PROCESS AND PRACTICE...

A Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

The Degree Master of Fine Arts in the

Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

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The Ohio State University
2008

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ABSTRACT

One of the greatest professors I worked with used to tell me it is better to have more questions than answers. I frequently question what I do as an artist and why I do it. It is constructive to define key elements in my process in order gain more insight on my practice. Through the analysis and discussion of current and relevant works, five elements emerge. These elements include concept, object, material, communication and translation. Investigation of each of these elements reveals their significance to my artistic process. It is my opinion that all these elements together, directly shape the work that I make.
Dedicated to Sara Natasha Abdi
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to: Ken Rinaldo
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Sometimes, artists are referred to as free thinkers. As an artist, I appreciate this label; however, I must admit that, at times, my artistic process is structured. When thinking about new or existing work, five elements related to my process come to mind. These elements are concept, object, material, communication and translation. Of course, there are more elements involved in my process, but these are the most ubiquitous ones that seem to weave throughout all my work.

Concepts permit me to convey meaning through my work. The act of developing concepts or coming up with new ideas is an exciting and necessary part of my process. The term object is relevant because I consider everything I make to be some form of an object. More importantly, it is crucial that finished work take on the appropriate formal composition. Material is essential to my practice because it relates to the physical and conceptual structure of my work. Because of my fascination for materials, they frequently become a source of inspiration. Communication is a big part of my work and art in general. I believe all art is a form of communication; specifically, art is a form of nonverbal communication. Translation is the key to understanding art. Throughout my process, I am constantly translating ideas into physical substance. At times, translation is the main concept in my work.
CHAPTER 2

CONCEPT

Throughout my education I have been taught that the process of making art begins with a good concept. While I would love to say that this is the way it always works for me, I cannot. Oftentimes, it is important for me to work with only my intuition. Feeling what to do rather than directly thinking about it can be a successful way for me to work. The reality for me is that the conceptual process is woven throughout the whole making of a work. Regardless of when the conceptual process takes place, it is an essential element of my practice because of its communicative properties.

Concepts are a direct form of communication. This is important because it is art’s ability to communicate a message that motivates me to continue my practice. Art allows me to convey messages in a way that verbal communication cannot. Concepts allow me to inlay messages in the work for viewers to read. Perhaps receiving a message in a different form is the most effective way to make someone think without knowing it (subliminal messages).

Concepts are synonymous with ideas and often I use the terms interchangeably. One of the most interesting things about ideas, in my opinion, is where they originate. With this in mind, one of my first works is about the idea process (how ideas come to fruition). *The Idea Process* (Figure A.1), a kinetic art work, began to strengthen my
intrigue for developing and working with concepts. The concepts of this work revolve around authorship and the origin of ideas. My inspiration to create this work came from my frustration with hearing people say they came up with an idea all by themselves. I believe all ideas are derived and adapted from other people and outside stimulus; we do not live in a vacuum. Thus, when people say they came up with an idea all by themselves they are subscribing to a fallacy.

*The Idea Process* contains a series of sprockets and chains that animate figures inside a box. When a viewer turns the crank on the piece, it starts a chain reaction, which suggests the flow of ideas from one person to the next. As the viewer turns the outer crank, it makes the clown turn the inner crank. After a few turns of the crank, the small figure's head lights up and you hear a voice say “ah-ha.” The work is intended to symbolize the flow of ideas through multiple people rather than one person.

Discussing the conceptual aspect of some of my work can be an intricate endeavor. One of the reasons for this is because frequently the work is dealing with multiple concepts. In order to make work that has more depth, I layer concepts. When works possess this quality, it leads to multiple readings and multiple entry points. In turn, I can create works that are rich, complex and lasting in the minds of my viewers. A good example of layering concepts is evident in a recent body of work dealing with area codes and identity.

714-310-614 consists of a lighted seven segment LEDs, displaying numbers in clear glass jars (Figure A.2). Seven segment displays are often used in electronic devices to display information about time, for example, digital clocks. Wires, revealed through the glass, connect everything to a battery pack and a single button. These elements are
sealed in the glass jar with a plastic white cap and a single red button inviting the press of a finger.

For me this work is multi-layered. The numbers in the jars represent area codes, for some a form of personal identity. They also represent geographic and social status; as with zip codes. While some people associate themselves with zip codes, area codes are also numbers by which we identify place and status. I realized that this was important to me when I moved from Los Angeles to Columbus. Because I had a cell phone, I was able to take my 310 area code with me. This meant a lot to me because I felt like I was able to hold on to my Los Angeles identity. My area code has become a numerical identity marker.

An ambiguous and equally layered meaning is that the object itself looks like a bomb. In our current state of always being afraid of terrorism, this was a layer that one cannot ignore. This was a conceptual strategy for me and I wanted the work to be laden with this ambiguity. I was hoping interactants would feel slightly threatened and to question “Is this a bomb?” At the same time, I wanted to tempt the viewer by creating a compelling desire to press the red button.

When pressing the button, at first it may seem like the numbers are ambiguous; however, when they come on, with no explosions occurring, I think it becomes evident for the viewers that the numbers indeed represent area codes. It seemed fitting to encapsulate numbers associated with identity inside a bomb because people are frequently willing to protect their identity at all costs.
CHAPTER 3

OBJECTS

While concepts and ideas are central to my work, the physical form is also highly relevant. I prefer to label the things that I create as objects. I have always been interested in the notion of art as an object as well as other aspects born out of the Minimalism art movement. I like to label myself as an object maker because as long as I can remember, I have always had a fascination for building and making. One of the biggest motivations to continue my practice comes from the feeling I get when creating something that did not previously exist.

One of the terms I have developed through my practice is “Environment as object.” Most people probably think of an object as something small, but for me it is helpful to consider that an object can be something large and encompassing. When I refer to environment as object, I am usually making a connection to installation type work. In my mind, one of the most valuable aspects of installation work is its ability to create an environment that can surround the viewer. More traditional work or smaller works are easily overtaken by the viewer or the environment. Installation work has the ability to wrap around the viewer, subjecting them to a more profound experience with the work. Although I love to make smaller objects, I have begun to realize the great potential of installation work. By seeing installation work as an object, it allows me to be more aware
of all the details and take responsibility for all the elements; it enables me to gain a different perspective. A good example of environment as object can be seen in an installation titled *In the year 2000*.

In the installation titled *In the year 2000*... (Figure A.3) the viewer enters a room with white walls and a partial drop ceiling constructed out of acoustic tiles. Stuck in the ceiling tiles are hundreds of used pencils. There is also a vent in the ceiling that conceals a video camera. On the floor, there is an old yellow chair and a TV on a small dresser. The installation is arranged to replicate the look of a living room intended for one person. I wanted to create a scene that would entice viewers to sit down and watch TV.

When the viewer enters the room they are stepping into an artificial environment. As they sit in the chair the work begins to come to life. After sitting down for a few seconds, the light over them starts to dim and as they look at the TV, they begin to realize that it is surveillance video of them in the current situation. As they look at themselves, they begin to see a random strings of text appear over their image on the TV. The text that streams over their image is composed of words that pertain to my thought process. The installation is a self-portrait of a period in my life; it also represents a make-believe environment in my head. The concepts for this work were shaped by my time and experience at Cal State Fullerton.

Essentially, the pencils represent ideas that popped into my head throughout a period of time. People regularly use pencils to document ideas, so it seemed interesting to juxtapose pencils with ideas. By shoving large amounts of pencils in the ceiling tile, I intended to illustrate the feeling I get when many thoughts overwhelm me. Because the
ceiling was intentionally lower than normal and because the pencils were directly in the viewers’ space, I think this emotion was conveyed well.

The ceiling tile represents being in the realm of an institution. It seems that every time I am in a school or office, I am surrounded by acoustic tile ceilings. Throughout my education, I have felt a struggle between the power of an academic system and the ability to be creative. Oftentimes, I feel like these are opposing forces. This notion also lends irony to the conceptual aspect of the work.

The installation gives viewers a chance to step inside my head for a moment. When they sit in the chair and activate the work the thought process text that appears over their image symbolizes an attempt to see themselves from my perspective. Skewing perception is an important aspect I frequently exploit in my work.

Because I see this installation as an object I was able to gain a better perspective on the work. Thinking this way allows me to see all the elements of the installation as parts. For example I can separate the pencils, ceiling tile and video and gain a clearer understanding of how each element functions in the work. For that reason, I also achieve a stronger awareness of how symbolism is operating on both an individual and collective level.
CHAPTER 4

MATERIAL

Ever since I was a child, I have had an ingrained curiosity for material. I have always been attracted to new and unusual things. Inevitably, this characteristic has directly shaped my artistic practice. A big advantage of having an attraction to material is that it has forced me to acquire many technical skills and knowledge of a wide range of processes. One valuable characteristic of material is its ability to communicate ingrained messages. Material can communicate statements, feelings and emotions. Unsurprisingly, different materials will have different effects on a work. For example, wood is warm and natural feeling, while metal usually seems cold and associated with the machine. With all the potential power of material, it is essential to my practice that I am conscious of which materials I use and why.

At times, I use certain materials to communicate a specific feeling in my work. For example, in the installation In the year 2000... I used ceiling tile as a symbol for an institution and I use pencils as a symbol for ideas. Using this example, it is productive to realize how materials change when they are put in a different context. Obviously when you are in an office building, you don’t really think much about the ceiling tile above your head, but when you see it in an artwork it raises questions. Because the material has changed context, it has changed meaning. Subscribing to this theory means that I must
consciously attend to what materials I am using in my work. I always make sure there is a reason why I am using a particular material. Normally, one material could easily be substituted for another if my only goal was to build something structurally sound. However, when trying to build meaning it becomes very important to use the right material not only for structure but also for conceptual cohesiveness.

One material or part that has dramatically changed my practice is the microcontroller. Microcontrollers are scaled down computer systems capable of controlling input and output devices (Figure A.4). Even though they are simplified systems, they are quite capable of handling complex actions. Recently, the art world has seen a surge in artists who use this technology. Some of the reasons for this include ease of use, support and price.

Referring to the microcontroller as a material is somewhat restrictive. Although it technically can be classified as a material, it is much more. The reality is that microcontrollers possess more complex properties than most materials. For example, microcontrollers can control complex interaction and the behavior works exhibits. Utilizing microcontrollers in my work allows it to sense its surroundings and output behavioral reactions. Subsequently, microcontrollers can change the whole meaning of a work in ways that traditional materials cannot. In my mind, it is productive to consider microcontrollers to be a “super material.”

One of the most valuable aspects of using microcontrollers is their ability to control interactive works. Interactivity is an integral element in most of my work. It allows viewers to play a part in the work, which increases their invested interest. This is important because I believe that increasing interest will increase the viewer’s connection
to the work. Using microcontrollers enables me to make interactive works, but more importantly I can create works that can change their behavior. One of the problems with traditional kinetic work is predictability and repetition. With microcontrollers, I can produce works that exhibit chance and randomization. One work that takes advantage of this aspect is titled *One Dozen*.

The work titled *One Dozen* consists of a dozen eggs in their original carton (Figure A.5). The carton is sitting on top of a white shelf. The eggs have been hollowed out and red LEDs have been inserted inside. At first glance, the eggs appear to be unaltered. There is a single red button in the corner of the shelf that suggests its interactive nature. Inside the box, there is circuitry and a microcontroller that controls the behavior of the work.

The work is about chance and surprise. The idea for this work came to me one morning. I cracked open an egg to make an omelet and to my surprise two yolks came out. I thought it was interesting that I didn’t really know what was in an egg until I cracked it open. This simple act seemed to imitate life in many circumstances. It was essential that this work include interactivity and chance it was necessary to use a microcontroller.

When the viewer approaches the work it is evident that the red button is calling to them. After pressing the button, one of the eggs will begin to slowly start to pulsate and glow red. This pulsing glow gives the sense that the egg is breathing. This behavior is intended to surprise the viewer because there is no indication that the eggs would glow red. The foreign aspect of a glowing egg also relates to increase of hormones found in many of our food sources.
The notion of chance is inserted by randomizing which egg will glow when the button is pressed. This sense of chance is increased by introducing many other patterns or behaviors that the work can display. For example, three eggs might glow, all the eggs might glow, or any combination or sequence. Because the microcontroller enabled the randomization it affected the concept more than any other material could have. It is this property that justifies the title “super material.”

Another material and process that has advanced my practice is rapid prototyping. Rapid prototypes are similar to microcontrollers in that they have infinite potential. In literal terms, it is what you define it to be. Rapid prototyping is the automatic construction of physical objects using freeform fabrication. Essentially, it allows people to print three-dimensional objects using a computer and a specialized printing system. Because of the profound possibilities of rapid prototyping, I also deem it to be a “super material.”

Rapid prototyping has really expanded the possibilities of my practice. With it, I can fabricate almost anything I can imagine. I have always hated knowing that a certain part could help me but not being able to obtain it. With rapid prototyping, I can just print it. While some might consider rapid prototyping to be a process, it is more helpful for my practice to think of it as a material. Like other materials, it does not simply add physical structure, it also adds conceptual value.

One example of this is in a work titled Data (Figure A.6). This work consists of two sets of glass jars. In one of the sets of jars there are rapid prototyped cubes that spell the word “DATA.” Each one of the cubes is a letter in the word and the letters are illuminated by red LEDs. In the other set of jars, there is rapid prototyping powder. These
jars are also illuminated by red LEDs. Both sets of jars sit on top of white shelves and they are connected by a yellow wire.

One of the first things a viewer probably notices is the red light emanating from the work. Often I use light as a means of seduction. I want to create an entry point for the viewer to access the work. Our eyes are naturally drawn towards illuminated objects and I think it is appropriate to exploit this phenomenon. Another fitting reason to use light has to do with its connection to communication. Often lights are used as a form of communication in advertisements and storefronts. Because of art’s association to communication, it seems reasonable to create a link between light and art.

The work is titled *Data* because that is what it speaks about. Specifically, everything around us (the world) is formed by data and information. For example, human beings are formed by data. All humans are made up of a similar substance, but it is our DNA that tells our cells how to form. Rapid prototyping is analogous. It is the instructions that determine the way the material formally manifests itself. In other words, it is the data that we feed into the printer that determines what comes out. The material in both sets of jars is exactly the same, the only difference is that one is formed by data and the other is not.

It is obvious that both microcontrollers and rapid prototyping are extraordinary materials suitable to be dubbed “super materials.” They have incredible potential in the realm of the arts. As time goes on, the prevalence of these cybernetic technologies and space-age materials will undoubtedly increase. As a result, the art world may dramatically change and adapt. Robert Rauschenberg can be quoted saying “You begin with the possibilities of the material.”
CHAPTER 5

COMMUNICATION

It is obvious that art can convey meaning and messages. I have already discussed how certain elements such as concepts and material aid in this process. It would be hard to imagine a good work of art that doesn't communicate something. Inarguably, art is a form of communication, but it is important to be more specific. I believe art is a form of nonverbal communication.

Communication can be broken up into two categories: verbal communication and nonverbal communication. Verbal communication is the content of what we say (our words). Nonverbal communication is the process of sending wordless messages (everything except our words). It is obvious that verbal communication and nonverbal communication are different, but three main differences emerge. Verbal communication is discrete and nonverbal communication is continuous. When we communicate verbally, we are either communicating or we are not. We can choose when we want to communicate and what we want to say. The same cannot be said for nonverbal communication. We are always communicating nonverbally; even silence can send a strong message. Another difference is that verbal communication is single-channeled and nonverbal communication is multi-channeled. The only way to communicate verbally is through our mouth. Nonverbal communication can occur through multiple channels such
as eyes, hands, body, voice quality and more. This is one of the reasons why nonverbal communication is usually more honest than verbal communication. It is very easy to control one channel, but when you have to control multiple channels it becomes challenging (Beebe 17). Finally, verbal communication is concrete and nonverbal communication is ambiguous. When we communicate verbally, we use specific words that have specific meanings. When we communicate nonverbally, meaning is often speculated. After defining the key differences between verbal communication and nonverbal communication, it is clear that most art can be classified as a form of nonverbal communication.

Seeing the interesting connection between art and nonverbal communication, I thought it would be worthwhile to create a body of work centered on that topic. One of the first works in this body is titled *Distance = Color* (Figure A.7). This work consists of a grey box with a perforated metal screen. The box with a window houses a light panel that is able to display thousands of colors using red, green and blue LEDs. Mixing different amounts of light from the LEDs enables the panel to produce different colors. The panel has two layers of a plastic diffusion material in front of LEDs which allows it to display an even blending of the different colors. This color blending effect works on the same principal that makes it possible for your TV to create multiple colors. On the front of the box, there are two round transducers (speaker/microphone) that allow it to detect the distance of the viewer. These transducers detect distance similarly to the way bats detect distance. They emit high frequency tones (ultrasonic, inaudible tones) and measure the time for them to bounce back. Inside the box is a microcontroller and circuitry which is central to the programming and functioning of this device.
The work is about translating nonverbal communication into colored light. Specifically, it is about translating distance into color. Depending on how far we stand from each other communicates something. Imagine saying "I love you" in someone's ear versus saying "I love you" from across a room. This work intends to make the viewer aware of how distance can change a situation. It is important to be aware that proximity and closeness will affect the nature of communication. Of course, color is different from the reactions you might get from a real person, but I think there is value in seeing things from a different perspective.

Another quality of the work that is worth mentioning is that it is interactive. The interesting thing about the interactivity of this work is that it is involuntary. Whether the viewer is aware or not, they interact with the work as soon as they walk up to it. Often my work is interactive, but usually the viewer chooses to participate in a conscious manner. One of the key features of this work is that the viewer does not immediately know they are interacting with the work. It usually takes viewers some time to realize that their action (distance) is affecting the behavior of the work. In real life, people aren't always aware that they are communicating a message with their distance. It is especially relevant that this work mimics that phenomenon.

Another work that is part of this body is titled Touch = Color (Figure A.8). This works consists of two grey boxes. The larger box is the output device and the smaller box is the input device. The larger box is similar to the previous work; it contains a light panel that can display thousands of colors. The smaller box reveals a soft, rubbery, black square region that can sense the pressure of the viewers touch. It also contains the
microcontroller and circuitry that enables the work to produce behavior in relation to the viewer’s actions.

This work is about the translation of touch into color. Often, we overlook the value and richness of nonverbal communication. The complexity of touch is one example of this. Touch can be versatile in its ability to convey many different messages. It also has the power to communicate stronger meaning than verbal communication alone. What could take thousands of words can be summed up into the single act of a hug. By translating touch into color I am presenting the viewer with a new perspective on how touch affects a situation. My hope is that this new perspective will allow interactants to realize the potential of touch. I want them to recognize that the act of touching is a form of communication and inevitably leads to a reaction.

Interaction is an integral part of this work. It is necessary for the viewer to physically interact with the piece in order to complete the work. When the viewer touches the black region on the small box, different colors are displayed. Depending on the pressure the participant uses determines the color that is displayed. The way this work is configured is intended to give the viewer a sense of one-to-one communication. When they do something, the piece does something.

One of the reasons communication and interactivity is important in my work is because I have studied Human Communication earning a BA at California State University Fullerton. I continue to be fascinated with the subject and its relation to my art practice. It seems fitting that I apply some of my knowledge in the field of communication into my art work. My different background has been important in developing a unique perspective as an artist.
CHAPTER 6

TRANSLATION

One of the most intriguing aspects about art is the notion of translation. Throughout my artistic process, I am involved in the act of translation. Sometimes, I deal with it directly as is the case in my nonverbal communication series. In these works, the subject matter is translation. I am directly translating one thing into another, for example, distance into color. Other times, I deal with translation in an indirect manner. For instance, when I am creating a work from a concept, I am translating conceptual data into an object. An effective definition of my art practice could be the process of translating data or ideas from one form to another.

Seeing that translation is vital to my practice, I decided to continue the nonverbal communication series and construct an installation work for my M.F.A. thesis exhibition. I was concerned with addressing some of the conceptual and formal issues related to the previous works in the series. I also wanted to further explore the realm of interaction and add more complex and captivating behaviors to the work.

In simple terms, *Tactile Adaptation* is an input and output device that centers on the notion of translation (Figure A.9). The installation consists of grey elements that create a stage for the viewer. In the middle of the stage, there is a fleshy object that has pressure sensitive resistors imbedded under a silicone skin. These sensors enable
microcontrollers to detect how hard and where the object is being touched. There are also
two small transducers imbedded in the fleshy object that detect distance. Surrounding the
fleshy object are five color panels that are capable of producing thousands of colors.
Theses color panels are similar to the ones uses in previous work. On the floor of the
stage, there are four speakers capable of producing low frequency tones. Exiting the stage
and color panels are yellow wires that lead into a control box mounted to the wall. Inside
this box are circuitry and four microcontrollers responsible for controlling the behavior
the work exhibits.

The main ideas investigated in this work reside in the juncture between material
and formal associations as they relate to exploration and discovery. When a viewer
interacts with the work their behavior shapes the behavior of the installation. The viewer
is able to explore the work physically through position and touch. However, there is some
level of uncertainty because the installation creates a sense of repulsion and attraction.
The unfamiliar and strange characteristics of the fleshy object creates discomfort and
hesitation to interact with the work. In contrast, seeing a field of colorful lights and
interesting sounds draws the viewers to interact. This ambiguity can occur in real life,
too. Sometimes it is not appropriate to touch other people and often touch can be
awkward. Despite these feelings of uncertainty, it is essential for humans to receive
touch.

Both literally and figuratively, the main connection to the work is touch. While
most artworks exploit the sense of sight, I felt compelled to take advantage of more. In
order to fully experience the work, it is necessary for the viewer to touch the fleshy
object. Depending on how hard they touch and where they touch changes the color of the
panels around them. The installation also detects the distance of the viewer. Depending on how far the viewer stands from the fleshy object determines what kind of sounds are heard. When a viewer interacts with the work, they gain the ability to manipulate the environment around them. One of my expectations is that a viewer will try to explore the work and try to figure out how their behavior translates into the work’s behavior. Some of the most important things I know can be attributed to the act of exploration and discovery.

For me this installation has many successful elements because it takes advantage of chance and unpredictability. One of the difficulties with some previous works was that they were too easy to figure out. Viewers quickly realized how their behavior affected the behavior of the work. With the use of microcontrollers, it is now easy for me to integrate chance and unpredictable behavior as a part of the aesthetic of the work. By incorporating randomization in the programming of the installation, I was able to make the behavior seem more complex and ultimately richer. This extended the idea of exploration and discovery by allowing the viewer more time with the diverse reactions of the work.

Touch is an extremely complex aspect of communication. Because of its complexity, it seems justified to translate it into another form. Specifically, this installation translates touch and distance into color and sound. Ironically adding translation to the situation can both simplify and confuse. When something is translated something is gained and something is lost. By translating, we gain a better understanding of something we didn’t understand before. However, when something is translated, parts of the meaning can be lost.
CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

It is the journey, not the destination, in which I am interested. I am not interested in figuring out my practice entirely, but instead, I am interested in trying to continue to figure it out. I will never really know everything about anything, but it is that process of trying that inspires me to continue my practice. Frequently, I question what it is that I do. It is this process that helps me to come up with new ideas and leads me to new places.

One of the ways in which I work is allowing one idea to springboard from another. I wouldn’t be in the place I am now if I didn’t have all my past to get me here. Although it may not always be completely obvious, there are always connections between my works. This paper traces my conceptual framework and discusses my concepts and association to objects and material in the process of making works about communication and translation. It is important to realize that these are not the only elements that make up my practice. They are, however, the main things that currently stand out in my mind. As my practice evolves, my work will continue to change; however, my love for creating will remain a constant.
LIST OF REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

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