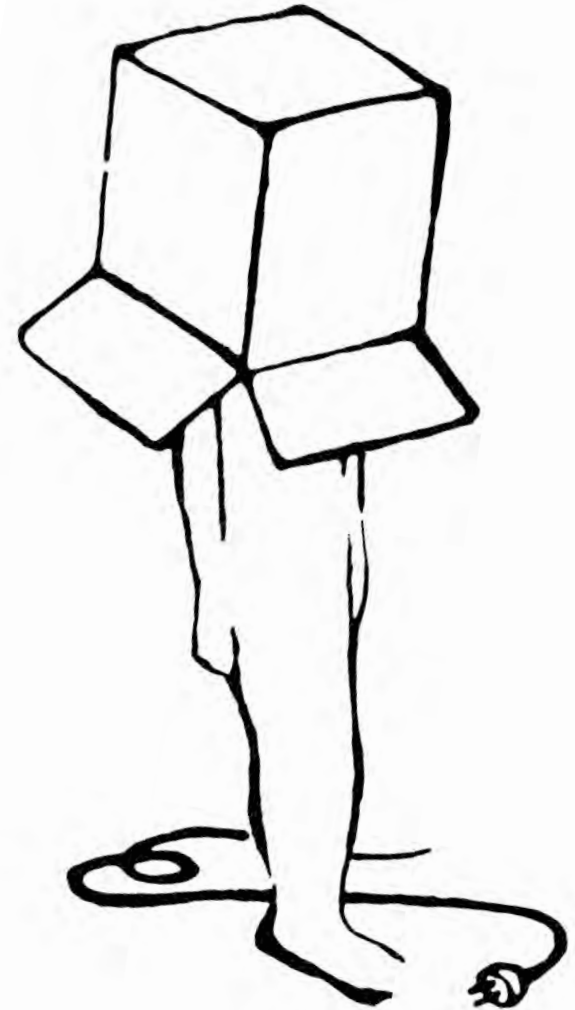
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HYPOCRITICAL DISCLAIMER

I'd like to preface this by saying that I'm not a misanthrope; all that I've recorded here is tinted with humor. Pockets of comic relief are injected into all of my work, hoping that it can depart from absolute cynicism through the leverage of irony. That said, I do not consider myself a comedian, and would like to clarify the position I take as a visual artist. My artistic practice is research-based, occupying a discursive and subjective field of knowledge, and operates as a contemporary, poetic response to shifting social and political environments. Although I occupy a critical stance, my observations should not be read as arrogant, accusatory comments directed towards society. In fact, they are the opposite, internally facing.

I confess that I am a perfectionist. Obsessive and anal in my approach to nearly everything that I do. I do not tolerate my own mistakes, and have never been able to justify my forgiveness of them. Because I am human and flawed, the resentment I harbor for myself is infinitely expanding: I cannot accept my own failures. For these reasons, I invite you to read this text as an instance of the author's experience, generated out of her own problematic relationship to the subject matter, deeply embedded within the confines of self-criticism.



PART 1

THE CONDITION

TO PUT IT SIMPLY, HUMANS ARE GOING EXTINCT.

My artistic practice is a critical investigation of human behavior as it is informed and manipulated by the prescriptive streamlined circumstances we've constructed and similarly inhabit in our digitally saturated culture.¹ Instinctual impulses and organic chaos are suppressed in the automatic and regulated state incited by our technoutopian environments. I use performance to explore three general interfaces that I've located as antagonistic towards natural human behavior: architecture, technology and codes of regulation. Primarily employing myself as a subject, I design situations in which I contend with the three aforementioned interfaces, and subsequently have developed a catalogue of responses that strive to mitigate the external forces governing human behavior, or the *constructed environment*.

I identify the source of the problem as an imperceptible societal trend to eliminate the experience that authenticates us as a living species: failure. We've unanimously designated its unattainable opposite as the standard of success: perfection. This quality is a requisite of our accelerated culture, the achievement manifested in an exponentially growing inventory of artifacts that are "faster, sleeker, better." And humans are becoming some of them. In the search for ever-increasing modes of efficiency and precision, humans have adapted their posture to the rigidity of architecture and adopted proliferate technological mediators as prosthetics. The overwhelming pressure to occupy a flawless state of being is a symptom of society, generated by the ego and aggravated by our continual exposure to environments that boast aesthetic and functional attributes exceeding our own. In a competitive fashion, we've subjected ourselves to a mechanical and agitated lifestyle that demands instantaneous reaction, shaping us into

receivers and transmitters that function at impeccable and unsustainable speeds.

With this as the crux of my work, I actively seek to illustrate the tension between the flawed human character and its seamless, contradictory backdrop. The performances aim to elevate and visually elucidate this misalignment, portraying it as a persistent struggle. The human in each of these pieces is prompted to react to the constructed environment: the results range from full embodiment and submission, to rebellious resistance and rejection of it.

It's common knowledge that humans shape their environments, and are reciprocally shaped by them. To reiterate, I do not consider this proclamation of mine, that civilization and its (contemporary) contents are restructuring the understanding and expectations of humans, to be a novel discovery. It's not. Countless people have also come to this conclusion without first consulting me, a few of whom I gratefully refer to throughout this text.

So if it's not enough that I'm articulating the obvious, my work also tends to exaggerate the quarrelsome relationship between humans and constructed environments. My performances evolved from minimal explorations of the body in architectural space, into strategized methods to defend the performer from total hyperinduction by it. I became increasingly interested in detecting the innate human qualities that are distorted, compromised or erased by our habitual interactions with the elements of the constructed environment. As I juxtaposed my own identity with that of the

escalated, technological ecology in which I was situated, I recognized failure as a paralyzing tactic that I could implement--failure as something that fiercely threatened the constructed environment. An asset, that I was hesitant to acknowledge, resided in myself.

BLUEPRINT

IT BEGAN WITH ARCHITECTURE

It began with architecture. For the first semester of my graduate studies in the Fall of 2009, my program was situated on the 3rd floor of a warehouse building located on the fringe of campus: N51. The elevator was insufferably slow, the ceiling was obscured by a network of exposed pipes and ducts, asbestos still saturated most of the flooring. In addition to housing our program, the four-story space hosted an eclectic assortment of MIT-affiliated groups: The Model Train Railroad club, MIT Electronics Research Society, the Environmental Health and Safety office, the MIT Museum and Gamelan Galak Tika, the on-campus Balinese orchestra. It was a drab space, but colorful in personality, defined by the unusual detritus that it collected: dissected computer hardware and old bike parts decorated the hallways, wires sprouted from random bits of electronic modules and indecipherable messages inscribed by the CNC router branded scraps of material. All of these and other indiscernible fractions accumulated in every hallway and corner of the building, everything harmoniously vibrating along with the erie sounds of the gamelan percussion, which was drowned out by the tinkering with half-built motorcycles. An in-process anthology of industrious and innovative thinking.



Building N51: interior view

The walls of my studio were white, but heavy from years of storing information accrued by its inhabitants. Scratched tiles, chipped corners, a texture of holes coated the walls. It was clear that work had been done in this space, that ideas had been moved. The Southern wall was paned in a grid of glass; these windows opened onto a parking lot with a neglected dumpster and faced the backdoor of a pizza parlor that sits beneath a fraternity house. The gutters of the street below would flood with the daintiest drizzles, lofting pizza boxes and cigarette butts as colorful embellishments to the uniform gray of urbanity. The generators that flanked the building's facade whirred constantly, preventing the pain of silence.

Here I felt comfortable, or normal. I made things and broke things. I was reckless in, and subsequently nurturing to my space. My noise chimed with the rhythm of the landscape, indiscernible from it. My concept of the self was identical to what it had been for years prior. No questions were formulated, no distinctions to be made. I did not think things could be otherwise.

In January of 2010, our program was relocated into the newly erected Media Lab building in the center of campus: E14. Designed by the Japanese architect Fumihiko Maki, the entire six-floor complex glistens and squeaks. It's made mostly of glass and other shiny, breakable surfaces that, when assembled reek of the contemporary. The building is virtually transparent, a design concept that parallels the interdisciplinary research and collaborative methodologies that founded the Media Lab.²

Every time I entered the magnificent, luxurious space, I half expected a member of the Apple genius bar to greet me and ask which color iPod I liked best. Or to find tourists parading up and down the sleek stairs with little MoMA stickers on their chests, disappointed that robots and NASA suits had replaced the Abstract Expressionist paintings. It was exciting and terrifying.

My studio was very different from the last. It had lost 6 feet in height, and 75 sq. feet in surface area. My desk occupied 1/4 of the space, which smelled like a hospital and had an internally-facing glass window that peers directly into a conference room filled with bright red rolling office chairs that would occasionally be filled with people who looked like they enjoyed them. Suddenly I had an office. Not a studio, a cubicle.



Building E14: interior view



E14 Lobby
MIT Media Lab Complex
Maki and Associates, 2009

I found it startling at first, unable to find places for all of the greasy tools and scrap piles of materials that have amassed and accompanied me over a period of years. Reminders of what I had created, or of the kinds of things I might create soon. They seemed sorely out of place. The amount of shelving and cabinets I had to install to manage this spillage made it nearly impossible to do anything in my office, except sit at my computer; which I was disappointed to notice, is what I do most of the day anyway.

Suffocating in the confines of my office that very much resembled a thrift store in storage, and hopeful in changing my working habits, I roamed the austere building constantly.

I can't recall a classic "aha" moment, but very quickly I underwent a transformation. My self-perception had been radically altered. Through daily confrontation with this antithetical structure, I became appalled and ashamed with myself: I wanted to be that building.

MAPPING the SYMPTOMS: highly absorbent

The attraction to E14 and the subconscious fantasy to “be that building” was not an abnormal response. To clarify my position, I’d like to dissect the understanding of what is *human* and locate a few of our species’ defining qualities relevant to this argument. Throughout this text, I will return to this mapping system to inspect other facets or symptoms of the human pertaining to particular arguments and performances.

Consider the dictionary definition of human, as seen in the *New Oxford American Dictionary*:

human |'(h)yoðmən|

adjective

of, relating to, or characteristic of people or human beings :

the human body | the survival of the human race.

- of or characteristic of people as opposed to God or animals or machines, esp. in being susceptible to weaknesses : *they are only human, and therefore mistakes do occur | the risk of human error.*
- of or characteristic of people's better qualities, such as kindness or sensitivity : *the human side of politics is getting stronger.*
- Zoology of or belonging to the genus *Homo*.

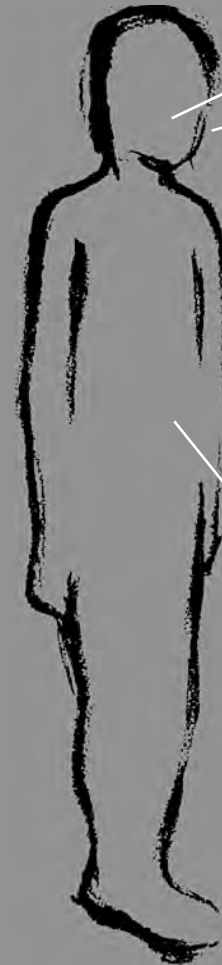
noun

a human being, esp. a person as distinguished from an animal or (in science fiction) an alien.

DERIVATIVES

humanness noun

ORIGIN late Middle English *humaine*, from Old French *humain(e)*, from Latin *humanus*, from *homo* ‘man, human being.’ The present spelling became usual in the 18th cent.; compare with **humane** .



SUSCEPTIBLE
MALLEABLE
OBSERVATIONAL

The eyes and ears are primary sources of input

SENSITIVE
PLIABLE
POROUS

The skin is the largest organ of the body, one that continually gathers tactile information.

HUMANS: OPEN TO INTERPRETATION

In *We Have Never Been Modern*, Bruno Latour insists that “human” cannot be defined, at least in terms of a singular, unwavering identity.³ Humans are in constant flux, operating as the transmitters and receivers in a continuous feedback loop. Like faceless conductors, what we *are* can only be defined by the tonal quality of what we orchestrate: by the nations we’ve assembled and the corresponding political relationships, the ruptures we’ve created in the natural world and our cultures that have transpired because of them. In the interstices of the social framework, objects scatter the earth as evidence, or reminders of the presence we collectively maintain. As our inter-specie-al relationships shift and the manufacturing and distribution of our material negotiators correspondingly shifts, as a population, we too are transformed. It’s evident that we are malleable, vulnerable creatures. Susceptible to alteration, we react to the objects and ideas that envelope us, perpetually delivering a response that reconfigures the course of dialogue.

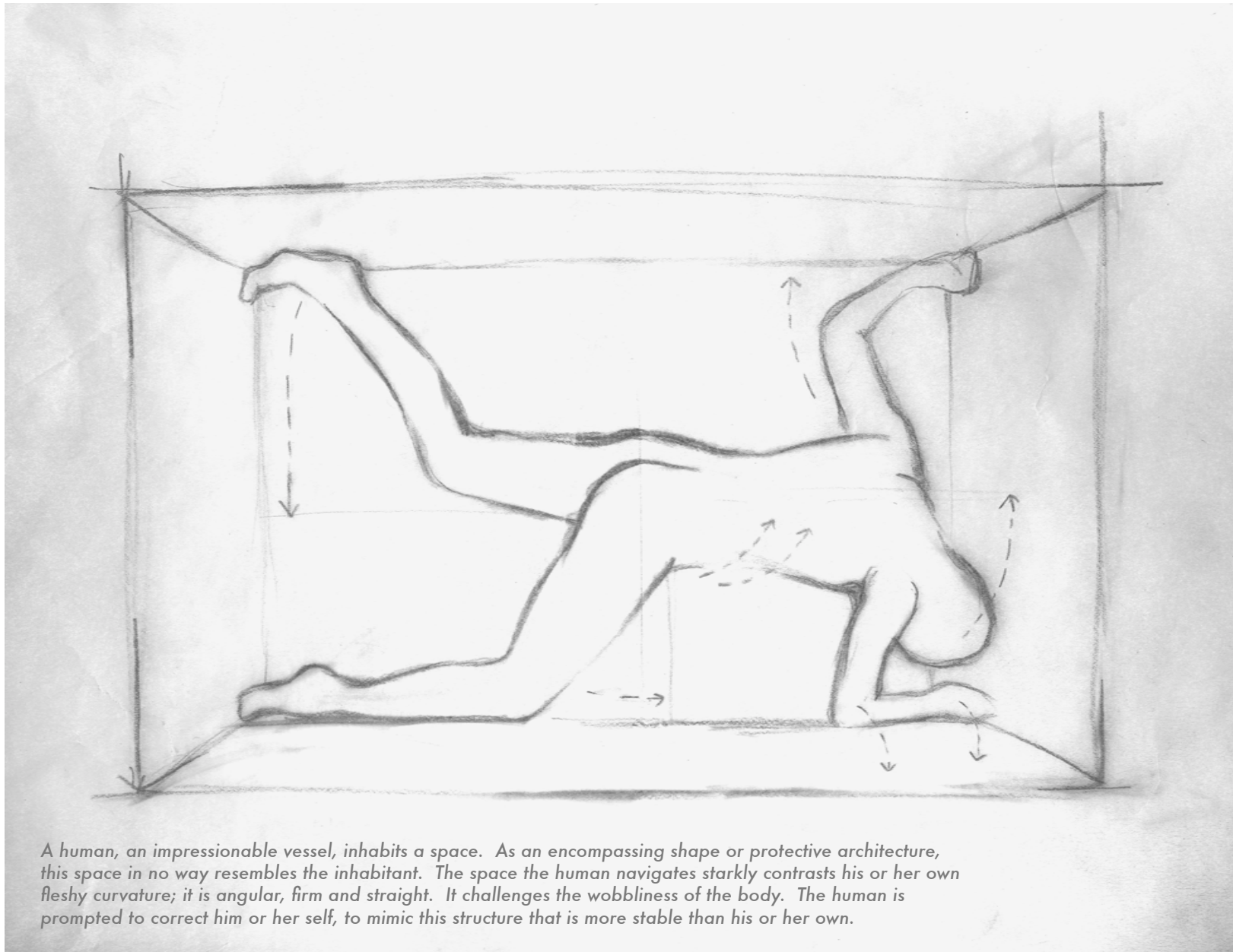
In concert with Latour’s philosophy that points to collective behavior, theories from sociobiology and environmentalism also claim that the individual functions with similar plasticity. Genetics and the behavioral instincts that assist humans in the process of learning are partially responsible for this malleability. When we learn, or reshape our general network of knowledge, we recontextualize ourselves within the matrix of information that we’re continually restructuring.

Two mechanisms are at work:

1. Innate and involuntary function of nerve synapses
2. Cultural conditioning

At some point, we understand that we walk instead of crawl, use words to communicate frustration instead of with fists, sit up straight in church, use forks not fingers, blackmail instead of beat-up our enemies, and hold the door for people carrying large objects. Reductively, this is done through people watching. This mimicry is not an intentional action, but a natural conversation between human intuition and social encounters. Each culture exhibits a recognizable collection of social mannerisms and behaviors that are particular to its own and absent from other cultures. Despite this fact of disparity, a population’s trademark behaviors are seemingly innate, and they are; but only in the sense that biology is programmed to conform or be culturally conditioned. The human brain is wired to observe and reserve this newly obtained information, which is later recalled and transformed into nerve impulses that attempt to recreate the perceived behavior.⁴

By observing and then imitating, we learn how to be. Or at least how to be part of a civilized society, capable of adhering to its values and concomitantly uphold them. In considering my inclination towards the building, and my desire to manifest it within myself, it can be rationalized as a form of cultural conditioning, which is encouraged by the biological systems in play.



A human, an impressionable vessel, inhabits a space. As an encompassing shape or protective architecture, this space in no way resembles the inhabitant. The space the human navigates starkly contrasts his or her own fleshy curvature; it is angular, firm and straight. It challenges the wobbliness of the body. The human is prompted to correct him or her self, to mimic this structure that is more stable than his or her own.

BREAKING GROUND

For a long time, I was completely oblivious to my own sensitivity to the building, my biological acquisition of it. My desire to embody it. In fact, after a fleeting period of romance in which I peered at it through admirable eyes, I began to hate it. In the spotlight of its perfection, my own sensibilities and idiosyncrasies became filthy shadows. Every feature it flaunted seemed to further distinguish myself from it, scripting my presence as a villainous and undeserving character on its stage. I wanted nothing more than to destroy it, to preserve my own dignity.

I became fixated on its power, enveloped by it, and muffled within it. My preoccupation with its oppressive presence resulted in frustration. I hadn't been able to make work since the relocation. Feeling angry and inert, I squandered away the hours that should've been devoted to "working," by laying on the floor in its atrium. It was always at night, when the building was vacated of visible productivity. This lasted for a period of weeks. Me and my thoughts, penetrating directly into the floor by the means of my limp forehead. Eventually, I became aware of this static posture as a pathetic form of self-pity and integrated movement into my hopeless marriage to a floor. With great effort, I used my hands to drag my downward-facing body across the smooth surface, eyes closed. When I hit a perpendicular blockage, I would hug myself to it and try to disappear into the joint between the floor and the wall. It felt good. I wanted to spend time in this state of surrender.

Over a period of weeks, my exploration of this plane became more intentional, and I began to crawl along the circumference of the space, inspecting the emptiness, the lack of dust bunnies. The stairs

became a challenge, and I worked hard to squeeze my flesh into its angular crevices as I carefully moved from the ground floor to the second floor and back down again. I did not tire of this movement, and would sometimes prepare scenarios and scores to be enacted in these nightly rendezvous. In hesitation of disrupting the blossoming union between myself and the building, I introduced a few basic props: a rope and a pulley. In attaching them to various expensive fixtures embedded in the architecture, I was delighted to discover the new positions and mobility they afforded me. Allowing me to experience the transition between horizontal and vertical, a whole new catalogue of movement emerged with their help. I was fond of securing myself to the austere floor-to-ceiling columns with the rope, fascinated by my ability to lean at shallow inclines, my feet stemming from its base. I began to feel more confident in my dialogue with the building, and more aggressive. I would secure myself at a 45 degree angle to the cylinder, patiently waiting for the moment that my weight toppled it. Curious of its strength and needing to prove my own, I began to pull at the column, sometimes running in place. Bruised knees and sore palms were growing pains, and I craved them.

I was using the building to gauge myself, as a body, as a brain. A struggle of pure resistance. At the time I wasn't aware that I was working, scrutinizing the building as a form of research. Because I was so focused on my inability to produce tangible output in the studio, I saw my behavior as procrastination. This activity lasted for 2 months. My confidence began to unravel.

Certain that it was the source of inhibition, I projected my anger into the building. I was tired of the one-way relationship I had with it. My resentment was unabsorbed, stoically bounced back to me with not a glint of acknowledgement. So many hours I had spent caressing its topography, offering tactile attention to its neglected surfaces that are so carelessly trampled upon, appreciating its texture of purity. I had wanted to complicate this dialogue, but reached a point where nothing more could be transmitted. It was only a monologue. This rejection provoked a churning sensation of hostility that I couldn't rationalize. Am I really infatuated with a building and disturbed by its apathetic response to me? Envy hadn't yet entered my vocabulary.

In an attempt to diffuse these inexplicable, violent emotions that had no justifiable source, and therefore no obvious process to appropriately handle them, I instead chose a destination. 2,100 miles from E14.

POINT of DEPARTURE

BOS_SLC_AA#8634_23MAR_2010

It was just one of those things you have to do. Kind of like the sense of obligation you might feel if you were about to walk past a \$20 bill on the ground. No wallet in sight, no one to make you feel guilty about it belonging in yours.

I picked up the phone and called American Airlines. I had a free roundtrip ticket voucher that I had earned for volunteering my seat on an overbooked flight, exactly 364 days prior. Knowing that it would expire the following day, and feeling close to expiration myself, I asked the woman on the other side of the phone what my options were.

(Not quite verbatim recollection of the conversation follows.)

.....
“Hi, I have a voucher for a free flight that expires tomorrow. Is it too late to book a flight?” I asked.

“Please state your name as it appears on your government issued ID...” she rambled off all of the standard identification fields and I gave her my vitals.

“Okay Ms. Witt, and what city will you be flying from?”

“Boston.”

“Okay Ms. Witt, where would you like to fly with us?”

“I don’t know. Where can I go?”

“Well, Ms. Witt, is this trip for pleasure, business or other purposes?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I just need to go on a trip.”

She was silent.

“Business,” I replied.

She chuckled. Maybe perplexed by the possibility that I’d be going on a business trip without knowing where I’d be taking care of the business.

“Okay Ms. Witt. And what airport would you like to fly into?”

“Well, it doesn’t matter.”

She seemed vexed and momentarily shed her corporate skin.

“Ms. Witt, you need to at least give me a region of the country. Unless you want me to arbitrarily pick a place. And it would help if you knew how long you wanted to be there.”

“I don’t know” I thought about it for a few breathes, but nothing came to mind. “...I don’t care, I just need to use this ticket. Tomorrow.”

She made a comment that was well-rehearsed, referring to the limitation of her professional responsibilities. I interrupted her:

“Okay, Sorry. I want to go to somewhere for one day and come back the next.”

She was silent.

“Can I do that?”

“Are you familiar with *alpha, bravo, charlie*? If you’d like me to read an alphabetical list of airports, I can do that.”

Her sassy retort hit hard, and I snapped out of indifference into desperation. Still unsure of where it came from, I spontaneously offered a destination.

“Utah. I want to go to Utah. Can I go to Utah?”

“Salt Lake City?”

“Yes, Salt Lake City, Utah.”

“Okay Ms. Witt, hold on while I check our availability.”

The pitter patter of the keys spurred a sense of movement in me, and I started to think about where I might be going and what I might do when I get there. I realized I only knew two things about it: Mormons and salt.

The next day, I found myself at Logan airport, skimming the two travel books purchased the night before. It was a scramble to acquaint myself with the most distinctive geography of the state, preferably within a 200 mile radius of the Great Salt Lake. I quickly developed a laundry list of places that looked like they’d be as far as I could get from E14 and mapped a series of possible itineraries, knowing that once I got in the rental car, none of them would be followed.

I had no goal for this trip. But the span of desert that cradles the Great Salt Lake was extremely enticing. The travel took an entire day, so I had some time to think about the impulsive decision to go to Utah. And how the vague pictures of the desert already satisfied a deep, undefinable need. I de-boarded the plane and picked up an economy car, which I spent nearly all of the following 48 hours in, with nothing but a change of clothes, a toy compass made of cheap plastic and a video camera.

Utah is a wildly beautiful state, endowed with a diverse and alien landscape. The southern part boasts the most striking features. Sharply carved canyons and towers of rocks shoot from the earth, unpredictably protruding and receding like scars of triumph. The northern half, where my trip took place, is arid and desolate. The Rocky Mountains recede to the east, evoking warmth and Western nostalgia. A cool, lunar quality transitions as the Salt flats span towards the west. The main arteries of the state are I-80 and I-15, each circumnavigating the barren secrets of the desert and the military establishments that populate it. To travel through the heart of the desert from East to West, one has to take the backroads, which vary in primitiveness. I tried to cut through the Dugway Proving Ground, a highly regulated facility for the development and testing of chemical and biological weapons. A duo of officers were posted at the entrance to the complex, and were not entertained when I tried to persuade them to allow me to at least turn around in the parking lot that resided behind the brambles of barbed-wire fence that flanked them. I engaged them in short conversation, but gathered little information about the site and was informed that I'd have to move the car in reverse. As I was backing away, I called out: "which route do you suggest I take to get to the Bonneville Salt Flats?" One of the men left his post and marched towards the car. He spouted out a list of numbers and cardinal directions; as I thanked him, he spotted the video camera in my lap and instructed me to surrender the tape or erase it under his supervision. As the tape was rewinding and recording an image of the dashboard, he warned me that I won't have a cell phone signal if I wander too far from I-15 and that small rental

cars sometimes fall prey to the rugged backroads. Against his advice, I rumbled towards the Pony Express.⁵

The road was as if it hadn't been traversed since the US mail system was first installed. My upper limit was 11 mph. The tiny car tumbled across the rocky terrain, sporadically jolting my body every so often, interrupting the steady vibration of my vacant emotions. I felt nothing. I was thinking everything. I wondered what my sister was doing at that moment, calculated the amount I had left in the bank, wrote a few emails in my head, switched the dial on the radio and wondered why bad music is forever being published.

After droning for a period of time, superficial thoughts were replaced by thoughts of the building. I witnessed the early moments of the semester and my choreography within it. The smoothness of my motion across its undisturbed facets seeming so impossible as I now sat, chattering and thumping across a different surface. Tumbleweeds gracefully rolled past the hood of the car, seemingly immune to the aberrational contours of the land. They were proud and unaffected, capable of relinquishing control to the unpredictable wind. Chasing one another in an endless procession, they seemed purposeful. Occasionally they would pause, a cluster of them gathering before embarking on the next segment. Despite the severe terrain, they seemed harmonious, maybe even tranquil.

I got out of the car to relieve myself. The sudden break of the motion was disturbing. A dizzying momentum lingered from the hours of jostling. I crouched beside the car and watched the thorny bushes roll across the road, horizontal and fearless, ignorant of right or wrong direction. I hate running, but I couldn't fight the urge. I got up and chased a family of them. My boots hit the ground with uneven steps, chunkily stubbing and hopping and tripping in a seizure-like frenzy. My gait was similar, like an unbridled fire hose. My chest felt icy as breath rapidly circulated through it, and I involuntarily stooped low, head hanging close to the dusty earth. Herds of the buoyant weeds continued to eclipse me. So I tried again.

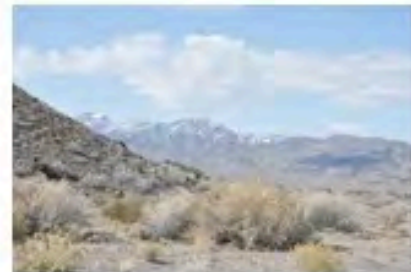


One lone tumbleweed



TUMBLEWEED
performance/video (3:57)
Great Basin Desert, Utah, 2010









It was not my first attempt at performance, but the first of this kind: non-narrative and movement-oriented. At the time, it was a physical gesture expressing freedom, an intuitive release of animalistic energy. The repetitive motion of thrusting the body across the ground was cathartic, a counter-response to the more delicate relationship I had with the building. Ritualistically, I stopped the car to barrel and fall throughout the 120 mile journey on the Pony Express. It took 8 hours.

It seemed necessary to document this routine with video, so I had the opportunity to immediately revisit the action from the stationary perspective of the camera. It was shockingly boring, my somersaults inconsistent and wimpy. In complete opposition to the aggressive sensations that I felt as the performer, the image on the video portrays the body as a hesitant and diminutive figure, cumbersome in its rise and fall to the earth. The vastness of the desert engulfs the performer, and she appears to be struggling to achieve something. This sentiment, of tireless but failing effort, when paired with the original impetus behind heedlessly plunging into rock-studded dust, points to a more sophisticated and significant interpretation: the performer was

imitating, attempting to merge with or conform to its environment. To seamlessly disappear into it.

It was through this spontaneous experimentation with performance, and the recognition of it as so, that I was able to decipher the hours I had spent flirting with E14. The tumbling in the desert was actually the second instance, I just hadn't documented the first.

The sun was crawling behind the horizon by the time I reached the Bonneville Salt Flats just East of Wendover. At the end of the navigable portion of the speedway, water lapped over the undulating surface of sodium deposits. Freezing water seeped through the plane of coarse granules that supported the car, submerging the tracks I recently plowed. The edge of the path was gradually eroding, or extending. I couldn't tell which. The car looked like it was going to sink and I needed to make it to Spiral Jetty, Robert Smithson's most prominent earthwork.⁶ *Before* my flight took off at noon the next day. I sped down the straight way as fast as the little Toyota could go.

I drove all night, convincing myself that I was making a good decision as the lights of Salt Lake City quickly faded in the rearview. There wasn't an address to where I was going, I only had a vague idea of where it unfurled into the lake. The guidebooks were very dismissive of Smithson's piece, mentioning it as a short trip from the Golden Spike where the transcontinental railroad had been joined in Corinne. The book contained a semi-detailed map of the region. I took a number of wrong turns, trying to follow the thin, nameless lines that cut from the interstate towards the Northern section of the lake. I should've bought a map instead of beef jerky when I stopped to ask directions. Only one out of four clerks I spoke with had actually heard of the famed land work. I was irritated, itchy and reminded of the times when I used to make myself finish a book even when I didn't like it. My patience for this homage was depleted, so I got a hotel and set my alarm for 5am.

I woke up, saw that it was dark and would just be a disorienting continuation of the night before, and went back to bed. 2 hours later, a shot of adrenaline fired through my system and I got back in the car, determined to make it to Spiral Jetty, which according to the scale at the bottom of the 5" map, should only be about 22 miles from my present location. If I drove 22 miles at 60 miles an hour, twice, spent 1 hour on the jetty, I'll be back where I am now at 8:44. And if I didn't make any wrong turns from here to the city, I could be back there by 10:00. Plenty of time to make the flight.

At 9:45am, I was standing in the middle of a dried up pasture, staring at a few horses fenced in on a distant hill, its golden grass glimmered in the morning light. The crimson red of the Great Salt Lake nowhere in sight. My car was parked on a dirt road about a football field away from me. We had been on that same looping road for the past hour. Sometimes it dead-ended, and sometimes it became a closed loop. I thought maybe the horses would listen. "I'm *FUCKING LOST!*" I shouted to them, among other obscenities. At this point, I still had hope for making my plane, so I got back in the car, Spiral Jetty crossed off the list. I pictured my therapist demonstrating some deep breathing exercises that she assigns me, but I never do because they seem so cliché. My hand monitored my belly as it inflated with the rhythm of some top 40 hit. Praising the wisdom of psychology, I made it back to a paved road, defeated but accepting of my failed pilgrimage.

As I turned back towards the town I had come from, I saw a small white sign no larger than a parking sign. Beneath a simple arrow, in plain black print it said "Spiral Jetty." My bladder was aching and I thought of a Smithsonian text in which he beautifully and anatomically compares the sea to the liquids of the body; that the two are of the same descent.⁷ "He won't mind," I thought as I held mine in and made the turn. "Besides, he's a proponent of entropy."

Sitting in furry white bathrobe in the Hilton Hotel that so graciously hosts airline customers with "car rental trouble," I scanned the tapes of my body as it (literally) poured over the landscape and became part of it. I knew what I had to do when I got back.



EXCHANGE
performance/video (3:45)
Spiral Jetty, Utah, 2010

(mis)imitations

PERFORMANCE + INSTALLATION
E14: MIT MEDIA LAB COMPLEX
APRIL 2010

A performative investigation of the subtle, conflicted relationship between humans and constructed environments. As the physical and theoretical framework, architecture is positioned as antagonist, reflexively informing the performer's struggle to exchange with and embody the rigid, perfected posture of the adversary.



The following week, I began to develop *(Mis)imitations*, a new piece that formalized and expanded on my instinctual interactions with the building. Acknowledging the problematic relationship I had with it, the piece became a critical gesture, commenting on my inability to manifest its pristine qualities in myself.



performance and installation site: STAIRS

FORM

Operating within a site-specific paradigm for both the performances and the installment of their documentation, the piece features five common architectural elements: corner, floor, water fountain, stairs and wall. Using the notion of imitation as a means of learning and adapting, the performer attempts to conform her body and behavior to each of these architectural elements.



monitor: 7"x 4.25"

The five durational performances were recorded on video and exhibited at their original sites in the newly erected Fumihiko Maki Media Lab building on the MIT campus. Spread throughout the entire first floor of the building, five small monitors were embedded in custom-made structural additions that mimic the existing architecture, obscured as native appendages to the space.

structural addition: STAIRS
MDF/pexpipe/matching wall paint



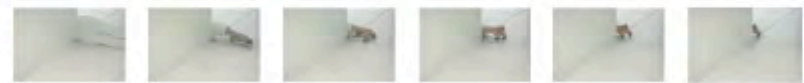
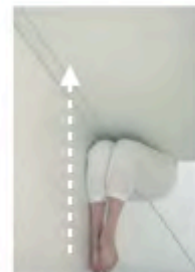
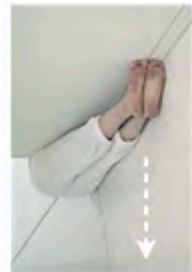
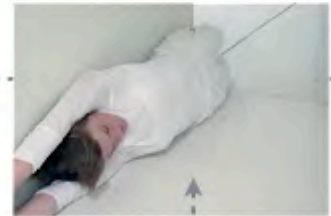
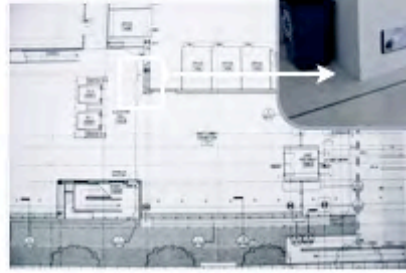
FLOORPLAN



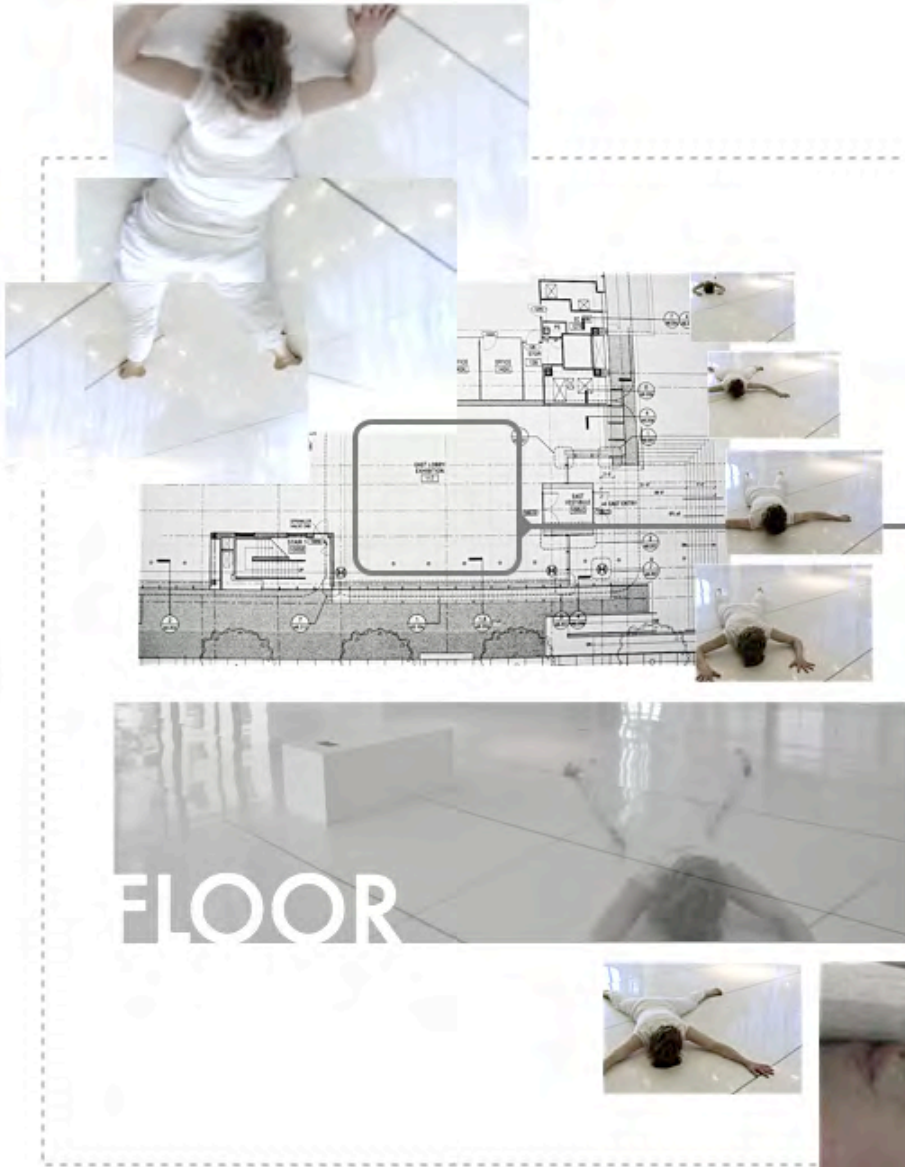
MIT MEDIA LAB
BUILDING E14_LOBBY
the five installation and site-
specific performance locations
with corresponding video stills.

- CO. corner
- FO. fountain
- FL. floor
- ST. stairs
- WA. wall

CORNER



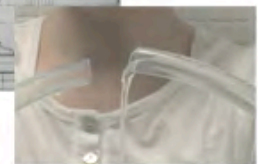
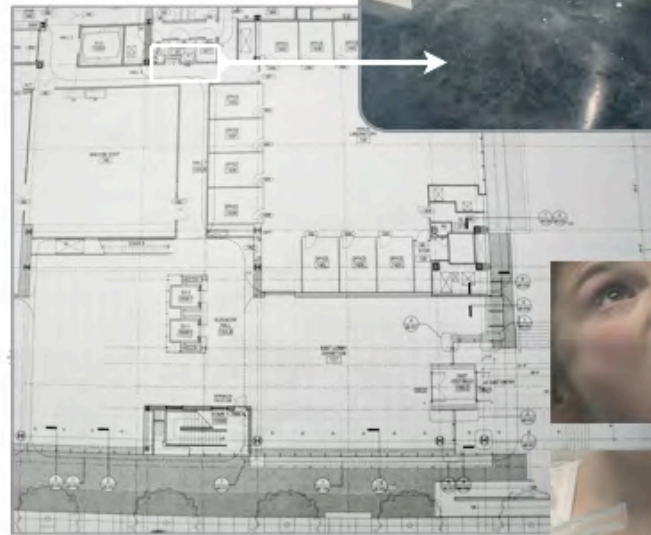
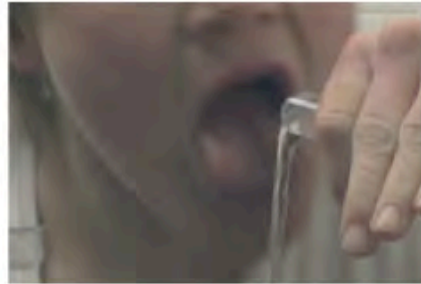
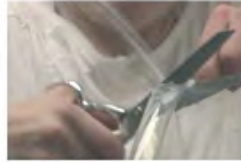
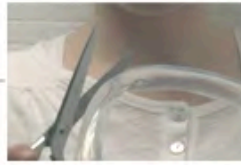
(mis)imitations
video + performance + installation
7 min 39 sec: looping video
MIT media lab building_april2010



ARCHITECTURAL ADDITION
48"x18"x24"

(mis)imitations
video + performance + installation
2 min 37 sec: looping video
MIT media lab building_april2010

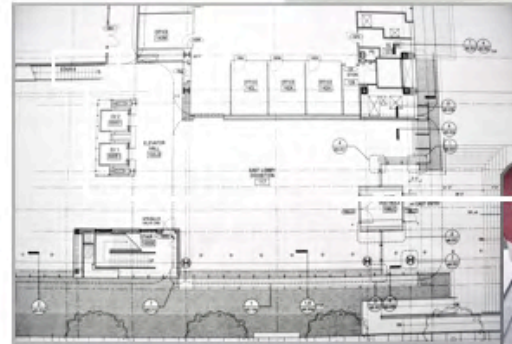
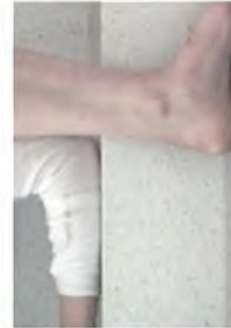
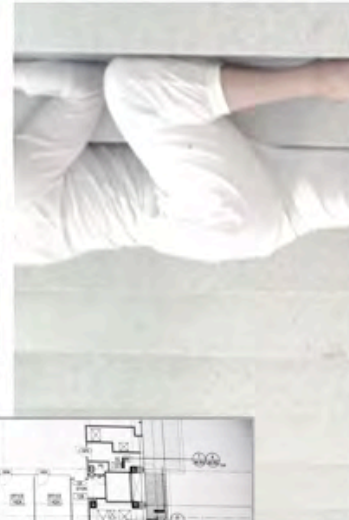


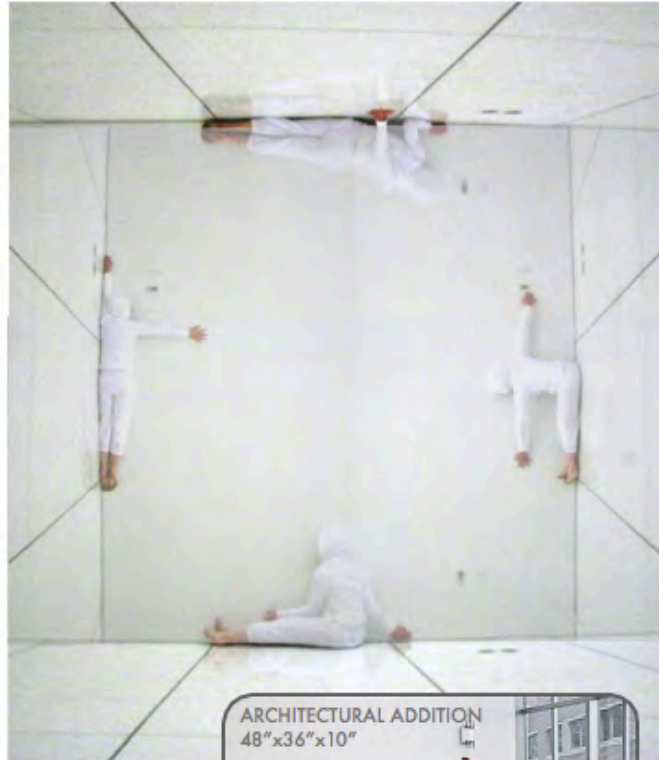


(mis)imitations
video + performance + installation
4 min 48 sec: looping video
MIT media lab building_april2010

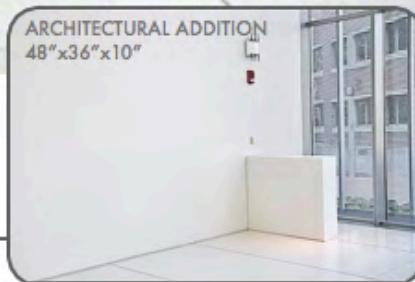


(mis)imitations
video + performance + installation
16 min 53 sec: looping video
MIT media lab building_april2010

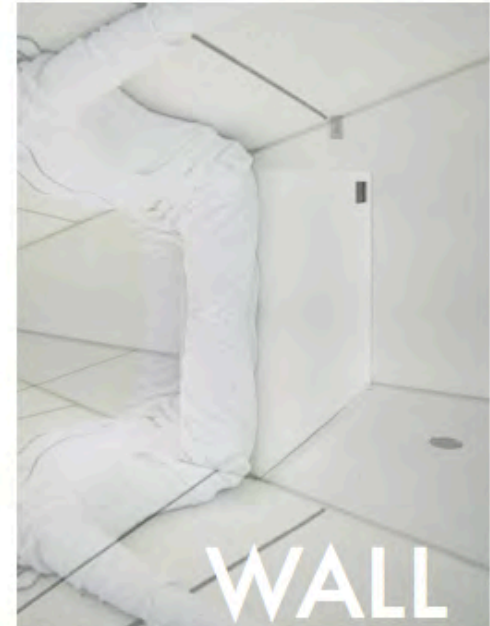
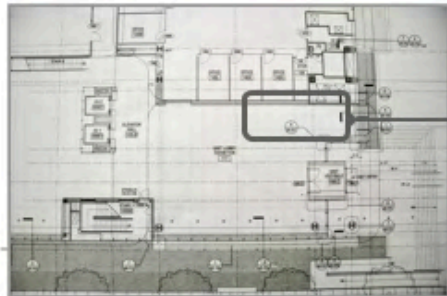




(mis)imitations
video + performance + installation
16 min 16 sec: looping video
MIT media lab building_april2010



ARCHITECTURAL ADDITION
48"x36"x10"



statement

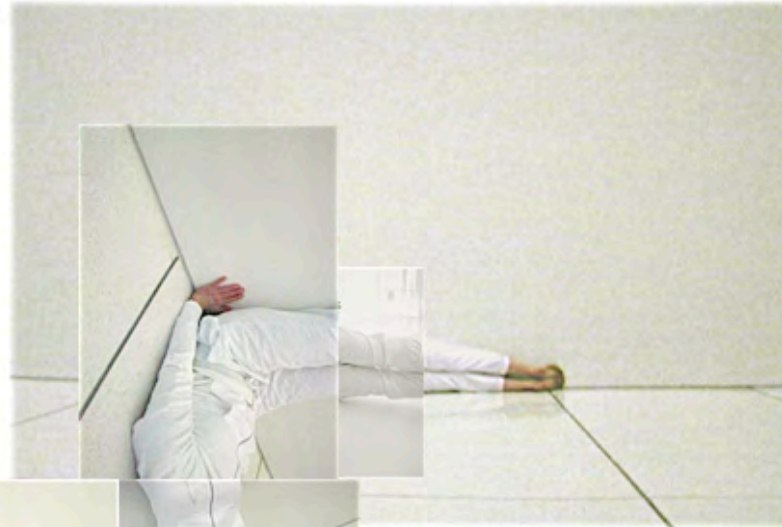
Slick floor sprawls, populated by nothing except light. Enclosed in a composition of dove white walls is stillness.

Surfaces evenly illuminated and evenly intersecting, precision defines its territory. The hollow, mute demeanor is evidence of control, of the ability to exclude. Vacancy exudes power. Perfection is exemplified. And standing in the center of it, I can only become sensitive to my own flaws. A visible aberration that disrupts the impossible silence, tainting it shamelessly.

I recognize and identify my species: animated and tactile, adorned in sweat and dripping with sensations devoid of boundaries. But only through its absence am I aware of the human condition, subjected to confront my own dirtiness as it contaminates and denounces the purity that surrounds me. And I can barely conceive that it was created by people who pulse with the same passionate blood that I do.

The environments humans construct and inhabit resemble everything we cannot be. Rigid posture, riddled with meticulous angles and synthetic stability, offers unwavering, loyal protection. Order is calculated and maintained. Swathed in architecture, we strive to embody such virtues. Looking to our sides and ceilings, we allow these subdivisions to define our activities and mediate social exchanges. The spaces we inhabit dictate our behavior, directing movements and determining paths, communicating through the products and values that incubate within its walls.

Polished, immaculate structures define the urban landscape, concealing human fallibility and superimposing a façade to be idolized and envied. Against this we are gauged. The plane of juxtaposition further distinguishes our inherent imperfections, visible and desirable only when we begin to loose sight of them



APRIL 2010

as they vanish on the horizon of the unattainable.

?

After the the initial rejection of it, my position towards E14 gradually cooled and I became neutral. Just like its walls. *(Mis)imitations* proved to be cathartic, providing closure to the conflict between myself and E14. Correspondingly I began to accept the conditions that reigned in its enclosure, and adapted to them. And didn't feel unhappy about it. Or anything about it. Unable to be qualified by the reductive identifiers "positive" or "negative," I couldn't determine the reason behind the underlying skepticism I continued to nourish. Something about it bothered me.

The transformation I underwent in that short period of time between January and April was not negligible; it was dramatic, and authentic. Conceptually, my work changed. Prior to entering the program, my work was developing into a socially engaged practice, facilitating events to initiate community dialogue surrounding environmental issues.⁸ Suddenly I was a solo performer, using my work as therapy as I grappled with more personal "environmental issues." My physical surroundings had impacted me to an acute degree.

Examining these nascent forms and encounters that eventually led to a larger body of performance work, I questioned the significance *Tumbleweed and (Mis)imitations* imbued into the notion of "imitation." Each of these performances inferred a more sinister side to the act of repetitive, monotonous mimicry.

Looking beyond the facade of the building, I searched for more instances of this adaptive behavior, and for any evidence that graver implications might result from it. Intentionally seeking this mimicry, my focus shifted from architecture, and onto the objects that are placed within it. The furniture, the tools, the technology. Can this behavior be transferred to objects? Do we imitate them as well?



BOXHEAD: test 2
Fall 2010
Image credit: Scott Berzofsky

Surveying the contents of my space, I envisioned my body as I handled the simple shapes. Scissors, a hammer, needle and thread. Each was implemented by the execution of a simple score, composed of repetitive, isolated body movements. But the most compelling and prominent object, the one I gravitate towards with my most undivided and intimate attention: the computer. An object we certainly succumb to: modified posture, dexterity exercised, focus intent on a single channel. Agitated, tweaky, twitchy. Mechanical and methodical. The simplest and most efficient way to move information, the whole body is statically enraptured.

Of course we synthesize our bodies with objects and appropriate mechanical behavior into our own catalogue of conduct, even more-so than the softer, fluid behavioral methods adopted as we transition through architectural spaces. With the proliferation of technological devices that require repetitive physical contact by certain parts of the body, it's not shocking to think that this could be a widespread phenomena. Our bodies become the circuitry that activates these objects--we are the electric current of the machine.

The Industrial Revolution generated the first and most powerful iterations of man embodying machinelike behavior. Unlike the quiet, artisanal method of production in which the individual takes total control over manufacturing, industry drowns out the maker's hand with a deafening, monotonous tone radiating from the orchestra of machines that now do the grunt work. Adamant in tone, Marx vividly describes the transformation of the factory laborer from a subjective craftsman into an objective appendage of a much larger, monstrous mechanism of mass production.

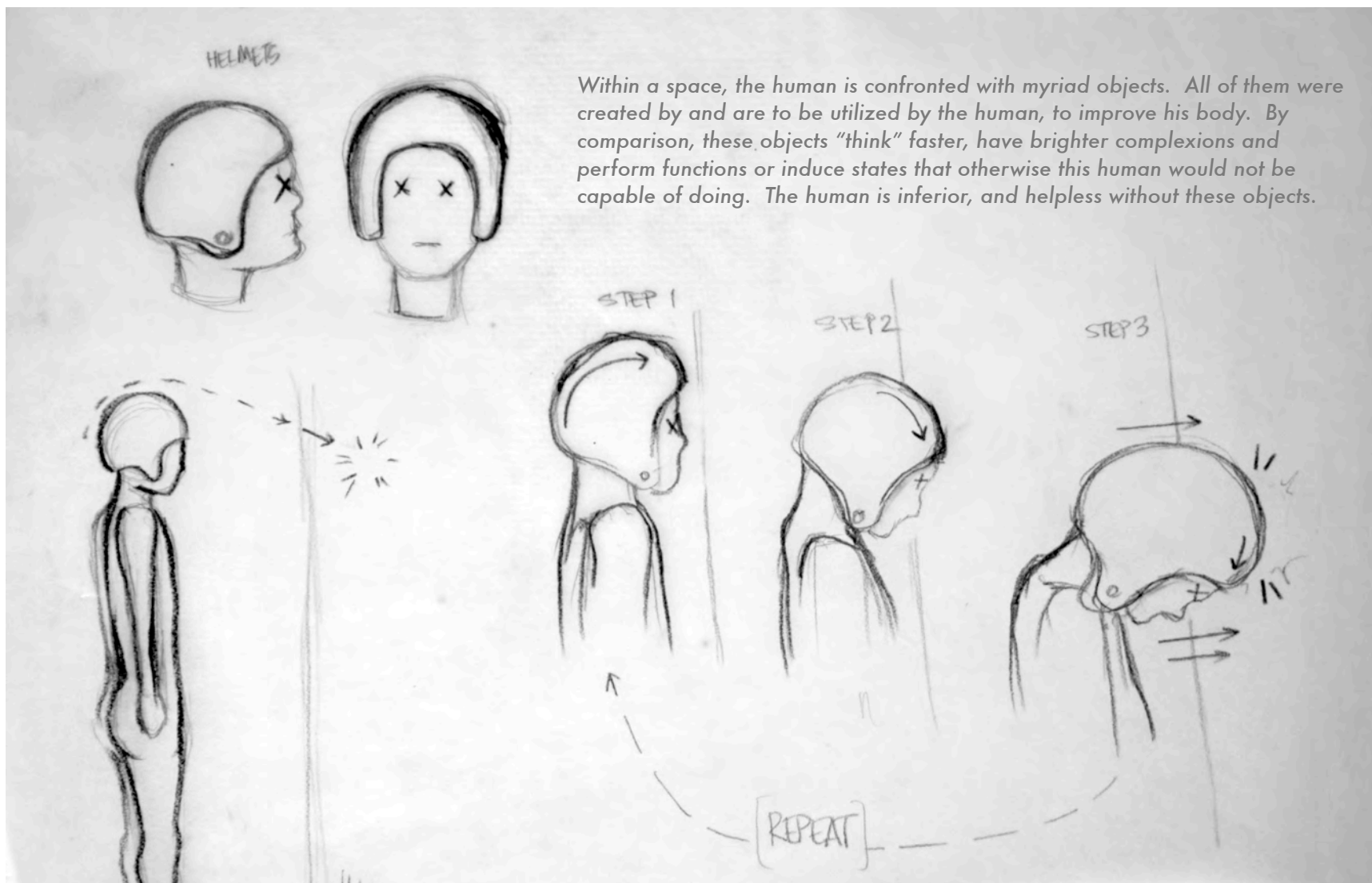
“...[A] labourer who all his life performs one and the same simple operation, converts his whole body into the automatic, specialized implement of that operation...constant labour of one uniform kind disturbs the intensity and flaw of a man's animal spirits...”⁹

Each laborer is assigned to an exclusive, probably diminutive function that they increasingly perform for the duration of the workday, and through this repetition, internalizes the action. Through muscle memory, the motor and sensory faculties of the individual adopt this behavior, rendering it an organic performance embedded in the human body.¹⁰ The fractional and automatic quality of divided factory labor, although more systematic and efficient, and ultimately more productive and profitable, certainly altered the mechanical state of each marginalized individual as they danced in synchronicity with the rigid, driving forces of the machine. An exhausting choreography.

Marx's observation offers a new layer of conceptual complexity that helps to problematize “imitation.” Although clearly relating to the invariable physical coordination that the laborer is subjected to, in its limitations, the behavior takes on a much graver consequence: a form of being governed. The laborer becomes a controlled unit, his or her individuality void of value, extinguished in the thunder of the capitalist machine. The quality of the human is extruded into a single shape of replicable and uniform consistency; the human is a commodity that resembles the parts of the machine. In search for profit, in search for *progress*, man sacrifices himself. In order to make progress, something gets destroyed:

“...constant labour of one uniform kind disturbs the intensity and flaw of a man's animal spirits.”

The sentence draws a powerful image, one that I wanted to animate, disrupt and dismember with my own body.



Within a space, the human is confronted with myriad objects. All of them were created by and are to be utilized by the human, to improve his body. By comparison, these objects "think" faster, have brighter complexions and perform functions or induce states that otherwise this human would not be capable of doing. The human is inferior, and helpless without these objects.

The human interacts with these objects and things in particular ways, to maximize their ameliorative and enhancing effects on this human's pathetic body. The human cannot live outside of these spaces, without these objects, and is prescribed to correct him or herself. These things are of a higher stature and with their parasitic or maybe paternalistic assistance, will emancipate the human from his or her own condition of flaw.

PART 2

AGAIN?

“Damn-it,” I thought, as complacency was slipped out from under my feet. Just as things had gotten cozy and I had made amends with the building, I found myself on the floor again. But this time, it wasn’t just a building—it was everything contained within it, both objects and ideas alike. Everywhere I looked, the mechanisms of control grinned back at me, smiling as if to say, “go ahead, try.” I was devastated as my imagination abstracted and warped the scene in front of me. People became robots, methodically pacing through the cavities of the building, intensely glaring into screens, tapping codes into them, speaking a pixelated language that hurt my ears. Nodding, sitting, standing up, shaking hands, sitting, typing, sitting. My colleagues in the building were avatars of Marx’s laborers, and my dread only exacerbated this image, erasing their emotion and filling the void with a flawless deadpan stare. I wanted to poke them and see them flinch, to stare into their eyes until tears dripped, to shake them out of their trance like an evangelist on steroids. Please god, don’t let me be (the only) human! It became my goal: to save them, to save myself, to preserve humanity. My main adversary? The insidious agency of *PROGRESS*. Its industrial force had unlocked my concern with imitation, rendering it as a tyrannical means of flattening or homogenizing the human, or perfecting the imperfectable. Extremist and absurd, I took a reductionist stance and began to contextualize progress as the pursuit of unattainable perfection, a battle in which humans were the casualty.

The imminent problem that I’m framing, which is progress as a form of (human) destruction, didn’t materialize overnight with the first installment of a textile mill. Although its visibility was heightened by the Industrial Revolution, this urge to (make) progress existed far

before Capital became the mode of exchange.¹¹ If we peer into the archive of civilization, we can make a parallel between modern progress and early man’s methods of survival; the former is only an evolution of the latter, both measures of success.

Our behavioral patterns are dictated by the obstacles in front of us: we’re programmed to adapt to whatever environment we find ourselves in, to subdue and conquer it so it’s fit to best serve our purpose: perpetuation of the species. Once we’ve mastered the lower-order needs within said environment our programming doesn’t turn off. Competitive creatures, we continue to seek methods of reinforcing our position of authority; we are programmed to excel. At some point in the development of civilized society, the trajectory of success bifurcated from the simple track of survival; the two are no longer equated, and success has far surpassed the coordinates of a system with recognizable values.¹²

In assessing the development of civilization in his book *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud notes the obvious, that humans have always implemented tactics and devices as a way of surviving the natural world, and one another.¹³ So not ironically, our contemporary condition, or this threat of humanity that I claim in the introduction, can be traced back to antiquity, when the first fire was lit and subsequently extinguished by the authority of man as he excreted his fluids on top of it. Representing man’s ability to control nature, this simple action is the first rendition of the on/off switch.

Fire and shelter are found at the foundation of survival, rudimentary examples of human manipulation over the material world in order to

better serve the purpose of propagation. These are justifiable means of exploitation, but the list of inventions and tools has since exceeded far beyond principles of endurance.

“With every tool man is perfecting his own organs, whether motor or sensory, or is removing the limits of their functioning.”¹⁴

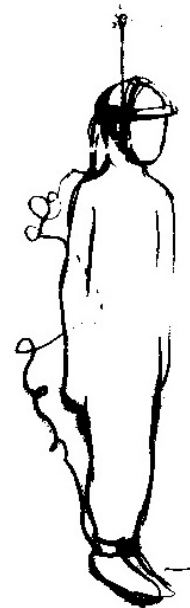
Freud wrote this in 1930, at the time when the telephone was still something attached to a wall, an undecorated utility that fundamentally served a single purpose: uniting individuals who long to be together in some capacity. Amplification for the voice, compression of time, money saved on postage.

Eighty years later, the list contains thousands of objects that have been released from their original, functional form. Mutants. Perhaps the most obvious, the telegraphic genealogy boasts an impressive morphology, the contemporary configuration being a lustrous yet utilitarian appendage: a portable device that not only instantaneously receives and transmits verbal information between people in different locations, but can tell time, tell you what you’re doing next, play music, do math, take photographs, watch videos, wake you up in the morning, buy things, predict the weather and allow the user to access the single-most comprehensive collection of world wide information.¹⁵ Not to mention other things. We also have paperless books, microchips embedded in the skin of lost pets that would otherwise be content as wild animals, vibrating toys for lonely adults, pills that improve the users’ state of mind and perpetual friendships that should have long-since fizzled out. Thanks to social networking applications like Facebook, we can now have the burden of keeping in contact with everyone we’ve ever met. And somehow, we still don’t have enough friends.

The lineage of products is over-populated by objects with no compulsory purpose, other than to serve the demands of our increasingly exhibitionist lifestyles, sustaining the curve of this extraneous development. We’re so accustomed to the assistance of

these enhancers that we’ve adopted them as naturalized and necessary extensions of our selves. We absolutely cannot leave our homes without our cellphones. If we do, we spend the day nervously and involuntarily patting our back pocket in a state of post-partum denial, as if the device is remotely inducing a tic so we never forget how important it is. The pat-check is an intermittent and obnoxious reminder that, even in its absence, it’s still an integrated part of the body.

We have polluted our physical space so densely with “smart devices,” that we’ve become immune to their intrusive presence. Or maybe so preoccupied with theirs, that we’ve forgotten our own. Buried beneath the objects we use, the identity of the human is not as discernible or belonging only to us, but is informed by the parasitic and paternalistic objects that conceal us, controlled by them.



So if the pursuit and acquisition of success (or as I'd like to argue, the perfecting of conditions) is only a naturally evolved, refined manifestation of survival tactics, and our species maturation is supported by these body extensions, does the identity of the human shift? And if so, does this pose a problem?

Both cyberneticists and sociologists will answer yes to the first. The second question is terribly subjective; however, scientific and technical researchers fielding this question have objectively analyzed the merging of man and machine as the inevitable outcome of the rapidly advancing field of artificial intelligence. A loose community surrounding this transformation has titled it the *Singularity*. The main thrust of the movement is not necessarily to promote cyborg philosophy, but to understand the implications of machine intelligence, and to prepare for the imminent occurrence of such sentient AI (Artificial Intelligence.) Raymond Kurzweil, the co-founder of this movement, predicts that computer intelligence will exceed that of human intelligence by the year 2045; he has many opposers, who insist that the neural and cellular architecture of the brain is far too complicated to be replicated in non-living matter. Using economic statistics and the history of technological progress, Kurzweil has plotted a graph that states otherwise--advances in this field are made exponentially, not linearly, and at our current placement on the timeline, we're just about there.¹⁶

Regardless of whether or not it is possible to download our consciousness, or invent computer consciousness, or create a new synthetic species that can reproduce on its own, or replace the entire labor force with superior agents, or render ourselves obsolete, or reverse the aging process and reach immortality...regardless of all these things, we are heading along a steep, upward trajectory, and as we consistently climb in this direction, there are consequences to be dealt with now. The reshaping of human identity isn't limited to the scope of physical modification through digitizing and prostheticizing our bodies; the transformation is much larger, bleeding into every aspect of human life, from the economic systems to the ecosystem to

the socio-psychological paradigm: Technology expedites our human interactions. Medicine mutates our bodies to be more resilient. Architecture encompasses us as protection from nature. Laws protect us from ourselves. All of these generalized factions of assistance seep into the social collective and infect the individual with a malaise of fallibility. Stemming from a total environmental persuasion, we are convinced of something: *humans are inadequate*. A deficit that is only curable by submitting to these emancipatory constructs of society that have implanted this problem in us. This here, is where I situate the problem.

Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben would call this inter-related uber-structure of universals that aim to control, the apparatus. The apparatus is not one area of discourse, one institution, one policy or one technology: it is the all-encompassing network of their aggregate existence, the emergent strategy that regulates the relationships between power, knowledge and society.¹⁷ Power and the control of knowledge are central focal points in Foucault and Agamben's disambiguation of the apparatus. I'd like to emphasize that the apparatus not only harnesses the human in its control, but itself is the force activating the human desire to achieve *perfection*.

Through the functioning of this capitalistic, global apparatus, we assume that we are in need of repair, and culturally consume the ameliorative agents that are forever being introduced to the market. We are desubjectified as we are captured in the tangled web of mass governance, our own identities mangled and dissolved in it. Our perspectives skewed by looking into *better* futures, the present is obscured. We become removed from the present conditions as the dominant objective of society is to continually move *forward*. In the momentum of global progress, the individual is disabled and diminished into a pixel in the ever-expanding network of progress. Independent judgement is easily impaired and societal structures can then be taken for granted, as the remedy for the self-deprecating anxiety they introduced in the first place.

To blindly accept the parameters for behaving, interaction, experiencing, is to dismiss questioning. If we aren't capable of distancing ourselves from what is laid in front of us and don't have the courage to critically analyze it, we allow it to control us. The absence of questioning is a surrender to consumer culture and hegemonic societies, or absorption by the spectacle that tantalizes us with aspirations of perfection.¹⁸ Guy Debord states it succinctly in his seminal work, *Society of the Spectacle*:

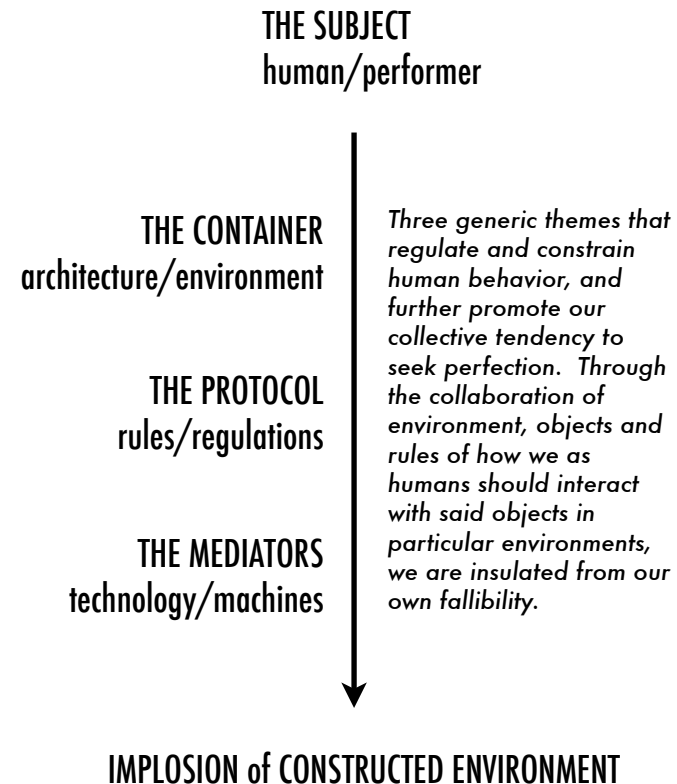
“The spectator’s alienation from and submission to [commodity and the social sphere] works like this: the more he contemplates [these objects and structures,] the more readily he recognizes his own needs in the image of need proposed by the dominant system, the less he understands his own existence and his own desires. The spectacle’s externality with respect to the acting subject is demonstrated by the fact that the individual’s own gestures are no longer his own, but rather those of someone else who represents them to him. The spectator feels at home nowhere, for the spectacle is everywhere.”¹⁹

Consumption is easy, and combined with the anxiety instilled through threat of punitive ramifications by authoritative or institutional powers, the act of questioning might be equated with crawling across the street in rush hour traffic. The collective trepidation we hold is almost justified. Why question if its easier to submit? I wanted to risk the traffic, to provoke and challenge the dominant path of progress.

THE EQUATION

I'm not a nihilist, but might be a luddite.²⁰ I wanted to place myself in a position that would empower me to dismantle the governance of architecture, technology and the codes of regulation we assume--to visually exemplify the futility of this exponential movement towards perfection and the symptoms that would incur. I began a series of performances that would exhibit the persuasive authority and restrictions of an environment, and insinuate the complications of it through machines or technology. The objective for the performer would be to firstly succumb to these oppressive forces, but by doing so, would in some way reverse the scenario; the environment would self-destruct, by the exploitation of a human in the implementation of its own authoritative agenda.

I devised a formula that did this and applied it to three non-sequential performances. Consisting of a few factors, both nouns and the verbs that activate them, this formula presented all of the elements needed to produce a catastrophic implosion of environmental control.



An entirely subjective method of evaluating and assessing The Condition (page 15), this schematic reductively illustrates the process of human extinction, depicted as the impossible struggle of flawless existence.

THE SUBJECT

sub·ject

noun |'səbjəkt|

1. The central variable which is transformed, or manipulated by interacting with the risk factors.



CHARACTERISTICS

noisy
clumsy
erroneous
fallible
natural
sensual
warm
spontaneous
emotional
impulsive
deliberate
instinctual
creative
responsive
mobile

SYNONYMS

Us, we, humans, people, the population, society, culture, community, consumers, bodies.

THE MEDIATORS

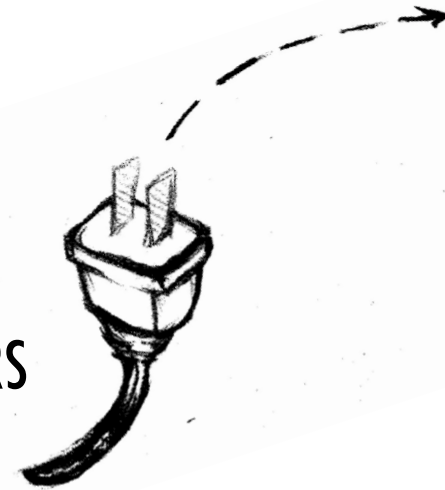
me.di.a.tor

noun |'mēdē,ātər|

1. The interactive debris within the container, that when handled properly either assist or hinder the subjects in achieving the goals of production, relevant to the perspective of the user.

FORMS

computer, phone, iPhone, iPad, iPod, iMac, iTunes, non-Apple devices, detritus, desk, chair, software, water bottle, coffee cup, vitamin, pill, money, mouse trap, ratchet strap, tape measure, masking tape, scotch tape, duct tape, mini-DV tape, mini-USB cable, things, more things, car, key, paper, pencil, eraser, control, alt, delete, tool, material, food, toilet, etc.



THE CONTAINER

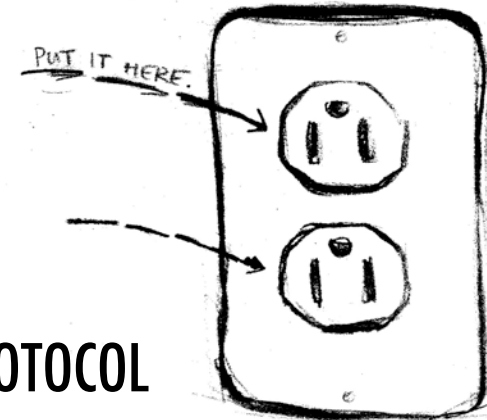
con.tain.er

noun |kən'tānər|

1. The physical environment in which the subject is situated, or the context. Its boundaries establish a score for navigation. It primarily refers to architectural constraints, but can also be interpreted loosely as that which provides a platform, a scenario, a stage.

FORMS

buildings, urban space, windows, doors, streets,
the office, the store, the home, the institution.



THE PROTOCOL

pro.to.col

noun |'prōtə,kōl; -käl|

1. The set of rules or processes for the subject to execute in order to effectively achieve the goals of production. It determines how the subjects will interact with the mediators within the container, or the standards by which their performance will be gauged. This spectrum of established regulations ranges between explicit and didactic, to inherited or assumed.

FORMS

social behavioral expectations, instruction
manuals, paths and roads, ISO standards,
measurement, policies, law, hours and minutes,
speed.

These vacant signifiers were the framework. For each performance, they would be defined.²¹ Through the intersection of these factors, I developed scores, that ultimately led to the total collapse of the situation. Creatively, I named it *The Equation*. It became my methodological approach for three performances documented on the following pages of Part 2.



INSTRUCTIONS
for GETTING LOST
Pages 59-68



MAINTENANCE
Pages 74-83



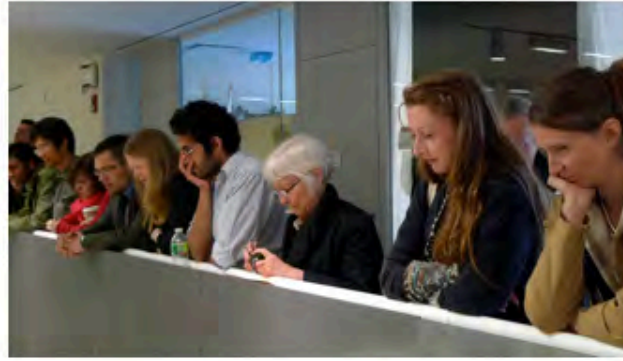
PROTOCOL
Pages 89-105

INSTRUCTIONS FOR GETTING LOST

PERFORMANCE + INSTALLATION
E14: MIT MEDIA LAB COMPLEX
SPRING 2010

a performative abstraction of the dichotomous behavior of humans in a highly systematized and accelerated culture. simultaneously machine and animal, we are a hybrid species: producing but rapidly destroying. globally communicating but distantly connected. apathetic but empathetic. capable of instinct but deactivated by networked conformity. independently mobile but blindly obedient. the systems and structures we use to contain ourselves are deteriorating, but with a beautiful flaw so characteristically unique of humans that only we can recognize it as so.

Image credits:
Nómeda Urbonas and Ben Jordan



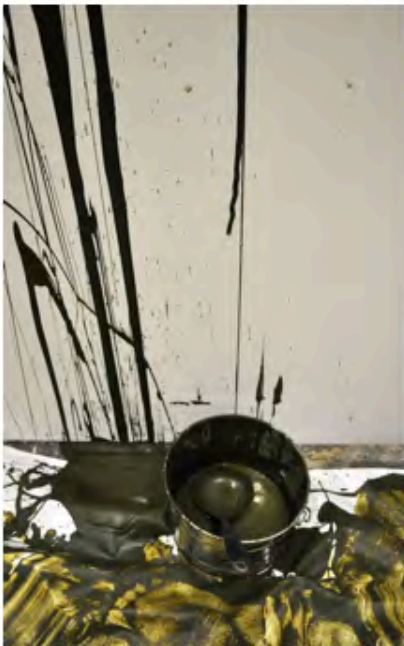
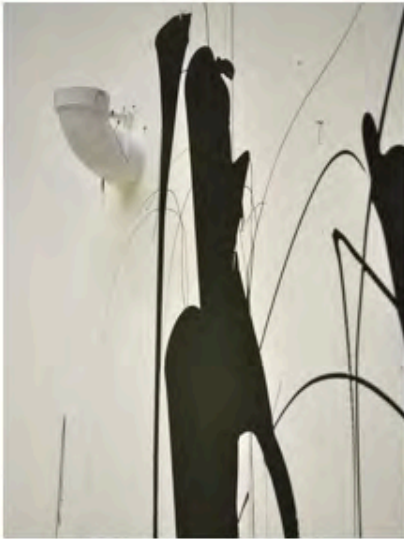
AUDIENCE

Located on a mezzanine or balcony one floor-level above the performers in the white room. There are no windows built into the set. The only position to observe from is above.



THE CONTAINER

A sterile white room, blank and brightly lit. Composed of 4 walls and a floor, each one a perfect square, creating a symmetrical cube. No roof. Entrance/exit or other portholes will not be obvious. With the exception of the 4 performers contained inside it, the room is entirely absent of visual information. This room may be located in a larger room in which other things are happening.



THE SUBJECTS

4 performers each occupy one corner of the cube. Their dress will be identical, regardless of sex: blindfolded and minimally dressed in baggy socks and underwear, all cotton and white. They will begin by standing near their designated wall, facing in no particular direction. Each performer has been instructed to follow a particular score of movement. Once the performance has commenced, they will proceed to mechanically execute the predetermined sequence of actions without communicating or interacting with the others. Behavior will be void of human quality. Expressionless and calculated.

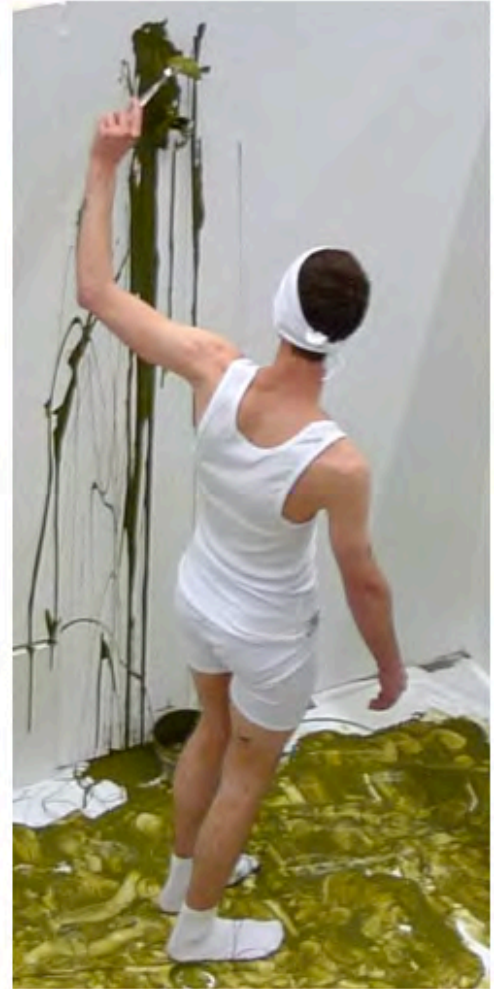
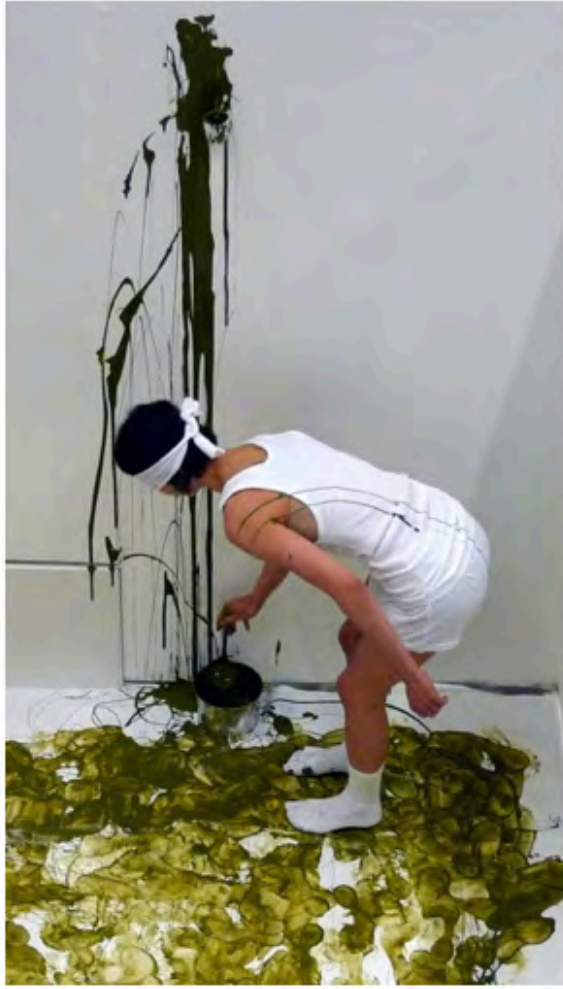


THE MEDIATORS

Each performer is equipped with 3 devices to motivate and execute their particular scores of movement: A bucket filled with viscous green liquid, a ladle and a narrow, open-ended pipe, fixated near the top of a remote wall. Each performer has been instructed to complete the same task of emptying their bucket. They are to do so by transferring the liquid to a designated pipe, one ladleful at a time. The pipes are significantly smaller than the buckets, and have the capacity to hold only a fraction of the volume being transferred.



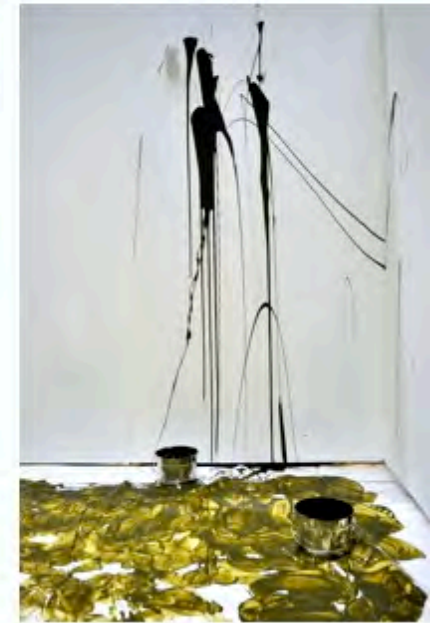
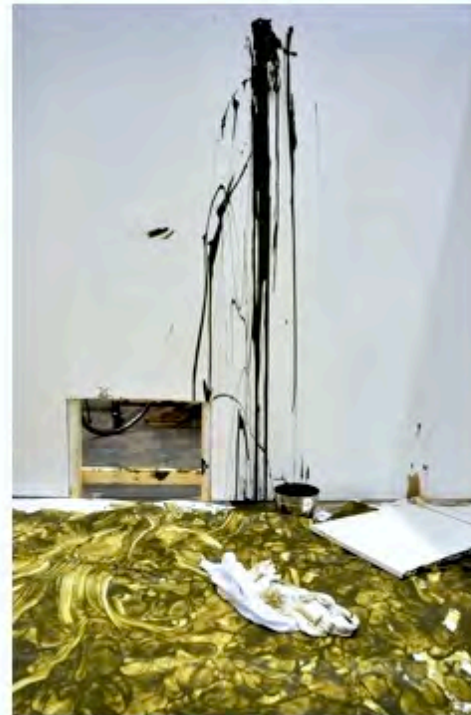
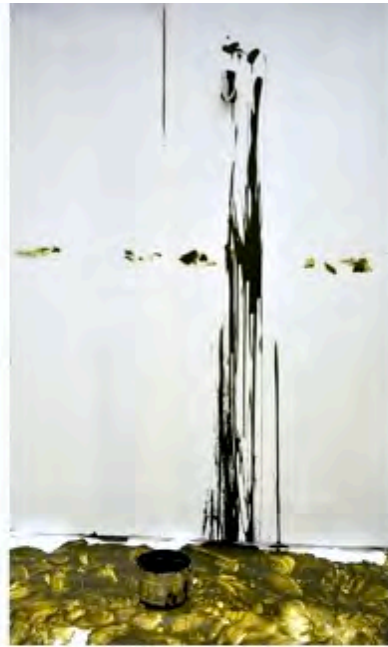
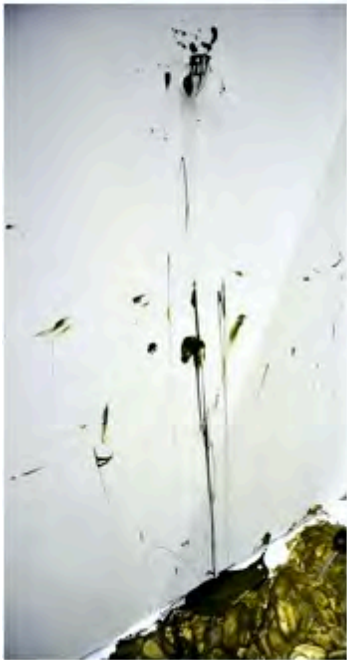












Technology is evolving more rapidly than the human body. Progress, as demonstrated in obscure or useless applications of technology, seems to be motivated by an urgency of competition. Each advancement eclipses the last, fueled by the anxiety of accelerated culture.

These advancements, designed to prove competency of the creator among particular, elite circles, are eventually reconfigured for marketability and are filtered into the general population. Specialized technology is made available to the public through menial ameliorative accessories, advertised with the intention of "making life easier." These specialized devices proliferate and become standard, eventually necessary, increasing global reliance upon corporate products.

Subjected to this aggressive pace of networked and systematized culture, the individual conforms and adapts to its protocol. The employment of instinctual thought and sensory faculties is reduced, obsolete. Conscious and deliberate thought cannot compete with the instantaneous processing mechanisms of industry.

Captured within the conduits of a complex, regulated labyrinth, the human body exercises automation. Bland, boring, blind. Disabled by the violent momentum of homogenized culture, our senses struggle to recognize and communicate their desperate message that something is lost.

MAY 2010

INSTRUCTIONALLY SOUND

Instructions for Getting Lost (IFGL) was structurally resemblant of instruction-based conceptual work in the 1960s and 70s. The scenario is easily associated with the Fluxus artists and their scores: a performer would be prompted by a set of written or illustrated instructions, which were often very ambiguous and absurdist in nature, and might be given a few props to assist them in the execution of the score. The act of interpretation on part of the performer was a main principle behind the vaguely scripted instructions, eliciting an indeterminate (and often humorous) result—one that could be interpreted by any number of performers, but could never be duplicated.²² I understood the equation as an iteration of these instructional performances. Taking into consideration the labor-factor that characterized *IFGL*, I began to apply the term “task-oriented” to my performances.

IFGL followed the equation precisely, exhibiting the human as automaton, an empty carrier for this act of inevitable destruction. The white clothing worn by the performers became signifiers of their blankness, as empty vessels. The blindfolds prevented them from witnessing and questioning their behavior. The expressionless demeanor of the four performers in *IFGL* placed them in a state of submission as they followed the score and applied the tools as instructed. The messy product of their dutiful behavior was successful. Despite the rupture, they remained unaffected and distanced.

They became machines.

a few notes on machines

Although more subtly than the 19th century textile mill laborer, we continue to submit ourselves to un-humanlike behavior imposed on us by the machines we interact with, or maybe of more prominence, we delegate to them the jobs we once did with our own bodies, *discarding* these procedural sets of physical behaviors and reducing our own to a minimal exercise for the fingers. Every time I enter a cafe, I have to chuckle at the landscape: multiple bodies, close in proximity but entirely dissociated, each channeling their energy into identical illuminated screens. The atmosphere resonates lightly with the layered tracks of tapping, the dainty score of fingers transcribing the isolated thoughts of the mind. When I enter the fabrication facility at the MIT Media Lab, I witness a similar but noisier version of the cafe scene. Students sit in rolling office chairs, iPods plugged in, emails open, half-distracted as they babysit screeching robotic arms that carefully travel calibrated braces along X and Y axes, cutting large sheets of stock with precision. Pencils and paper are nowhere in sight. AutoCad and Rhino (3D design software) beam from desktop computers at every work station, valid substitutes. These programs not only reduce shop clutter and contain the design drawings in one place, but they also do (a lot of) the work of designing for you. Admittedly, these tools allow for more elaborate, innovative and sturdy realizations of the imagination, but not without

removing the signature of its creator. The removal of the creator from the process of fabrication is the first step in leveling not only the diversity of physical attributes of our environment, because they are then all produced by replicable methods; it also emotionally disengages the creator, placing him in an almost-ambivalent position of spectator as he watches the machine magically manufacture.²³ This is a disservice to and debilitation of the humans who replace themselves indifferently. But stress leads to heart disease, so maybe it's not a total disservice to hand over a few of the jobs.

On the other end of the spectrum, we have the iAddicts. The over-achievers. For them, machine assistance isn't a method of simplifying duties and labor; it's a method of making their own lives a total mess by creating a complicated, chaotic social life that simultaneously needs to be lived and responded to, both in person and through the screen. A vicious cycle of "using" that, if stopped, might lead to withdrawal.²⁴ Substance abuse. Through the advent of portable and networked communication devices, we are prone to heightened and unrealistic expectations of ourselves. The augmentation of communication fostered by these practical devices, while being their primary function, negates their slogan of simplicity. On an average weekday, I electronically receive 8 academic lecture

announcements, 6 important unclassifiable announcements, 2 meeting reminders, 4 call-for-proposals, 150 pieces of junk mail and about 18 personal messages that necessitate my immediate response. Just through this one conduit, I'm presented with the prospect of a very exciting week. Opportunity just magically presents itself to me, knocking on the door that is my face. But the task of filtering through the heaps of electronic messages in and of itself is justification for hiring a secretary. Especially if I decided I wanted to do anything besides look at the pixelated version of these opportunities on the screen. We're convinced that we too operate with the speed, endurance and consistency of the machines we've surrounded ourselves with.

It goes without saying that the machines I refer to in contemporary times are drastically different from the gargantuan and violent contraptions that Marx references. No longer is the machine defined by the visibility of its rapidly churning parts, the audible proclamations of its power, or its placement in a facility that paints the sky with lovely shades of gray. The stereotypical assembly line tended to by hundreds of drones is only one variation of meaning. Which is so far gone that it takes on a romantic, classic character of nostalgia. Machines have evolved from their initially dirty and cumbersome presence into attractive units of hand-held property, profitable in part by their cuteness. There's a machine out there for every shopping enthusiast, and in every color too!

The shift in operator or user has radically altered the meaning of machine, dispersing the power of production and communication from aristocratic hands swathed in white gloves into the grimy, coarse hands of the everyday individual. Although the division of labor among factory laborers promoted specific isolation of a laborer's task, the environment of production was collaborative, each laborer instrumentalized as a vital organ in the complex assemblage of machinery.²⁵

Now, we're faced with an archipelago of authorities, individuals privately consulting with and employing their machines. To compliment this more isolated and intimate relationship between humans and their pet machines, we are witnessing a role reversal, in which the machines are taking on qualities of our own. In response to this personalized possession of machines,



it seems that the folks steering the capitalist agenda have found a way to convince computer engineers to collaborate with plastic surgeons. These little machines we all take home have been endowed with attractive features that make them more irresistible to caress than a real human body, without the risk of getting dumped. Shinier, smoother surfaces gracefully entice hands. The laptop, with its resting place for the hands is something like a more private and tactile television. Images on its screen are vivid, brightly mimicking what the eye detects. But even more picturesque and saturated than reality; I swear the sky was a little gray that afternoon. Sound effects sweetly disregard the pixilated attributes we'd expect from an electronic register. My morning alarm clock arouses me delicately, falsely inserting me into a concert hall upon waking. And since robots and devices made to optimize human performance are programmed down to every last nanometer, it's hard to imagine them as fallible, making them all the more complimentary and admirable to the humans that coddle them.

Seduction follows. Of course we're going to become intimately involved with machines²⁶. These objects are sexy. I don't deny it. I'll be the first to admit that I'm having a romantic affair with my macbook pro. My fingers caress, stroke its body as it lovingly displays my own affection on its face. I stare at it almost all day long. I invite my cell phone to graze my ear, encouraging it to reach down to the soft spot on the underside of my chin. I speak to it, not withholding any feelings or secrets.

These objects receive more attention from me than my partner. Whom I don't even need because I have an iPod, an iMac, an iPhone, and am making room in my schedule for an iPad. When are they coming out with the iPenis?

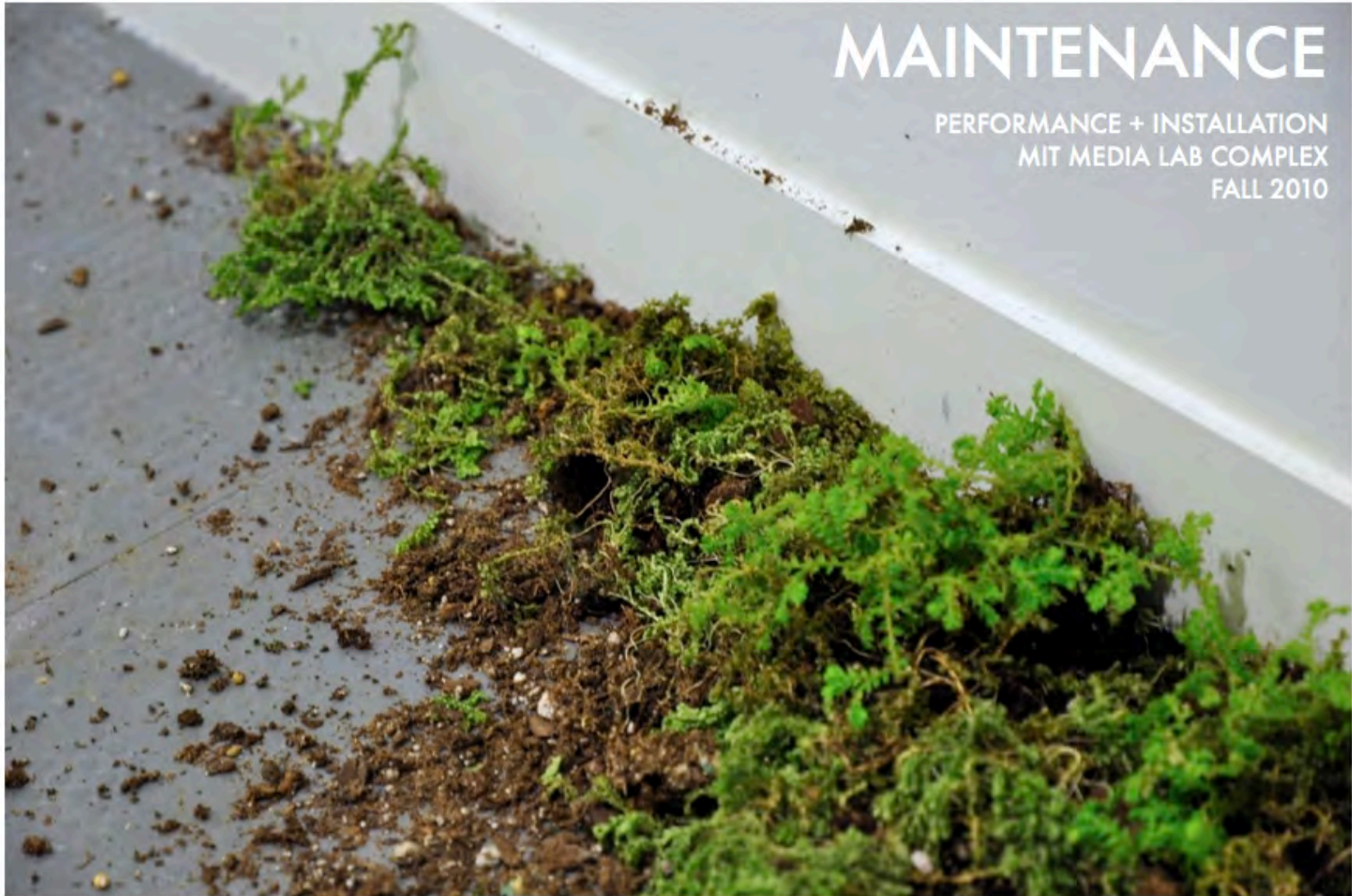
Latour criticizes the suffix of "anthropo" tacked onto morphism as redundant. All of these machines are anthropo-ish, as they are products produced by a society composed of humans²⁷. It's inevitable that they're already endowed with qualities of our own. They're just mediators for concealed, narcissistic admiration. I like to think of it as an identity crisis.

Not unlike the concept of "getting used to," the human race is restructuring its understanding of the self through proliferate and routine applications of technology. our dependence on technology is inescapable, the circuits wildly embedded and exponentially stitching with a pulse of its own. And what we've birthed is a spiritual hybrid of human and machine, a compliant and well-endowed species.

INEVITABLE FAILURE

It became clear to me at this point that perfection wasn't a lone, driving theme in my work. The spotlight was shared by flaw, and maybe even failure: flaw as inseparable from the human. As something we perpetually deliver. With *IFGL*, the flaw was a product that innocently unfurled, and ultimately became the opposing and dominant force that annihilated the constructed environment. In recognizing this as the antibody, I became a proponent of failure, celebrating it. Perfection and the apparatus that invokes it became less important as my focus was redirected towards its archenemy. I wanted to create failure.²⁸

NOTE: The two preceding performances were solo performances, myself employed as "the subject." In both cases, "the container" was a small window space that faced the lobby of E14. The equation was reduced to a simple "task" to be performed, in which the performer would be presented with an impossible job to complete, the absurdity inserted or exacerbated by the difficult tools that have been provided to assist her in doing so.



MAINTENANCE

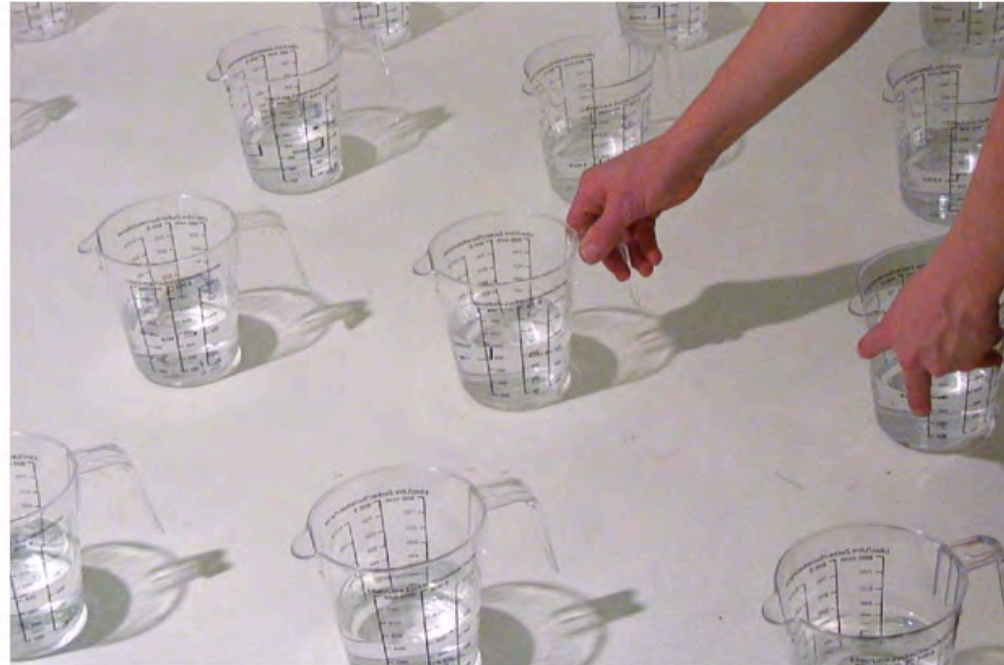
PERFORMANCE + INSTALLATION
MIT MEDIA LAB COMPLEX
FALL 2010

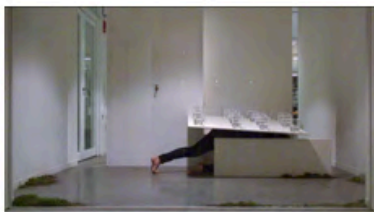


PERFORMANCE TASK DESCRIPTION

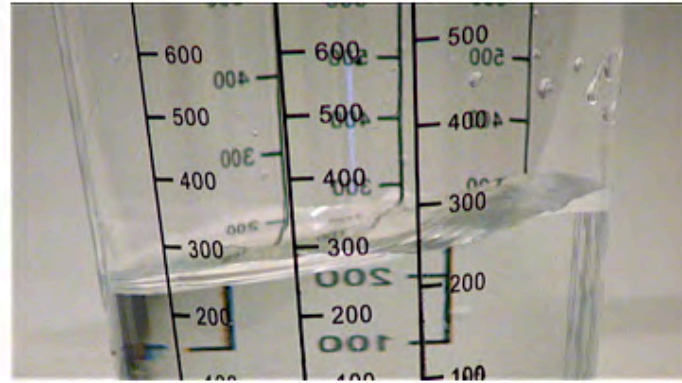
Fill 16 measuring cups with equal amounts of water. Evenly space them on the table. Use the table to deliver the water to the plants.



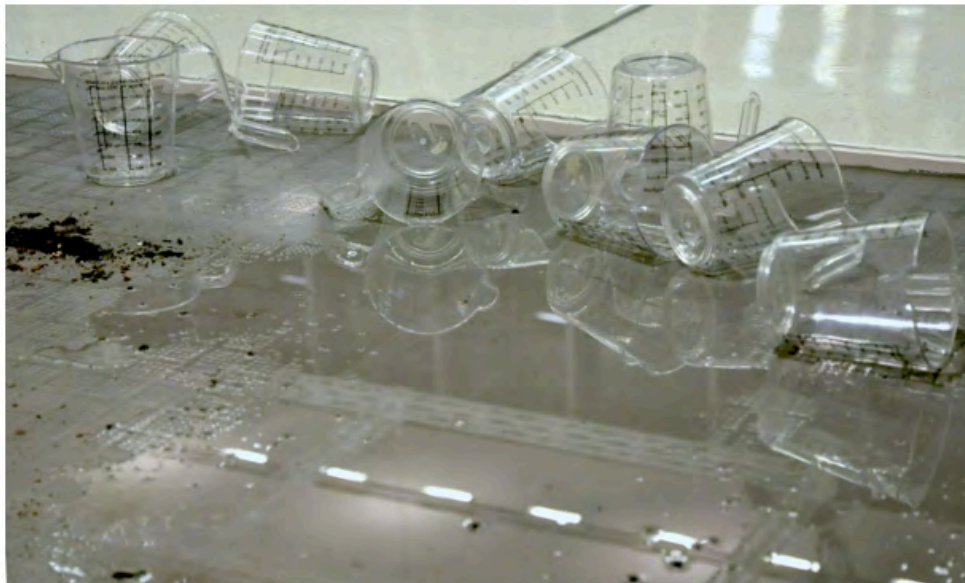














It's unproductive and ignorant to dismiss technological progress as a trivial, nonessential aspect of human survival. Without it, I wouldn't be able to transmit (these) words to you except through my vocal cords, which would malfunction in the possible absence of an immediate source of potable water. But superficially floating on the spectacle of innovation, recent explosions of extraneous technological interfaces are no longer generated within the paradigm of necessity. Instead we're confronted with a whole new species that exists (without cognitive but still good intentions) to improve the quality of already-comfortable life. In the search for ever-increasing modes of efficiency, precision, and perfection, we've adapted to and adopted these proliferate mediators as prosthetics, which paradoxically produce complicated and flawed situations.



STATEMENT

October 2010

FAILED FAILURE

A predictable situation, the dominant critical comment *Maintenance* conveyed was again a trite pointing of rebellious fingers: “look what happens when we follow the rules!” Failure was present, but not all-permeating. The performer may have been disappointed in her failed struggle to defy gravity and carefully nourish the plants that pathetically sprouted in the joints of the unsuspecting room. But I found that, like the performers in *IFGL*, her compliance with the protocol given to her, although eliciting the destructive result I was looking for, conceptually *agreed* with the equation. Both of the preceding performances became a statement that fulfills its demands by saying, “yes, humans are grateful, robotic servants to these constructed environments.”

In both *IFGL* and *Maintenance*, the performers remained removed from the disaster they illustrated. They were equipped with a set of tools or devices, which were also responsible for the destruction; but as crutches, these objects became buffers, protecting the performers from assuming total liability.

The mediating tools we use to quickly transfer and process information are devaluing our innate, sensual propensity to experience the world through confrontations of the body, both physically and emotionally. Our vulnerability has been reduced. Vulnerability is a vital attribute used in distinguishing living things from non-living things. Biology claims that humans are animals: voluntarily acting creatures, responding instinctually and spontaneously to the stimuli that provokes them. Each response becomes a risk.

Maintenance and *IFGL* didn't satisfy this need for vulnerability. The humans were indifferent. The minimalist aesthetic only contributed to the apathy--the vignettes could be viewed as white cube iterations of slap stick. In the following piece, I wanted to extend this flaw into the persona of the human, as a qualifying adjective. Not only would the constructed environment disintegrate, but the performer, in the act of failing, would be aware of this vulnerability and manifest the quality in herself.



TEST RELEASE
video still
Spring 2011

MAPPING the SYMPTOMS: suspiciously tame

Understanding civilization as “invented,” or a constructed reality that organizes and simplifies life for humans, it’s evident that the development of tools, government, business, hospitals, institutes, urban centers, et al. would be both products of and fuel for progress. But essentially, how does the perpetual ambition towards societal “betterment” *psychologically* affect the human?

impatient

aggressive

excitable

passionate

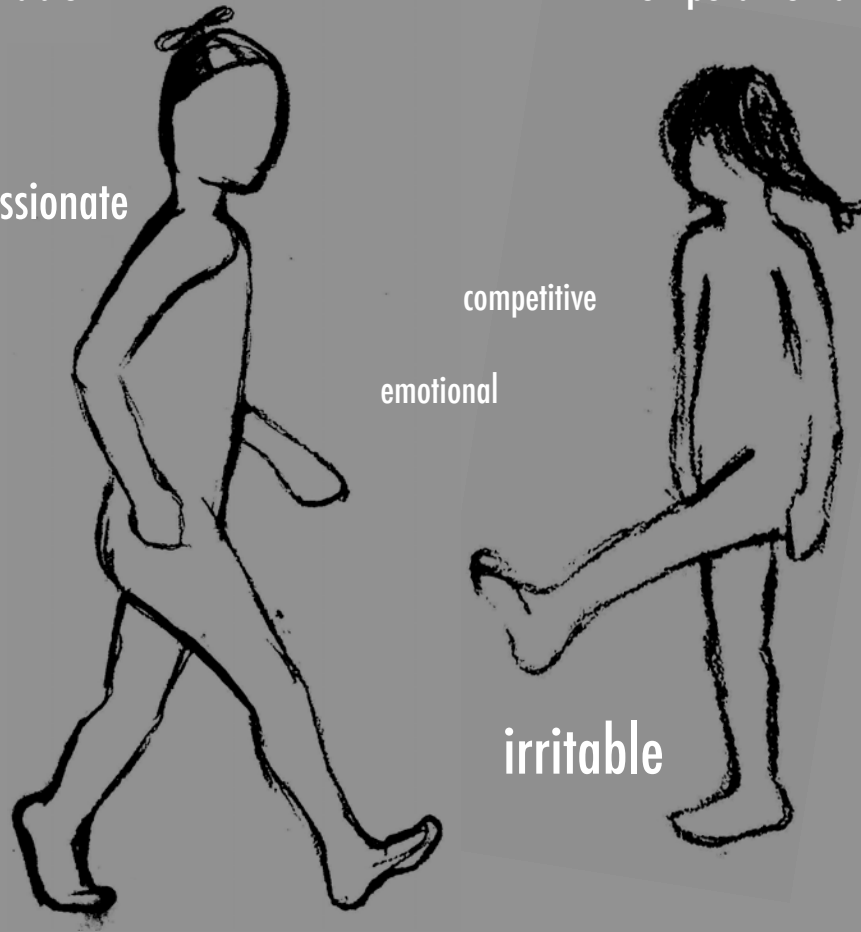
expressive

temperamental

competitive

emotional

irritable



HUMANS: DISINFECTED

At first glance, the idea of perfecting something has a humane, altruistic aura. But fundamentally, humans are flawed. To perfect conditions requires suppression and censoring of the self. The ego resides in a space of incessant conflict, adapting and conforming to the external demands of society, a direct repression of the instinctual, aggressive animal spirit that fortifies our biology.²⁹ A part of the human is compromised.

Freud would obviously root this sublimation as stemming from our libidinal interests, toggling between our repression of sexual and scatological tendencies, which he attributes to the evolutionary erection from a four-legged species to one that walks on two legs:

“From that point the chain of events would have proceeded through the devaluation of olfactory stimuli and the isolation of the menstrual period to the time when visual stimuli were paramount and the genitals became visible, and thence to the continuity of sexual excitation, the founding of the family and so to the threshold of civilization...With the assumption of an erect posture by man and with the depreciation of his sense of smell, it was not only his anal erotism which threatened to fall a victim to organic repression, but the whole of his sexuality, so that since this [moment], the sexual function has been accompanied by a repugnance which cannot further be accounted for, and which prevents its complete satisfaction and forces it away from the sexual aim into sublimations and libidinal displacements.”³⁰

From here, we can assume that we've been trained to extend our shame into other facets of emotional and behavioral instincts. Here, I'd like to consider aggression, anger and defeat as expressions we'd rather not expose. Yes, these first two exhibit potential for abuse if not channeled correctly. But the taming of the human (which is firstly to ensure the safety of civilization) has narrowed our outlets to vent these naturally arising sensations. They are carnal, biological expressions that require expulsion. Aggression in particular indicates the pure intensity of human emotion, a fundamental and direct desire linked to passion, and sexuality. Yet another vital life-force that perpetuates the species. Defeat is an equally important faction of the ego--if we're conditioned to hide our weaknesses, we create an environment that not only encourages the exponential rise of competitive power structures, but one that is dishonest and self-deceiving.

On the other hand, we've been conditioned to curtail our smiles in moments of victory and avoid prideful expressions of joy. Or to falsely congratulate the enemy in his moment of triumph. An omnidirectional network of mixed signals, we're uncertain of the true location and shape of our actual emotions.

In promoting failure, I'd like my work to afford room for defeat, for vulnerability. I'd like to provide a space for the performer to psychologically release, be it aggression, disappointment or pleasant elation. A democratic space that allows the representation and collision of the emotions. Total contamination.

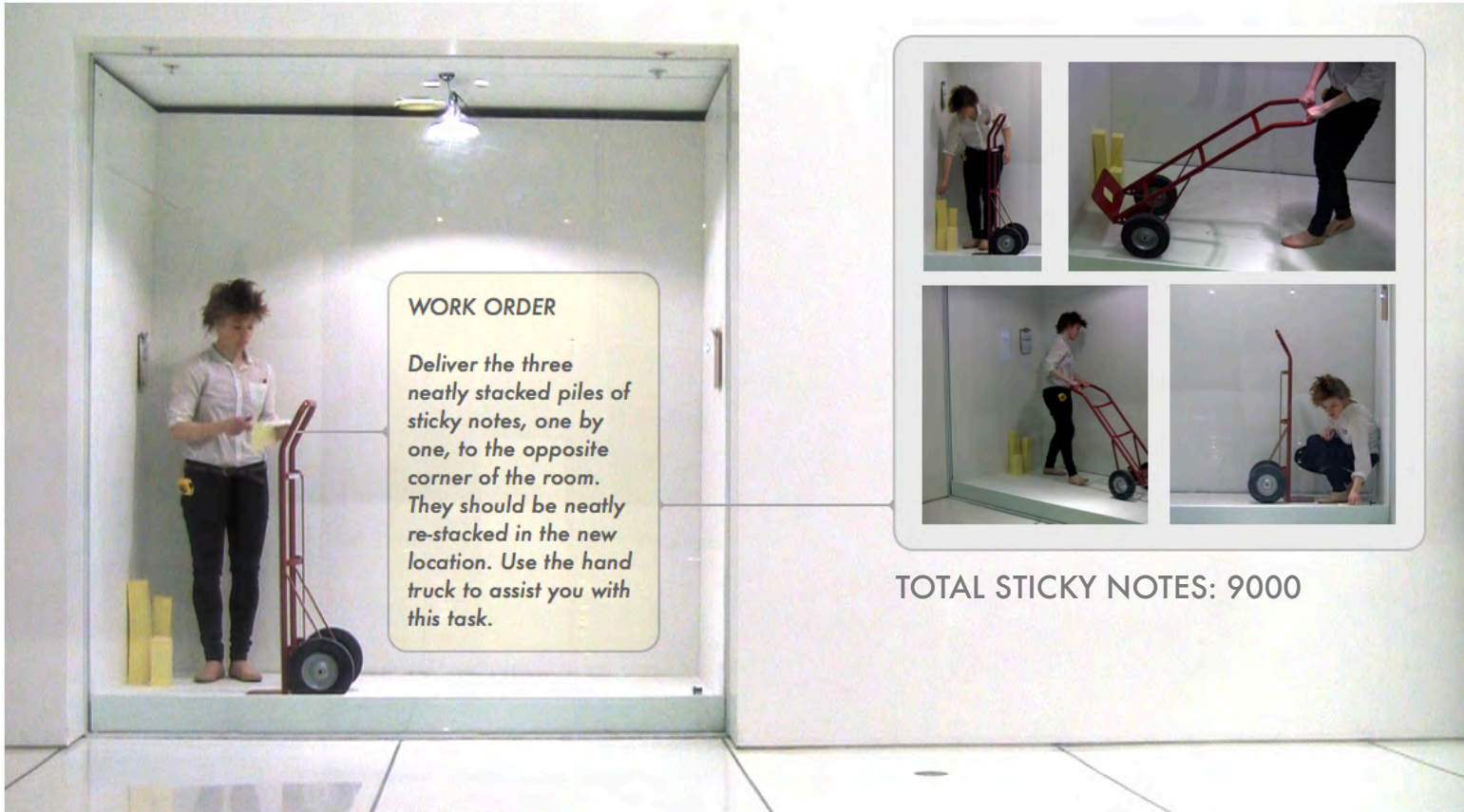
FAILURE PERFECTED

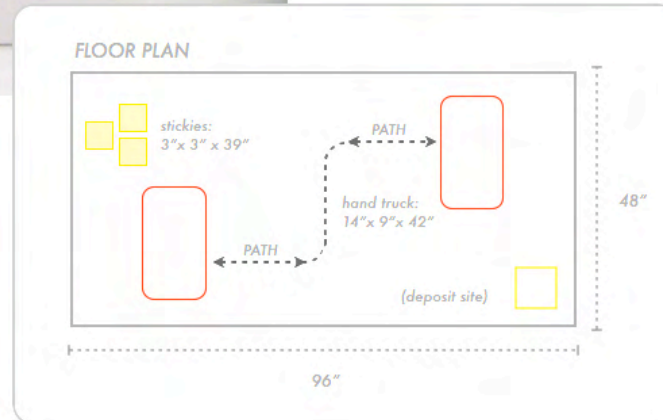
The missing factor was emotion. It had to be visible in order to fully portray this vulnerability; not as defeat necessarily, but as a gesture that defies or *rejects being governed*. I wanted to see something happen *to* the human. To see this body return to an honest state, to be frustrated by the overly rigid and stultifying circumstances. Similar to my own experience in the desert, I wanted the performer to portray the human in an erratic state of liberation. She would resist and retaliate, accepting her own inability to comply, her image reflecting the opposite of her perfected environs. And in acknowledging this vulnerability, feels pain. She would throw something, kick something, maybe make a face. Proving that perfection can't be derived from the human, that the stride toward it might be a stride towards extinction. Perfection is human decay. I wanted to see the human in his own inevitable, but beautiful state of failure. A backwards form of self-preservation.

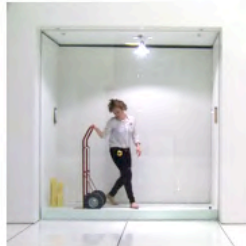
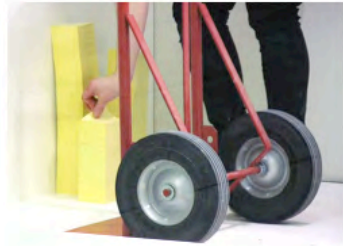


PROTOCOL

PERFORMANCE + INSTALLATION
MIT MEDIA LAB COMPLEX
SPRING 2011

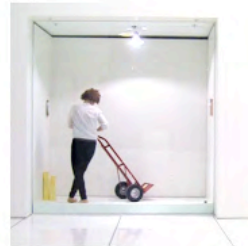






STEP 1: Grab sticky note.
STEP 2: Place sticky note onto hand truck surface.
STEP 3: Move hand truck in reverse.





STEP 4: Carefully maneuver hand truck in clockwise direction to approach docking site.





*STEP 5: Safely halt hand truck.
STEP 6: Remove sticky note from truck bed.
STEP 7: Place sticky note on top of the new stack, neatly.*

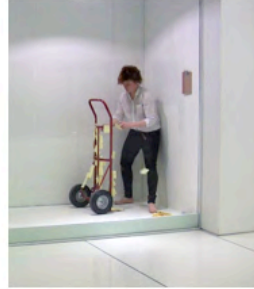
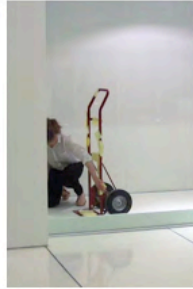
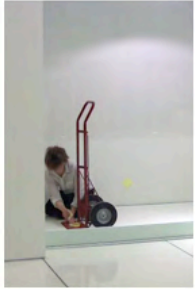




STEP 8: Reverse follow the path from the deliver site and return to pick-up location.
STEP 9: Repeat process until all sticky notes have been relocated. (9000 in total.)

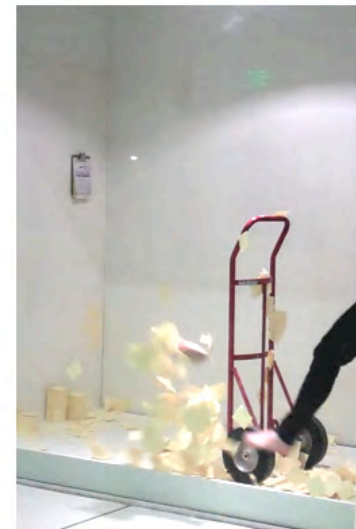
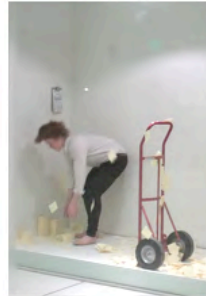




















HALT

There came a point when I needed to stop. It wasn't the acceptance of, but the *promotion* of failure, that became problematic. Everything became an instance of pre-planned defeat, and in focusing my efforts so intently on this inevitable decomposition, I crumbled in tandem. In overstepping the boundaries of tolerant forgiveness, I tread on territory that's inherently destined to collapse in on itself. I was setting myself up for failure.

This would be a good time to elaborate on the distinction I make between Sarah as performer and Sarah as Sarah. As the preceding pages might point to, it's hard to differentiate between the two. Allen Kaprow, who lies on the extreme end of the indistinction between art and life, might consider it ironic to even take on the title "artist." In his 1966 Manifesto that articulates his understanding of the (then) contemporary artists' departure from traditional art historical contexts in the attempt to discover a "new" stance that resides outside these discipline boundaries, he defines the "everyday" artist:

"[to assume the role of artist is] an attestation not to talent for a specialized skill, but to philosophical stance before elusive alternatives of not-quite-art and not-quite-life. *Artist* refers to a person willfully enmeshed in the dilemma of categories who performs as if none of them existed."³¹

The Art/Life synthesis he challenges in this excerpt is referring to an artistic practice that obliterates the contextualizing of art as such; a practice in which the artist consciously perceives their habitual interactions with the world as both art and non-art. And although I don't necessarily operate within Kaprow's granular paradigm that recognizes brushing teeth as a potential, personal performance, I do believe the two (the "real" Sarah and the performer Sarah) are intrinsically bound. My work is the negotiator; the elasticity that enables a variable distance between the two. As an intuitive, instinctual, emotional character in both instances, it's difficult to be precise.

The work I produce is not necessarily by choice. An artist's work is always "about" something. For me, this "about" is generated by genuine and/or unavoidable investment in "it." (be it technological advancement, climate change, politics, etc). Or more accurately, because I directly sense this topic's impact on me as an individual, a "real" person. My performances are not theatrical, in the sense that the role I play is not one I can fall in and out of. Rather, it's a role that allows me to activate a facet of myself that's otherwise concealed, or inhibited.³² My work differs from Kaprow's proposition in that my performances are not actually located in the everyday--they are not formulated as the conscious recognition of undecorated, organically emerging experiences. They are intentional actions taking place in a specifically designed space; but my intentions are endowed with the consciousness that these performances

are a form of behavioral research that will eventually loop back into my practical life as a form of experiential knowledge, or as the circulation of inquiry that is never fully answered.

I've always questioned my role as a cultural producer. As an artist practicing at an institute whose foundation is built on the technical sciences, I've been prompted by my environment to critically assess not only my own role, but the entire field of artistic research within this context. Like most college campuses, MIT functions like an autonomous society, but one that has particularly sharp momentum and speed, a rapidly advancing techno-utopia of its own. When compared to the more concrete, objective sciences that dominate the culture here, the field of art might be marginalized as an insignificant and extraneous byproduct. But in this juxtaposition, the criticality of an artistic practice becomes even more potent, more visible in its dialectical stance. Art is a critical mirror to the world, operating as a speculative machine that enables its makers and audience to peer through a transformative lens. Artistic production provides alternative, inquisitive platforms for understanding and engaging within a given context; it's not a method to procedurally solve problems, but instead a liberated method of processing and communicating information. It's a framework for exploring alternative potentials in the "real world," or for *suggesting* the possibility of them in a critical voice.³³ It's the dissection, synthesis and production of a subjective knowledge, or a perpetual feedback loop of curiosity and investigation.

"When you attend to how your performance affects your real life...when you attend to how it may have altered the social and natural surroundings...it can be basic research."³⁴

Allen Kaprow, *Nontheatrical Performance* (1976)

Like Kaprow, I want to experience the research, to produce a cache of knowledge that can be translated and applied in the everyday. Yes, the problematics I subject myself to as a performer are slight exaggerations, maybe dramatic distortions, of my everyday reality. But performance is my processing of reality, a conduit through which I'm continually redefining myself. Which has its down-sides.

The caged, chaotic character I had been nourishing was intolerable and paranoid, stepping on my heels constantly. I was propelled forward with a frenetic energy, fraught with anxiety. Speeding directly into the walls I had built around me, my entire being was screaming at me to stop. So I slammed on the breaks and bought a turtle.

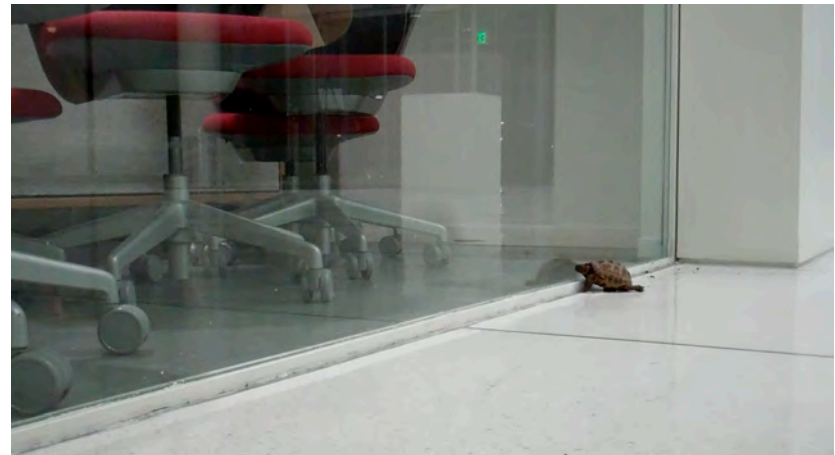


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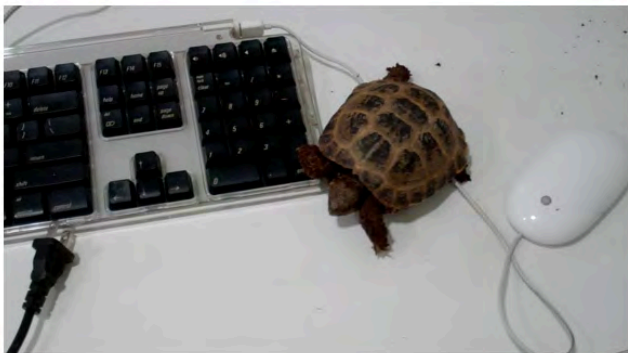
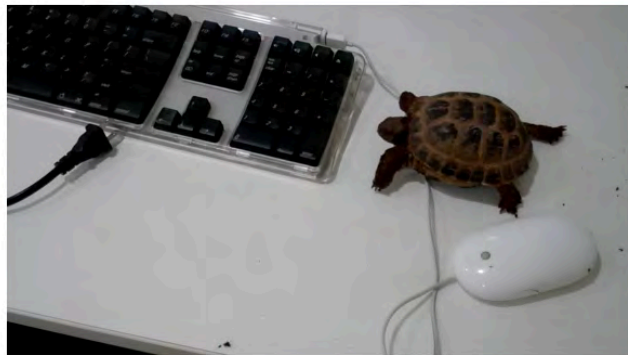
PART 3

SLOWING DOWN

I've never had a pet, nor have I ever wanted one.³⁵ I have a hard enough time getting myself fed and dressed in the morning. But there was a deep, vague magnetism, an instinctual yearning that lured me to this timid and prudent creature. I thought about it for a long time, and understood that he would be with me for a long time. One night in January, I stopped thinking about it and did it. I drove to PetCo. Twenty minutes later, I had a pet that would be with me for twenty (x3) more years. We returned to my studio, and he was shell-shocked, his stubby limbs and wrinkled neck retracted, frozen underneath his brown dome. There wasn't much to do with him once I set up his small terrarium. So we sat. Eventually, his tiny head emerged, unfolding the creases of skin that blankets it. I'm not sure what illogical thoughts were moving through my head, but I brought him down to the lobby of E14. In no way had I anticipated working with this tortoise. This companion was not a worker to be exploited. It was a relationship to nurture as a personal gift to myself. A symbolic gesture.



Correction, it was a tortoise.



TURTLE THERAPY
PART 1

I had actually been planning to work with animals in the building for a while, as a way of deflecting the nature/culture argument from the human and reshape the work into a more literal, direct conversation.

First, I considered rabbits. In addition to their notoriety for rapid procreation, their frenzied and nervous energy would be a nice compliment to the sterile ecology of the building. After a few discussions with another student, he advised me to reconsider. “You’re not ready for bunnies.” That same student and I continued the dialogue and together we began to develop a piece that would bring a deer into the building. It was never realized, but the proposition of this post-apocalyptic image as an elegant disruption was sufficient in itself. In the meantime, I began to work with my tortoise, Turbo.

Unlike the rabbits and deer, I didn’t have anything particular to accomplish with Turbo. But like the other projects I had produced, in which I establish an environment and by being in it, inherit its traits, I wanted to absorb the tortoise.

I handled him how I imagined he might like to be handled: delicately but with deliberation. He didn’t react well to the illuminated emptiness of the lobby. Like their built-in roof indicates, tortoises like to hide. The vast and uniform surface of E14’s lobby offered no amenities of this sort. His claws slipped on the terrazzo, grasping for a non-existing texture that would enable him to anchor his feet and loft his body. He was barely able to shove himself forward, his shell sliding slowly as he paddled with effort. It was difficult to witness.

The infantile stage of our relationship was much like this--I would bring him to new spaces in E14, hoping he would be excited by the shift in scenery and the mobility beyond his teasingly transparent cage. These moments transpired, but were always fleeting. As I hovered his body over the ground in preparation for a gentle landing,

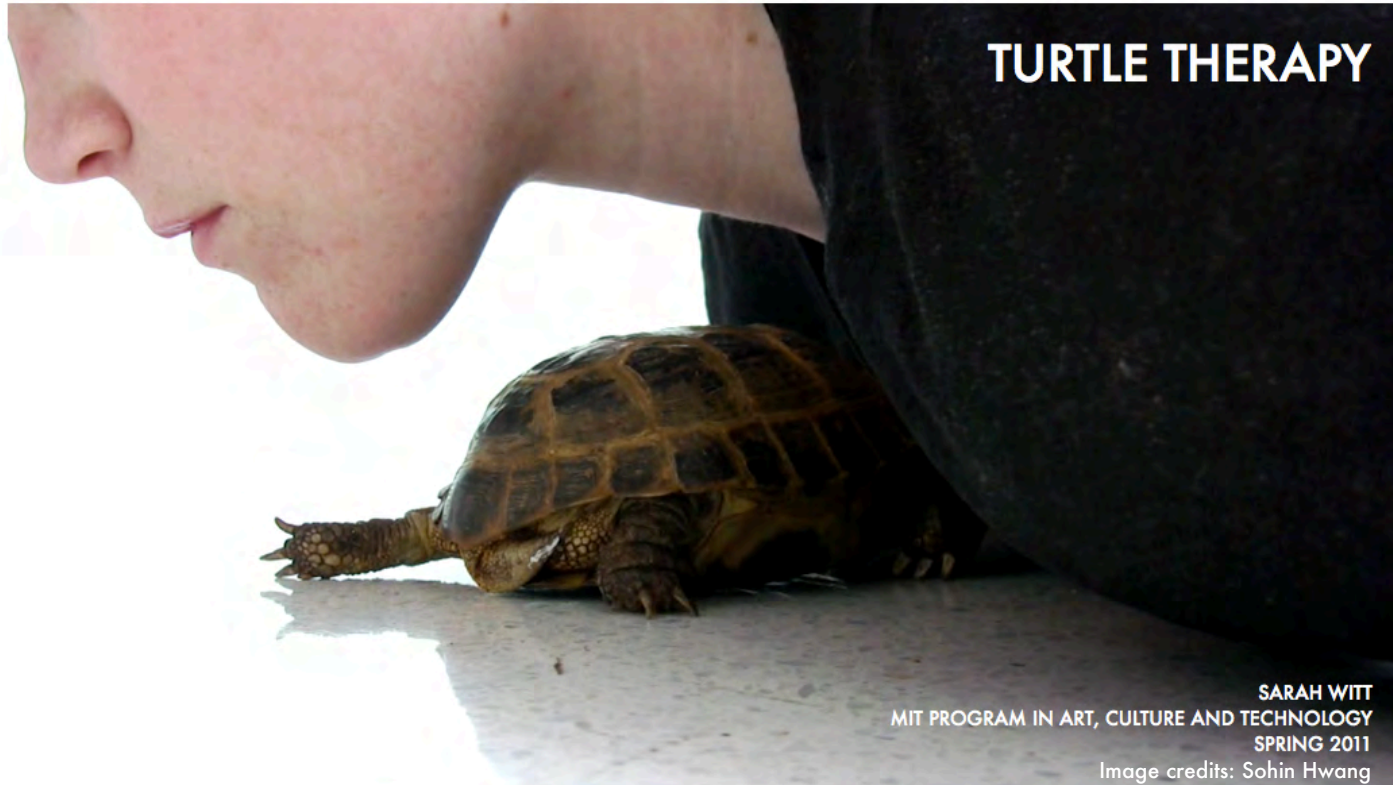
his limbs would eagerly tread the air and his neck would protrude to a cartoonish degree. He would quickly waddle across the rubber flooring or wooden tabletops until he reached an obstacle. If he were on the floor, I'd let him wander and would later find him tucked away in a corner or wedged between a piece of furniture and the wall. On a table, he would creep to the edge; in fear of him plunging 3 feet, I would scoop him up and reorient him before an unfortunate scene would find me more regretful than I already was; it was clear that he wasn't thrilled with these situations, and as the instigator, I felt guilty for subjecting him to these traumatic experiences.

I put him back in his own small glass unit for month, and just observed. His calming presence became an invisible influence, radiating serenity onto the pandemonium that was my office. I became acutely tuned into his moods, which are more multi-dimensional than one might expect: Crabby, curious, apathetic, nervous, placid. But always they were contained within the margins of one overriding sentiment: acceptance. His soft temperaments began to seep into my own, begging me to consider his feelings, to alter my own states and behaviors accordingly. Or to examine the patterns of them. He became a vehicle for reflection.

Some time passed, and after Turbo seemed to have adjusted to his habitat in "the world's most exquisite building,"³⁶ and I felt confident in my ability to read him and respond respectfully, we went down to the lobby again. This time, I stayed with him. He was my security.



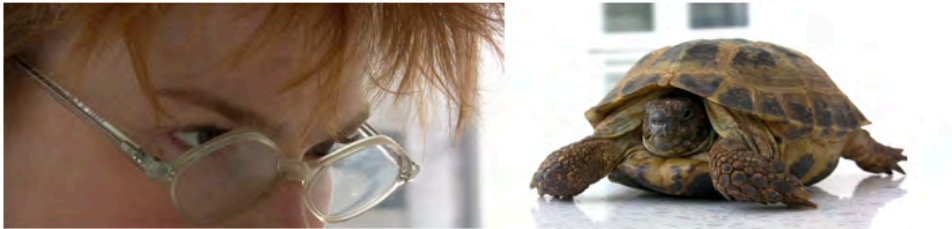
TURTLE THERAPY
PART 2
Image credit: Sohin Hwang



TURTLE THERAPY

SARAH WITT
MIT PROGRAM IN ART, CULTURE AND TECHNOLOGY
SPRING 2011

Image credits: Sohin Hwang















CESSATION

It was almost a posture of fearlessness. Surrendering to the polished floor below us, completely disengaged from all that surrounded us, we lay there for about two hours. The incessant chirping of business, the scattered click-clacking of heels and hushed voices crescendoed and dissipated, the quiet hum of generators in the basement droned steadily. I noticed these fragments of activity for a while, distractions that only perpetuated the distance between Turbo and myself. He blinked as if to acknowledge my unpreparedness, or my inability to concede. Blink. Blink. Blink. Slowly, at regular intervals, his lids met one another. The membrane visible as it obscured his small black eyes, almost as if this wasn't an involuntary body function.

My chin began to ache as I stared at my collaborator. We had been face to face for a psychologically uncomfortable amount of time; I wanted him to do something, to initiate something that would allow me to respond, to prevent me from having to confront myself. He probably wanted me to take him back upstairs. It was excruciating. I felt silly and impatience began to crawl from my core into my extremities. Restless in my self-consciousness and unable to protect myself in this vulnerable position, I blinked back at him, acknowledging that one of us needs to do *something*. It became rhythmic, and we exchanged a series of controlled winks. Quick slips into resignation.

A human and a tortoise, silently spreading on the surface that greets the visitors to a celebrated center of intellectual rigor. Oscillating between hyper-awareness of this absurd scene and complete abandonment of it, I began to let go. Neither participants nor protesting obstacles in this constructed environment I had struggled with for so long, we became immune to it. But were a silent and critical disruption within it.

I recognized this as a pivotal shift in my thinking. The previous works produced at MIT (Parts 1 and 2) had been developed through an accumulative analysis that rigidly worked with a binary model. Using a “you do it or you don't” mantra, they attempted to delineate human reception to constructed environments into two categories.³⁷ In the first, the protagonist blindly acquiesces and embodies the environment. In the second, the protagonist unleashes aggression and resists the environment. These two suggested responses, *EMBODIMENT* and *RESISTANCE* were slightly more complicated than the hard designations of passive or active.

EMBODIMENT

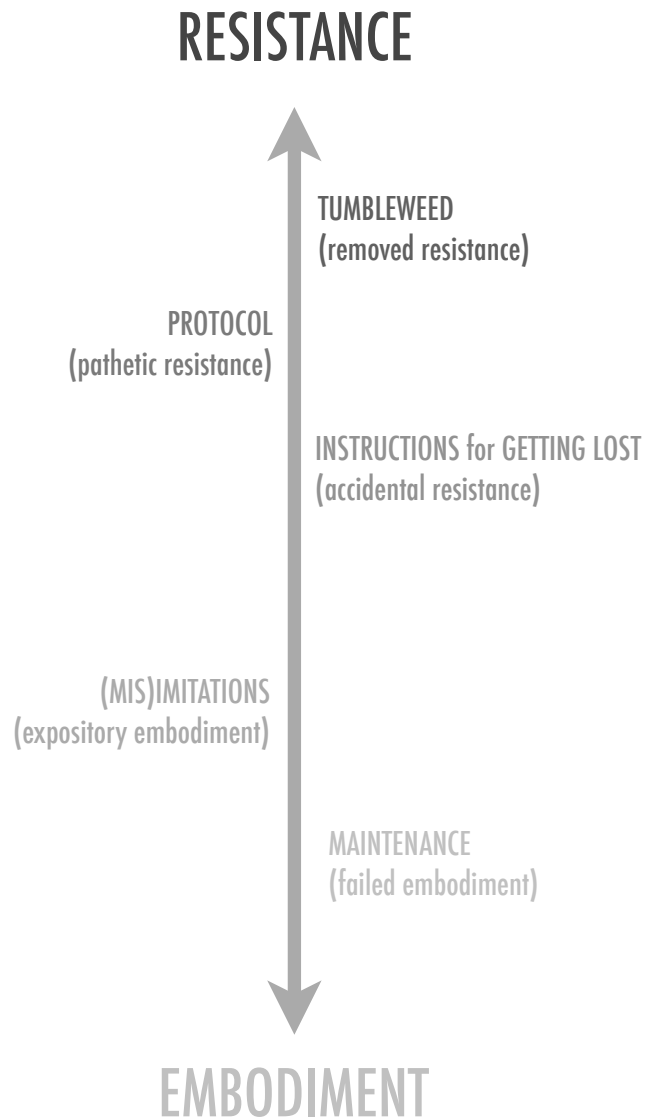
A mode of adaptation in which the subject internalizes the constructed environment, submitting to its control in order to protect the self from being alienated. This is a form of armoring which allows the subject to harmoniously exist in these technocratic environments, but perhaps with the sacrifice of independent and conscious thinking.



RESISTANCE

Rebellious in tone, the subject takes a confrontational stance and perceives the constructed environment as an external antagonist, or something to challenge. Measures are taken to counter and ultimately alter the existing conditions.





All of my previous performances, although not dogmatically adhering to either of these modes (passive embodiment or active resistance), take on a binary composition when viewed collectively. When compared to the others, each is easily classified as existing only on one end of the spectrum:

Although neither good nor bad, when reduced to this level of simplicity, one method of coping tends to override the other as the correct option. The language I had been employing erred on the side of “resistance,” alluding to the active and liberated approach as more ameliorative or cognizant. Embodiment was criticized as a passive seduction by the constituents of an environment, or a blind embrace of perfection. But this was a very black and white analysis.

Having adopted the pace of my tortoise, I found ample time to evaluate this model I had created and locate the space that separates the two, richly populated by a multitude of responses composed of both active and passive tactics. I began to assume a third position, one that openly occupies this vast territory of gray in between. A fluctuating state that works to mitigate the didacticism of the two, removing the constraints of choosing between perfection and failure--an acceptance of my own oscillation and transmutability, indiscriminating in whichever gray value that I occupy along the spectrum.

As it were, I found that a shade of apprehension was in order. I became interested in *calm deliberation*, employing a composite of passive and active behaviors that selectively respond to the constructed environment. Not unaware of the circumstances, but also not impulsively combatting them with a reciprocal violence, I propose two approaches: “slowness” and listening.”³⁸ As counter-behaviors, these modes potently contrast and dismiss the technoutopian being, but through a subtle and contemplative approach. These quiet qualities operate with a language unfamiliar to contemporary digitized society; by implementing such behavior, the

persuasive forces of constructed environments become inert.³⁹ To listen was a manner of consciously gathering information and sensing the rhythmic pulse of the situation; to be slow was a manner of cutting off the circulation of it.

Paul Virilio uses the term “dromological” in his designation of speed as the primary agent in the assertion of power. The digital era has birthed an anxious expectation of immediacy: the entire material world is more available, more present as modes of transportation and communication are increasingly accelerated. Instantaneous global transactions of information have become the standard with the use of the internet and cyberspace. The world has shrunk and condensed, alluding to a total break down of our perception of *time-space*, rendering it a near-obsolete concept. We move so quickly and with such automation that our concept of our real bodies in real space has begun to degenerate.⁴⁰

To stop, to slow down, to cease, seemed to be the most effective way of reacquainting my body with its location, and simultaneously, oppose the hegemonic pace of progress and introduce a counter perspective. I tried this very literally.

(IM)PEDESTRIAN

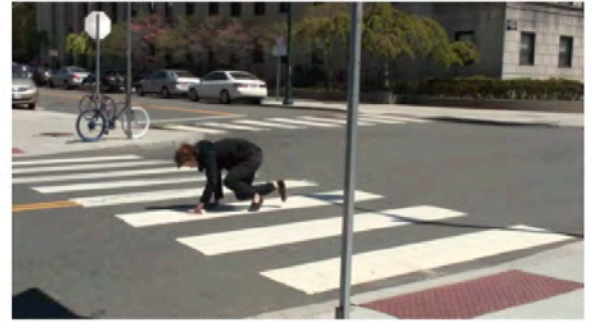
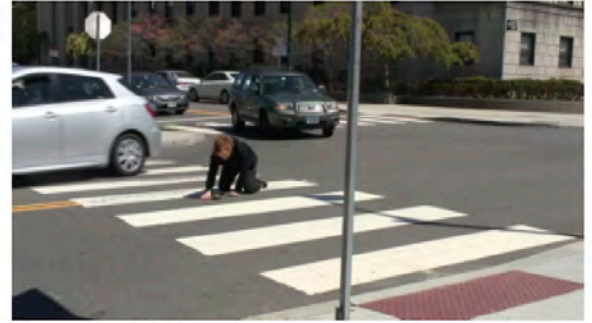


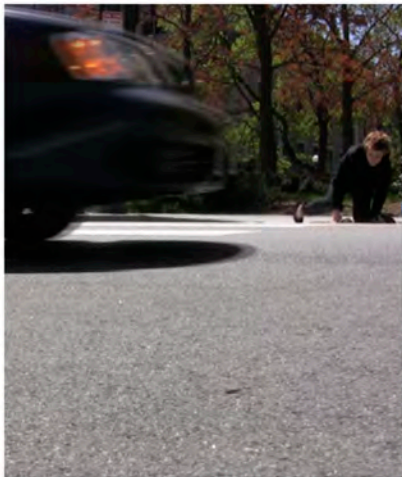
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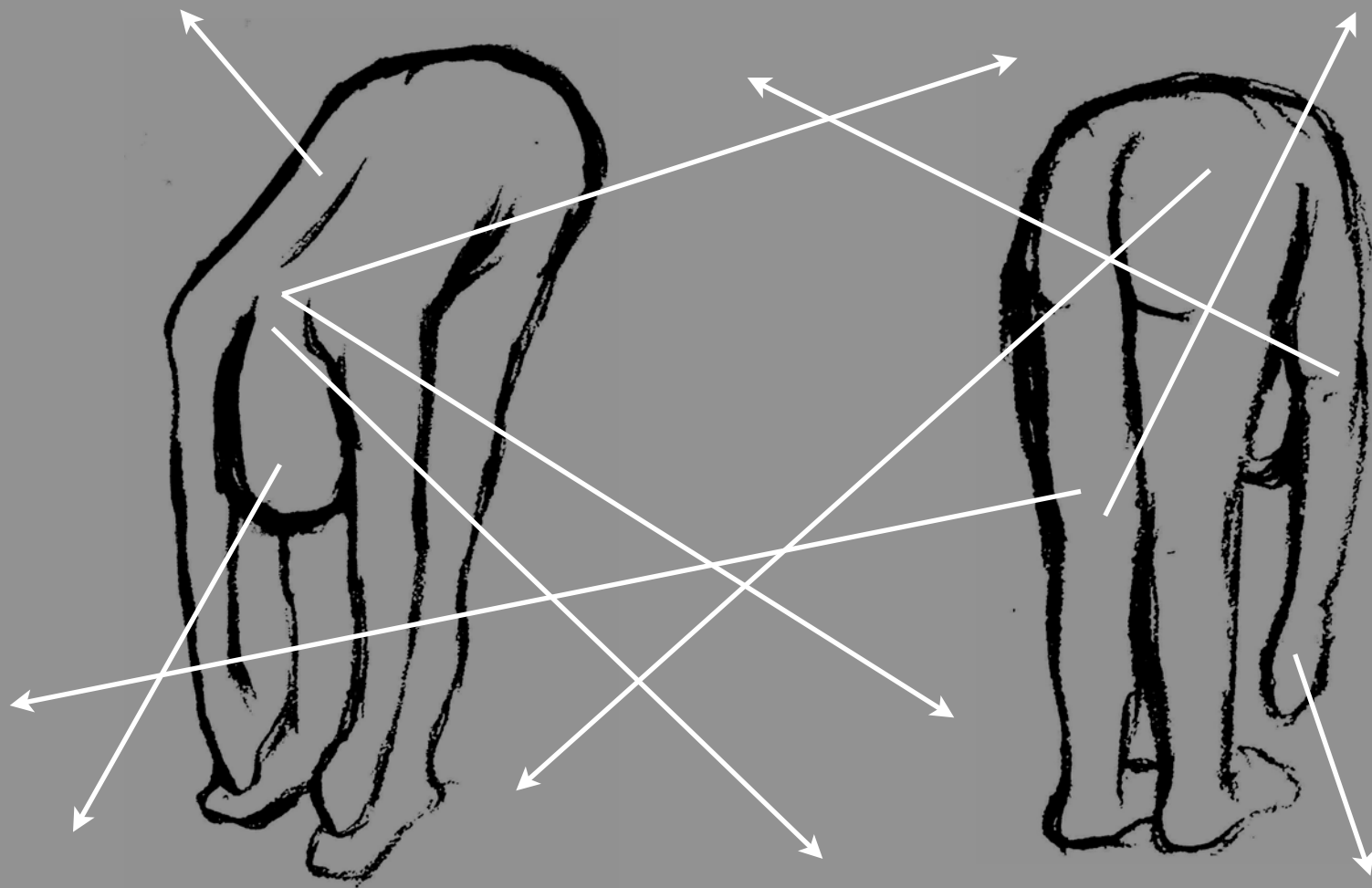
TOO SLOW

I performed this gesture improvisationally. I had assigned myself the task of slowly inching across the street, my muse determining the score and setting the pace. I had hoped to remain calm and slow, as the simple nature of the concept suggests. But I could not.

The agitation of panic that I witnessed in the operators of the vehicles and the eyes of parents hiding their children's became my own. (Occasionally it was just plain irritation and stupidity.) Unable to release into this vulnerable position, I was acutely insulated in risk. Every nerve synapse in my body diligently tended to the whirring circumstances that threatened the livelihood of my own humming anxiety. Although I was prepared, my contenders in traffic were not expecting. My strategy was to physically rupture the continuous movement that defines our culture, to create a moment that necessitates the abandonment of it and draw attention to this motion-centric process. Instead, I found myself only to be a limp mechanism of the machine, an eroded cog that would be eradicated and forgotten. My spontaneity was no impediment, the action diminished and drowned out in the noise of the steady drone of movement. In the moments of mortality, I could not trust myself nor the others. I desired to reconnect to the stable rhythm of accelerated society.

Again, my strategy will need revision. (Sigh.)

MAPPING the SYMPTOMS: hyper-extensive



HUMANS: FLEXIBILITY for STABILITY

The human cannot be reduced to the end-caps of a sensory circuit as mere input and output modules. In between the moments of reception and transmission, the human traverses a complex network of indeterminacy. Bombarded by the constant and unpredictable input of information through our tactile senses, our physical and mental bodies perpetually shift accordingly. There is never a moment of permanence.

In this constant cycle of observation and reaction, we undergo transformations as we process the dialogue we maintain with our surroundings. You cannot get from point A to point B without creating a line. As diverse as the stimuli that we encounter, the individual has invented a just as unfathomable range of postures that correspond. Between the two, we've traveled an unfathomable distance. Continually in this state of negotiation, we cannot cement ourselves to any single stance.

This includes every instance of life: biological, political, economic, social, fashion, taste, identity, religious, beliefs, values, likes and dislikes.

The potentials we hold are infinite and, like my previous suggestions of emotional availability, deserve the possibility of emergence. This opportunity for vocalization or visibility might be analogous to the concept of democracy. For one person to expect him or herself to remain statically attached to one value or perspective would be stultifying and absurd. Contradiction is lurking in all manifestations of thought, and to limit oneself to the two polar options of "yes" or "no" is unfortunate. For society to demand full representation of only one response or belief would be the implementation of a totalitarian regime.

UNRESOLVED

As I worked through the issue of human extinction by perfection, and investigated the problematic structures of society that supported this possibility, I discovered that I am living under an authoritarian dictatorship. However, this is an independently operating political body with one citizen.

As a perfectionist, I am engulfed and governed by an astringent autocracy. Administer and follower of the self-sovereign rules that encapsulate me, my freedom of speech has been limited to:

“NOT GOOD.”

and

“NOT GOOD ENOUGH.”

I recognize two problems with these two statements. The first affects the way that I perceive myself. To continually search for a solution or the correct approach in subjective problematics, in this case it's towards “being human,” is to search for something that does not exist. Truthfully declaring some sort of ultimate and singular resolve will only lead to dogmatism and restrictive thinking. It is an unproductive and futile quest.

Secondly, this agitation is transferred to the ways in which my work is produced and can be received. To limit the methods of “human preservation” to this or that, or to suggest a path towards absolute humanism, is to negate the work as a truly dialectical position, or one that invites multiple opinions and “truths” to coexist and collide.

This artistic investigation of humans and constructed environments establishes the mechanisms of control as external, and characterizes the human as susceptible to the internalization of these structures. Building E14, the platform or context in which this work was conceived, provided the necessary friction for it to be considered a form of critique. Had I transplanted these concepts and produced this work in another environment, say in a small fishing village or an elementary school or a homeless shelter, it would have little relevance or critical significance. The values maintained and assumed in E14's environment, which exemplify the institutional character that subsists on empirical truths, were essential in the successful reception of the pieces as critical inquiry into human behavior. By contrast, this antithetical platform of scientific and economic interests actually corroborated the message portrayed in the performances, allowing them to introduce a different perspective or interpretation of accelerated, technocratic culture. Although I believe that artistic practices can be a legitimate method of producing and distributing this kind of subjective knowledge and can operate as a form of provocation, the work itself cannot demand *truth*. If right and wrong are the only possibly conditions of an artwork, then it cannot take a dynamic stance and challenge the shifting platforms and juxtapositions that support it.

To emancipate myself from this self-imposed bind of two intertwining problems, I must remove defeat from its installment as the dominant perception towards the discursivity of these works and instead recognize that their variations in structure and strategy are actually evidence of a natural, human response (my own.) The multiplicity of these works that instinctually altered course in their

approach towards constructed environments, inadvertently is a trajectory of human preservation. As a unit, these performances reject the notion of unearthing our “true” human behavior. The vitality of a critical body of work is generated out of the democratic clashing of alternative perceptions, all of which will have the potential to be activated.⁴¹

In her essay “Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces,” Chantal Mouffe describes the dynamic of democratic politics, revealing that in order to achieve a truly democratic state, we must recognize the impossibility of arriving at rational consensus. As a social body that is inherently pluralistic and therefore riddled with conflicting ideas and values, we should understand antagonism as an inescapable component that upholds diversity, not a threat to it. To eradicate conflict implies the eradication of independent thought--the reconciliation of these differences would only be replacing one hegemonic, singular state with another one. Antagonism is a vital force that must be present, it is the collision of positions (all of which are autonomously hegemonic) that allows a critical culture to emerge. Mouffe has labeled this rejection of consensus and the necessary tension or instability that ensues, the *agonistic struggle*:

“It is a struggle between opposing hegemonic projects which can never be reconciled rationally. An agonistic conception of democracy acknowledges the contingent character of the hegemonic politico-economic articulations which determine the specific configuration of a society at a given moment. They are precarious and pragmatic constructions which can be disarticulated and transformed as a result of the agonistic struggle among adversaries...[it] recognizes that society is always politically instituted and never forgets that the terrain [of this struggle] is never a neutral one.”⁴²

As a miniature society of control, I must handle my situation with parallel considerations pertaining to a society of proper scale. If I were to consciously attempt an agonistic ecology in this work of human preservation, I would first have to remove all of the binary

labels that relate to “preservation” and “extinction”: Success and failure, effective and ineffective, less and more. I would then have to accept this loss, and understand that between the extremities is fertile ground. I would then write a manifesto, that, if I fail to adhere to, would not be a sign of weakness, but would signify a dynamic evolution in stance, one that might support the preservation of a self within a species:

To implement an artistic practice as a social critique, in order for it to remain potent, I cannot impose a singular gesture or stance towards the preservation of humanity. I must allow my voice to span the full register of pitch, and occasionally be hushed.

I cannot replicate the coercive strategies of the constructed environment that I oppose, nor seek total annihilation of it. To effectively subvert the polished, precise texture that homogeneously swathe contemporary culture, I must reside and unravel within it.

My work is not permanent, nor am I. Preservation is found in the conditions of temporarily pulsing aberrations, minute ruptures in the steady rhythm of societal noise, an acknowledgement and praise of absolute dissensus.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Of course it's difficult to quantify and qualify the tremendous support one receives in writing a thesis or developing a body of artwork, or for that matter, in life. It would be petty to measure and inventory these contributions, and so I can only recognize and reciprocate by putting forth gratitude. I hyperextend my sincerest appreciation all who became participants in this work, and for helping me understand what it means to be human, in ways that I may not even be conscious of myself.

To my committee, for their honest insight, criticism and encouragement: Joan Jonas, Ute Meta Bauer, Alise Upitis.

To the faculty and staff at MIT who have tirelessly and generously coached me throughout this process, and in essence, made it possible: Mario A. Caro, Susan Cohen and Council for the Arts at MIT, Chris Clepper, Andrea Frank, Ed Halligan, Lisa Hickler, Wendy Jacobs, Oliver Lutz, Charlie Mathis, Muntadas, Angel Nevarez, Laura Anca Pallone, Sam McGee, Meg Rotzel, Martin Seymour, Gediminas and Nomeda Urbonas.

To my friends and dear comrades in the ACT Program, who have undoubtedly altered my understanding of what it means to be human, and patiently withstood the unpredictable trajectory of these discoveries: Haseeb Ahmed, Narda Alvarado, Gina Badger, Sarah Baumert, Sofia Berinstein, Scott Berzofsky, Nell Breyer, Sohin Hwang, Tomashi Jackson, Jaekung Jung, Emily Katrencik, Everett Lawson, Xavier Le Roy, Mabel Negrete, Amanda Moore, Jegan Vincent de Paul, Elizabeth Watkins, Jess Wheelock, Ian Wojtowicz.

And to my extremely tolerant and incredibly supportive family, whose contributions I can't even begin to describe: To Betty, Christine and Jon, who have taught me the meanings of strength, courage and acceptance. To my father Harry, who's taught me the importance of "*do it now*," and subsequently the meaning of forgiveness when I couldn't. And to my mother Mary, who's taught me the meaning of unconditional love.

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“Indeed, we are not surprised by the idea of setting up the use of soap as the yardstick of civilization.”

Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, 1930.



NOTES

¹ The “culture” I’m referring to is that of industrialized, Western nations.

² The Media Lab, a degree-granting program and advanced technological research center, was founded in 1985 by Nicholas Negroponte and Jerome Wiesner. The lab is divided into specialized units that are funded by corporate sponsorship. The following is an excerpt from the mission statement of the Media Lab as seen on its website: “At the Media Lab, the future is lived, not imagined. In a world where radical technology advances are taken for granted, Media Lab researchers design technologies for people to create a *better* future...Future-obsessed product designers, nanotechnologist, data-visualization experts, industry researchers and pioneers of computer interfaces work side by side to tirelessly invent--and reinvent--how humans experience, and can be aided by, technology.” Media Lab online mission statement, accessed July 31, 2011, <http://media.mit.edu/about/mission-history>. Ironic that such a highly advanced and specialized group would be okay with having gaping glass windows as walls, making their work publicly available. Or at least visible. Which says nothing about what’s really going on in there.

³ Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 133-145.

⁴ Wilson, *On Human Nature*, 53-70.

⁵ The Pony Express was a horseman delivery route that blazed a rugged trail across the desolate and unsettled land between St. Louis, Missouri and San Francisco, California. Primarily due to the heightened possibility of a civil war, it was installed in 1860 to increase communication between the East and the West. The dangerous road (many horsemen were killed en route) was placed out of commission in 1861, outmoded by the Transcontinental Railroad. (citation: self. I stopped at the Golden Spike in Corrine, UT and recall this bit of history about the Transcontinental Railroad.)

⁶ Holt, *Writings of Robert Smithson*, 109-116. Spiral Jetty (1970) is Robert Smithson’s most well-known land art piece: literally a spiral, the jetty is made of basalt rock, mud and salt crystals harvested near the site of its construction. The coil is 1500 feet long and 15 feet wide, extending out from the shore of the Great Salt Lake. Typically the piece is submerged; I was completely surprised by its exposure. The water surrounding the jetty had completely evaporated.

⁷ Smithson was a visually stunning writer. In his poetic language, his essay *The Spiral Jetty* describes the earthwork through an expanded discussion of geological, theoretical and metaphysical concepts that led to its construction. Fixated on the lake's color of "tomato soup," he chose to build the jetty off a plot of land near Rozel Point, where this crimson was particularly vivid:

"Chemically speaking, our blood is analogous in composition to the primordial seas. Following the spiral steps we return to our origins, back to some pulpy protoplasm, a floating eye adrift in an antediluvian ocean. On the slopes of Rozel Point I closed my eyes, and the sun burned crimson through the lids. I opened them and the Great Salt Lake was bleeding scarlet streaks. My sight was saturated by the color of red algae circulating in the heart of the lake, pumping into ruby currents, no they were veins and arteries sucking up the obscure sediments. My eyes became combustion chambers churning orbs of blood blazing by the light of the sun...Swirling within the incandescence of solar energy were sprays of blood...I was on a geological fault that groaned within me." Robert Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty," in Holt, *Writings of Robert Smithson*, 113.

It seemed that urinating on his piece would only be a natural manner of morphing my own energy into that of the land's, an even exchange.

⁸ The most recent project I produced was a public installation of Sioux-style tipis made from salvaged plastic waste and locally harvested bamboo. Hosted by art organizations and community centers, the project was loaded into an old school bus and embarked on a month-long tour around the United States, visiting urban locations where we led workshops with youth and promoted issues in sustainability and art activism.

⁹ Marx, "Division of Labor and Manufacture," 136.

¹⁰ Marx, "Machinery and Modern Industry," 150.

¹¹ It's hard to depart from Marxist discourse and allow the notion of progress to gravitate towards an underlying desire beyond the acquisition of capital, but within the scope of discussion I'd like to declare that financial incentive is already assumed as one of the many motivating forces behind progress.

¹² Foucault, *Order of Things*, 132-162. Foucault questions the reductive theories of evolution in the 19th century, particularly those divided into a binary argument in which a species either strives to reach god-like perfection, or evolves into a new species completely in the process of achieving this perfection.

¹³ Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, 63-65

¹⁴ Ibid., 64

¹⁵ Clearly this is a reference to the iPhone, Android and other smartphones (mobile telephones that also serve as computing devices.)

¹⁶ Kurzweil, *The Singularity is Near*, 14-21.

¹⁷ Agamben, *What is an Apparatus?*, 7.

¹⁸ Debord, Guy. *Society of the Spectacle*, 12-24. Situationist artist Guy Debord's term for apparatus is "spectacle," which he originates as stemming from image-saturated, consumer culture and capitalism. This work was originally published in France in 1967.

¹⁹ Ibid., 23.

²⁰ Luddites were actually not against technology, but against the resulting exploitation of the human. Luddism was actually an organized movement of laborers in the early era of the Industrial Revolution, a primitive trade union of sorts, that was "a normal means of putting pressure on employers or putters-out." Hobsbawm, "The Machine Breakers," 58. In this sense, I can identify with "machine-breaking" as a colorful and direct method of resistance.

²¹ Although I built or installed sets for these performances, they all took place within E14. I consider this building to be site-specific to my work, in that its conceptual interests originated through my conflicting relationship to it. Over time, the distinction between my program (Art, Culture and Technology) and the program of our cohabitants (Media Lab) became more severe. As an artist supplanted into an advanced technological research environment, my own position as a critical voice became more controversial and dialectical.

²² Dezeuze, "What is a Fluxus Score?", 26-27.

²³ Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 19-55. In his famous essay, Benjamin outlines a lengthy and specific list of repercussions that follow the mass-reproduction of artworks through the mediums of print and moving image. His questions are a foreshadowing of the cyber-era's immediately available and abundant sources of information. How does the value of an artwork shift? How present is the audience in viewing a reproduction?

²⁴ See Sherry Turkle's book *Alone Together* for an extensive analysis of psychology in relation to the social networking phenomenon.

²⁵ Marx, "Machinery and Modern Industry," 145.

²⁶ For more information on human attraction to machines and our ability to (in the actual sense of the term) love them, see David Levy's book *Love and Sex with Robots*.

²⁷ Denying the threat of humanity in relation to machines, Latour states: "How could the anthropos be threatened by machines? It has made them, it has put itself into them, it has divided up its own members among their members, it has built its own body with them. ..." Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 137.

²⁸ In reading about the development of photography and the Daguerreotype, I was pleased at Daguerre's pitch of his camera as being able to satisfy the leisure class' need for art, despite their lack of skills: "it will be possible to take....the most picturesque scenery, for the manipulation is simple and does not demand any special knowledge, only care and a little practice is necessary in order to succeed perfectly. Everyone, with the aid of the Daguerreotype, will make a view of his castle or country-house: people will form collections of all kinds, which will be the more precious because art cannot imitate their accuracy and perfection of detail..." Louis Jacques Mande Daguerre, "Daguerreotype," in Trachtenberg, *Classic Essays on Photography*, 12.

²⁹ Ibid., 113-117.

³⁰ Sigmund Freud quoted in Foster, *Prosthetic Gods*, 85-86.

³¹ Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, 81.

³² I see my own work as a philosophical and personal critique, a phenomena that Kaprow relates the role of the artist to that of the philosopher, implying that artists are effectively replacing them: “Now, as art becomes less art, it takes on philosophy’s early role as critique of life...Precisely because art can be confused with life, it forces attention upon the aim of its ambiguities, to “reveal” experience.” (Ibid., 82.)

³³ This first became apparent to me as a teaching assistant in Introduction to Visual Arts, a course for undergraduates at MIT. It was remarkable to see the students transfer knowledge from their own research disciplines and creatively explore the material in visual language.

³⁴ Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, 179.

³⁵ I accidentally “borrowed” a lost kitten for one week. He was a great alarm clock until his owner called.

³⁶ Robert Campbell, Boston Globe Reporter as quoted in MIT School of Architecture and Planning, *PLAN75*, March 2010. <http://sap.mit.edu/resources/portfolio/ml/>.

³⁷ Foster, Hal. *Prosthetic Gods*, These interpretations (embodiment and resistance) are loosely appropriated from Freud and Lacan’s theories of the ego, and how Foster interprets their theories in regards to artistic reception of technology, comparatively analyzing F.T. Marinetti’s “Futurist Manifesto” and the approach of the Soviet Constructivists.

³⁸ Listening as opposed to emotionally reacting. Slowness as a selective and deliberate method of responding, that is derived from careful observation of situation via acute “listening.”

³⁹ Tiqqun, *The Cybernetic Hypothesis*, 74.

⁴⁰ Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, 149-151.

⁴¹ Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 71-82.

⁴² Mouffe, “Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces,” 3.