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## "fuck off, get free, love and love's the only thing"

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*Virginia Commonwealth University*

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**“fuck off, get free,  
love and love’s the only thing”**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine  
Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By

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## Abstract

A child, angry at concrete and strip malls,  
enjoying coffee from too many styrofoam cups.

“The best thing for being sad, replied Merlin, beginning to puff and blow, is to learn something. That's the only thing that never fails. You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies, you may lie awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins, you may miss your only love, you may see the world about you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honor trampled in the sewers of baser minds. There is only one thing for it then - to learn. Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting. Learning is the only thing for you. Look what a lot of things there are to learn.”

- T.H. White, *The Once and Future King*

An abbreviated version of this quotation was the introduction to my father's thesis. My father is a mathematician and computer scientist, all of his computer's have been named Merlin. He was born in Cuba in 1944. In 1960, shortly after the Cuban Revolution, men with guns came to his home and threatened to take his father away. Soon after my father was sent to live with family friends in the United States, where he felt he had to assimilate and turn his back on his culture. In his words, he was “ripped from paradise.”

I have difficulty planning anything. Is it possible that my father's experience contributed to this fact? Why bother making plans when everything could very easily, unexpectedly and dramatically, change? Did my father's experience as a teenager in Cuba contribute to my mercurial nature?

My grandmother left Cuba around 1967. The popular family narrative goes that she left her home for the United States with nothing more than what she was wearing, having to beg the Cuban authorities to let her keep her wedding band. She was an occasional painter, portraits mostly. There's one of me at a young age. It terrifies my father, we don't know why. She once painted a galaxy for me that I was quite fond of, working from a photo in National Geographic. My favorite painting of hers was about my cousin and his struggles with heroin addiction, a struggle that resulted in his death. Addiction took the form of a snake in the painting. My grandmother never liked me. I have been told that she felt that way since my birth. When I was sixteen, she decided I was a communist. At the time, I was fond of taking photographs in cemeteries. From one of these images, a photo of an angel with a star on it's head, I produced a painting in reds and black. Because of this image she came to the conclusion I was a communist.

When we were younger my brother and I would sit with her around the dining room table, amazed and delighted, as she recreated images in from our comic books. She refused to draw guns.

I've learned things from comic books.

Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon's comic book, *Watchmen*, parodies and deconstructs the concept of super heroes, presenting an alternate world where superheroes emerged in the 1960's, helping the United States win the Vietnam War. There is a comic book within *Watchmen* titled *Tales from the Black Freighter*. In this tale, a shipwrecked sailor builds a raft by lashing together the corpses of his fellow former seamen. On the perilous journey aboard the raft, the sailor eventually turns to cannibalism in order to survive. In one panel of *Watchmen*, a character is depicted sitting outside a newsstand, reading *Tales from the Black Freighter*, while eating a leg of chicken. Echoing this in the next panel, the sailor is shown aboard his raft lifting a piece of his former shipmate to his lips. When I reread the *Watchmen* a few years ago, I had an extremely visceral reaction to this combination of images, realizing that the sight of them, when I originally read the comic in my youth, contributed to the fact that I have been a vegetarian since the age of fifteen.

I had a pet parakeet who lived for fifteen years. I used to draw comics, casting the bird as various superheroes.

“The world is always ending for someone”  
- Neil Gaiman, *Signal to Noise*

Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean's graphic novel, *Signal to Noise*, opens with a quote from Roland Barthes' *Image, Music, Text*: “Everything has a meaning or nothing has. To put it another way, one could say that art is without noise.” The book's main character is a filmmaker that learns that he has cancer, and doesn't have much longer to live. He is writing a screenplay about the end of the world as he imagines how it might have been, anticipated in the year 999 AD. His apocalyptic vision is to a degree about scale: “I sat in the dark and thought: There's no big apocalypse. Just an endless procession of little ones.”

The signal-to-noise ratio is a system of measurement that compares the level of the desired signal, with the undesirable level of noise. I define noise as anything undesirable.

In 2008 I started a band with my pet fish, Alex Halsted. Alex is an elephant nose fish. Elephant nose fish produce a constant electrical signal, which establishes an electrical field around their body, any disturbances in this field the fish interpret as obstacle, mate, or food.

The fish developed this ability because of their need to navigate their environment, its environment being the muddy rivers of western Africa. The fish's signal can easily be made audible simply by placing speaker wire in the water the fish inhabits, and connecting the wire to an audio amplifier. The results sound a bit like morse code. Making Alex's signal audible is completely useless to the fish, it's pure noise.

I often make work from discarded materials. Lately much of this work results from the process of mixing acetone with polystyrene foam found in various dumpsters in the city of Richmond. Acetone dissolves the long polymer strands in the foam, releasing the trapped air from the material. The material disintegrates, though not completely due to the insoluble cross-linked parts of the polymer. The result of this process is a malleable putty, and once the acetone evaporates, the material becomes a rigid plastic. I've been using this process to recreate other unwanted, discarded objects. A student recently asked me if I sanitized any of the material I found in the garbage, I answered "No, that would be a waste of water."

Trash is really exciting. It suggests possibilities. Some of my earliest memories are of playing in the gravel parking lot next to the train tracks behind my mother's workplace. I was excited about what I found there amongst the rocks, imagining how they could be combined to produce other things.

I was a strange child, often angry at strip malls and concrete.

The sound of crushed glass is another early memory. Going with my father to recycle glass bottles, watching the men atop great piles of glass, crushing the material separated by color with long metal poles. They looked as though they stood on mountains of jewels.

Several years ago I read somewhere (I cannot recall where), something to the effect of "the artist's desire is to be immortal, to live forever through their work." At the time, this nearly angered me, the desire to live forever seemed so bold. Why live forever? Should our short lives be not celebrated, what concern of ours is it to want to live forever?

Walking to the grocery store last December, passing the Dollar Tree, I noticed out of the corner of my eye an advertisement in the store's window featuring a plastic solar powered dancing snowman. Golden. Imagine an actual snowman, cheerily dancing in the presence of the sun, celebrating the approaching end of its short life. Does the plastic snowmen dance in the presence of the sun, because it knows it's virtually immortal?

There are immortal jellyfish in the sea, *Turritopsis dohrnii*. They begin as larva swimming around, and settle on the sea floor where they develop into polyps. These polyps spawn free swimming jellyfish. When the jellyfish experience physical harm or starvation, they revert back to polyps, which again spawn genetically identical jellyfish. This process can repeat indefinitely.

In 1976 (the year of my birth), plastics became the world's most widely used material. Plastics are fascinating, their primary use being in the manufacturing of disposable goods. A thin red plastic coffee stirrer being one example, with its use value of approximately five seconds. Now consider the fact that this thing can retain its form for hundreds of years. Given the right conditions, it will eventually degrade, breaking down into smaller and smaller particles. Imagine carelessly littering this item, and this item finding its way to the sewer system, then to a river, and eventually the ocean. Imagine it traveling thousands of miles and ending up in the belly of an albatross. Imagine it there in the stomach of the bird, combined with other plastic items like disposable cigarette lighters, bottle caps, etc. Imagine this combination, as it does, preventing the bird from passing the contents of its stomach, preventing it from accepting food. Causing malnutrition, dehydration, eventual starvation and death.

Polystyrene is one of the most widely used plastics. Polystyrene is used to manufacture a variety of items, such as compact disc "jewel" cases, and the containers used to transport fish, both for consumption, and for the aquarium hobbyist. Due to its rigidity and light weight, polystyrene is an extremely efficient conductor of sound. I learned this fact in my youth, by inserting a sewing needle into a foam cup, and placing the needle on a vinyl record. In the recent past, I've often used a polystyrene container to amplify the sound of a Slinky, the results being the imagined sound of a future weapon.

Styrofoam is a trademarked version of polystyrene, the trademark is owned by the Dow Chemical Company. The Dow Chemical Company was one of many producers of Napalm B during the Vietnam War. The company became the sole supplier of Napalm B to the United States Government after negative publicity and protests convinced the other suppliers of the chemical to shut down their operations. Dow continued to manufacture Napalm B up until 1969.



The US continued to drop Napalm bombs on North Vietnam up until 1973. Dow also manufactured Agent Orange, a chemical defoliant used by the U.S. military during the Vietnam War.

I have enjoyed coffee from too many styrofoam cups.

I feel a conflict within my desire to make things in a world that already has so much. I feel a responsibility about bringing new things into the world. I am concerned about where the materials used to make a thing might have come from. Were the people who harvested or produced the material properly compensated for their efforts? How far did these materials have to travel from their point of origin? Once the thing is made from these materials, will the thing be anointed a thing of worth, will someone have to take care of it? Will it become a commodity, it's continued existence necessitating proper handling and shipping?



I have worked as an art handler for a number of years. This work has given me a backstage pass to the fine art world. With this access I have witnessed how much material is discarded as a result of storing and shipping fine art works. For the past few years I have traveled to art fairs both here and abroad, and I have made it a habit to photograph the aftermath of these fairs and all of the waste they produce.

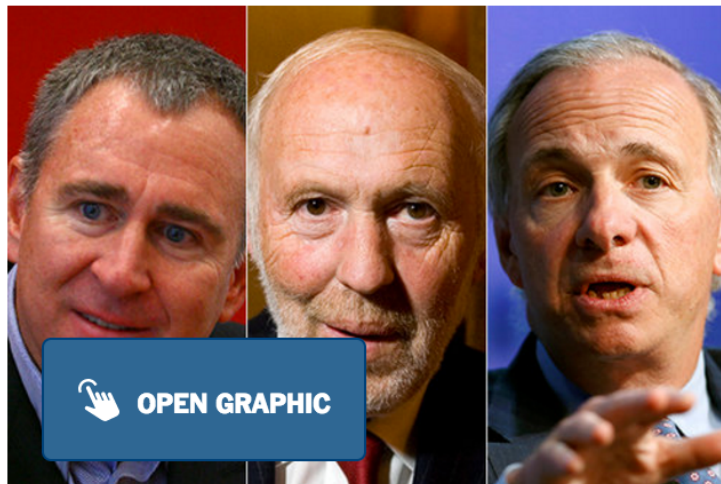
There have been, of course, positive aspects to being an art handler, though there did seem something inherently off about the experience of getting paid thirteen dollars an hour to install Jasper John's "False Start" on the stingray skin wall paper of the kevlar-reinforced walls of a hedge fund manager, who had recently purchased the painting for \$80 million dollars.

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GRAPHIC

## Top 10 Hedge Fund Earners

JPMorgan paid its C.E.O. \$27 million in 2015. In another Wall Street universe, the hedge fund manager Ken Griffin made \$1.7 billion.



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There he is on the left, coincidentally in the New York Times this morning. He was much nicer to us after his wife left him.

The general manager of the art handling company that employed me to install "False Start" told me that he felt that all of his employees were expendable.

Through this same company, I was employed to assist someone with the installation of their thesis exhibition at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago. I had previously worked for this person and their family by installing portions of their vast fine art collection. They were very kind, tipping myself and the rest of the crew generously for our time. Once, while installing

the thesis exhibition, I was alone in an elevator with this person when they quipped; “God, I can’t wait to get out of grad school.” I thought this hilarious, in that at the time I was going through the process of applying to graduate school. Their work wasn’t terribly interesting; a series of material investigations based on a helicopter ride they had taken over parts of Africa. I had applied to the School of the Art Institute, was accepted, and offered a decent sized scholarship. Though it irked me, opening up the the school’s graduate school guidebook, to see the aforementioned person’s work featured in a two-page spread. It seemed unlikely that this exposure in the catalog was based upon the merit of their work. It seemed much more likely it was based upon the fact that they and their family were generous donors to the institution. Further more, it was disturbing to me to know that a significant part of their family’s fortunes were rooted in the General Dynamics Corporation. General Dynamics being the entity responsible for the initial production of F-16 fighter jet, as well as numerous other missile and combat systems.

Having had first hand experience with so much wealth, wealth occasionally earned with military contracts, wealth so closely tied to the fine art world, I have a slightly bitter taste in my mouth. Maybe art should be cheap? It most certainly should be accessible, not exclusive. Ideally, I would like artwork to promote dialog. Art work solely as commodity and luxury good is terribly depressing.

Negative ions are invisible molecules found in various environments, especially near moving water. When they reach our bloodstream, they are thought to produce a biochemical reaction which boosts the level of serotonin in the body. Negative ion generators have been used to treat mild forms of depression, as well as seasonal defective disorder. Negative ions are also produced by plant leaves, though in small amounts.

Cars can be irritating. Large, inefficient metal machines often transporting a single person, the driver, to their destination. The driver behind metal and glass, is cut off from other drivers, and the world. Cars enable a limited scale of engagement with day to day life. They can also be used to leave the city to visit the sea or the mountains. The sound of traffic can also be exceedingly irritating.



(Still from *The Gleaners and I*)

Vulcanization is the process of adding sulfur to natural rubber. When rubber is heated and mixed with sulfur, the long rubber polymer chains become bound to the sulfur atoms, which transform the two into one giant molecule. A once biodegradable material is made permanent.

It is estimated that nearly 300 million automobile tires are discarded in the United States alone. Tires present a specific problem in landfills, in that when buried, the pocket of air inside the walls of the tire causes the tire to rise to the surface. Many dumps refuse to accept them, this contributes to the fact that tires are so often illegally dumped, or left by the roadside.

The Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company owns the worlds largest tire producing plant. Their tires are produced from synthetic rubber, from crude oil produced from marine plants, phytoplankton that died 300 - 350 million years ago.

One element of my thesis exhibition was fountain made from a discarded tire coated in deoxygenated polystyrene. Another element of the exhibition was a framed letter to the president of Virginia Commonwealth University. It read:

Dear Dr. Rao,

During my time as a graduate student at VCU, I was very fortunate to be a teacher's assistant for two of the university's excellent adjunct faculty members. The dedication that they illustrated to education, and to their students, was invaluable to me. I am concerned that they were not adequately compensated for their efforts, so I was hoping we could work something out.

I have paid \$3,514.46 in university fees during my two years at VCU. The university's website states that the university fee are "used by the university to support recreational sports facilities, the Student Commons, campus development, career and counseling centers, student disability and student service center, intercollegiate athletics and other programs."

I fully support the university's investment in student's health, and I realize having such a well equipped facility makes for an excellent recruitment tool. Personally, I never took advantage of the gym. I would like to propose that a portion of the university fees that I have paid be dedicated to what I believe is the most important part of the university experience, that being education. Taking the \$240 annual fee for use of the Cary Street Gym as a base figure, I believe it entirely reasonable that two checks be made for \$240, made payable to the adjuncts I studied under.

Thank you very much for your time,

David Moré

Below the framed copy of this letter was a stack of two hundred and fifty bumper stickers that read: "Adjuncts Deserve Better Pay."

As of this writing, the majority of the faculty at American universities are adjunct faculty. This fact is troublesome. This means that the majority of people charged in educating at the university level are in positions in which they must live in fear of losing their jobs. My computer's dictionary defines adjunct as "a thing added to something else as a supplementary rather than an essential part."

The bumper stickers were printed before I accepted an adjunct position for the fall following my graduation. I am slightly concerned by accepting the abysmal pay associated with adjunct faculty work, I am once again devaluing my time, as I did when I was employed as an art handler.

A friend and fellow art handler once remarked that he hated bumper stickers in that they didn't actually promote any real dialogue. How are you to have a conversation when the statement a person is making is on a machine that separates them from the world?

A friend texted me the other day an image of the aforementioned bumper sticker displayed on the back of her car. She followed the image with a text that read:

“If I only I had one to go beneath that said, ‘so do women, people of color, immigrants, home health aides, teachers, customer service representatives...’”

It’s not easy to make a living as an artist. As in the rest of society in this country, there does not seem to be much of a middle class in the fine art world. It seems often that an artist is either astronomically wealthy, or barely scraping by.

Despite the fact I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to attend graduate school, I still question my decision. On the one hand, it did serve as the experience I intended, in that it provided time and context to concentrate on art making. Though I cannot help but think the money I invested could have been spent in building something better.

It’s a troubling fact that I gave money to an institution that in 2008 signed an agreement with the Phillip Morris tobacco company that prohibits professors from publishing or discussing the results of their research without the permission of the company.

It’s also troubling that the assistant vice president for business services at VCU was recently quoted as saying “VCU is excited that our students will enjoy the convenience and low prices the Walmart on Campus will offer,” in regards to the branch of the mega retailer that opened on campus during my time at the University. I really wish they had said “*Some of VCU...*”

I question what the American university system has become. Is it becoming increasingly like the American corporation, like American society as a whole, where wealth is controlled by the few?

Is it a system that often pushes young people into a great deal of debt, at a time in their lives when they cannot be faulted for not knowing what to do with their lives.? Will the necessity of paying back this debt make it more difficult to find out what they truly want to do with their lives.? This seems bad for the wider culture at large.

I do not want to disturb anybody. It’s part of the reason I have never learned to play an instrument. I do not want to irritate anyone with my clumsy attempts at learning how to play.

One of the reasons I'm interested in music, is that, it's often made through a process of collaboration. Would it be a stretch to say that all music is produced as a result of collaboration? If you're not actually collaborating with a musician, you're collaborating with your chosen instrument, with the history of music itself, with the space and time and context in which the work is being produced and received. Does music achieve it's effects in part because it's often (always?) a product of collaboration, of two or more things coming together, even if they butt heads half the time?

I started working with sound in part because I am interested in immaterial things. With things that do not take up much physical space. With things that are temporary, rooted in time, that are here then gone. All the *stuff* already in the world remains a concern. Where will all these things end up once they are no longer of use to anyone? I am a person not terribly concerned with owning things. My apartment is hilarious and bare. I did eventually buy a bed, when I deemed the fact that I had been sleeping on a pile of blankets was too eccentric for a man of my age.

Many audio-based art works are heard via speakers. This doesn't seem entirely necessary. It's perhaps an unfortunate default that our experience of listening to a sound work, to music, even to other people, is so often mediated by electricity and speakers. Speakers are fairly simple in their construction, little more than paper cones vibrating when combined with magnets and electricity. The paper cone can be anything. Speakers can be made from a column of magnets wrapped in scrap paper and magnet wire, attached to a styrofoam takeout container. Styrofoam containers being particularly interesting when employed to present time based work, because of their short intended use value, and the fact they can retain their form for thousands of years. These containers are frequently found littered in the streets, a common component of the urban landscape. When they are litter, they are noise.

Last year I traveled to a stagehand gig in the company of four dedicated skateboarders. Stagehand work involves unloading trucks and rigging lights and doing whatever else it takes to facilitate a large scale concert experience. Riding in the car, it was amazing to listen to skateboarders talk about all the spots they had found to skate as we passed them in the car. Skateboarding is a great way of improvising, collaborating with your environment, using a simple object; some wood, metal, and wheels. People often start skating in their youth, when presented with a world that's already there, fully formed that they didn't create, that might seem mundane, they might seem absurd. A skateboarder finds possibilities that exist in this world as it presents itself.

They're not terribly concerned with product, more so the moment; the completed trick, the shared the experience with friends.

Perhaps my interest in sound is partially because it's analogous to life? In that it's fleeting, it's immaterial, it's not necessarily concerned in creating a thing, it can be irritating, it can disturb, it can be unavoidable, and it can be exceedingly beautiful.

Note: The title of this document originated from a t-shirt I once owned, for the band *Thee Silver Mt. Zion Memorial Orchestra*.