An Art Unconfined

Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Fine Art in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By
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Dedication

In memory of Joe Max Gallegos and Dr. Bill Bunis
Two eccentric minds that have helped to inspire a lifetime of learning
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Vita

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Group Exhibitions

2009. Begged, Borrowed & Stolen, OSU Urban Arts Space
2009. Do, Skylab
2009. Anthropocene, Silver Image Gallery
2008. BBQ/, Sherman Clean Space
2009. Autopoiesis II, Splinter Warehouse
2008. Simulacra, Haskett Hall Sound Stage
2008. Shift F-11, Hopkins Hall Gallery
2007. Autopoiesis, Splinter Warehouse
2007. Synaesthesia, Solar Culture
2004. Regime Change Starts at Home, Flash Gallery

Fields of Study

Major Field: Art
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Chapter 1: The Determined Manifesto of a Reluctant Artist (Winter 2009)

My motivation is not to change the world of art (not to say that it isn’t an intriguing idea), but rather to change the world at large, with my art or otherwise. My interests are in human agency, representation for the underrepresented, social justice, progressive politics, equality, the cultural significance of a diverse populous, revolutionary thought, direct action, respect for the natural world, peace, creative expression, experimentation, community building, youth, music, collaboration, spontaneity, and improvisation.

I hang on to a conversation I once had with a professional artist who told me that I should be trying to contribute to the ongoing conversation of fine artists past and present. But if I’ve learned anything in art school it’s that art with rules is not an art that I am interested in. I am for an art that is free. I am for an art that is fun. I am much more interested in broader conversations, in the democratization of “fine art”. I am for an art that speaks to the gallery curator as much as it does to the gallery custodian.

The goal is to navigate culture, to straddle class, to try to speak to the masses but hear the individual. To this end I am for an art informed by social science and critical theory. I am for interdisciplinary practice, for an art that is inquisitive, informative, and above all engaging. I want to learn from Duchamp, Cage, and Kaprow, as much as I want to learn from Marx, Mills, and Bourdieu. Even in subjective works, I strive for objective perspectives. I am for an art based in empiricism.

I have an absolute love for hip-hop. I have always been amazed by graffiti. I am for an art that can be innovated by a community of poor urban kids that have been largely ignored by society. I am for an art that can be found in the deepest subterranean recesses, where no one would ever expect to find it. I am for an art that is rebellious, adventurous, and empowering.

The same professional artist that told me what conversations I should be having as an aspiring artist also told me that graffiti isn’t art. I am for an art that revokes such an assessment.
Style, the way one maneuvers in society, the kind of people one chooses to surround them self with, the experiential choices one makes, the media one consumes. Style for me is a general approach to life. Life informs my aesthetic. My life is my aesthetic.

I am interested in utilizing beauty, in the sensual, in notions of synesthesia, in singular moments and the passage of time. I am interested in exploring site specificity, and creating environments, in cognitive lubrication, and in intuition. I don’t mind making work that is quirky, that is playful, that is visually complex, or visually stark. There is a time to be serious, and a time to have fun. I am for an aesthetic open to evolution; I strive to keep my ear to the street, my finger on the cultural pulse, and my mind open to the voices of youth. I am for an aesthetic dripping fresh with style.

Language is of vital importance; the written word, the spoken word, the translation of language, the codification and slang. There is a power that comes with communication, the ability to convey, to define, to consume, to understand.

Visual language is of equal importance. I have come to realize the evocative value of light in composition and the providence of movement in relation to the quiescent.

Human behavior as an aesthetic is of incredible interest. I strive to make art that reflects my audience, to engage the community as an integral part of the work, as a system of social feedback. I am fascinated by group dynamics and collective behavior, the anticipation and wonderment of spectacle, the tension and slack of social gathering. The performance of the audience, (even unbeknownst), and the demonstrative nature of congregation, all of these aggregate movements are critical to how my work functions, to its style, to what is at root. Experience is crucial.

I like to draw, mostly with markers, abstract doodles, characters, letters. I usually do this at night, laying on the ground, listening to music. I’ve been playing guitar and bass since I was a kid. Much to the disappointment of my friends I don’t know many cover songs and rather prefer to improvise. I quite enjoy photography as a means of looking at the world from different perspectives. I’ve also found photography to be a great impetus for adventure. I love cinema. Film and video remain my primary medium. I liken cinematography, as I know others do, to painting with light. Editing, what I really enjoy the most, to me is like making music. It’s
rhythmic, can be rigid or spontaneous, formulaic or free. It sets a pace, is dynamic, capable of building tension and releasing it into a calming sense of ease, or not. I like to exploit mass media, and work with found footage. Sound is exceptionally captivating, especially in relation to silence. Data is a wonderful medium to work with. Manipulating signals with information via digital input and output is an exciting frontier. I’ve quite enjoyed working with visual performance technologies, especially to explore real time interactions with sound and video. I consider myself a geek. I have an affinity for exploring emergent technologies. I hope to venture more into the territory of 3-dimensional animation technologies. I am excited about the narrowing of the digital divide across generations in our society, and the possibilities that the Internet still has to offer. Digital imaging is a powerful tool. I think appropriation is telling of the age in which we live. I get stoked on design, typography, apparel, and advertising. I also like to “unplug”, to get off the grid and enjoy nature for all its worth. I would like to learn more about hand building, carpentry, and metal work. Mechanics is also interesting, although I think I’d rather paint a car than rebuild an engine. Right now my biggest aspiration as an artist is to work with people as my medium.

My studio practice comes in bursts of productivity interspersed with vast contemplation. I don’t like to work under pressure, but sometimes I think it is the only way I can get anything done. I think I think too much. I’m a dreamer. I enjoy riding the bus, walking, and listening to my iPod. This to me is as much a part of my practice as sitting in front of a computer interface. Again, experience is crucial. I am for an art informed by what I experience outside of the studio, and outside of art. My practice is My Practice. But I am for an art that shares with the world.
Chapter 2: Introduction: I’m a Filmmaker

I arrived to art school as a filmmaker. Working primarily in the realm of documentary and experimental video, and having only dabbled in installation and visual performance, the title of “artist” seemed to me something quite different from the one I had grown accustomed to. I felt comfortable in the skin of a filmmaker, it was one the primary reasons I chose an art program over film school, to get a bit uncomfortable, to challenge myself, and to blur the imaginary line that was keeping my work situated on a projection screen. My stated goal upon arrival was to step beyond the technical confines of traditional filmmaking and to further broaden my creative horizons, to consider the possibilities of interdisciplinary study and creative collaboration across media, to supplement my filmmaking skills with new strategic visions.

In light of stepping into a new technical arena my conceptual interests remained mostly the same. As I have said on other occasions when asked to speak about myself as an artist and/or about the work I produce, I am not so much interested in changing the world of art as I am interested in changing the world at large, (with my art or otherwise). To this end, my research and civic engagement has always revolved around socio-political issues, as I strive to see the world through a sociological lens. From a perspective that engages what American sociologist C. Wright Mills has termed The Sociological Imagination. In short, a viewpoint that takes historical social forces into account when considering one’s personal life experiences; a meeting of biography and history.

Specifically, I am interested in considering the effects of social stratification, the resulting power dynamics that stem from inequality along lines of race, ethnicity, gender, and class, especially economic gaps and the effects of the power elite over the middle class and working poor; consequences of ownership over the means of production (particularly in the mass media), the role of the state, permanent war economies, the military industrial complex

1 For more see C. Wright Mills, The Sociological Imagination (Oxford UP, 1959).
and monopolies of violence. Attempting to read between the lines of political rhetoric and policy while paying attention as much as possible to the voice of the underrepresented, I am interested in social criticism as an impetus for creative social advocacy and activism. Youth culture and its utilization of art as a means of social empowerment holds a particularly special place in my heart and have been integral loci in my studies and work. Taken together one could say, (I would say), that I strive to lead a life actively engaged with the society that surrounds me, cognizant of dominant power structures and the potential influence that grassroots mobilization has to undermine the efforts of systematic oppression. This is what I think about on a daily basis, and more than anything else these are the topics that motivate my creative energy and inform my art making.

With that said, it should be noted that I did not come to art school to reorient my theoretical concentration per se, but instead to discover new tools useful for becoming even more effective in my engagement with the aforementioned concepts. To that end I can say now that I have certainly supplemented my skill set, refreshed my creative approach, and developed an entirely new sensual vocabulary. However, as I reflect on my time spent in graduate school I realize that this journey has also opened new doors in terms of “ways” of thinking, to consider not just what I think about, but how I think; new dimensions in conceptual processing. It is my expectation that such insight into the development of my process is what will resonate most in the proceeding pages. Though as I believe to have gained increased cultural understandings as well, it is my hope that this will also become evident along the way.

What is to follow is intended to serve as a reflection of the research I have conducted over two years as a graduate student in the Art and Technology program at The Ohio State University. With keywords like research, student, art, and technology, and each word having a particular set of connotations, the writing in turn should reflect those connotations at respective moments. At times academic, at times more blunt, somewhat biographical, a bit self-analytical, with some allusions to technique, and certainly retrospective. It is a thesis written in the vein of a memoir, as a documentation of creative self-revelation, mindful of a diversely rich experience, attentive to multiple perspectives, and aimed at an even greater level of engagement. Hopefully, it is as truthful as a subjective account can be, the story of a socially minded filmmaker’s immersion into the world of fine arts.
Chapter 3: Thinking Outside the Box: Newbies, Self Reflection

Art and Tech. Lasers, robots, stainless steel, LED’s, plexi, sensors, wire, processors, circuits, servos, ferromagnetic fluid, and the like. These are the things people seem to think about when considering the notion of Art and Technology, (at least that is what most of my peers working in other disciplines seem to think). In an age of techno-fetishism these materials and ways of working are inherently seductive and more than capable of producing the most dazzling of spectacles. However, unmotivated and without strong conceptual backing, even the coolest functioning robot or greatest looking light show has the potential of falling flatly into a realm of vapidity (what I have heard advising faculty refer to as the “Gee Whiz” factor). In other words, an aesthetic that while sometimes beautiful and mesmerizing can unfortunately also have the potential to lead one to become pigeonholed into a particular paradigm, a sort of postmodern futurist aesthetic worthy only of Wired magazine and science fiction novels. And as much of a geek as I pride myself on being, I have never been interested in becoming the next great gadget guru.

Transversely, my objective upon entering a computer mediated art program was to navigate this new technological world from the perspective of my own conceptual framework, to learn new and effective ways of translating my particular message to a given audience. I am certainly interested in harnessing the seductive qualities of technology, and of attracting a captive audience via spectacle, but it has never been about the technology per se; rather the acquisition of a new skill set, and the utilization of technology as a tool, akin to the paintbrush or potter’s wheel. As such, I have strived to maintain a focus on theoretical foundations, ideals, and concept, prioritizing the underlying message of the work and turning to the technology only as needed. In short, consciously attempting to avoid reducing concept to gimmick or

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2 One might be inclined to raise the question: why then art and technology and not another medium such as painting or ceramics? To which I would respond, besides the already noted potential for technology to engage an audience, it is also a natural outgrowth of working with video.
developing any sort of technological crutch, with the hope that the *work* of the art itself is prioritized over the completed “artwork”. What matters most is what the audience is left thinking about (with the ultimate hope that those thoughts go deeper than just “Gee Whiz”). As such, over two years of graduate work in the Art and Technology program there have been times when the technology has been thoroughly embraced, and at other times completely abandoned, all dependent on the situational need to reinforce the concept. However, whether in conscious incorporation or exclusion, what this world of blinking lights and gadgets has certainly provided me with is a springboard for a fresh perspective, a *way* of thinking, quite literally, outside of “the box” that is the filmmaker’s frame.

Reflections on two projects in particular will hopefully help to articulate this point. Both projects were conceived within the first two quarters of my tenure in the program, both a particular revelation of my desire to escape the traditional confines of single channel film and video projection.

*Newbies*

Prior to arriving to the art and tech program I was informed that I would be teaching a digital imaging class that focused on using Photoshop as a tool for art making. Although I had experience with Photoshop I felt compelled to revisit the software in greater depth, in order to refresh my familiarity with the interface. Having had an attraction to typography for as long as I can remember (I think the interest is rooted in my fascination with graffiti), many of these practice sessions took on the form of simple letter designs. The more I played, the more something seemed to develop. Not exactly knowing in which direction I was heading with these case studies the compositions got filed into a folder on my desktop labeled *Newbies*.

Starting as simple phrases, or even single words, and encompassing only one or two colors, I began to realize the elegance of a minimalist approach. I began to think of ways to exhibit these static works in order to get my point(s) across. Having spent the previous few years working in rather heavily processed video exhibited as single channel projections in a screening room or as the back drop for a performing band, the potential for simple printed
compositions and their inherent mobility was quite refreshing. Again however, concept remained principle.

In the case of the Newbies compositions the concepts revolved around my thoughts at the time primarily concerning the “world of arts” vs. “the arts world”, and more specifically the power of street art to reach the masses and my newfound impressions of what I perceived to be the rather narrow scope of the gallery system. As such, these works were further subdivided into subfolders labeled street and gallery respectively. Thus rose the dilemma of not only how to exhibit the works, but where, given the respective messages.

Under these circumstances, I realized this to be an opportune time to embrace the seduction of technology, and simultaneously experiment with working outside of the video camera/projector. My initial proposal: 5” x 7” decal prints attached to LED lit battery operated light boxes constructed out of plexi. These could be installed in a gallery, or alternatively (and more excitingly to me) bolted onto a street sign.3

It should be noted that each series aimed to speak to a particular audience. In the case of the gallery series my intention was one of pointed critique, challenging the general manner in which art is thought of; its very role in society. As for the street series my hope was that they would read as social agitators, motivation for passers by to consider their role in society. Unfortunately at the time of this writing these projects have yet to come to physical fruition due to budgetary constraints, given my insistence on installing the street series en masse without any intention of retrieving the works, hoping they would stay up indefinitely, or, in the most romantic of scenarios, be acquired by inspired viewers as keepsakes. Of course there is also an acknowledgment of the fact that like most guerilla street art the works would most likely be systematically removed, this in itself a biting would-be commentary on the nature of art and its role in intended places in society. In any event the designs remain filed away, waiting for the day I can afford to put them to use. A sampling of examples from both series follows.

3 Regarding the latter, I must cite primary inspiration from two sources, the street artist Gore B, whose painted found objects can be seen affixed to street signs Brooklyn, and the Graffiti Research Lab, who are engaging 21st century notion of graffiti by including technology in their subversive street installations throughout New York City.
Newbies: Gallery series example

Image 1. Didactic Octothorpe 2007
Newbies: Gallery series example

Image 2. FUCKARTCRITIQUESOCIETY 2007
Newbies: Street series example

Image 3. Revolutionary Starting Line 2007
Newbies: Street series example

Self Reflection

Faced with the requirement of having to show work in The Ohio State University Department of Art Graduate Group Exhibition in the winter quarter of 2008, I vowed to produce something new. Not only something new to my body of work, but something entirely different and unfamiliar to my usual process. As a filmmaker, one of the simplest things I could think of to do differently was to shift from recorded time to real time. However, as simple as it might have been to consider this subtle transition, conceiving an actual idea worth producing would prove more challenging.

My initial thoughts led me to think about exploiting closed circuit surveillance to make a commentary on mass media. The question arose, what if the media turned an eye on itself? My initial thought for attempting to answer this question without using any recorded material was to connect a video camera to a television, utilizing the television as a monitor for the live signal, and then turn the cameras view on that very signal by pointing its lens at the monitor; in essence causing the signal to look at itself. Having inadvertently done this a number of times over the years I was aware of the resultant effect, an infinite feedback loop of abstract pulsating colors. However, I sought to take things a step further by connecting the television to an output projector in order to display the signal on the gallery wall. In doing so the entire installation would become interactive, allowing the audience an opportunity to manipulate the signal by moving between the plane of the camera and the television, or the plane of the projection and the wall. My intention the interactivity was that it serve as a commentary on media critique, pointing to the viewers’ ability to intervene with self-referential media, thereby interrupting the recursive cycle.

However, while working through the installation it dawned on me at this particular message was likely too convoluted, that I might not be giving my audience enough information. A recurring dilemma in my work as I continuously attempt to figure out how to get a significant message across in the most subtle and elegant ways, (ways by which I find myself most moved in others work). In spite of this I was able to achieve something rather groundbreaking in my process. A realization that I could in fact escape the confines of traditional filmmaking,

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4 A few years prior I had in fact seen Canadian experimental filmmaker Jeff Moneo record this effect for use in one of his short films.
that I could utilize my cinematic knowledge in a gallery context, and that I very much so could start to think “outside the box”. The work, admittedly primitive, and perhaps ineffective in its original intention, instilled a sense of confidence that I could continue to grasp onto in times of doubt. It is for this reason that the title of the piece is so meaningful to me. It really was a process of *Self Reflection*.

Propelled out of the first two quarters of my graduate experience with a renewed confidence, coupled with a realization that as far as the program was concerned I had the freedom to pursue studies in virtually any direction I so chose, I decided to step even further out on a limb and enroll in a ceramics course titled “Monumental Building”. As the title suggests the goal of the course was to build a monumental piece out of the provided material: unfired bricks donated by the Belden brick company of Canton, Ohio. Students enrolled in the course were provided an allotment of the material and could work in any manner they so desired. For me, this leap into a new medium would prove to be a time of great experimentation in materiality, sculpture, and installation.

Initially, and for some time, I was at a loss for what to do with the pile of bricks sitting in my studio. Having never taken a single ceramics or sculpture course in my academic career, it was truly a step outside of my comfort zone. Some suggested that I incorporate video into the work, or use the material to explore stop-motion animation techniques, but for the same reasons I have already noted, I wanted to embrace the possibility of doing something different, to embrace the material in and of itself and take a calculated step away from what had become familiar.

To that end I began to play with the material without consciously thinking about what I was doing. Energized by quite literally getting my hands dirty it hardly mattered what I was making, so long as I continued to make. The point was to explore, to experience, and ultimately to consider the notion of producing work without necessarily plugging something into an electrical power source. A period of playful experimentation both confusing and liberating, the overwhelming sense during the weeks spent working with bricks was one of great renewal in terms of my artistic process.
Although I spent significant time deconstructing and reshaping the material, toying with different applications of the clay body, I also found myself working with the bricks in their given form as a traditional building material. In doing so, perhaps subconsciously, I discovered parallels to recent contemplations of course work I completed the previous quarter in the comparative studies department, specifically surrounding readings and discussion in a course titled “Theorizing America”, (which had provided new angles for consideration regarding particular social issues concerning American culture). Specifically, I began to consider the relationship that existed between the utilization of bricks as a material for wall construction and the role of the state as a governing body. Notions of empire and political border management permeated my thinking as I found myself reflecting on the paradoxical nature of nation building, wherein ones physical and philosophical creation is so often reliant on the full or partial destruction of another vis-à-vis a monopolization of violence. In a world defined by walls I was intrigued by the differing physical and psychological perceptions of the state from opposing sides of a politic, (and often in its most simple form from opposing sides of a wall). Moreover I began to consider the hierarchical support structure of the state in bureaucratic terms; the role of academics, policy makers, and cultural creatives, and the potential consequences that the actions of these sociopolitical and cultural decision-makers could have on the lives of everyday people. Far reaching contemplations that could apply to any number of political relationships throughout Human history, I couldn’t help but think to the involvement of the United States in the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East as a particular point of resonance. Concepts again, more so than any explicit technique, that would eventually inspire me to make a piece that spoke broadly to these specific ideas, both literally and metaphorically.

Thus was born the sculptural installation that would become titled *All Walls Fall*. A scale brick wall, built upon a slate landscape, supported by three faux columns, in turn supported by an office desk. On one side of the walls façade a stretch of pristine green turf, on the other side a scene of absolute destruction. The open desk drawers glowing with beautifully with shining light, upon closer inspection filled with crumbled brick. This dichotomous depiction serves as a monument to empire, and a reminder that throughout history, without fail, *All Walls Fall*. 
Image 6. *All Walls Fall 2008*
Image 7. *All Walls Fall*, detail 2008
Aside from the concepts explored, what I really learned from this experience was that I did not have to be limited by any particular set of constraints or media, or pigeonhole myself within a particular way of working. In the end, although I did utilize a modicum of technology by way of the lighted elements, it was the first project I completed that was in no way computer mediated. Moreover, whether or not I was yet “good” at it, I realized that I could put on the hat of a ceramicist or a sculptor or any other discipline that was necessary. As simple as it may have been, it was quite liberating for me to step well outside of “the box” and move in an entirely new direction.

As a politically motivated piece, one intended to serve as an analysis and statement on the history of political power structures, in the process of producing the work I came to realize
that its title and metaphorical value could be viewed though a much broader scope, aimed at any number of structures or systematic ways of thinking. For me the walls that fell during this process were those that I had built up around myself as an artist, after this experience I truly came to realize that my approach was one for me to determine, that I need not be confined by any overarching structure. I learned that I could take a chance, and that I could succeed. In the end I proved myself to be correct in my assertion. Truly, *All Walls Fall.*
Chapter 5: Social Sculpture and the Importance of Active Engagement: BBQ/

“Only on condition of a radical widening of definitions will it be possible for art and activities related to art [to] provide evidence that art is now the only evolutionary-revolutionary power. Only art is capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a senile social system that continues to totter along the deathline: to dismantle in order to build ‘A SOCIAL ORGANISM AS A WORK OF ART’… EVERY HUMAN BEING IS AN ARTIST who – from his state of freedom – the position of freedom that he experiences at first-hand – learns to determine the other positions of the TOTAL ART WORK OF THE FUTURE SOCIAL ORDER.”

- Joseph Beuys (1973)

My first year as a graduate student was one of deep thought, observation, learning, newfound relationships, revelation, discovery, and progression. After a summer spent in reflection, I entered the second year of the program refreshed and ready to continue exploring uncharted creative territory. Also having spent time during the summer working in creative community organizing (revisiting pursuits that I had undertaken before graduate school), I was inspired more than ever to work in a collaborative manner and produce work that would actively engage an audience, prompting interactive participation, and above all, experience.

Throughout the summer I continually kept in the forefront of my mind the work of conceptual artist Tom Marioni, whose piece The Act of Drinking Beer with Friends is the Highest Form of Art served as a particularly resounding source of inspiration. In particular, I found it most interesting that Marioni wasn’t actually making something tangible, but really documenting an experience, and that his approach to the work was not as performance per se, (i.e. something scripted, acted out), but rather, in the vein of Joseph Beuys, a form of social sculpture. I was also taken by the fact that the work evolved and had a life of its own outside of

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5 For More see Marioni, Tom. Beer, art, and philosophy a memoir. (Crown Point, 2003)
the museum gallery, (not to mention that it was fun, something that to seemed markedly absent in many works of fine art the more I learned). As an aspiring artist interested in engaging a public while simultaneously addressing social issues it only seemed to make perfect sense to follow suit.

With all of this in mind I set forth devising a plan to further address my conceptual interests while simultaneously testing the waters of social sculpture. I realized that the first step in these efforts would be to find collaborators interested in helping to find a venue and organize a participatory event conducive to this type of endeavor. Fortunately it was not difficult to find three peers eager for such experimentation.

After a few brainstorming sessions, the event that was to be known as *BBQ/* was scheduled to take place at the Ohio State University sculpture facility. Billed as “an evening of food, art, and communal gathering… a participatory event geared towards creative camaraderie and imaginative energy”, the goal was to take a step away from a traditional gallery show in the hope of prompting active engagement from those in attendance. Art for the sake of participation and in the spirit of community, *BBQ/* was not merely meant to be a showing of interactive works but also a way of creating an environment that could serve as a conduit for memorable experience.

In terms of the work I would end up producing for the event I faced a bit of a double-edged sword, as conceptually I felt motivated to continue working in a similar direction of *All Walls Fall* (i.e. in continued scrutiny of cultures of empire). However, given my interests in developing a greater sense of participation and not wanting to alienate any potential participants, I was also wary of making work could be read as overly “preachy”. Deciding instead to work more on “the sly”, in a thinly veiled manner, I began thinking of bilateral approaches that could speak indirectly to something important while simultaneously having an air of fun. Countless outlines, sketches, mock-ups, and conversations later, the ongoing series of work titled *Amercian Draems* would eventually emerge. And of the numerous ideas dreamt up for the series, I finally settled on three works that I hoped would serve my intentions for the event in particular.

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6 Again noting that much of this thinking was also stemmed a frustration that had developed with negotiating the world of fine art, where in I felt that the system was too often taking itself too seriously.

7 Misspelling intentional.
The companion pieces *LETS PLAY BEER PONG* and *LETS PLAY CORN HOLE* are quite simply parodies of college life in the United States, and more specifically the ability for students to actively *dis*-engage from the woes of the world by focusing their attention on partying; often spending their free time participating in popular drinking games such as “Beer Pong” and, especially in the Midwest and at Ohio State University, “Corn Hole”. To attempt to drive this point home I constructed a set of each game stenciled with four letter words, each with political implications unique to the American experience; words such as IRAQ, BOMB, RACE, CASH, FUEL, VOTE, etc. Although this was an intentional design element intended to serve as visual cue and aesthetic play on words, the real art was in the participants actual playing of the games on these particular sets (in their appropriate setting, outside of the space near an active BBQ grill). And though the games were in fact utilized, it is difficult to know if the point was taken, as it appeared that people were enjoying the activity as they would under any other circumstance. In that way the point was reinforced, if only for me.8

The third piece produced for the event was a video installation titled *American’t*. Motivated from a similar perspective, the installation also aimed at a pointed critique of the American media, the seductive nature of technology, and our cultures unique preoccupation with self-reflexivity (e.g. reality television). To do so, video footage was shot in the space one night prior to the event of myself and three friends watching ourselves get drunk (in part as an homage to Marioni). We were able to do this by sitting in front of a camera that fed our image live to a projection on a wall in front of us, thereby allowing us to look forward seeing the image of the back of our heads, in essence allowing us to watch what we were doing, (in this case sitting either on the floor or in lawn chairs drinking beer from a cooler and eating snacks). The detrital aftermath of our gathering was then left in the space with the recorded video documentation re-projecting on the same wall. This footage was then mixed with another live feed from the same camera / projection perspective showing participants interacting with the objects left in the space and both the real and recorded video on the wall. Hence, one could watch oneself watching us from the night before (and even drink a beer while they were doing it, sit in the same chair that one of our projected likenesses were sitting in, etc). Thus creating a 4-part feedback loop of self-indulgent beer drinking media saturation.

8 And though I took great satisfaction in an e-mail being sent out by faculty a few days later requesting that the beer pong table be “moved to a fraternity basement”, as this only further reinforced the works intention, it was yet another example of the difficulties of trying to strike a balance between the playful and the serious.
Image 10. *American't* 2008 (photo courtesy of event participant Rob Thompson, as found on Facebook)
I have found these types of work to be much more difficult to document. However, this isn’t so much frustrating as it is telling of the concept. It is an art that is both experiential, and ephemeral, and in that way an art that mimics life. Sometimes one just has to be present to experience an instance in time for oneself, it cannot be accurately conveyed in a photograph or articulated in writing. I have found myself increasingly drawn to this kind of art, recognizing the desire of people to hold onto something sacred, a capacity and willingness to engage in order to create memorable experiences. There is something very powerful and beautiful about that; an art that exists not just in an image or an object, but more so in the hearts and minds of those involved in its creation.⁹

⁹ It is for this reason that I have noted when an a documenting image in this document has been found on Facebook, or provided by a participant, as I take great pleasure in knowing that they were moved enough to try and photographically capture their experience.
Although it also difficult to gauge whether or not the precise underlying message of American’t was perceived, it did end up being an interesting, fun, and most engaging introduction into the world of social sculpture, and an absolute joy to watch people interact with, especially in the context of the other captivating and beautiful works being exhibited by other artists in the space on that evening (collaborators to whom I am eternally grateful for contributing). In the end BBQ/ would prove to be quite a successes, evidenced not exclusively by the work, but also in the participatory turnout, in the bringing together of people in the spirit of sharing creative energy, in the smiles and laughter on the faces of participants in attendance. It would not have been such an experience without their contribution, and therefore not be the work of art that it was. With regard to process, I also consider the event to be one of the most meaningful learning experiences of my time spent in graduate school, a reaffirmation of the great value of working collaboratively with other artists on a common goal, and of giving into intuition and sharing.

The success of BBQ/ would lead to the subsequent organization of two like-minded events, DO in the winter quarter and (Im)Mobile: A Gathering in Acts in the spring. Both would provide me with even greater opportunities to experiment with sensual illumination, real-time narratives of the collective conscious, and social sculpture. Providing a space to play and move in directions far away from a computer screen, a refuge from the intensive video work that was simultaneously being developed for my formal thesis show (to be detailed in the next section). Through these events I was able negotiate the urges of my internal Luddite and explore new ways of actively engaging an audience, including but not limited to scented bubbles, bouillon base gelatin, and an experiential scavenger hunt, all of which shunned technology, and, with regard to the latter, objective aesthetics all together.

The art is in the thinking, and in the experience; for me it is at its best not just when you perceive it, but when you feel it. It is a way of working that I have enjoyed immensely. And although I still continue to enjoy working within a more traditional manner of new media, the supertemporal “artless exhibition” approach is one that I plan on pursuing much more in the future. Hoping to continuously strike a balance between the developments of spectacle via the seduction of technology, and the raw energy of child-like imagination. Call it anti-anti art if you will, the prevailing goal is not one of postmodern critique but rather of calling attention to the power of creative Human agency within a social context.
Image 12. *Do participant blowing scented bubble 2009*
(photo courtesy of event participant Paul Simmons, as found on Facebook)
Image 13. *Do participant cascading scented bubbles 2009*  
(photo courtesy of event participant Zepher Potrafka, as found on Facebook)
FRANKLIN PARK SCAVENGER HUNT
5.30.2009
6 - 10 PM

Please feel free.
Complete any or none of the following, in no particular order.
Photographic documentation is welcome, but not required.
Memory is...

* toes in grass
* pick a leaf off a tree, rub it in between your thumb and index finger, smell
* climb a tree
* try to eat a koolicle
* look for the person you know the least in the crowd, ask if you can give them a hug
* find a grassy slope, roll down it
* find dirt, get your hands dirty
* find a partner and face each other, take your right hand in their right hand, take their left hand in your left hand, spin as fast or slow as you like for as long as you'd like
* find a partner (or partners), lay on your backs (in different directions if you so desire), simultaneously spend time describing what you see directly above you, be as descriptive as possible
* stare at a star other than the sun and spend time remembering your best childhood friend
* scream, at the top of your lungs, that which you love most in the world
* lay on your stomach, look towards the horizon, hug the earth
* get dizzy
* for at least one minute, (longer if you'd like), concrete is lava
* find a comfortable spot, for what feels like 5 minutes sit in silence, listen
Image 15: Participant “getting dizzy” as part of Franklin Park Scavenger Hunt 2009
(photo courtesy of event participant Sarah Weinstock, as photographed by event participant Dina Sherman)
Chapter 6: History in the Taking: A Critical Analysis of the (Mis)-Representation of Native American Identity in Popular Culture And the Use Value of Performance in Political Contexts

“Handmade moccasins for people to see / I rock a party on the rez and smell the sage in the breeze. Vatos’ looking at me strange / you know I don’t care / I’m about to start a revolution with this braid in my hair”

Felipe Cuauhtli, Los Nativos (emcee)
Science Mayan

I.

“Would you celebrate Osama bin Laden Day?”

- John Trudell, Native American writer/activist
When asked about the celebration of Columbus Day

Historian Howard Zinn’s seminal work *A Peoples History of the United States: 1492 – Present*, begins with a chapter titled “Columbus, the Indians, and Human Progress.” Here Zinn presents the story of Christopher Columbus’ arrival to the Bahamas from the perspective of the men and women that inhabited the islands in 1492. The tale, as it unfolds from the perspective of the indigenous Arawak people is one of Manifest Destiny and conquest: a fervent quest for gold and the brutal subjection of a populous in the name of God. So begins this history of the United States, one riddled with genocidal violence and enslavement. Some might say one of absolute terror.  

American Indian author and activist Vine Deloria, Jr. frames the situation in a similar, albeit quite more trenchant fashion:

“An old Indian once told me that when the missionaries arrived they fell on their knees and prayed. Then they got up, fell on the Indians, and preyed… Columbus managed to combine religion and real estate in his proclamation of discovery, claiming the new world for Catholicism and Spain. Missionaries

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have been unable to distinguish between their religious mission and hunger for land since that time.”

Like Zinn and Deloria, *History in the Taking* is a project that attempts to speak from this perspective, the perspective of the oppressed. Moreover, it seemed only fitting living in Columbus, Ohio at the time of the project's conception to have the namesake serve as a centerpiece, both literally and figuratively. A single static time-lapse video framing the bronze statue of Christopher Columbus that resides on the south mall in front of Columbus City Hall. Overlaid on the shot the words “Columbus, Ohio Celebrating 516 Years of Occupation.” The viewer also hears a passage from the log of Christopher Columbus on the subject of his first encounters with the Arawak people, as translated by Zinn in *A Peoples History of the United States*.

“They… brought us balls of cotton and spears and many other things, which they exchanged for the glass beads and hawks’ bells. They Willingly traded everything they owned. They were well built with good bodies and handsome features… They do not bear arms, and do not know them, for I showed them a sword, they took it by the edge and cut themselves out of ignorance. They have not iron. Their spears are made of cane… They would make fine servants… With fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want.”

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Columbus, Ohio
Celebrating
516 years
of occupation

Image 17. Still from History in the Taking 2009
II.

“No Place exerts its full influence upon a newcomer until the old inhabitant is either dead or absorbed.”

- D.H. Lawrence, English author / literary critic

*Studies in Classic American Literature*

*History in the Taking* is constituent of a grander vision that has come to be known as *The Human Xeno Project: A Series of Subversive Acts*. As the first installment, (or subversion as it were,) of an indefinitely numbered multipart series of acts and art works aimed at opening new dialogs about racial and ethnic identity in the United States. The project aims to target arenas where such conversations may not be readily prevalent (i.e. within the gallery itself). *History in the Taking*, as a concept, is but a seed, one of many waiting to be planted, destined to sprout through a prevailing American culture with the hope of cultivating progress. This is the work of the art.

As a work of art, *History in the Taking* is a multi-channel video and sound installation comprised of a subset of found imagery and language that has plagued the post-colonial representation of Native American identity since the “discovery” of the New World by Christopher Columbus in 1492. It is meant to serve as a nonlinear audio/visual journey through a codification process that has ensued since the arrival of the *Santa Maria*\(^{13}\) through the onset of the contemporary postmodern age in which we currently find ourselves. It is however by no means thought to be definitive. Nor is it entirely without bias, this in recognition of my ancestry and personal identification as Chicano and upbringing in an often racially polarized community adjacent the Navajo Nation in Northern Arizona, as well as my previous academic studies, and work within Native American communities in Southern Arizona. To that end a bit of biographical information seems appropriate.

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\(^{13}\) Initially, and somewhat ironically, named *La Gallega*. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santa_Maria_(ship)]
My undergraduate studies in sociology and media arts were completed at the University of Arizona in Tucson between 2000 and 2004. During this time work in both disciplines orbited the politics of culture, social stratification, and racial inequality. It is also during this time, having seen a number of childhood friends pursue alternative, often volatile economic undertakings, that I became interested in working with “at risk” youth.

Upon graduation from the University of Arizona I was fortunate enough to have been offered employment by a faculty member in the media arts department whom was working with a summer wellness program funded by the college of public health. *Hiva Yu Allewame* (Always Being Healthy) was an initiative aimed at the youth living in the urban Pascua Yaqui settlement of Guadalupe, Arizona (nestled between Phoenix and Tempe). In addition to workshops facilitated by public health professionals on the subjects of diet and exercise, interpersonal relationships, sexuality, HIV/AIDS awareness, gang violence, and substance abuse, we as media artists worked with youth on developing media literacy skills and the conceptual and technical tools necessary for the creation of their own video works, encouraging them to find their own voice and work to tell stories important to them and from their own perspective, with the ultimate goal being one of empowerment.

It was during this time, (for one of the first times in my life as an “educated adult”), that I was able to consciously consider the impact that cultural identity could have on a community, both young and old, for better or worse. The beauty that came with inter-generational dialog and the passing of tradition, as well as the ugliness that tarnished impressionable young minds systematically taught that they were too different to succeed in a society. Cultural richness juxtaposed with economic poverty, ritual waning in the harsh light of prejudice, a true sense of ambivalence, caught between the maintenance of custom and the embrace of substance abuse and gang activity as a means of escapism; many of these young people found themselves at a critical crossroads.

This contrast of celebration and degradation is not without external pressure or history, and is continuously reified in mass media, the simultaneous adoration and abhorrence of an indigenous population appearing as something uniquely American. In his book *Playing Indian*,

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*14 The plight of the Yaqui is particularly unique given their migration from Northern Mexico to Arizona and their recognition as a Native American tribe by the United States government having not become official until 1978. Often tri-lingual in English, Spanish, and traditional Yoeme language, Yaqui youth often find themselves facing multifaceted stereotypes as both Mexican and Indian, and from different directions at different times. Included is prejudice from other Native Americans who sometimes view them as “not real Indians”.*
cultural historian Philip Deloria speaks to the contradictory notion of “Noble Savagery” as it has been applied to native peoples since the dawning of European enlightenment in the Americas, describing the process as “Two interlocked traditions: one of self criticism, the other of conquest.” Americans seeking to define themselves by what they are not (read European) by embracing Indianness (to borrow the term from Deloria) as a symbol of the spirit of freedom in critique of Western culture, while simultaneously feeling the need to absorb the land in which they sought such freedom. In the wake of such binary thinking arose a dilemma that would be the cause of post-colonial trauma for generations of indigenous people to come: the American need to assimilate or eradicate the native inhabitants of a continent.

*History in the Taking* points to this contradiction by way of a video mash-up element entitled *Pesky Truth*. Here the viewer sees two image sequences layered onto one another, the first layer being archival film footage from the 1933 Civilian Conservation Corps. produced news reel *Rebuilding Indian Country*, the second, cell animation from a 1924 cartoon titled *Felix Goes West*. Left in raw form but juxtaposed as a composite montage the viewer becomes privy to the dichotomy.

The newsreel footage depicts a Native American community cast in the light of the noble. Men and women at work, children at play, the film culminates in a pow-wow like rodeo ceremony, with tribal members in full regalia parading American flags on horseback. Overlaid onto this noble depiction is a representation of savagery. *Felix Goes West* finds the character Felix the Cat ambushed and chased by a hostile arrow-shooting Native. Felix is eventually caught and brought before the Chief who orders that he be given “Big Shoot”, a punishment comprised of being slung over the Eastern horizon. Upon landing Felix is relieved to be “away from the pesky Red Skins at last”, until he spies a statue in the likeness of an Indian outside of a cigar shop and goes running for cover.

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Such contradictory depictions in mass media have served to influence the perception of Native America, by both indigenous and non-indigenous populations alike, often reinforcing the aforementioned ambivalence of young people, whose trends in media consumption are greater than ever.\textsuperscript{16} \textit{History in the Taking} seeks to leave the viewer with a point of contemplation regarding such depictions. To that end I try to provide as many points of access as possible, in the hope of reaching as broad of an audience as possible. When developing the work I have attempted to utilize stylistic approaches are hopefully simultaneously accessible and deep, for those seeking (or expecting) something in particular out of fine art exhibited in a gallery while at the same time trying to reach younger or more naïve viewers.\textsuperscript{17} Moreover, each video is exhibited on small 5 x7 inch video monitors, forcing the viewer to watch in solitude amongst a crowded gallery, leaving he or she to negotiate their individual feelings relative to the surrounding society.

\textsuperscript{16} The goal of utilizing this particular source material was to emphasize the history of such contradictory representation within mass media. Although it is unlikely that today’s’ youth would be watching Felix the Cat there are no shortage of contemporary examples that could be pointed to as well, including a number of popular animated series.

\textsuperscript{17} For more see Image 23 in Appendix A.
I am of the opinion that as artists and scholars we should feel compelled to bring such issues to the table, and to as many people as possible, in order to analyze and discuss ways at which progress can be realized. Lest we agree that an American identity can be carved out the methodical rejection or reformation of an indigenous culture (or any culture for that matter) we should find ourselves collectively moved to consider working in the direction of a new, more inclusive paradigm, one built on honest representation and acceptance. Suffice it to say that based on my own personal experiences I do not believe we have yet achieved this goal.¹⁸

III.

“Indians scattered on dawn's highway bleeding /
Ghosts crowd the young child's fragile eggshell mind”

- Jim Morrison, American poet, musician, countercultural icon

*Dawns Highway (An American Prayer 1978)*

In *Playing Indian* Deloria steps beyond the classic American contradiction of assimilation or eradication to discuss the role of costume as disguise in the forming of an American identity, where non indigenous (and whites in particular) have been motivated to adopt Native identity as a way of experiential performance for cultural and political purposes. One such example that Deloria offers up is the communalists of the 1960’s and 70’s counterculture who chose to live in accordance with what they believed to be a Native way of life; communal living in hand built shelters modeled after traditional Native dwellings, sustenance farming, adopting nature inspired names, etc. In many instances these young people were openly rebelling the American imagination that had been created by the generation previous and sought freedom through the playing out of Native fantasies.

¹⁸ Although a great deal of progress has been made regarding ethnic celebration and race relations in the United States, even at the time of this writing there is widespread media coverage of racial discrimination towards President Barack Obama.
However, as Deloria notes, the fantasy of communal sharing did not always coalesce with a reality of American individualism, especially in light of an ill-conceived conception of revolutionary anarchism and a penchant for the hand picked adoption of particularly useful Native symbolism over actual Native philosophy.\textsuperscript{19} Such symbolic appropriation also became prevalent by a wide array of young activists and intellectuals engaged in countercultural movements of the New Left. Although many of these participants subcategorized themselves into groups aimed at specific agendas, they generally found common ground in a collective antiwar sentiment, with the American Indian becoming symbolic of both rebellion and peace, all the while referencing the use of psychoactive drugs. Regarding the latter Deloria refers to a statement made by the politically charged Weather Underground, which indicated that “LSD and grass, like the herbs and cactus and mushrooms of the American Indians, will help us make a future world where it will be possible to live in peace.”\textsuperscript{20} These groups (including Native “Red Power” groups themselves) borrowed symbols from one another in such a way that a dissipating effect was often had on the original meaning of the appropriated symbols. According to Deloria:

“Sixties rebellion rested, in large part, on a politics of symbol, pastiche, and performance. Inspired by media saturation and the co-optative codes of fashion, the emblems of social protest were plucked from different worlds and reassembled in a gumbo of new political meaning… everything fed into a whole that signified a hopeful, naïve rebellion that often had as much to do with individual expression and fashion as it did with social change.”\textsuperscript{21}

This co-opting of symbol, meaning, and culture negotiated itself into social reality as theorists and artists alike came to realize the age of postmodernism.\textsuperscript{22} With its rise came a myriad of social and cultural advancements. However, Deloria is quick to note that many of these advancements remained in the realm of the symbolic, as “cultural gesture”, where political policy and issues regarding racial, gender, and ideological identity remained at odds.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 159.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 160
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 164
\textsuperscript{22} Deloria speaks directly to the interpretations of Warhol and Cage as articulating the power of symbolism.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 166
History in the Taking seeks to tackle these concepts through the scope of musical performance as specifically articulated in four music videos from the 1970’s. Referred to as the “Psychedelic Indian” sequence, each instance of music video finds Native American identity appropriated via costume and/or behavior. Cher performs her 1973 hit single Half-breed as a half naked and hyper sexualized Native American princess on horseback. Felipe Rose of Village People serves as her male counterpart, disco dancing shirtless in trademark headdress. Big Bank Hank from The Sugar Hill Gang also appears in headdress performing the song Apache, pretending to smoke a peace pipe and make “whooping” sounds with his hand and mouth. And finally, viewers are presented with rare footage of Danish recording artist Tommy Seebach, also performing Apache, surrounded by buckskin bikini clad go-go dancers that emerge from a teepee.

By manipulating the footage with a keen eye for hypertextualized psychadelia, these appropriations, per Deloria, serve as self-reflexive and postmodern critiques of appropriation. Framed mise en scene replicates, video fields scroll like ephemeral film strips, colors grow brighter, and imagery twists and twirls into kaleidoscopic abstraction reminiscent of Native American basket designs. However, in the midst of such chaos comes yet another point of contemplation as the montage is interrupted by found footage of a home movie documenting a New Mexico pow-wow circa the 1960’s. Here the viewer is given a chance to witness some of the symbols that are being appropriated, to consider what meaning may be lost in such costumed co-option of identity.

Although Half-Breed starts with the lyric “My father married a pure Cherokee”, Cher’s mother it turns out was of mixed ancestry, including English, French and Cherokee. In all likelihood Chers’ ethnic look is derived from her Armenian father.
Musicologist Richard Middleton may make an argument that these music videos serve as examples of appropriating the “low other”, as a way of voicing the popular to create a “politics of the low”.

Likewise, Josh Kun may see them as heterotopist

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“contact zones” that re-imagine the social world in a more progressive manner. However, I can’t help but think to the youth with whom I worked, to the culture that they must negotiate and the implications of dismantling their tradition. This leaves me questioning my own role. Am I to be implicated in such dismantling by way of my artistry? Though I have not intention of doing so, it seems a risk worth taking to help bring the conversation to the forefront. Working in this vein, and recognizing myself as nothing more than an advocate, I am willing to put my work on the line in order to spark meaningful conversation. This is the ultimate goal of the work. In doing so I am aware that I must remain open minded to any and all social criticism that I may face by taking on such a sensitive subject matter.

IV.

“I never thought about it before… I always just thought of him as a cartoon character, like Mickey Mouse.”

- Anonymous viewer of History in the Taking

On the subject of the Cleveland Indians team mascot Chief Wahoo

_Hiva Yu Allewame_, the wellness project in Guadalupe, eventually came to an end due to budget constraints. However, the team that had worked with the program (some for over four consecutive summers, myself for two) felt compelled to continue. Out of this motivation came funding for a new initiative called NAYEP (Native American Youth Empowerment Project), based in Tucson, Arizona and open to all youth who self identified as Native American. We as artists were able to establish our own 10 week workshop and after school safe haven known as MASA (Media Arts Social Action). The more participants we engaged with the more we came

26 For more see Josh Kun, _Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America_, (University of California Press, 2005).
to see the detriment of the misrepresentation and/or under representation of a new generation “urban Indians”. Transversely, it was encouraging to see the power that came with young people discovering their own voice and embracing a practice of creating media of self-representation.

Inspired by these voices, History in the Taking takes a cue from witnessing the command associated with the switching of a perspective to shed light on a given subject. Such is the goal of the remaining two video loops offered in the installation, respectively titled Fresh Scalps and Keeps Other Flavors Out. Both examples make use of didacticism in order to comment on popular cultures branding of Native American identity in a commercial context. Fresh Scalps directing its gaze at Native Americans as mascots in professional sport, and Keeps Other Flavors Out aimed directly at Land O’ Lakes brand butter, which has utilized the “Indian Maid” as its principle logo since 1928.27 The mascots in Fresh Scalps rotate in the sky while a barren desert landscape crawls behind them, the words Fresh Scalps flashing across the screen. The Indian Maid in Keeps Other Flavors Out is remade subtly remade with a frown on her face, the recursive image held in her hand replaced with scrolling text that reads simply “I want my dignity back”. The goal of both is to prompt the viewer to consider the ramifications of Native culture taken for granted in the broader context of popular culture. What does it mean to exploit a cultural identity in order to market a product? Before arriving at an answer we must first ask the question by consciously confronting ourselves as consumers.

27 The “Indian Maid” is also commonly known to be the butt of sexualized jokes amongst school children http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Land_O_Lakes
Image 21. Still from *History in the Taking (Fresh Scalps)* 2009

Image 22. Still from *History in the Taking (Keeps Other Flavors Out)* 2009
I entered art school as a self-proclaimed filmmaker. And after two years, when it is all said and done, I am not exactly sure what to refer to myself as. Although I am growing more comfortable in the skin of an “artist”, it seems even more difficult for me to determine what media interests me most, or to label myself as any particular kind of artist. But I must admit I quite like it that way. As you likely have already ascertained if you’ve read your way this far, I have no desire in finding myself relegated to any exacting role. Life simply has too much to offer. To date I have fantasies of grandiose public sculpture, theatrical productions, and starting a band… (maybe someday I’ll study constitutional law and find my way into a political career).

Looking back what I can perhaps say with the most certainty, if anything, is that I am an American artist. Given my fascination with the social structures that surround me and the cultures in which I have been steeped this seems to make the most sense. And although I feel I have a lot to say about a lot of things, my work always seems to find its way back to saying something about a social way of life, and I suppose about an American way of life in particular.

I recall my first week in graduate school, sitting in a teaching seminar surround by all the other students in the graduate program. Looking out the window, daydreaming, I was struck by the green trees glittering in the setting sun, surrounded by the concrete and brick of the largest academic institution in the United States. I was amused by the fact that I had somehow ended up here of all places, seemingly by fate… just another American college student in a classroom at The Ohio State University.

I have learned a lot since embarking on this pilgrimage to middle America. New technological skills and contemporary art history lessons notwithstanding, I have also learned about the importance of continuously striving to further engage creativity as a tool of expression.
and communication. I have learned about the importance of working to find a balance between tradition and innovation, and about the knowledge that comes from risk and a willingness to accept failure. And perhaps more than anything I have learned about the great power that resides in harnessing tension and creating spectacle, something that also seems uniquely American in retrospect.

To that end I must give credit not only to the academic course work I have completed while in school over the last two years, but yet again to my experiences outside of the confines of academia (where I find some of the best learning is to be found). From going to my first professional hockey match, to attending the inauguration of the United States first black president, I have been able to witness first hand the ability for tension and spectacle to captivate an audience. It is an approach I have diligently tried to utilize in my own work, and that I hope to continue to hone in future endeavors as well.

I am also compelled to acknowledge the countless conversations I have had with fellow Art and Tech student and collaborator Eddy Ostrander, on the subject of art in general and on these topics in particular, (and whose’ use of tension I find particularly reverberating). Thus it seems fitting that my graduate school experience should end with a piece that was completed from concept to finished product in collaboration with Ostrander, with a bit of laughter and a playful jab at Americana, and having everything to do with tension and spectacle: an automated robotic pump that functions intermittently at a snails pace to produce single servings of ketchup for toaster oven hotdogs made in a gallery.

IMAGE MISSING. I GUESS YOU HAD TO BE THERE.
Tension and spectacle appear to be a sure fire way of grabbing the attention of Americans, with the seduction of technology being exceptionally useful. But what then? For me the goal remains the same. Not necessarily to change the world of art, but certainly to labor to change the world at large. Perhaps as Americans and as academics we are particularly privileged to appreciate and create art. But my suspicions that art exists everywhere and is for everyone have been reaffirmed, and with a better understanding of how to capture the imagination of others I intend to use my knowledge for the betterment of society. I may not have found my audience yet (perhaps they haven’t found me), but with a newfound set of strategies, and in an air of unconfined artistic liberation, I feel refreshed and reenergized to continue taking on the task of bringing the old cliché of “creative problem solving” to a more meaningful and substantive level. I know at the time of this writing that I have only scratched the surface, but I am ready now more than ever to dig deep, and I look forward to what the future holds. In conclusion, this end is but a beginning.
References


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All other images appear courtesy of the artist unless otherwise noted.
Appendix A: The Development of a Practice: Converse, Stare, Listen, Doodle, Chart

The first week of graduate school we learned that we would be coordinating studio visits with faculty throughout the course of the program. These ongoing dialogs were to serve as a primary source of learning. The purpose of visits in the first quarter, we were told, was for faculty and students alike to gain insight into each other’s respective work and studio practice. I would be lying if I said I wasn’t intimidated.

The two words seemed completely foreign to me: ‘studio’ and ‘practice’. I had certainly never before maintained any sort of static workspace, opting instead to work from school labs, libraries, office cubicles, or “on location”; as a filmmaker / new media artist I have never owned my own gear, and not until graduate school did I even own a computer outfitted with the software needed for my type of work. More so I was at a loss for describing any sort of practice, and to be quite honest I didn’t even really know what it meant maintain one. I had simply never thought of it before.

Over the next two years, through working in my first real studio, from home, again from school labs, and once again from a variety of public spaces, I would discover what it meant have a practice as an artist. Certain aspects of my practice, things that I had always done but didn’t realize, were revealed to me as I became cognizant of my processes through discussions with faculty and fellow students. Other tactics have been developed and honed out of particular needs or have spawned from particular insights. What seems certain to me now is that is quite beneficial to become aware of ones practice through of process of advisement, critique, study, and self-reflection. The following is intended to document, in part, that revelatory process. It is written as a bit of an after though, with a fantasy in mind that someday, maybe 20 years from now, some poor grad student feeling confused will stumble across this thesis and get something out it. I realize this romantic notion is quite unlikely. Why you would ever find yourself to the appendix of this document is beyond me.
“What did we do tonight?” he asked. “We practiced seeing” she replied. I’ll sit and stare for what seems like an eternity, for the sake of examination, or for the sake of contemplation. Walking, especially on an overcast day, seems especially insightful. Color pops, the environment starts to give feedback. I’ve been collecting rust off the streets for well over a year now. Sometimes we should close our mouths, shut our eyes, and just listen. Though I’ve found great value in conversation, with artists, a bit, but more so with friends, family, and even strangers. Ride the city bus; it’s a great way to gain perspective on everything from architecture to the economy. The more music the better, it cleanses foggy thinking, adds vibe, and can reinvigorate a stagnant work. Style is everything, keep it fresh. The Internet is your friend; the Internet is your enemy. So much insight to be gained from visiting the dollar store, both aesthetically and culturally, it is a microcosm of society and great source of inspiration. Unplugged, off the grid, getting my hands dirty under the sun, day dreaming of a neo-Luddite revolution. Relativism is one of the best ways of appreciating anything. I don’t know how to use this software, but I sure as hell am going to click on every button and drop down menu until I figure out how I can utilize it in my work. Read everything, even product packaging. Dumpster salvage. Roaming the isles of a hardware store is like a free lesson in engineering. They say “save everything”, I get it. Embrace the primitive spirit, DIY, and do it your own way. There is nothing quite like buying a brand new pen or marker. I’ll doodle for hours on end; drawing is a way for me to have a conversation with myself. Take notes. Become increasingly conscious of media consumption. Photography expeditions help me see the world in an entirely different way. Write. I have come to embrace the fact that some of my best thinking is done at night, often when I should be, or am trying to fall, asleep; it is annoying at times but useful, just go with it. Schedule art time in the calendar, and welcome it when it happens spontaneously. Art is everywhere, and can happen at any time. Tune in to each sense individually. Listen to intuition; don’t be afraid to experiment, even with the absurd. When approaching a new project, I like to make a depth chart in my minds eye. The goal is that the work functions on multiple levels simultaneously, deep enough to be pushing philosophical boundaries but close enough to the surface that is still accessible. Consider the professional as well as the dilettante, and certainly don’t forget about the random person walking down the street. Learn from everyone, everywhere, at all times. Teach from learning. Learn from teaching. Teaching is a real privilege in comparison to washing dishes. Experience art in the gallery as well as in
unexpected places. And by all means, take the time to step away from it all, talk about things other than art, appreciate the value of ones character, keep your friends, and spend as much time feeling with the heart as thinking with the brain. Above all, have fun!

I strive for my Art to fall anywhere along this continuum at any relative time.

Image 23. Depth Chart 2009