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# Dichotomous Key

By

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B.F.A., Kansas City Art Institute, 2002

A thesis submitted to the  
Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment  
of the requirement for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts  
Department of Art and Art History  
2006

University of Colorado at Boulder




U18304 4908575

This thesis entitled:


Dichotomous Key

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Has been approved for the Department of Art and Art History



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Date 5.3.2006

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

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Dichotomous Key

Thesis Directed by Assistant Professor Yumi Janairo Roth

*Dichotomous Key* is a physical, visual, and conceptual exploration of American consumer culture. As an artist I use the objects that I own and desire to form a visual discussion of this consumer culture. This written thesis serves as the conceptual support for this action. It is my attempt as an artist to bring awareness and perhaps spark a change in the lifestyle of my viewers through the critique and celebration of their consumerism.

I use myself as a tool with which I can form a discussion of this excessive American lifestyle. I begin this process by categorizing the objects that I already own into *essential* or *desirable*. My stove is *essential*, while my favorite stainless steel floor lamp is *desirable*. *Dichotomous Key* explores these personal relationships I have with the objects I own and my insatiable desires for more.

The Dichotomous Key is a key for the identification of organisms based on a series of choices between alternative characters. A user will be given a series of two choices that will lead to the correct name of a given item. For example, a. object is covered in stainless steel and b. object is not covered in stainless steel. Given the option of a toaster and a Kleenex box, the user

could then easily identify each object. The introduction of *Dichotomous Key* as the title becomes a conceptual device for the viewer to visually make connections between multiple objects and the objects he or she consumes.

I attempt to take away the categories of *essential* and *excess* in my own domestic objects through their deconstruction. By visually existing as shapes, each object in *Dichotomous Key* begins to question ideas of commodity by being rendered functionless. In the following pages I will explore the personal interactions I have with the objects that I own, and my insatiable desires for more, in relationship to the concepts, materials, and contexts of *Dichotomous Key*.

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## Introduction

In the work entitled *Dichotomous Key*, I physically, visually, and conceptually explore my insatiable desires for mundane objects. Through the exploration of the objects that I own and want to own, I am able to investigate ideas of “essential” and “excess” when referring to everyday possessions.

What is the essential amount of stuff I should own? Ask any American and I guarantee the material equivalent of the essential would differ from person to person depending on cultural and economic background. As a suburban dwelling, middle-class American, I would describe my washer and dryer as *essential*. On the contrary, perhaps a person living in a remote desert of Africa might describe these appliances as *excessive* for their lifestyle.

I am speaking to the idea of *essential* with a societal understanding of relative and absolute poverty. Relative poverty is based on a comparison against the poor people of a society, while absolute poverty is determined by the minimum standard necessary for survival.<sup>1</sup> *Dichotomous Key* forms its discussions around the idea of relative poverty. Its definitions of *essential* are determined from the poverty of not only American society, but also many societies throughout the world. We Americans have become numb to this diversity of ownership. It is my attempt as an artist to critique the inability to

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<sup>1</sup> *Poverty, An Introduction to Social Policy*,  
<<http://www2.rgu.ac.uk/publicpolicy/introduction/needf.htm>> 1 May 2006.



appreciate our possessions through an uneasy embrace of this consumer culture.

A dichotomous key is a rubric for the identification of organisms based on a series of choices between alternative characters. A user will be given a series of two choices that will lead to the correct name of a given item. For example, a. object is covered in stainless steel and b. object is not covered in stainless steel. Given the option of a toaster and a Kleenex box, the user could then easily identify each object. The introduction of *Dichotomous Key* as the title becomes a conceptual device for the viewer to visually make connections between multiple objects and the objects he or she consumes.

In *Dichotomous Key*, I use myself as an example with which I form a visual discussion of this consumer lifestyle. I begin this process by categorizing the objects that I already own into *essential* or *desirable*. By categorizing this way, I realize that I define the essential objects in the most basic terms, while the desirable objects are described using multiple adjectives. For example, my *stove* is *essential*, while my *favorite, stainless steel floor lamp* is *desirable*. Why is this? Am I attempting to validate the unnecessary want by making the object sound more important? In the following pages I will explore the personal interactions I have with the objects that I own, and my insatiable desires for more, in relationship to the concepts, materials, and contexts of *Dichotomous Key*.

## Concept

### *Stuff*

I refer to everyday, mundane objects of the home as *stuff* because I feel this word expresses the most commonly understood definition. What is *stuff*? The dictionary states that *stuff* is “the essential substance or elements.”<sup>2</sup> But how do we, average Americans, define *stuff*? I often times refer to the piles of bills, half consumed soda cans, and wrappers found on my kitchen counter as *stuff*. But how in any way is this *stuff* essential?

I consider *stuff* to merely be a collection of objects that serve a simple and unnecessary purpose. When referring to an object that has an intended purpose, we give that object a *name* rather than a *category*, like *stuff*. Consider a spoon. I have never referred to a spoon as anything other than a spoon. Perhaps I have called it a soup spoon or a dessert spoon, but I have never called it a *stuff*.

In *Dichotomous Key*, I attempt to take away the category of these objects through their physical deconstruction. By existing in their abstracted diagrammatic version, the work begins to question the commodity of the objects through their loss of function. Each object existing as a collection of material shapes, forces the consumers desire to steer from the specific object to the mass and quantity of *Dichotomous Key* as a whole. The work celebrates ideas of consumption through the visual exploitation of my

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<sup>2</sup> *Stuff*, [Dictionary.com](http://dictionary.reference.com/) <<http://dictionary.reference.com/>> 13 Mar. 2006.

possessions as one consumable installation. The categories of *essential* or *desirable* lose their importance and the objects are no longer my toaster, my chair, or my stove; they are simply *stuff*, my *stuff*.

### *Essentials*

I am constantly buying multiple objects that satisfy the same function. I look in my closet and I cannot begin to count the number of shoes, sweaters, or shirts I own. But what is truly *essential*? As stated before, I believe the material equivalent of *essential* for any American greatly differs from people from diverse cultural and economic backgrounds.

I use the word *essential* to describe an object that is used on a daily basis. My stove is *essential* because I use it to cook the food that I eat. On the contrary, I do not really need a stove that has a fancy high and low broil setting and is made out of a sleek black material to match the décor of my kitchen. But as an American, I am provided with a wide variety of stoves such as these.

The majority of Americans live a fast-paced, transient lifestyle. I find this interesting in contrast to the material baggage we acquire in hopes to fulfill these wants and desires. How is it we can keep up this fast-paced lifestyle and still have this mass of material wealth? My attempt is to visually and physically comment on the disposability of this lifestyle through the absolute

mass and quantity of *Dichotomous Key*. A transitory person is often forced to dispose, or pick and choose between valued items. *Dichotomous Key* contradicts this idea through its physical permanence. The work is not only massive in its scale, but it is designed to exist as thirty-one panels that make up a whole. Its conceptual effectiveness is lost in its parts. The viewer is forced to consume the installation as a whole or not at all.

### *Wants and Desires*

This relationship to an object that is merely bought for its aesthetic qualities is one of *want* or *desire*, not of necessity. I do not need a hundred dollar vase that is designed by Philippe Starck, but I *want* one for its aesthetics and because it is designed by Starck. I am curious how we develop these physical *wants* and *desires* for these material items. Why is it that I may like this vase, but others may not? I ponder this question in comparison to how food tastes. As a child I am born with an inexperienced palette. How is it that my taste is developed to like carrots but not peas? Being a child, I have no experience on which I base this opinion, but I am still sure I do not like peas. I believe this to be a physical response in my character similar to my *want* for the Starck vase.

Dictionary.com states that consumerism is the attachment to materialistic values or possessions.<sup>3</sup> Why are we so attached to the things we own? Do these material things give us a greater value? We live in a culture where many social standards are defined by television. I spend hours watching show after show on HGTV learning ways to improve the materialistic aspects of my life such as my house and the objects within it, as a physical attempt to improve the quality of life.

*Dichotomous Key* allows me to investigate these wants and desires on multiple levels. The work itself is an exploration of the objects that I own. It is presented to the viewer in such a way that the viewer begins to resolve what each object is based on a comparison of their own personal inventory of objects and possessions. I wish for my viewer to learn to appreciate the things he or she owns and to evaluate their own understanding of a materialistic lifestyle. The thirty-one plywood panels display objects of my home that have been carefully rendered in felt. The objects are introduced through calm and mundane color to promote a meditative state for the viewer. *Dichotomous Key* as a whole, and its individual parts, becomes an object of desire.

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<sup>3</sup> Consumerism, [Dictionary.com](http://dictionary.reference.com/) <<http://dictionary.reference.com/>> 5 Apr. 2006.

## Material

### *Physical Materials*

Felt, plywood, and straight pins are the dominant materials that make up the work entitled *Dichotomous Key*. These intentional material choices give the work strength through their specificity as well as their cultural and historical associations.

Felt is a material that is associated with ideas of comfort, industry, expediency, and protection and can be cheaply obtained. As an artist I am harnessing all of these inherent qualities to invite variety within the interpretation of the work. I believe that this layered understanding presents the work in its most complete form.

The use of plywood speaks to ideas of gender through cultural stereotypes. As a middle-class suburban American, I was taught to understand that men work in their garage woodshops as a pastime while women work in the home. We are often fed these basic stereotypes through American advertisement as well. Historically, plywood was developed as a cheaper, but still high-quality alternative to solid wood. It refers to modern design and industry of the 1920s. Famous designers such as Charles and Ray Eames used plywood to create affordable, yet high-quality furniture that was marketed to the average consumer.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Furniture, The Work of Charles and Ray Eames.*

<<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/eames/furniture.html>> 12 Apr. 2006.

The use of straight pins introduces ideas of the domestic and feminine chores such as sewing. I also welcome the reference to insect pins and exaggerate this reference through my method of display in which the shapes of these household objects are displayed as though they have been dissected or disassembled and then pinned down.

### *Imagery*

My choice of imagery for *Dichotomous Key* is determined by my own inventory of objects. I use my possessions and myself as an example of American consumer culture. I enjoy the objects that I own and purchase on a regular basis. Whether they are *essential* or *desirable*, their aesthetic presence within my house brings me joy. I use my own human relationship to inanimate objects as an example of the American consumer because it is most familiar.

In *Dichotomous Key*, objects such as chairs, vases, toasters, lamps, and grills are presented to the viewer in their dismantled form. Each object is broken down into a series of shapes such as circles, squares, geometric and organic shapes. Color choices for each shape are determined from the original object. The objects are then arranged in groupings to create visual compositions on specifically scaled panels of plywood. Each shape is individually pinned to the plywood with straight pins at the top, once again

referencing the dissection process. The plywood panels are presented in a grid that references modern design. Their modularity implies modernity, expediency, and disposability. However, the permanence of their installation ironically contradicts these ideas.

The thirty-one panels together create one massive wall that references the merchandising of home improvement stores like Target or IKEA. Each panel invites the viewer's own interpretation and understanding of what the object is. The visual layout is intended to provoke ideas and memories of model kits, Colorforms, and felt boards. As a child we used these toys to give us adult characteristics of ownership. As an adult we often lose appreciation of the value of ownership.

A leveling of value and contradiction in worth happens with the objects that make up *Dichotomous Key*. A stove is often more expensive, more valuable than a toaster. However, each object is given the same qualities through the use of material and mode of display in order to express their overall value. The individual object's inherent worth has been either negated or inverted. The toaster can now be understood as having more value than the stove because of the number and detail of each of the constituent parts.



### *The Self as a Tool*

I have chosen to use my own lifestyle as the subject for *Dichotomous Key* because it is most comfortable. I am a consumer, a middle-class American consumer. I am interested in the choice to use myself as a tool for this discussion because I am a person who finds value in American consumerism and consumable goods. At moments, I find that I am proud of the abundant lifestyle that I live. After all, this is all that I know. And at other times I am ashamed of these material possessions. I am constantly questioning their value. The dichotomy of these relationships within the self enables the visual discussion to become cyclical, forcing the viewer to repeatedly challenge his or her own relationship to consumerism.

*Dichotomous Key* does not seem personal through its use of mundane color, yet it is personal. It presents to the viewer an approval of consumerism through the display of valued goods, my goods. In contrast, I am interested in how it can also be interpreted as a critique of the self and this consumer lifestyle. I am fascinated in how the work is both read as commercial and personal simultaneously. The objects become visually similar to the merchandising of the department store in their grid fashion. Each object is also a commodity that is for sale. The personal aspects are defined through the artist's hand in the choice of a particular object and how it is disassembled, the color in which the object is presented, how it is carefully rendered in felt, and its composition on the plywood panel. The objects are

also made personal through connections and comparisons to the viewer's own possessions.

### Context

#### *My House*

I do not own the house that I live in, but I want to own one like it. It is a nicely sized fifties ranch in Golden, Colorado, with a large back yard for grilling. It is a two-block walk to South Table Mountain where I can enjoy beautiful views of Colorado. Shelter, on the other hand, is *essential*, just as my stove. Survival would require something as simple as a cardboard box. These descriptive qualities allow us to create stereotypes about the people we know. I invite descriptions like these to be made about *Dichotomous Key* based upon the visual information that is provided.

I use the context of the objects and the specific objects found within my house to express my American consumerism. The everyday objects that make up *Dichotomous Key* are intended to invite viewers to critique me, as well as the work. I invite stereotypes to be made based on the objects that I possess and present. This connection to the viewer interests me in the way this relationship conceptually feeds back into the work.

It is as simple as the clothes on our backs. People are constantly judging us by our appearance. For most, like myself, the appearance of our

homes is as socially important as the clothes that we wear. We put up barriers, the walls and doors of our homes, to keep everyday people out or in of our personal lives. Our clothes are commodities just as the objects we own and adorn our houses with. *Dichotomous Key* allows me to break down these personal barriers and situate my “fashion” for my home within the public sphere, inviting judgments to be made.

### *The Gallery*

*Dichotomous Key* invites the viewer to reorient his or her own exchange with these objects by challenging ideas of commodity through place. The gallery or museum allows these commodities to be received as art. The viewer is asked to spend time with these art objects in a place where he or she would not normally search for commodity and question his or her own ideas of consumerism. This relationship complements the concepts of the work by allowing the work itself to exist as art and also as commodity.

Rosalind Krauss writes that sculpture “sits in a particular place and speaks in a symbolic tongue about the meaning or use of that place.”<sup>5</sup> *Dichotomous Key* speaks to the consumer atmosphere of the gallery through its choice of display on the walls. The walls of the gallery are commonly understood as a place for consumption and define the work as art. The

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<sup>5</sup> Rosalind Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), pp. 279.

viewers are asked to visually and conceptually consume what they are presented. The viewers are also presented with the option to purchase the art. I want for the objects as art, not objects, to exist as commodity. I hope for my viewers to have a *want* for this art just as I have a *want* for these objects.

### *The World*

Within the context of societies throughout the world, *Dichotomous Key* is specifically about American consumerism. American consumer culture is a place where you can pick between ten different toasters that all just toast bread. Why? That is the question that I ask myself on a daily basis. *Dichotomous Key* is a celebration of this American relationship to these objects. I take pleasure in the multitude of options I am provided with as a consumer. These selections are what allow me to find the toaster that best fits the characteristics of my own dichotomous key. I believe that the ability to provide my viewers with the opportunity to consume my image of a toaster as well as their understanding of a toaster, gives the work strength.

Susan Stewart states that the collection's function "is not the restoration of context of origin but rather the creation of a new context."<sup>6</sup> The collection of objects that are chosen for *Dichotomous Key* creates a new context that is

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<sup>6</sup> Stewart, Susan. "Context Destroyed" in *On Longing: Narrative on the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993) pp. 152.

intended to suggest everyday American consumerism. Their mode of display takes away their specific reference to the home. The merchandising of *Dichotomous Key* alludes to a place within a home improvement store, an American home improvement store. The use of my collection of objects, within the context of my home, the gallery, and the world, is an endeavor to affirm the viewers own consumer desires.

### Conclusion

*Dichotomous Key* is an artistic attempt to assess American consumer culture. The work is equally about my consumer dependencies and my cultural acceptance of being a consumer. The efforts of the work do not stop at this. It provides my example of consumerism to viewers as an attempt to bring awareness and reception to his or her consumer dependencies.

Just as critic Herbert Read questions the value in art, I question the value of the consumer culture that *Dichotomous Key* presents.<sup>7</sup> As an artist, my goal is to strive for the moment where my viewers find worth in the time they have spent with the art. I want it to be remembered. According to Read in order to create great art, there must be tension. And in order to create

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<sup>7</sup> Herbert Read, "The Freedom of the Artist," in To Hell With Culture (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 1963), pp. 122.

tension, there must be a balance of contradiction.<sup>8</sup> *Dichotomous Key* is my equivalent of visual, material, and conceptual contradiction.

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<sup>8</sup> Read 124.

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