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Buy Nathan Sharratt: A Requirement of the Masters of Fine Arts Degree of Georgia State University

Nathan Sharratt

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BUY NATHAN SHARRATT: A REQUIREMENT OF THE MASTERS OF FINE ARTS
DEGREE OF GEORGIA STATE UNIVERSITY

by

NATHAN SHARRATT

Under the Direction of Ruth Stanford, MFA

ABSTRACT

Buy Nathan Sharratt: A Requirement of the Masters of Fine Arts degree of Georgia State University, is a multidiscipline and multiplatform exhibition of post-institutional critique that uses my lived experience of being an academic artist pursuing a terminal art degree at a public university as its point of departure. It evaluates how societal expectations influence the formation of individual and group identity in mediated culture. *Buy Nathan Sharratt* challenges the hierarchy of economic and social value systems by simulating an institutional museum retrospective of super-famous and super-commoditized artist “Nathan Sharratt.” The exhibition is divided into a gallery space, a project space, a gift shop, and a virtual space. It includes art objects and performances to pose that the art experience has been compressed into a simulation, in which art serves as the trigger for social networking and virtual experiences, rather than critical assessment.

INDEX WORDS: Installation, Conceptual art, Performance art, Institutional critique, Social media, Commodity

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DEGREE OF GEORGIA STATE UNIVERSITY

by

NATHAN SHARRATT

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2016

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2016

BUY NATHAN SHARRATT: A REQUIREMENT OF THE MASTERS OF FINE ARTS
DEGREE OF GEORGIA STATE UNIVERSITY

by

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August 2016

DEDICATION

To my wife, Mona. An eye roll from you always lets me know I'm on the right track. I couldn't do this without you.

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Thank you to everyone who supported me during the conception, installation, and reception of this thesis and exhibition. Thank you to my committee members for your invaluable feedback and support. Thank you to my docents, Blake, Sabrina Finnegan, Adrienne Gonzalez, Haley Hall, Destiny Jean, Miranda Kyle, Kris Pilcher, Han Vance, Hannah Young. Thank you Allen Peterson for encouraging your students to volunteer. Thank you to my studio assistant Sara Hopkins. Thank you Zachary Shaw for donating your company's social media services and your friendship through the years. Thank you Mike Stasny for being the Best Mike. Thank you to my family, who has always supported my creative pursuits, even if they didn't always make much sense. And especially to my wife, Mona, and mother, Julianne, for their support, guidance, and ways with words.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Simply, *Buy Nathan Sharratt: A Requirement of the Masters of Fine Arts Degree of Georgia State University* is a retrospective of the art career of a fictionalized Persona that I created named “Nathan Sharratt” who shares my name and my appearance. He is an exaggeration of an artist who has perfected self-promotion and branding and whose mission in his career is to endlessly and unabashedly increase his worth in money and prestige. Complexly, the exhibition is an experimentative investigation of how an artist’s seemingly narcissistic commodification and aggrandizement in a meritocratic society trigger societal and personal reactions. Personally, *Buy Nathan Sharratt* is a journey of self-reflection where I, as the actual artist, consider how my true personal values, beliefs, goals, and ambitions are in conflict or in agreement with the Persona.

The installation *Buy Nathan Sharratt* is an open investigation into the ways in which the expectations of society inform and influence the shaping of individual identity, and how societal perceptions of that identity—regardless of the degree of rationality or accuracy of those perceptions—inform group identity and behavior. If I present myself as a successful branded artist who has achieved dominance over both symbolic and economic value norms—the complete commodification of his brand and an institutional retrospective, the perceived pinnacles of economic and artworld success, respectively—how is social behavior altered toward the self as I know it or the self as perceived through my work? What happens when a performance uses my name as the institutional artist? Is it possible to discern the difference between the perception of the brand that uses my likeness from my personal self? What ambiguities are created when the initial viewing of the exhibition and its relational experiences are collapsed into altered and abridged experiences when shared with others?



Figure 1-1 Buy Nathan Sharratt, Installation view, 2016. The Artist as Persona

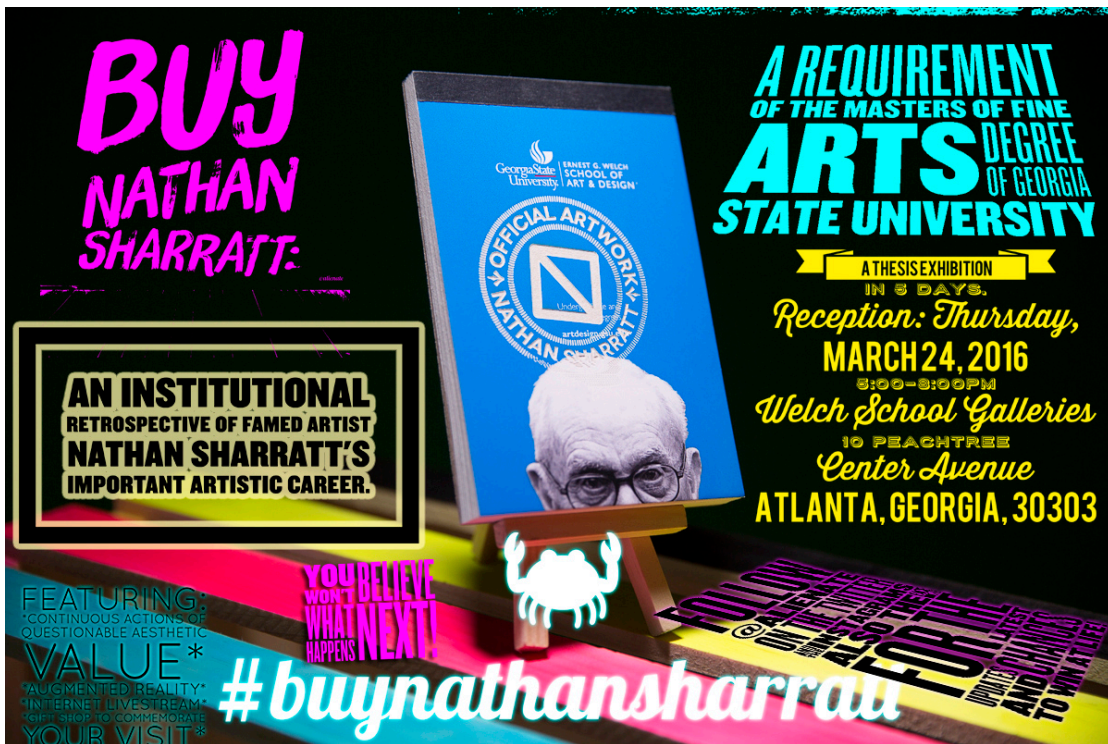



Figure 1-2 Buy Nathan Sharratt: You Won't Believe What Happens Next!, 2016. Digital image, dimensions variable. Typographic design created by using iPhone apps designed to make memes




Figure 1-3 Buy Nathan Sharratt, Installation view, 2016



Figure 1-4 Sharratt, Nathan, *#BUYNATHANSHARRATT: Look At Me When I'm Buying You*, installation view, 2016. Found mirror, wood, acrylic, cardboard. 45 inches x 12 inches

 **Nathan Sharratt Art** Published by Nathan Sharratt [?] · March 18 · 🌐




Artist Sponsorship Opportunity Now Available for Glorious Artist Nathan Sharratt! #buynathansharratt <http://www.nathansharratt.com/sponsor>



974 people reached View Results

👍 Like 💬 Comment ➦ Share

👍 Deborah Delamater, Deisha Millar and 7 others Top Comments

 Write a comment...  


 **Tori Tinsley Warezak** oh my
Unlike · Reply · Message · 👍 1 · March 18 at 4:02pm

Figure 1-5 Sharratt, Nathan, *Nathan Sharratt Is A Legitimate Artist Sponsored By You??*, 2016. Social media advertisement

2 CONCEPT

“It is time for artists to challenge that with which they cannot live, and to bring into view that which they refuse to live without. This task of confronting contradictions in all forms, at all levels, of crossing beyond the parameters of the art world to do so, is not the work all artists will have the inclination to choose.”¹

In contemporary society, values and mores are expressed through a process of masking—of hiding and revealing. We hide our “true” identities, motives, and intentions which are often highly individualistic, selfish, and based on achieving a perpetual state of comfort (power and greed are in service to this state of comfort). In public, we present to the world various performed identities that are more in line with a romanticized version of society that we wished



Figure 2-1 Sharratt, Nathan, *Portrait of the Artist as Hitchiker*, Installation view, 2016. Souvenir lenticular photo from Haunted Mansion gift shop in matching souvenir frame purchased at Walt Disney World

¹ “The Social Responsibility of Artists” by Carol Becker FROM: *Culture and Democracy: Social*

we lived in, one that is more cooperative, just, and egalitarian. Consequently, societal values are often at odds with individual values. As a person who self-identifies as an artist, I am separated into different personas and express different perspectives based on what role I am playing or what role I feel I am expected to play. These roles are performances of my self influenced by my observations of and alignment to societal and cultural norms and mores. If I want to be a “successful” artist, for example, what exactly does that mean? While success means different things to different people on an individual level, quantitative patterns and trends have emerged on a societal scale.

Through research and observation, I have concluded that the value of my artistic “brand” is a primary—if not *the* primary—signifier of artworld success. According to this version of success, in order to be accepted as a relevant artistic voice I must have a strong brand value, both symbolically and economically, with economic value weighted more heavily. The stronger my



Figure 2-2 Sharratt, Nathan, *Official Artwork Seal*, 2013. Digital vector file

artistic brand becomes, the more opportunities I will have to create art and then have that art be seen by a wide audience. To achieve this, I must pass through institutional gatekeepers and conform to artworld expectations on my path to becoming a “successful” artist. As an art-maker, my work gains both symbolic and economic value through association with other vetted and branded institutions—whether a museum, gallery, collector, critic, publication, residency, curator, artist, etc. Passing through these institutional gates influence an artist’s identity; as an artist becomes more successful, they also become more institutionalized. Once an artist achieves a “successful” career status, an increasing amount of energy must be spent to stay at that level, and art moves from a practice of inception to one of maintenance.

Careerism has overtaken the artworld. In order to advance in my career, I must be remarkable—that is, worth talking about—to get the attention of the gatekeepers, introducing a significant social networking aspect to artmaking. Being a “successful” artist is as much about who you know, and who knows you, as it is about the quality of your art. The gallery is the space where networking and social capital are gained and exchanged, and through this social networking, online and off, art and reality collapse into the same flat plane. This is the repressive desublimation of culture.

“Art in this society, like politics in this society, has been relegated to the realm of entertainment.”² Through numerous conversations with gallerists, collectors, curators, critics, art appreciators, and artists, I feel it is safe to conclude that the moment in an exhibition’s run where it has the most viewers is during the reception, or opening. The rest of the time the typical art gallery plays host to a trickle of daily visitors (major museums excluded), with the majority of

² “The Social Responsibility of Artists” by *Carol Becker* FROM: *Culture and Democracy: Social and Ethical Issues in Public Support for the Arts and Humanities*, ed. Andrew Buchwalter (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), pp. 239- 247.

sales being either presales or to established collectors with whom the gallery already has a relationship. The reception is when the gallery contains the largest number of people in geographic proximity to the art on display, but those viewers are frequently not critical viewers. Many art world denizens have told me that they can't really get a good look at the artwork during the reception, due to the social distractions, and that they intend to, but often don't, revisit the gallery during a quieter time to consider the artwork critically. I have had similar experiences.

We go to galleries not to experience art but to have a pleasurable social experience by drinking free wine and chatting with our friends in front of a backdrop of art. But most importantly, we go to be seen—to raise our social capital. As a contemporary art museum curator once told me about opening receptions, “I notice who's there and who's not.” Due to the heavy social-networking requirement, there simply isn't enough time or energy to consider the art fully. Combined with the physical geographic proximity requirements, the primary art experience for many exists not in the gallery, but in a universe of International Art Magazines, journals, critical reviews, offsite discussion, jpegs, social media, and sales figures. The gallery as a place for art to exist and be considered as a primary art experience is a false flag. Its true function is to facilitate social entertainment and networking. This works against the art's intentions, if such personification can be ascribed, and undermines its symbolic value by flattening it to the same reality hierarchy as the architecture (or other environmental constraints) that physically contain or support the art. But because it conflicts with art's role in our wished-for society—in which it is pure, untouched by greed, and serves as a gateway to some form of personal transcendental experience—we continue to perform by pretending that art is in its own world, known as the “artworld,” in which art is not a product of capitalistic values or expressions. In spite of this, I believe this paradigm can be altered by acknowledging its existence, making the hidden

machinations visible, and through a praxis of radical slowness realign our true values more closely to our wished-for values.

To address these disconnects, I am creating a performance of the artist as celebrity institution, replete with relational representations of the economic, social, and personal systems required for an artist to achieve the current normalized version of artworld success. Because my personal beliefs often diverge from these norms, I have created a Persona to allow myself to embrace this version of culture in order to understand it and myself more fully.

2.1 Repressive Desublimation of Culture

Herbert Marcuse first presented the idea of repressive desublimation of culture in 1964. In basic form, it considers that people may unwittingly repress themselves through consumerist excess and that this act contributes to the degradation of culture and the repression of its peoples.

Oxford Reference describes repressive desublimation of culture:

Herbert Marcuse's term for the process whereby art (in the strictest sense) is rendered banal and powerless. In *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), his million-selling account of the changes to society wrought by late capitalism, Marcuse argues that the real problem posed by the culture industry for critical theory and hence society itself is not its blurring of the distinction between high culture and low culture, but rather its blurring of the distinction between art and reality.... Marcuse argues that the mass production and distribution of art and its concomitant permeation of almost every aspect of daily life has destroyed what was most potent in art to begin with, namely its antagonism toward the ordinary ... Where before in art and literature representations of artists, prostitutes, adulterers, and so forth testified to an other, perhaps utopian, life, now they are simply an affirmation of the existing order and carry no power of negation. Desublimation is in this sense repressive.³

As I interpret it, the instantaneous gratification of consumption—including art—sucks the energy from social critique, so instead of being liberating, it becomes repressive. And through

³ Buchanan, Ian, "A Dictionary of Critical Thinking," *Desublimation*, n.d., *Oxford Reference*, Web, 23 November 2015.

technology, we aren't able to discern a difference between art and reality in capitalist society. We experience art, for example, through social media in the same way we consume pictures of cats and discuss whatever we had for lunch that day.

The discussion of “cultural flattening” has connections to the Japanese Superflat movement, whose manifesto was written by Japanese artist Takashi Murakami. In the article *WTF is... Superflat?*, Kyle Chayka describes Superflat as

. . . defined first by its visual aesthetic, an instantly recognizable, super-slick gloss that combines anime (Japanese animated cartoons) and ukiyo-e (traditional Japanese block prints) influences, as well as the mass production fetish of Warhol . . . Superflat might bring to mind Warhol's integration of fine art and pop culture into one flat plane. Murakami expands on that, appropriating the contemporary globalized visual culture and the new possibilities of manufacturing to create a flawless mix of high art and the lowbrow that can be bought in any country and consumed anywhere—without diminishing the art's impact. Super flat!⁴

Many aspects of the exhibition make reference to Superflat, from the bright color scheme to the flattening of hierarchy—bringing fine art, low art, pop culture, history, and social constructs into the same flat plane. Historical artifacts that have been digitally scanned and released through the internet as open-source files are re-created through 3D printing, flattening time as well as space.

Buy Nathan Sharratt further expands upon these ideas by taking aspects of Superflat and Marcuse's repressive desublimation to mediate them through personal experience in a post-internet age. The connected individual's experience, through technological mediation, is primarily one of alleviating discomfort through consumption and entertainment. We must invent this contentment in order to survive, which turns it into, “a caricature of well-being in which we try to see ourselves as having attained happiness.”⁵ This fantasy of happiness is then reinforced

⁴Chayka, Kyle, “WTF is . . . Superflat?” Hyperallergic, 28 October 2010, Web, 3 January 2016.

⁵ Pezeu-Massabuau, Jacques, *A Philosophy Of Discomfort*, (London : Reaktion Books. 2012) 34.

through the reward of social currency. If we present a good enough virtual version of ourselves, then more people will like us, and, hopefully, the happier we will be.

The consumption of appropriated globalized visual culture, combined with a dissociative always-on, a-la-carte sharing economy, has habituated us into believing that everything in the world is available to our whims and desires, and other people become abstract automatons monotasking the execution of those whims and desires. Through this we form a collective sense of contented familiarity based on shared experiences and fulfilled expectations, but only for those on our same consumptive level. We are part of the same in-group when we order a cab through our smartphone, but not the same in-group as the person driving the cab. The driver's labor and personal experiences are nullified through technological mediation, and the person becomes abstracted and dehumanized.

Culturally, high and low art are flattened to the same hierarchy through the consumption of infinite virtual distribution and repetition. Combined as such, neither can be discerned from reality—Magritte next to Koons next to Kinkade next to more cats. Art now serves us as a toaster serves us, conforming to our will and executing its function when it behooves us for it to do so. As long as art maintains our comfort, it is inoffensive and insignificant—aesthetically pleasing wallpaper. When it doesn't, we become emotional and demand for it to stop distressing us by dismissing its validity through actions such as censorship.

The defensive act of censorship always fails at its purported goals of protecting viewers from ideas the censor finds offensive. To start, the act of censorship often calls more attention to the censored object or idea than if no censoring had occurred. More importantly, it causes the social critique function of art to lose effectiveness since it no longer wields authority as something outside ourselves that we could look to for perspective or to give context and

meaning. Instead, art becomes so thoroughly blended in with everyday life that it surrounds and smothers us. Art that has been culturally flattened is no longer capable of social critique. The signal, through technological reproduction, has become noise, but we either don't notice because we are distracted or don't care because we are contented by the pleasure of immediate gratification.

My goal for *Buy Nathan Sharratt* was to allow art to reaffirm its socio-critical capacity by exposing these uncomfortable truths that include our own complicity in/complacency with these systems as they pertain to culture. By using a simulated reality that transparently embraces current societal values, *Buy Nathan Sharratt* challenged the viewer to regain agency through a praxis of radical slowness, critical thinking, and authentic self reflection which ultimately will allow us to become more fully human.

2.1.1 Discomfort, Media, and Gratification

We are too comfortable. As Jacques Pezeu-Massabuau describes in *A Philosophy of Discomfort*: “the ultimate stage of comfort should be seen thus: not simply surrounded, but contained, even detained, in a harmonious prison of the conventional terms, shared images and given concepts of an apparent objectivity in which every culture seals its objects.”⁶ Our civilization, “gently places us in the norms for which our culture has programmed us since the dawn of time.”⁷

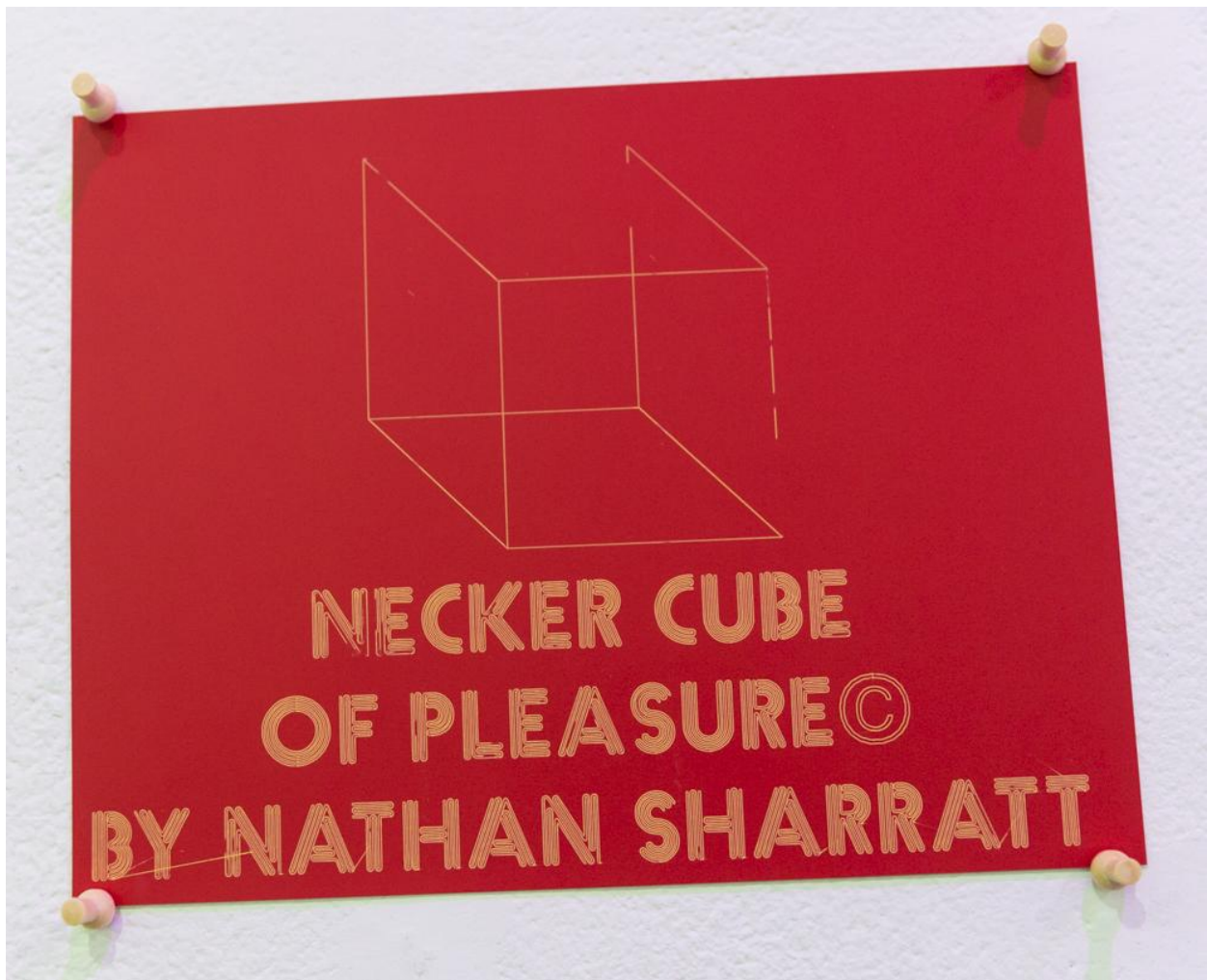


Figure 2-3 Sharratt, Nathan, *Necker Cube of Pleasure© I*, 2016. Computer-drawn pen on paper, 11 inches x 8.5 inches

⁶ Ibid. 27.

⁷ ibid

Online socialization embeds our identities into the formation of a subjective social reality that is hyper-individualistic, yet dependent on a constructed groupthink reality—this is the “networking” part of social networking. Because we become dependent on these social constructs where the work of critical thinking and understanding is done for us (or taken away from us), we prevent ourselves from learning the coping strategies to deal with and process discomfort beyond our immediate control. While exceptions always exist, instead of writing, discussing, or investigating a topic at length where we might perform some measure of authentic self reflection, we share an article on Facebook that someone else has already written, amplifying the author’s singular perspective and contributing to the homogenization of discourse. Usually this article conforms to our existing beliefs and creates an echo chamber when shared with friends who also already hold similar beliefs. When situations arise in which our comfort is challenged, we seek an external outlet for our internal distress to reacquire a contented equilibrium. Because we have not become accustomed to processing discomfort internally, this is when we rage and shame externally on social media those we target as scapegoats for our displaced frustration and aggression.

This inability to process discomfort creates a new kind of global citizen, one where the sense of self is defined almost entirely by immediate gratification in service to mitigating discomfort. The entitlement we’ve trained ourselves to believe we have reinforces the belief that our individual voice or desire is the only relevant one by rewarding us for exercising that individualism through status, prestige, wealth, or the temporary alleviation of discomfort—it feels good. This new construct is destructive due to the inherent governing dynamics that make it incapable of determining reality from fantasy, because it doesn’t have to: everything is exactly

how you want it, and if it's not, you can change it to be so. Just delete those Facebook friends who disagree with you or change the proverbial channel.

Buy Nathan Sharratt aims to subvert comfort to allow art to once again critique society by reconfiguring the expectations that allow us this form of habituated consumer contentment. While habit can relieve anxiety by establishing a margin between personal choice and social conditioning, it is “only when the individual is integrated in the precise framework of collective existence, in relation to others, that they can fully grasp their personhood and implement what remains of their power of decision.”⁸ To be fully human, we must extricate ourselves from continuous technological alienation by accepting the discomfoting fact that other people do not exist to fulfill our desires or serve as punching bags for our displaced emotions. This requires a difficult process of self-reflection and awareness to view discomfort as a beneficial and necessary tool for breaking away from damaging social habits.



Figure 2-4 Sharratt, Nathan, *Consumer Portrait I*, 2016. Digital image, Dimensions variable



Figure 2-5 Sharratt, Nathan, *Consumer Portrait II*, 2016. Digital image. Dimensions variable



Figure 2-6 Buy Nathan Sharratt, Installation view, 2016. Performing as the Persona and working on product price tags



Figure 2-7 Buy Nathan Sharratt installation view, 2016. Viewers who chose to become active consumers received an embossed, signed receipt and souvenir laser-cut shopping bag. Receipts are the original receipts when I purchased the goods at Walt Disney World during my wedding trip

3 EXHIBITION OVERVIEW

Set in a pared down simulation of a museum, the exhibition space consisted of four areas: the Gallery, the Project Space, the Virtual Space, and the Gift Shop. I performed continuously as the Persona of world-famous artist “Nathan Sharratt” for the entire duration of the five-day exhibition. At varying intervals, “Nathan Sharratt” would boldly announce to those present that he was leading a tour in a few minutes and that they should participate in the tour. Docents also led tours at various times.



Figure 3-1 Buy Nathan Sharratt gallery mockup, 2016. Mixed media

3.1 The Gallery

The Gallery of art was the presumed ‘main event;’ the reason for everyone to come to the show. Curated by fictional curator Arthur Fantastic, the title of the gallery display, “Null Object: An Institutional Retrospective of Artist Nathan Sharratt,” refers to a digital animation tool called a null object, which shows no visible content or substance but can be attached to other objects to control their attributes. The idea of an invisible force guiding and controlling our actions recurs throughout the exhibition, concurrently with an undermining of this control by making the invisible visible. Adam Smith’s concept of the Invisible Hand asserted that individuals’ actions



Figure 3-2 Sharratt, Nathan, *Null Object Gallery Sign*, 2016. Laser-cut acrylic, dimensions variable

toward personal gain could have unintended social benefits more so than if they were directly working toward a direct social benefit⁹. In *Buy Nathan Sharratt*, I believed it was important to allow viewers to discover their own path through the work, rather than explicitly defining the path for them. Individuals are free to pursue their own interests, whether it's through the enjoyment of cultural participation, the purchasing of goods to alleviate discomfort, the entertainment of digital voyeurism, or theoretical critical engagement and activism. Viewers could engage with, engage against, or ignore completely presented objects, concepts, or performances, in-gallery or online, a-la-carte style.

The null object, the “Art,” had no visible content or substance. Instead, strategically mounted at the expected 60-inches from the floor on a blank white wall, glazed ceramic bathroom tiles were mounted. Bombastic though didactic museum-style wall text was laser-etched into the tile then rubbed with colored inks to describe artwork that is real but not exhibited nor present in the gallery. The wall text, traditionally a temporary and disposable information-delivery device, was elevated to the status of art and made permanent by etching the information it displayed in stone.

On the text tiles, didactic museum-style text contextualizes the work through language that gives mostly factual statements twisted through the lens of my personal anxieties and fears. For example, from *Wall Text: What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Stronger*: “Pop music has not yet passed the artistic vetting process of credibility the way pop art has, and these work[sic] were viewed as fun distractions suitable for decorating children's rooms.” These are thoughts that run through my mind as I imagine critical responses to my work, or conjecture about why a work might not have sold during an exhibition, or how that artwork could be harming me because, as

⁹ Thornton, Mark. "Cantillon and the Invisible Hand," *The Quarterly Journal of Austrian Economics* n.p. (2009) 27–46.

unsold inventory, it is not translated into money that I can use to pay my cell phone bill or studio rent. Another example, from *Wall Text: Postmodern Prometheus*: “After this exhibition Sharratt was blacklisted for one year and no longer received unsolicited art opportunities from the local art community.” I don’t believe I was actually blacklisted, but I did go through a period where opportunities were less frequent. These thoughts are typically fleeting, and my rational mind dismisses them for what they are: irrational, emotional reactions based on limited information. In these wall text artworks, those reactions are allowed to run free and are treated as fact. This is also what can happen with online discourse: fleeting, emotional and irrational thoughts are allowed to run unrestrained by rational or critical thought, and are quickly but “permanently” etched into virtual stone that can be reproduced infinitely.

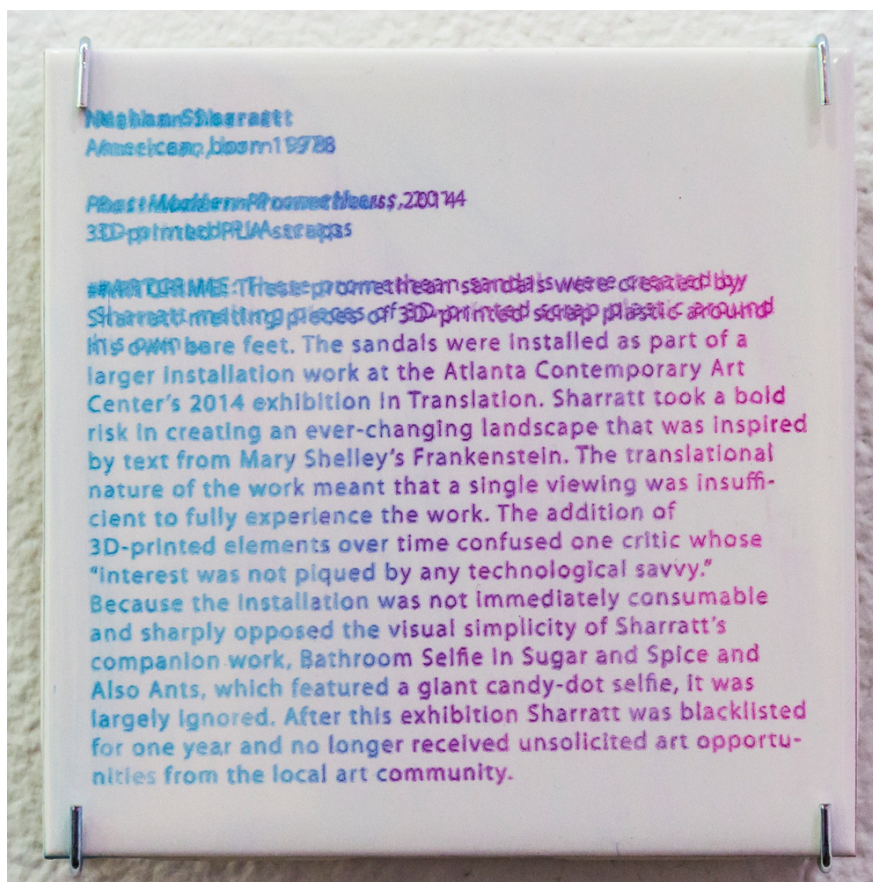


Figure 3-3 Sharratt, Nathan, *Wall Text: Postmodern Prometheus*, 2015. Ink on laser-etched ceramic tile, 4.25 inches x 4.25 inches

In the performative tours, this experience was heralded to the viewer as better than seeing the actual art, because it can exist infinitely in the viewer's mind as anything they want. It is always immediately available and transcends even the phrase "immediate gratification." It is the ultimate "Necker Cube of Pleasure©," a term I invented for this exhibition that refers to a situation upon which we project our own desires and modes of thinking, and the resolution of rational truth is a paradox that does not need to be resolved because we have already been gratified. For the artist, "Nathan Sharratt," the benefit of invisible art is that it can never be criticized because the viewers are individually shaping it to suit their desired form. The art is infinitely expansive and incomprehensible in its entirety, and therefore the art approaches a state of sublimation in the viewer's mind.

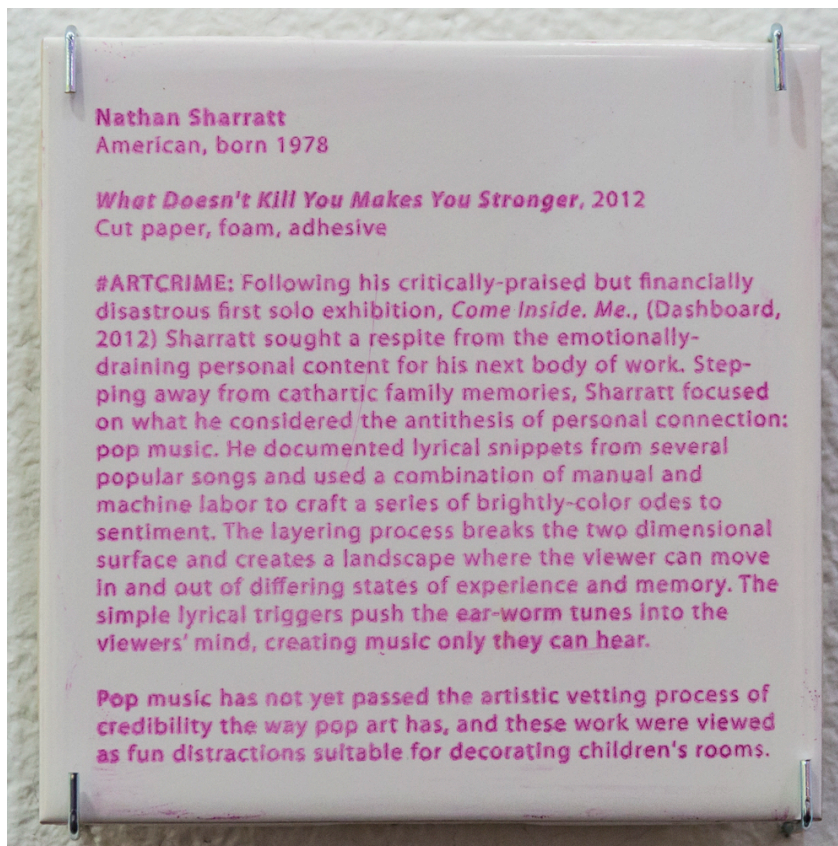


Figure 3-4 Sharratt, Nathan, *Wall Text: Postmodern Prometheus*, 2015. Ink on laser-etched ceramic tile, 4.25 inches x 4.25 inches



Figure 3-5 Buy Nathan Sharratt, Installation view, 2016. Training docent performers.

Working alongside me in the gallery were several volunteer docents, who functioned performatively as personifications of institutional control. As gatekeepers of knowledge, customer service representatives, and hype-men and hype-women, the docents worked to make the invisible institutional forces visible. They also remind us that institutions are made up of people, who can choose to exert their agency to shape the situation however they desire, or transversely however their employers desire, by selecting the specific words and ideas they choose to share. I instructed them to engage visitors to the gallery and to ask them questions about the objects and why they thought the artist might have created them or placed them within the context of the exhibition, and to give them opportunities to discuss issues they felt were

important related to the exhibition. For example, I suggested they focus on unpacking questions about why the exhibition or objects are presented to the viewer in the way they are, why certain objects might have been selected for inclusion in the exhibition, and what that might mean to them or the viewer.

3.2 The Project Space

“L’Objet” was a mini art studio and administration office where I also livestreamed the day-to-day maintenance and production activities as I worked on my art practice within the gallery. As needed, I would interrupt my work to perform as “Nathan Sharratt” the Persona.



Figure 3-6 Buy Nathan Sharratt, Installation view of project space L'Objet, 2016.



Figure 3-7 Buy Nathan Sharratt, Installation view of project space L'Objet, 2016.

My decision to work in the space was also an expression of labor, and connected to several objects in the exhibition that referenced labor as it relates to commodity. This spoke to the idea that objects don't just appear from the ether, fully formed and perfect. There are people working to make all the products we buy. I wanted to make labor visible. The work I did in "L'Objet" was a representation of all the drudgery artists have to do that isn't making art—all of the things that are distracting as an artist but feel necessary to sustain my career: increase my "brand value," price my work, commodify it, title it, present it in a pleasant way so that it will be

attractive to buyers, assert its importance, insert it into the art historical conversation, promote it, document it, and above all, ensure it is seen by people (as to repeat the process again).



Figure 3-8 Sharratt, Nathan, *Hello My Name Is Sabrina You Should Understand Me*, 2016. Docent performance with laser-etched wood and modified gold glitter name tag from Target

3.3 The Virtual Space

The virtual space: “L’Internet” consisted of a continuous and publicly-available live broadcast on YouTube, social media performance, and performative texts and essays posted on my website and social media accounts. The virtual space acted as an invisible space with which to perform and observe others' reactions and performances as they are presented online and within social media platforms. Social media posts that were meant as art were hashtagged #buynathansharratt or #makeamericanateagain as much as possible. To facilitate online dialog, I chose a livestream application that included a chat window to allow people who might not want to—or were unable to—physically approach the gallery or artist directly have access to me as well to other digital voyeurs. My social media accounts were also posted and available for anyone who visited the gallery but might not have been comfortable approaching me directly, or might be uncomfortable engaging or criticizing an artist at his own show.



Figure 3-9 Sharratt, Nathan, *Daily Live Stream Events*, 2016. Digital image used on social media, Dimensions vary




Questions relating to discourse were thusly posed: Do we successfully navigate the obstacles of modern capitalistic life and find meaning? Or do we lose ourselves in the *Brave New World* of pleasure and distraction, to the point where we no longer want to find meaning because our desires are always being immediately gratified through technology? And how does this manifest in culture? Neil Postman, author of *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, writes that, “Huxley grasped, as Orwell did not, that it is not necessary to conceal anything from a public insensible to contradiction and narcotized by technological diversions.”¹⁰ He observed television’s effects on discourse in 1985, where, “in the age of television, the paragraph is becoming the basic unit of news in print media.”¹¹ Today, the Facebook post or 140-character Tweet is the basic unit of news. With 24-hour news networks like HLN being restructured and rebranded as a social-network network that “focuses on the ‘must-see, must-share’ stories of the day,”¹² even the news gets its news from social media.


More and more frequently, social media is becoming the medium of choice for the dissemination and primary experience of culture. No longer does one have to physically visit a gallery or museum to see artwork. Now, online comments, pictures, posts, likes, hashtags, and media distribute everything that is necessary to experience and understand culture. A smartphone and an internet connection are all that is needed to actively engage with art. At least, that’s the way current usage suggests the trend is headed, and is reflective of the way most viewers experienced *Buy Nathan Sharratt*—through second-hand accounts posted online after the exhibition had closed.

¹⁰ Postman, Neil, *Amusing Ourselves To Death : Public Discourse In The Age Of Show Business* (New York : Penguin Books) 2006..

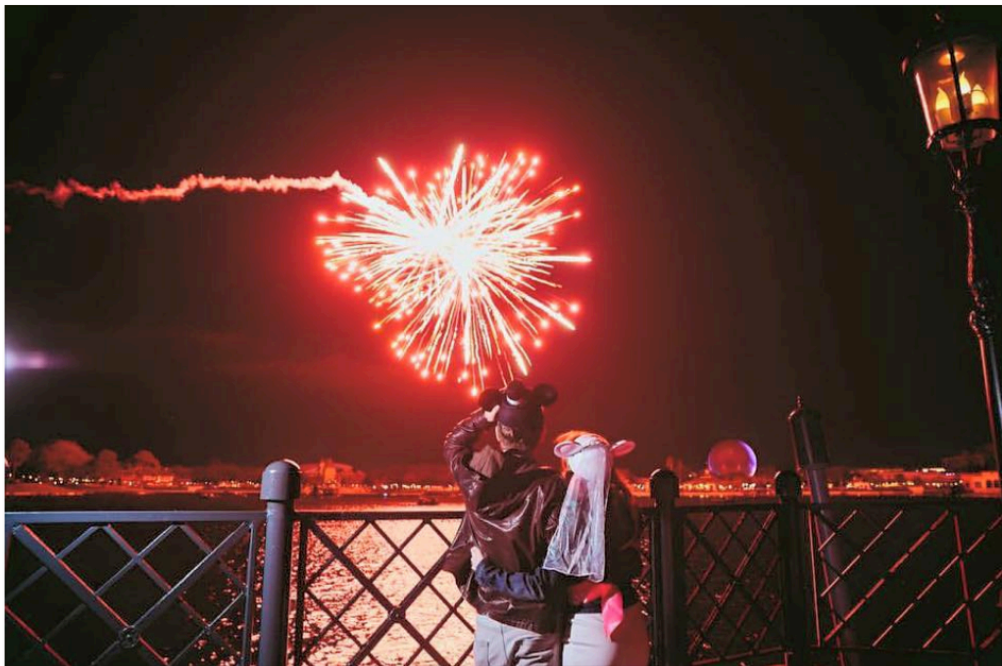
¹¹ Ibid.


¹² HLN: The News and Views Network | HLNtv.com, *HLNtv.com*, N.p., n.d. Web 06 June 2016.





 **Nathan Sharratt Art** at  Epcot - Walt Disney World. 


Published by Zachary Shaw [?] · March 18 · 

"It was so private, no paparazzi at all." Wedding guests at the recent big-ticket Walt Disney World nuptials of renowned artist, Nathan Sharratt & bride, lesser-known artist Mona Collentine, were impressed with security measures and a delightfully low-key, but glamorous event. Mr. Sharratt noted, "We had several photogs on hand, so I can email you some promo pics."



287 people reached 

 Like  Comment  Share 

 Han Vance, Cynthia Heiss and 4 others




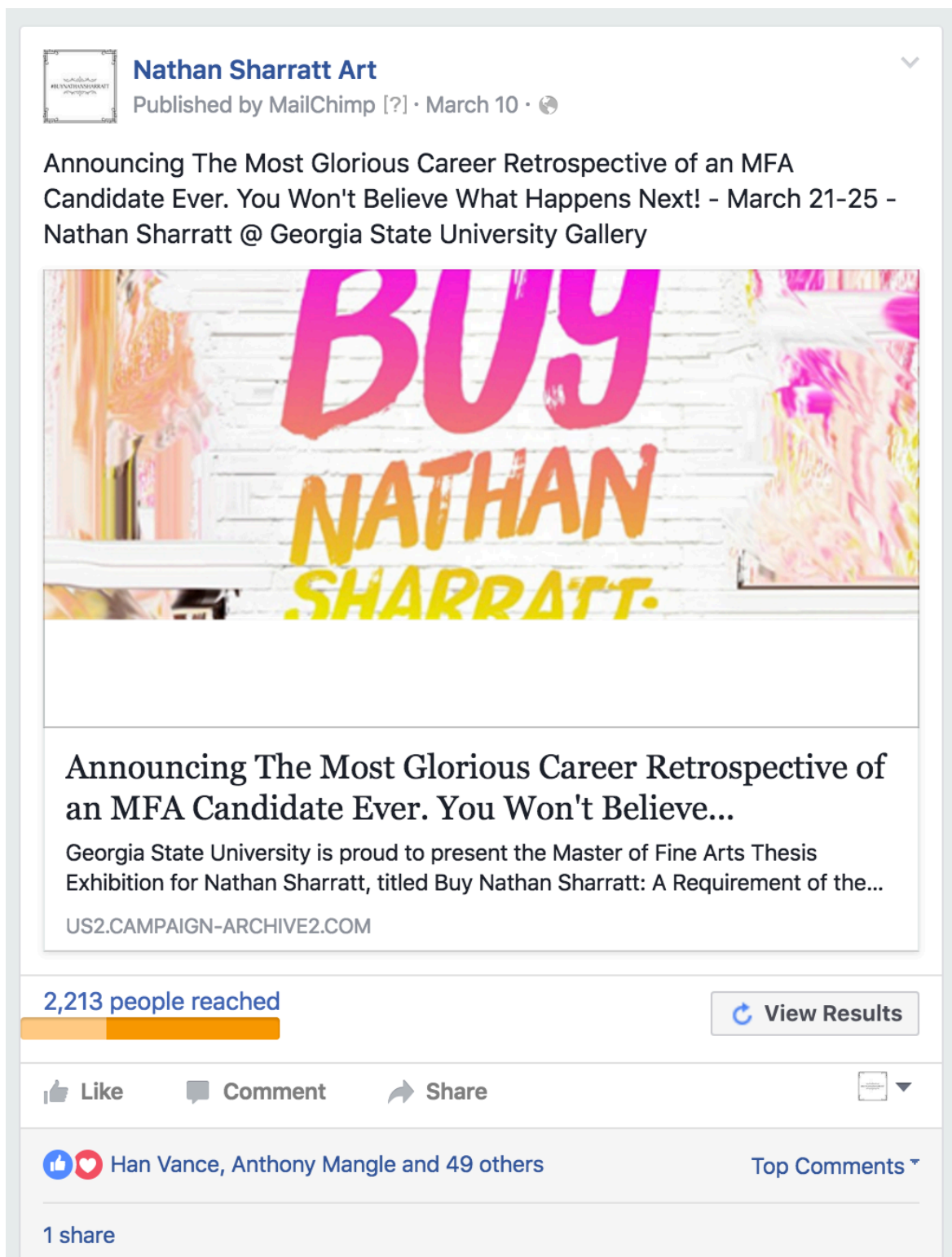

 Write a comment...  

Figure 3-10 Sharratt, Nathan, *It Was So Private, No Paparazzi At All*, 2016. Performative social media post created by social media marketing company &Also



Nathan Sharratt Art
Published by MailChimp [?] · March 10 · 🌐

Announcing The Most Glorious Career Retrospective of an MFA Candidate Ever. You Won't Believe What Happens Next! - March 21-25 - Nathan Sharratt @ Georgia State University Gallery



Announcing The Most Glorious Career Retrospective of an MFA Candidate Ever. You Won't Believe...

Georgia State University is proud to present the Master of Fine Arts Thesis Exhibition for Nathan Sharratt, titled Buy Nathan Sharratt: A Requirement of the...

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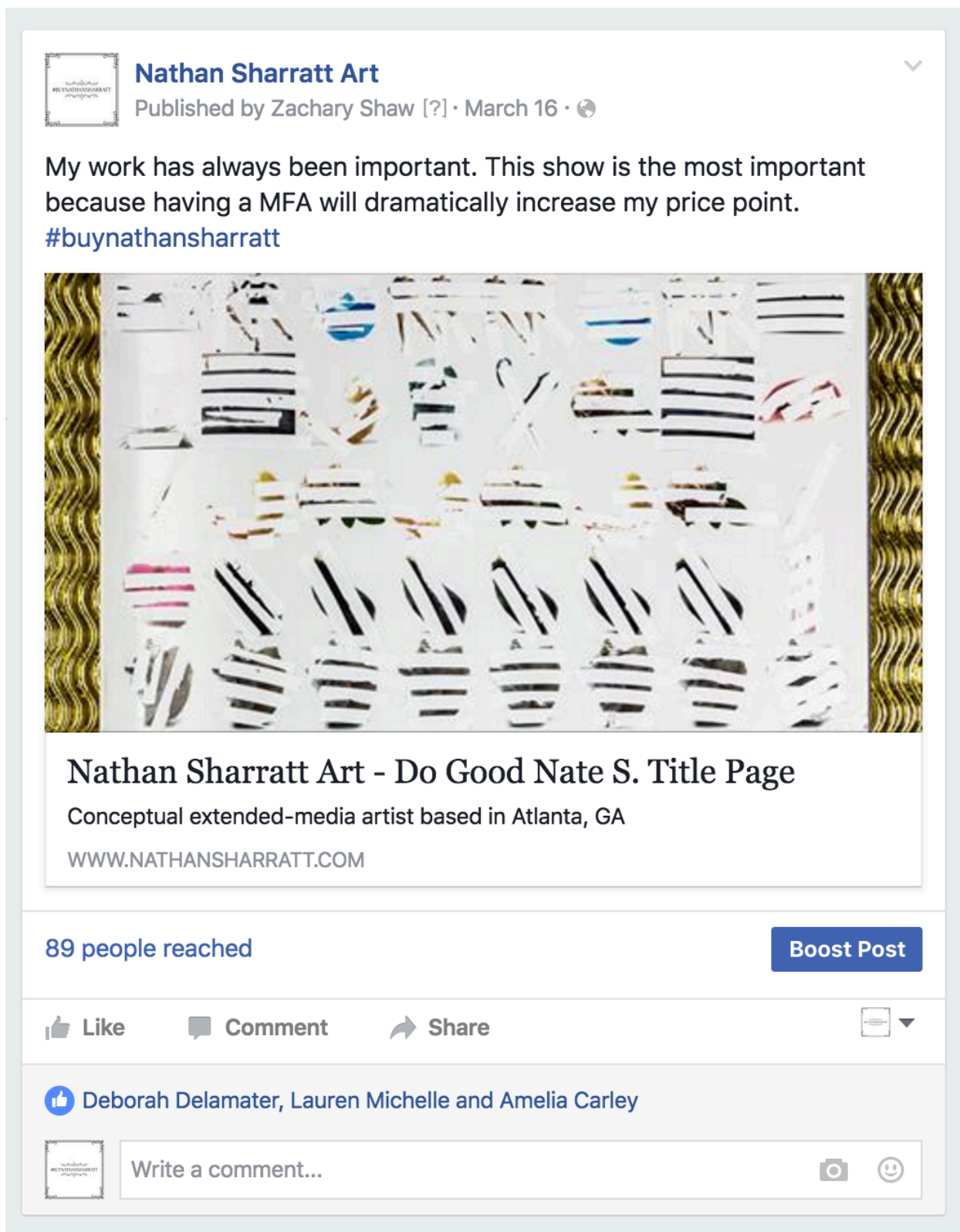
[View Results](#)

Like Comment Share

Han Vance, Anthony Mangle and 49 others [Top Comments](#)

1 share


Figure 3-11 Sharratt, Nathan, *Announcing The Most Glorious Career Retrospective of an MFA Candidate Ever. You Won't Believe What Happens Next!*, 2016. Performative social media post



The image shows a screenshot of a Facebook post from the page 'Nathan Sharratt Art'. The post is dated March 16 and was published by Zachary Shaw. The text of the post reads: 'My work has always been important. This show is the most important because having a MFA will dramatically increase my price point. #buynathansharratt'. Below the text is a photograph of an artwork titled 'Do Good Nate S. Title Page', which consists of a grid of various abstract, colorful, and striped patterns. The post also includes the artist's name, location (Atlanta, GA), and website (WWW.NATHANSHARRATT.COM). At the bottom of the post, it shows '89 people reached', a 'Boost Post' button, and interaction options like 'Like', 'Comment', and 'Share'. There are also three likes from Deborah Delamater, Lauren Michelle, and Amelia Carley, and a comment input field.

Nathan Sharratt Art
Published by Zachary Shaw [?] · March 16 · 🌐

My work has always been important. This show is the most important because having a MFA will dramatically increase my price point.
[#buynathansharratt](#)



Nathan Sharratt Art - Do Good Nate S. Title Page
Conceptual extended-media artist based in Atlanta, GA
WWW.NATHANSHARRATT.COM

89 people reached [Boost Post](#)

👍 Like 💬 Comment ➦ Share

👍 Deborah Delamater, Lauren Michelle and Amelia Carley

Write a comment... 📷 😊

Figure 3-12 Sharratt, Nathan, *An MFA Will Dramatically Increase My Price Point*, 2016. Performative social media post created by social-media marketing company &Also

3.4 The Gift Shop

The gift shop was named “Obiekt—The Curated Retail Experience.” This was where the bulk of the energy and floor space of the exhibition was dedicated. In addition to artifacts from my own previous performances and artworks, numerous appropriated commercial, historical, and artistic commodities were branded with an “Official Artwork of Nathan Sharratt” seal and logo.

The seal is, on one level, the embodiment of unchecked expansionism, narcissism, and greed. Every object in the shop is branded with the seal. Some of the objects in the shop had the intentional appearance of empty vessels—like tchotchkes, souvenirs, knick knacks and toys—while others were interventions or re-presentations of historical and cultural objects. Each item



Figure 3-13 Buy Nathan Sharratt, Installation view, 2016

was carefully considered, and the arrangement of objects was important. For example, the pencils were aligned parallel to each other with the etching to be viewed as a single phrase or image; however when they were presented in the shop separated, with gaps between them, the message couldn't be understood unless the pencils were pushed back together again.



Figure 3-14 Buy Nathan Sharratt, Installation view, 2016

Throughout the shop the themes of division and union are repeated. Objects that functioned as opportunities for directed creativity, such as coloring books, Create-Your-Own Vinylmation, puzzles, cross stitch, and scale models of my favorite pop culture characters, allowed the viewer the potential to become a participant by making something subjectively beautiful or interesting without years of training in art. However, many collectors would likely follow established trends by not actually altering the artwork once they purchased it, but instead

preserve it in whatever state it was when I, the artist, last touched it. This reflects how strongly we cling to the status quo.

Some objects were priced according to whether I “did the work for you” or not. The coloring book artwork, *Inspired For You I Did, Art Therapy Star Wars 100 Images To Inspire Creativity And Relaxation*, (Figure 3-16) was priced at ten dollars per colored page. The more I colored for you, the more expensive it was. There were also objects that spoke to division, such as a red “Make America Nate Again” baseball cap and four roach motels (a reference to Donald Trump’s divisive comments on immigration) with the “Make America Nate Again” slogan cut into each, and spray-painted in CMYK—the four primary inks used in most printed mass-media. (Figure 3-15)

The CMYK color scheme recurs in my practice and holds several symbolic meanings. It is a reference to my previous career in the magazine industry, as well as a representation of the “old guard” of analog media that is being or has been supplanted by digital media. CMYK is also used to represent the flaws—and ingenuity—of human technology: cyan, magenta, and yellow are the three true primary colors, and theoretically when mixed should form black. But, due to natural impurities in pigments and our inability to filter out those impurities effectively, a key color, black, is needed to accurately image representations of reality in printed media. “Make America Nate Again” is a call to return America to the proletariat.



Figure 3-15 Buy Nathan Sharratt, Installation View, 2016



Figure 3-16 Sharratt, Nathan, *Inspired For You I Did, Art Therapy Star Wars 100 Images To Inspire Creativity And Relaxation*, 2016. Partially-colored coloring book

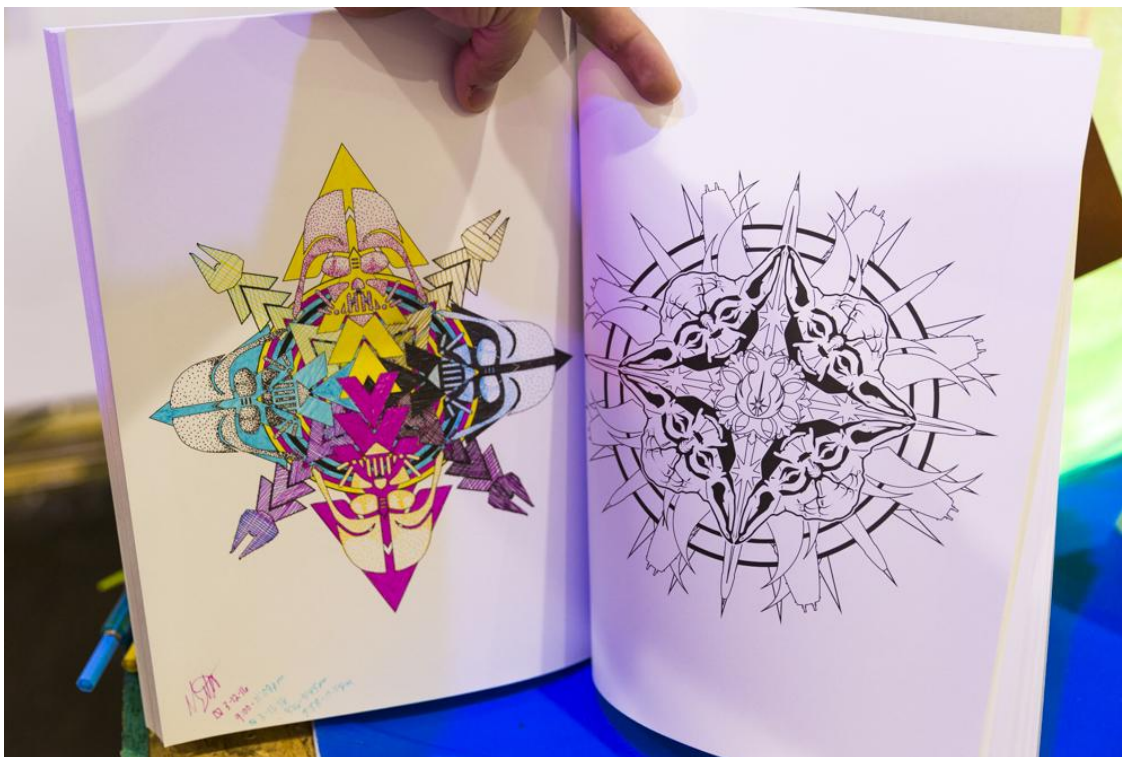


Figure 3-17 Sharratt, Nathan, *Inspired For You I Did, Art Therapy Star Wars 100 Images To Inspire Creativity And Relaxation*, 2016. Detail



Figure 3-18 Buy Nathan Sharratt, Installation view, 2016. A pair of matching coasters, titled *I Am Complicit* and *I Am Complacent*, 2016, laser-etched souvenir coasters from Walt Disney World, were priced dynamically: whichever the buyer thought was worse was more expensive



Figure 3-19 Buy Nathan Sharratt, Installation view, 2016. Left: *I'd Give It All Up If I Only Could*, 2016. Right: *I Just Want To Be Home*, 2016. Laser-etched painted-ceramic garden gnomes from Target



Figure 3-20 Sharratt, Nathan, *Now Anyone Can Celebrate*, 2016. Laser-etched mirror-finish ceramic balloon dog



Figure 3-21 Buy Nathan Sharratt, *Installation view*, 2016. Gold-foil gift boxes line the floor

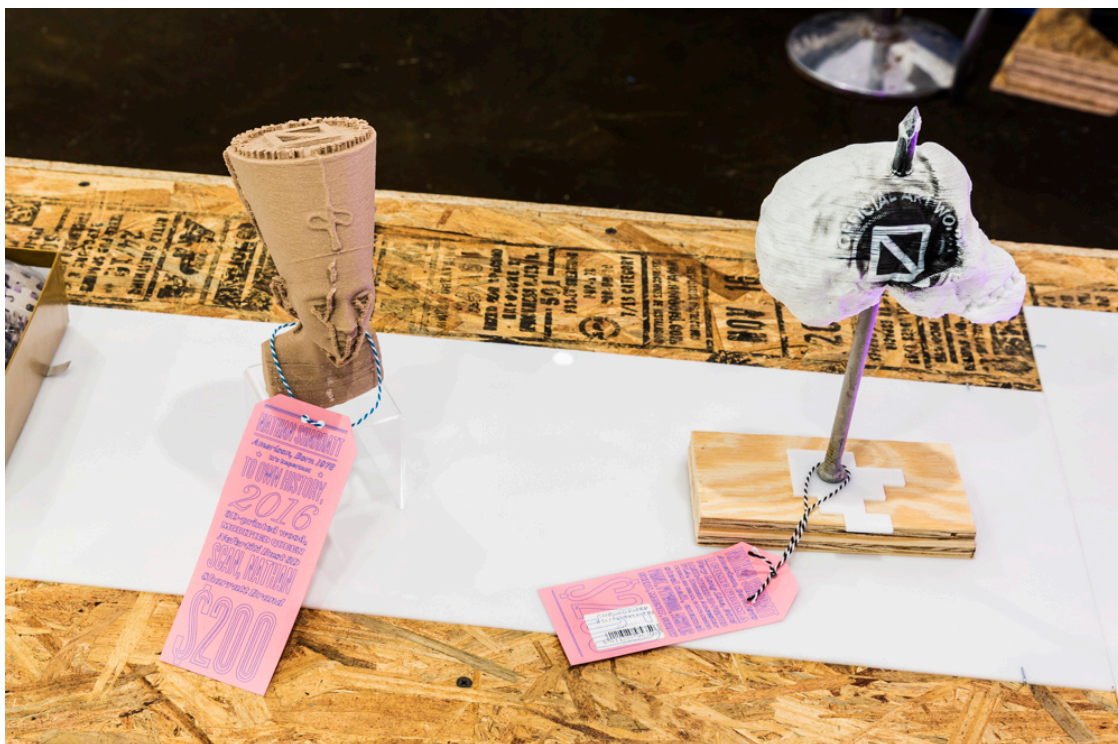


Figure 3-22 Buy Nathan Sharratt, Installation view, 2016. Left: *It's Important To Own History*, 2016. 3D-printed wood. Right: *I Come From A Very Long Line*, 2016. 3D-printed PLA, spraypaint, galvanised nail, acrylic, plywood



Figure 3-23 Buy Nathan Sharratt, Installation view, 2016

3.5 Development of Nathan Sharratt the Persona

The exhibition included objects, artwork titles, performative text, social media as art, promotion and marketing as art, a continuous livestream documentation, performative docent tours, video and audio, and a continuous performance by myself as the Persona of the exhibiting institutional artist “Nathan Sharratt.” Much like Stephen Colbert’s persona on The Colbert Report, this Persona uses my name but does not necessarily share my personal views. Colbert has stated in an interview that he doesn’t mind if, “[on the show] the audience can’t tell who’s who at times.”¹³ And, like with the Colbert persona, in performing as the Persona for this exhibition, the line between truth and fiction is blurred to reflect the confusion and difficulty of determining fact from opinion or outright falsity in modern discourse.



Figure 3-24 Performing as the Persona: Signing autographs during a performative tour. Photo credit: Angela Bortone

¹³ <http://www.oprah.com/own-oprahs-next-chapter/oprah-meets-the-real-stephen-colbert-video>

3.5.1 The Performance of Persona

The Persona had a series of tasks to complete during the week, which included refreshing stock, drawing price tags for objects in the gift shop (which also function as and are formatted to look like artwork titles), training docents, promotion via social media, administration, tech support, documentation, etc. All actions are representative of tasks I perform to maintain my practice. There were not enough hours in the day to accomplish everything so that by the time the show closed, there was still unfinished work to do—for example, some objects still did not have price tags, and I had planned to devote time to creating several new objects that were never produced. This reflects social anxieties based around career accomplishments and the imbalances between creative production (objects or ideas) and the maintenance and administration of that creativity.

It was important to blur the line of authenticity with much of the content of the exhibition. Although I left many clues to guide the viewer, I understood that complete confusion was counter-productive, so, excluding performative “tours,” any question or engagement a viewer directed toward the Persona about the exhibition was answered honestly according to my personal beliefs. Docents were given the option to decide their own approach to viewer engagement. Some would tell the truth as I explained it to them, acknowledging the artificiality of the installation, or they would invent new stories about where the objects originated and why they existed. One docent, for example, claimed the famous street artist Shepard Fairey was a big fan of mine, and Fairey begged me to appropriate his work for my exhibition (Figure 3-25). Some viewers played along with the narrative, accepting the wild claims and responding as if they were true. Others listened to the docent or my interpretations but gave no indication of

whether they believed them or not. Both paths allowed the participant and viewer to engage on their own terms, but still within the situation I had created for the exhibition.



Figure 3-25 Sharratt, Nathan, *OBE Nathan Sharratt*, 2016. Laser-etched unverified Shepard Fairey wheat-paste fragment collected from a public wall in New York City

I chose to have the Persona use my real name to acknowledge my complicity in the degradation of culture and discourse. Every time I buy an object I want but don't need, I

contribute to the repression of culture. Every time I click a link to some sensationalist story, I feed advertising dollars to that website, encouraging them to create more sensationalist stories as “news.” Every time I engage with a social media post, I tell the algorithm to amplify that post and show it to more people. The Persona represents getting lost in the “click hole,” where meaning becomes lost and the pleasure of immediate gratification drives our choices, perhaps leading us down paths we hadn’t originally intended to go down. The Persona is an unreliable narrator, and its syntactic role reflects my own confusions as I try to navigate this world of abbreviated excess and micro-pleasures to find meaning and agency within.

Giving the Persona my name put me in a more vulnerable position and allowed me to look critically at my place in the world. My name, when attached to an artwork, gives that artwork symbolic and economic value based on how strong the foundation is that supports my brand: how many people have seen my past work, who’s seen it, where they’ve seen it, what they’ve said about it, what I’ve said about it—an artist’s reputation is their value. Their provenance is their authenticity. The Persona uses my name to create a high-stakes focal point that is more relatable and accountable than if I had used a pseudonym.

If I had created the exhibition as a retrospective of a completely fictional artist, the viewer would be too comfortable in the security of the fiction, and agency would be removed from the viewer. A fictional pseudonym is an Object; it is acted upon. The Persona is a Subject; it acts, although that agency is mediated through my own lens of personal experience. The Persona is necessarily narcissistic to the extreme as a reflection of our “pay attention to me” culture and the simulated performance of self on the Internet. The Persona facilitates the exchange of social currency by serving as a locus of attention, and functions as a starting point for conversation.

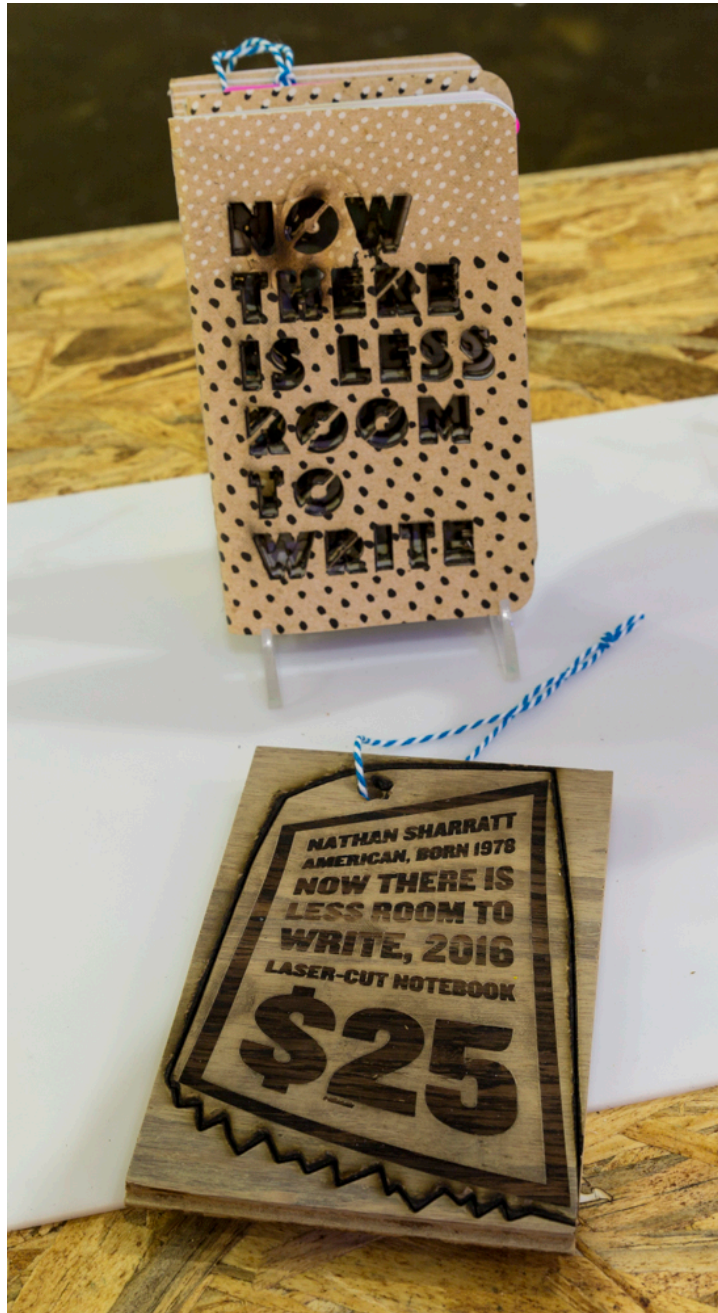


Figure 3-26 Sharratt, Nathan, *Now There Is Less Room To Write*, 2016. Laser-cut notebook

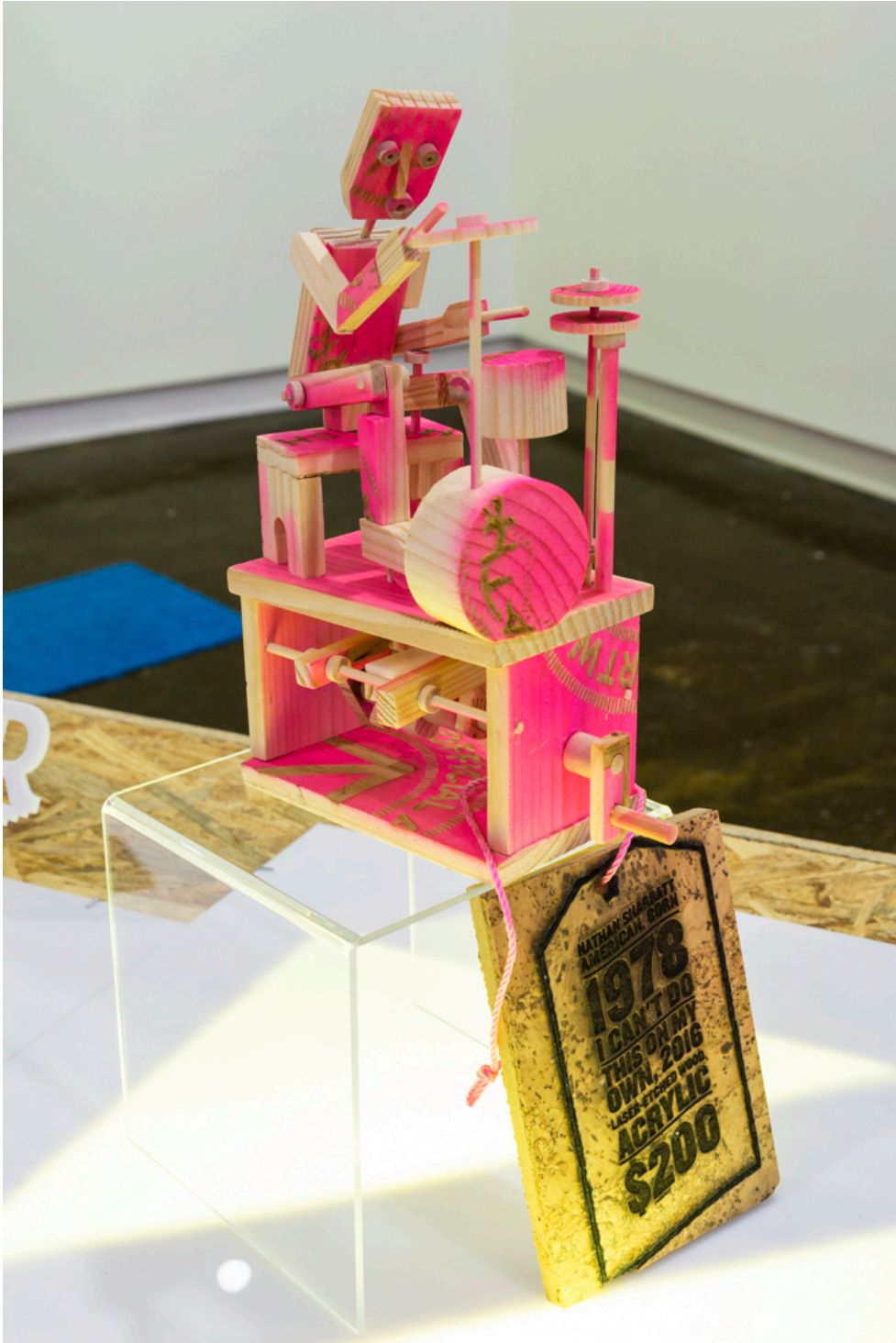


Figure 3-27 Sharratt, Nathan, *I Can't Do This On My Own*, 2016. Laser-etched wood, acrylic, adhesive

4 CONCLUSIONS

Rather than addressing topical issues, I think that a work of art has to address critical issues: the topical political issues of the day, to the extent they exist, are certainly of concern to people as individuals, but in a work of art it is the structural questions behind those topical issues that are important.¹⁴

In *The Social Responsibility of Artists*, Carol Becker discusses a controversial problem that she believes many in the art world systematically attempt to avoid because it makes everyone uncomfortable, defensive and insecure—the artist's responsibility to society. She believes that American artists avoid debating this sensitive issue not out of any sense of *laissez-faire* elitism but,

actually has more to do with fear: Fear of accusations of those both inside and outside the art world who label the work in question narcissistic, sexist, racist, classist, elitist, indulgent, hermetic, or at worst, naive and unpolitical. Instead of attempting to clarify the meaning of art in society, to validate the work they do, to struggle with the complex issue of the place of the artist in society, many artists simply refuse to address the issue, as if artists alone did not have the obligation to ask themselves how their work fits into the broader social framework of which they are a part.¹⁵

In planning *Buy Nathan Sharratt*, I did not want to be another American artist who refused to discuss complex issues out of fear. When I was asked by someone to censor certain works before the show opened because they believed the work had the potential to be misconstrued or perceived as offensive if taken out of context, I considered the request, but ultimately decided to keep the works in the exhibition as planned. I was aware of their sensitive content; I had created the objects specifically because of their sensitive and complex histories and symbolism. If I had removed them then I would be yet another artist cowing to fear of

¹⁴ Halley, Peter. "From Criticism to Complicity." *Flash Art* Summer 1986: 46-49. Print.

¹⁵ "The Social Responsibility of Artists" by Carol Becker FROM: *Culture and Democracy: Social and Ethical Issues in Public Support for the Arts and Humanities*, ed. Andrew Buchwalter (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), pp. 239- 247.

criticism or reprisal, and the issues they represented would remain uninvestigated. Additionally, since I designed the exhibition to put me in precisely this state of vulnerability to trigger dialog, if I conformed to a culture of silence by removing the sensitive artworks, it would make that dialog impossible.

One of the primary structures that I sought to address was contemporary discourse through networked technological mediation. Most mediated discourse, as it exists today, is a process of emotional reactions focused around artificial or actual conflict for purposes of entertainment. The inherent characteristics of social media play a large role in this discursive reductivity.

Though discourse is not diametric and exists on a spectrum, the presentation and expectation is often of a binary system. A system in which complex ideas are reduced to dialectic extremes: right versus wrong; my side versus your side; us versus them. This leads, among other problematic behaviors, to abuses of rhetoric known as informal logical fallacies. For example, the equivalency fallacy, which describes a situation where there is a logical and apparent equivalence, when in fact there is none.¹⁶ The maxim, “two sides to every story” is an example of the equivalence fallacy. Asserting any two things to be equal, or any story or fact to have a counterpoint, doesn’t inherently make it true. Nor do facts succumb to belief. Science, for example, exists whether someone believes in it or not. Another example is the straw man fallacy, used when winning by an entertaining spectacle is more important than critical thinking. Here, someone misrepresents his or her opponent’s position to make it easier to attack, by covertly

¹⁶ Phillips, Harry and Patricia Bostian, *The Purposeful Argument: A Practical Guide, Brief Edition* (Cengage Learning, 2014) 129.

substituting a superficially similar proposition and then attacking that, rather than the opponent's original proposition.¹⁷

Logical fallacies allow some people who are unable or unwilling to present reasoned arguments to nonetheless persuade listeners to their cause by exploiting cognitive biases. A cognitive bias refers to a “systematic pattern of deviation from norm or rationality in judgment, whereby inferences about other people and situations may be drawn in an illogical fashion.”¹⁸ An individual may then create her or his own "subjective social reality"¹⁹ from her or his perception of the input. The danger of exploiting cognitive biases is that an individual's perceived construction of social reality, not the objective input, may dictate their behavior in the social world.²⁰ This happens frequently in social media discourse, where the micro-blogging format and continuous “feed” prevents most long-form debate, and so it becomes easier to “win” arguments by appealing to primal emotions such as fear, anxiety, insecurity or anger.

I included social media as a material knowing it has reductive and antagonistic qualities. By performing as the Persona “Nathan Sharratt” who expressed beliefs that were not my personal beliefs, this left me in a highly vulnerable position. A viewer could, if disinclined toward the effort involved in critical analysis, decontextualize one or more artworks or performative statements and re-present them as my own personal beliefs with very little effort. This is, in fact, what happened, when an individual decided to hijack my exhibition. I will use this hijacking as a case study to show how it exemplifies the degradation of modern discourse.

¹⁷ "Your Logical Fallacy Is Strawman." *Your Logical Fallacy Is...* N.p., n.d. Web. 30 May 2016.

¹⁸ Haselton, M. G., et al., “The evolution of cognitive bias,” *The Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology* (Hoboken, NJ, US: John Wiley & Sons Inc. 2005) 724–746.

¹⁹ Bless, H., K. Fiedler, and F. Strack, *Social cognition: How individuals construct social reality* (Hove and New York: Psychology Press 2004) 2.

²⁰ Ibid.

Before the exhibition opened, my paid studio assistant demanded that I remove two objects that he found offensive. I refused, for reasons described above. During the opening reception, he stole an unrelated artwork and began a ruthless attack on social media of me, the artist. He focused first on presenting a straw-man argument that the artworks were not artworks at all, but examples of what he deemed as white privilege, that I was exploiting other cultures for purely economic gain, and that I was personally an embodiment of several oppressive institutions. The accuser based his arguments on fictional artistic texts that he mistakenly interpreted literally (embracing the glorious neoliberal patriarchy etc.), anecdotes, and a debunked news article about the illegal 3D-scanning of a Nefertiti bust by two artists,²¹ which had been revealed as a hoax by 3D-scanning expert Cosmo Wenman.²² The hoax and its blurring of performance with reality was a significant factor in my decision to use that 3D model for *It's Important To Own History* (Figure 3-22).

He and others in the online community demanded that I thoroughly explain my motives and intentions for making the artwork in question. I understood the confusion many people felt based on only seeing the hijacker's version of events, so I spent several days writing a 10-page statement (effectively a mini-thesis) explaining the performative nature of the texts, the performance of the Persona, and reintroducing some context to the forcefully-isolated artworks by describing how they fit within the installation as a whole.

Instead of conceding or opening the conversation up to discuss broader issues, he doubled-down and reinvigorated his attack against me by demanding I stop explaining myself and instead sit down and shut up. He quickly shifted the focus to a new set of crimes, such as erroneously claiming that I exploited him as a worker by not giving him a percentage of the sales

²¹ Voon, Claire. "Artists Covertly Scan Bust of Nefertiti and Release the Data for Free Online." *Hyperallergic*. N.p., 2016. Web. 05 July 2016.

²² "The Nefertiti 3D Scan Heist Is A Hoax." *Cosmo Wenman*. N.p., 2016. Web. 05 July 2016.

from the exhibition's giftshop (he received 100% of the sales income in addition to his original compensation package). This is an example of the goal-post fallacy, which involves "demanding from an opponent that he or she address more and more points after the initial counter-argument has been satisfied, refusing to concede or accept the opponent's argument."²³

The criticism was presented within a framework of ethics and followed a predictable trend in the critique of socially collaborative art. As Claire Bishop observed in *The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents*:

What serious criticism has arisen in relation to socially collaborative art has been framed in a particular way: The social turn in contemporary art has prompted an ethical turn in criticism. This is manifest in a heightened attention to how a given collaboration is undertaken. In other words, artists are increasingly judged by their working process—the degree to which they supply good or bad models of collaboration—and criticized for any hint of potential exploitation that fails to “fully” represent their subjects, as if such a thing were possible.²⁴

In this sense, the Persona served as an effective focal point for engagement, but due to the method and means by which the online dialog was manipulated and controlled by a single domineering personality, the conversation never progressed beyond personal attacks and emotional groupthink reactions to incomplete or misrepresented information. Rather than being evaluative, the critique was accusatory and content with “calling out” and “knocking [me] down” to “teach [me] a lesson.”²⁵ This type of punitive and generalized outrage elucidates the challenges of our current social dialog environment, which has become a scorched-earth arena of win-at-all-costs vehemence in place of respectful or rational discourse. These new dialogic combatants abuse cognitive biases to manipulate empathetic people to further their personal goals through, for example, straw man arguments that appeal to their sense of liberal justice.

²³ "Moving the Goalposts." <https://www.logicallyfallacious.com>. N.p., n.d. Web. 05 July 2016.

²⁴ Bishop, Claire. "The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents." *Artforum International* Feb. 2006: 178-83. Print.

²⁵ Quotes observed in the hijacker's social media posts reacting to my exhibition.

The theft and subsequent weeks of defamatory attacks were defended—through a *reductio ad absurdum*—as a “silent” critique of my work parallel to my “institutional embrace of the neoliberal patriarchy.” However, my work was never actually examined any further than a partial description of two isolated artworks and quotes from my performative artistic texts presented as my personal beliefs, and the “critique” quickly devolved. The goal of the critique was plainly not to evaluate art, since no evaluation occurred, but to “destroy” my professional and personal reputation while simultaneously raising the hijacker’s own status within the community. What was presented as legitimate artistic critique failed to actually evaluate the art, and likewise failed to broaden the parameters of the debate. Instead this “critique” fell victim to *schadenfreude*.

The social media noise that ensued silenced or rejected any explanation or description of the work given. Initially, the hijacker demanded I “explain myself” and my intentions about the work, and when I did I was then told to “sit down.” This further exemplifies the problematic nature of social media dialog around emotionally-sensitive topics: discourse through critical thought, respect, and rational action is discarded in favor of entertainment and the spectacle of conflict. It has become a pleasure-delivery-device. The feeling achieved by belonging to a group which is, participants believe, doing something good by furthering their beliefs within the comfort of their particular echo chamber.

I observed a few trends in the initial social media reactions. Some said satire and irony was “played out,” some viewed the work literally and believed I was blind to my privilege by exploiting other cultures, some said I was unoriginal in creating a store as art, but most agreed that I didn’t think about the work at all, that it was empty, and that it was clear I did no research at all. The public misunderstanding of art is not new, especially art that uses popular imagery to

break down the distinction between high and low culture. Carol Becker describes the situation artists faced during the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s, observing that post-modern artists who

adopt forms already popularized by the media, are in a bind, because many outside the art world see such work as a joke, a scam, perpetrated on them by artists. People outside the art world rarely understand the seriousness with which even humorous, parodic art is executed. Few understand the subtleties of visual language well enough to respond to its irony and sarcasm. Hence the ease with which Congressmen can convince the general public of maliciousness in work which was actually made with a serious socio-critical intent. Artists have often responded to this dilemma with silence—unwilling, or unable to explain their work to a popular audience—hence the hostility people feel to the art world which excludes them and which they fear deceives and mocks them as well.²⁶

The difference is that the misunderstanding was perpetrated by fellow artists, gallerists, and even a curator—not Congresspeople nor the general public—who should have been fully equipped to investigate the work beyond the parody and humor to the underlying “serious socio-critical intent.” This shows just how thoroughly the online social construct has convinced us of its status as reality, and how easy it is to intentionally distort reality through social mediation technology. We trust the veracity and judgment of our networked tribe so thoroughly that “fact checking” has been removed from the virtual citizen’s lexicon. We see something shared by a friend online, and it is become truth, and we immediately react to that “truth” based on our ascribed moral code and however we’re feeling at the time.

In *Buy Nathan Sharratt*, I wanted to discuss the dangers and implications of reductive discourse in a post-internet age by designing a situation that could trigger dialog and critical thinking about the current state of contemporary culture. Once hijacked, the work was presented in a way that made it indistinguishable from reality, and it lost its function for social critique.

²⁶ “The Social Responsibility of Artists” by Carol Becker FROM: *Culture and Democracy: Social and Ethical Issues in Public Support for the Arts and Humanities*, ed. Andrew Buchwalter (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), pp. 239- 247.

However, the online reactions triggered by the hijacking were subsequently folded into the exhibition as participatory relational aspects, and once flattened into the same plane as the rest of the exhibition, becoming its own gestalt simulacra, the work as a whole was able to distinguish itself once again from reality to achieve social critique. The dialog that was initially stunted is now able to exist and expand beyond the boundaries of personality.

I set out to critically examine the ways in which institutional social constructs create gaps between my self as a person and my self as perceived by others, and how those gaps affect individual and group behavior. To achieve this I created a relational space within which I performed in a highly vulnerable state. When others exploited this vulnerability, I learned that critical thinking and discourse are stymied by the reductive nature of social media, our need for immediate gratification.

When viewed in aggregate, *Buy Nathan Sharratt* shows the difficulty we face as a connected society in having meaningful discourse through technological mediation. This discourse is necessary, even if it is discomfoting to us or if we disagree with what is presented. It requires time, energy, and self-reflection. Discursive reductivity prevents us from gaining understanding and is dehumanizing. If we can learn to bely our emotional desire for immediate gratification, the possibility for understanding can be restored. I hope that through this experience, both active participants and passive observers of *Buy Nathan Sharratt* might allow themselves a moment of stillness to reflect on the ways we treat each other, especially online, so that we might become more—not less—fully human.



Figure 4-1 Sharratt, Nathan, *Now There Is Less Room To Imagine*, 2016. Laser-cut sketchbook. Detail

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