MakerMakingMade

A Thesis

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By

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ABSTRACT

Making exists only in the now. It arrives and leaves in tandem with its own creation. As soon as it is done being created, it no longer exists. What exists in its place is the made. My recent work puts forward the question of whether the process of making itself can function as the final, referential product, taking the place of the made that art history has conventionally relied upon. I consider my practice an opportunity to experiment with different modes of making in pursuit of a better understanding of what making is and how it exists. My work utilizes a wide range of both traditional and non-traditional materials, methods, and techniques. Whether my work takes the form of an erased action or a projected idea, I am interested in the way a concept manifests and becomes part of a larger discourse. The products of these explorations, be they tangible or ethereal, call into question how making is recorded, interpreted and ultimately understood.
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2: Reese, Peter A. *Rock Holding*, 2005 - I stood in the center of an empty room. At 9:00 A.M. I picked up a 7½ lb. stone. Holding the stone level with my stomach I attempted to keep it perpendicular to my body from 9:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M. At 1:21 P.M., after 4 hours and 21 minutes, my arms gave out and the rock fell to the ground. This ended the performance.

3: Reese, Peter A. *All I Can Give To You (A Handful Of Dirt)*, 2007 - I walked to the center of the Oval on Ohio State’s campus. I knelt down in the grass at the edge of the brick circle facing towards its center. Using my hands I dug a hole in the ground. I had to pull out the grass to get to the soil underneath. I gathered up a handful of dirt and extended my arms in front of me in a gesture of offering. I bowed my head and closed my eyes. I remained in this position for one hour. When this hour had passed, I placed the dirt on the brick in front of me, stood up and walked away.

4: Reese, Peter A. *All I Can Give Back (A Handful Of Sand)*, 2007 - Standing in the rain I stripped off my clothes to my underwear. I stepped forward and picked up a cup that I had previously placed in the sand. Pouring the water from the cup I inscribed a square in the sand around my feet. About 5 feet in front of me there was a shovel planted in the sand with its handle pointed upwards like a monument. I knelt on the sand inside the square. Next to where the cup was set was a head covering which I had woven out of the green reed that grew where I was performing. I put this on my head. It blocked out my vision. I dug my fingers into the sand, pulling out a handful. I extended my arms toward the shovel and sat still. Two minutes and 45 seconds later I placed the sand on the ground in front of me. I removed the head covering and placed it on the ground also. I stood up and backed up to where my clothes were resting. I put them back on and stepped out of the rain.

5: Reese, Peter A. Stenciled text, 2008


7: Reese, Peter A. *Same Clothes For One Year*, 2006-2007 - At 12:00 A.M. on October 15, 2006 I took off all of my clothes. I put on a pair of grey underwear, then a pair of blue jeans. I put on white socks and white shoes with white laces. Finally I put on a short-sleeved grey T-shirt. All of these items were brand new and had all tags or labels removed. I wore these items every day for one entire year. Additionally, I also had a grey hooded sweatshirt, a grey work coat, a grey knit cap, and tan knit mittens to be worn as needed in the event of cold weather. At 12:00 A.M. on October 15, 2007 I removed these clothes.

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13: Reese, Peter A. *MakerMakingMade*, 2008 - This piece was performed for a second time in Columbus using a wall as opposed to a floor. The higher portions of the wall were reached using a rolling ladder. Instead of the space being entirely covered in words before their erasure, the phrase "THIS IS ME MAKING" was erased during the writing process. I wrote the phrase, erased it, and then wrote it again.

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19: Reese, Peter A. *Same Clothes For One Year (Reassessment As 365 Layers Of Paint)*, 2007 - The image in this piece was derived from a photograph taken in the first minute of the performance *Same Clothes For One Year*. I translated the image into a simple black and white line drawing, which was transferred onto the 9 inch x 12 inch plywood panel using white spray paint and ink. Then, using a paintbrush and white acrylic paint I painted the clothes onto the figures in the drawing. Once the paint was dry I painted another layer on top of it. I repeated this process 365 times; once for every day of the performance.

20: Reese, Peter A. *Learning Process II: Trumpet (Reassessment In 750 Pieces)*, 2007 - I created a black and white line drawing from a still image taken of the performance *Learning Process II: Trumpet*. I transferred the drawing onto a 48 inch x 10 inch piece of plywood using white acrylic paint and ink. This painting was then taken to a woodshop and cut into 750 pieces, one piece for each minute of the performance. The vertical cuts were made using a saw with a 1/8 inch blade and the horizontal cuts were made using a saw with a 1/16 inch blade, resulting in a loss of wood during each cut. Once the painting was cut into pieces I painstakingly reassembled the painting. As no pictures were taken of the painting prior to its being cut, this was done without any visual reference. After all 750 pieces were correctly placed the panel was encased in clear resin to underscore the loss of material that was part of the process.

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22: Magritte, René. *Ceci n’est pas une pipe (This is not a pipe)*
Where exists the art?
In these lines being written,
read, both, or other?
PREAMBLE

What is an empty grave, literally? It can be looked at as an absence, or a void, or more simply: a hole in the ground. A hole that, in any other context, would be just a hole. However, when connected to its intended purpose, to house a body, it becomes something else entirely. It starts as an unassuming piece of earth but once that earth is displaced in a specific configuration within a specific context it becomes a symbol. The hole in the earth marks the presence of a death. It is an absence indicating a presence.

_Digging A Grave (with my bare hands)_ is a piece I have been planning since the winter of 2006. The piece involves just what the title suggests, the act of me digging a grave using only my hands. As for whom the grave is intended, I cannot say. Were the grave proposed to hold someone other than myself it would speak about homage, respect, humility, and the idea of thankless labor, that is, labor without recognition from the party for whom the work is immediately beneficial (the dead). To designate the grave as being mine is to make manifest the common English idiom “to dig one’s own grave.” The nature of the act could, indeed, be interpreted through such an idiom; however, aside from the humorous pun inherent in the spirit of the action there lies a deeper conceptual motivation that begs to be acknowledged. To that end, viewing the intended performance with the assumption that it is my grave
being dug also raises questions about mortality (and its acceptance), earnestness, will, and volition.

My intention is that this action would not manifest itself in any sort of tangible image or object to be shown in a gallery context. Instead, it would exist as something decidedly less tactile: an idea. More specifically, it would reside solely as the idea of my having dug the grave. Just like an absence (the grave) indicates a presence (a death) I want to use the absence of a physical product to call attention to the presence of an action having occurred, visible or not.

So what does this mean for me as I assume the role of the gravedigger? Gravediggers are employed to create in this physical world a space in which families intend to inter their most beloved relatives. They are charged with such an intimate, important task and yet historically they have been and continue to be viewed as lower class. Gravediggers work behind the scenes, staying out of view during the interment service, giving way to the more highly respected funeral official. The nature of their manual labor-based occupation and their physical proximity to the deceased causes them to be perceived as “unclean” (both literally and figuratively) next to the impeccably dressed guests and administrative colleagues present at their workplace. In my opinion, though, it is the superior, intrinsic spiritual proximity to their employers that sets them apart from their “cleaner” peers in the field. A gravedigger is the last person to have any sort of relationship with a given human being. They perform hard physical labor to accommodate the “remains” of a person whom they never met in life. Essentially, they work for the dead. It is a thankless job. Knowing that this is the role into which I have placed myself, why would I want to continue?
There is a point in my working process when I am forced to relinquish control over the outcome of the work and yield to the making. This point can come at a number of different times during the creation of a given work, but it always seems to come. Sometimes it comes when I have exhausted all my mental resources and, no matter how much I try to think through something further, the only available option left is to do. Other times, it comes before all of the complex logistics or elements that a given work will come to require have been fully recognized. Regardless of when this moment arrives, it always does and it always dictates the next step that the piece requires: I must give myself to the work.

"The idea becomes a machine that makes the art. This kind of art is not theoretical or illustrative of theories; it is intuitive, it is involved with all types of mental processes and it is purposeless. It is usually free from the dependence on the skill of the artist as a craftsman."
- Sol LeWitt, Paragraphs on Conceptual Art (1967) (Stiles and Selz 822)

This, in and of itself, can mean any number of different things depending on the specifics of a given piece, but the level of devotion is always the utmost. The work lets me know that all that remains for it to reach its full potential is for me to throw myself into it entirely. Not to give the work any particular element, but to allow the work to use me as it sees fit. I offer my body as a vehicle for an idea to expand and become manifest. I believe that it is only in giving myself, without restrictions, to the project at hand, that the work has the potential to achieve success.
CHAPTER 1
NEC SPE NEC METU

In 2003 I read a book on Caravaggio that told of his exploits in the 1600s. He
and his “gang” would roam the streets at night, drunk on commission money and
carrying swords inscribed with their motto: NEC SPE NEC METU. This translates to
“Without hope or fear.” It struck a chord and has become an important part of how I
consider my practice.

A leap of faith is required when adopting a credo such as NEC SPE NEC
METU as a baseline for artistic practice. A lot of the work must be performed or
manifest without knowing exactly what it is being done or why. One must often act
on the compulsion or impulsion that came along with the conception of a given idea.
There is a sort of blind faith in the decision-making. A “trust in the making” attitude.
My 2007 piece godpainter serves as a good example of this.

I had reached a point in my practice at which I was thinking about where,
within the body, making comes from when an odd image stole into my head around
all the other pragmatic thoughts. Just when I had come to a cautious conclusion that
maybe making came from the heart and the lungs and the head, an image flashed in
amongst the linear stream of proposals and acceptances (or denials), disrupting the
process enough for me to take notice. It was an image of my head painted pitch
black. In an instant I knew what I had to do. I had to visually represent those places where I thought making came from in order to have a reference with which to evaluate the validity of that thought.

![Image]

godpointer, 2007

(fig. 1) I began by filling a container with sumi ink. I stripped off my clothes to my underwear. Standing in my underwear I started by painting the square on my chest. Then my face and head. I used a wide paintbrush. Next came the line joining my chest and my head. I took off my underwear and I painted my crotch and my hands. I was careful to be sure that each part was sufficiently covered with ink and that my lines were straight. When I was satisfied I walked into the sound booth and propped my camera on a box. I set the timer and snapped a few pictures, sure that my whole body was in each shot. There were no other requirements. Once I had a few shots I stood in a bucket in my studio and washed off the ink with soap and water.

So I continued with the rest of my day, all the while allowing this proposed action to accumulate more layers of complexity until I could finally return to my studio. Once there I let the making take over, allowing myself to become a tool for
its use. I followed the plan that the making had established, not necessarily knowing what it was but following it faithfully. I didn’t know what I was doing, but I somehow knew it was serious and important. I knew that I hadn’t done anything like it before but I wasn’t scared. I rationalized it by thinking that I was doing it so I could look at it when it was finished and analyze it. godpainter may have been the only piece I’d done for the purpose of being outside. Not for the experience of being in it, but the experience of viewing it afterward. It became, in my mind, much less a performance and more an image. I considered it an image of an idea.

Once the action was finished I printed out a photograph from the performance and tacked it up on my studio wall across from my desk. Inspired by possible misquote from Charles Mingus “With one hand I can make you see god.” and a reference to a comment made by Egon Schiele in his later years "The children call me 'Lord God Painter' he proudly announced, because 'I go around the garden in a smock."

I wrote “godpainter?” below the image in black marker and this would eventually come to be its title.

In retrospect, godpainter can be read as a work which touches upon notions of making in multiple respects including but not limited to: artistic creation (tangibly and conceptually), dissemination (physiologically and ideologically), and the giving of life (literally and figuratively). Aesthetically it resonates within arenas and traditions varying as widely (although strangely related) as performance art, professional wrestling, ninja movies, and sado-masochistic sexual fetish. There are also visual cues present within the work relating it to historical bodily adornment. The markings on and coloring of the body are reminiscent of tribal body painting as
well as tattooing and other ritual markings. The act of marking the skin with pigment paired with idea of creation can easily be interpreted as correlating to the rites of passage associated with traditional tribal body modifications, such as entering manhood, whether that association is intentional or not. Ultimately, though, I feel that godpainter functions as a good example of how an idea can evolve from an ethereal concept inside of my head to an action which can be referenced in the physical world and, in turn, become fodder for additional conceptual development.

As demonstrated by the process that led to the creation of godpainter, operating with NEC SPE NEC METU present in one’s practice allows fearlessness by tempering the chance for recklessness. A given situation can be entered into knowing that its parameters have been conceptualized thoroughly but the outcome is ultimately determined by the making. The phrase “without hope or fear,” in its entirety, can be interpreted as a blind faith or optimism based on confidence, with the word “hope” acting as a synonym for “expectation” rather than “without hope” acting as “no expectations.” An attitude akin to: The result of this process is completely unknown and therefore no expectations can be had, good nor bad. Apparent or not, there is a reason behind what is being done and that reason (whatever it may be) should be trusted. Regardless of the outcome, its consequences will have to be dealt with, so let’s see what happens.

My work has spanned the gamut of challenging the limits of my mind and my body, continuously expanding my understanding of what I am capable of should I allow myself to become driven by the making. Using my body as a material forces me to attempt things physically that I would never have the need to do in my daily
life. It also gives me the wherewithal to push myself both physically and mentally beyond what I formerly thought was possible.

Without the knowledge and confidence gained through this exploration and consequent insight into my body's limits and potentials, I would doubtless be reluctant to keep taxing and testing it to the extent that I have. That said, my physical and mental limits have played major roles in numerous works. I have utilized the boundaries of my person to consider the capacities contained therein and made works that expand or exhaust those potentialities through the manipulation of my body over time and under pressure. The subjects of different works have tested the capacity of my corporeal self to sustain a position, contain a volume of material, or hold a heavy weight. These works have also touched upon the idea of fullness being achievable not only conceptually, but in terms of the naturally occurring abundance or limitation possible within my body and also within a gesture or action that I may potentially perform.

*Rock Holding* was the second physically demanding piece that I made and the first that depended totally on my body's limits to define its parameters. It pitted my mind against my body in a test to see which would be the first to give in to the pressures of the situation. Unbeknownst to me at the time, this piece would be a large step toward my realization that my body can be used as a tool and that, like any other tool, it has limits that lay waiting to be discovered. While a work such as this can suggest some faint conclusions, it also opens up the possibility and desire to push those limits further. "Means To A Means," the two-day series of performances including *Rock Holding* and *Knuckle Performance*, proved an apt title as *Rock*
Holding ended up functioning as such rather than as a means to an end. It functioned, ultimately, as a piece that was just for me. I was pushing myself in an effort to know myself more deeply.

Rock Holding, 2005
(fig. 2) I stood in the center of an empty room. At 9:00 A.M. I picked up a 7½ lb. stone. Holding the stone level with my stomach I attempted to keep it perpendicular to my body from 9:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M. At 1:21 P.M., after 4 hours and 21 minutes, my arms gave out and the rock fell to the ground. This ended the performance.

The more current All I Can Give... series, however, is leaning more towards the idea of physically and mentally taxing my body in tribute or homage to others as well as myself. All I Can Give To You (A Handful Of Dirt) consisted of me placing myself in a vulnerable, physically taxing position for an hour in an effort to make myself available to anyone who chose to notice. The humble gesture of offering was an attempt to allow myself to be at the mercy of my surroundings. This donation was literally the maximum amount of material that my hands could hold - which was, in this case, soil - and, with eyes closed, I focused my attention on those who were present in the moment with me.
All I Can Give Back (A Handful Of Sand) found me in a similar physical position but this time with a more sacrificial, homage based motivation. I was asked to respond to a group of performances acted out in an open courtyard by some colleagues at a workshop with the Goat Island performance group in Chicago. As I was exploring the aftermath of the performances and trying to formulate an appropriate response, I became troubled by the fact that I would be presenting in a
space swarming with yellow jackets, as I have been severely allergic to their stings since I was a child. After much deliberation, I decided that I wanted to make myself vulnerable to this potential danger to show my appreciation for my colleagues' work. I responded the following morning by standing in the courtyard in the rain, removing most of my clothing, kneeling, and covering my head with a mask composed of reeds local to the courtyard. I then offered all that I could hold (a handful of sand) toward a shovel that had been stuck into the earth blade-first and stood like a monument to their hard work. Although the material that the action presented was readily available to everyone in the space, it nonetheless expressed my desire to make a public gesture of offering. The hope was that the submission and earnest display would demonstrate a level of humility. While this action took less than five minutes and was far from physically challenging, it did take an immense amount of mental resolve. I had to put my fears and reservations on hold in this tribute to the work of others.

*Singing Like A Blues Singer* allowed for a further extension and expansion of my body within the world.

*Singing Like A Blues Singer*

I sat in the center of a gallery on a stool with a piece of paper in my hand. On the paper were a variation of the lyrics to a song called "Jesus Make Up My Dying Bed" first recorded by Blind Willie Johnson in 1927. I rewrote the lyrics to remove all references to religious content. I began the performance by singing the lyrics out loud without accompanying music. When I got to the end of the song I began again. I repeated this process without stopping for 8 hours. I was attempting to experience what it was like for my voice to embody the emotional tone of a seasoned blues singer. I hoped that the quality of my voice would reflect that genuine feeling.

Again, this piece called for my body to be employed in new ways. Having never truly sung a song out loud, before making this work, I discovered a new aspect of my
body that I had never experienced. Singing loudly in public, and attempting to be on key, gave me insight into my own capacity for singing and allowed me to hear my "singing voice" for the first time. A fortunate, secondary result of this piece was the opportunity to observe how direct experience and physical proximity can play a role in the dissemination of an idea. Formerly my work had relied on a tangible object or a "mediatized" (Auslander) still image or video that had to be directly viewed to carry its message. *Singing Like A Blues Singer* allowed for witnesses to experience the work in real-time without being present in the space or viewing a concrete documentation. My voice literally traveled through space, beyond my body and the room that contained it. The removal of an intermediary between myself, the work and the witness is something that I plan to investigate more.

My methods of working and the materials with which I choose to work are constantly pared down to their simplest forms and configurations. A large part of my process involves examining the concepts that drive my intended work while evaluating what materials or actions can best facilitate those concepts. I try and use only what is essential when making a given work.

"New materials are one of the great afflictions of contemporary art. Some artists confuse new materials with new ideas. There is nothing worse than seeing art that wallows in gaudy baubles. By and large most artists who are attracted to these materials are the ones that lack the stringency of mind that would enable them to use the materials well. It takes a good artist to use materials and make them into a work of art. The danger is, I think, in making the physicality of the materials so important that it becomes the idea of the work (another kind of expressionism)."
- Sol LeWitt, Paragraphs on Conceptual Art (1967) (Stiles and Selz 825)

This often means limiting the number of materials and the ways in which they are acted upon and interacted with while creating a piece of art. This desire for essentiality serves to simplify the steps required to make a piece and allows for
concentration on the conceptual layering present in the work rather than worrying about extraneous factors. The pursuit of finding what is essential in each piece results in varying levels of materiality in different works.

I recently made a piece that consists of the sentence “I want to write a story about a man who realizes that he is god.”

I want to write a story about a man who realizes that he is god.

(fig.5) Stenciled text

This piece first presented itself as the desire that the sentence puts forth. Although an initial idea can sometimes form easily, deducing the necessary steps to advance that idea beyond its conception can be equally difficult. Such is the case when, with limited fiction writing experience, one attempts to write a story that exists as little more than the proposal of a theoretical notion. Questions arise such as: who is the man destined to be the subject of this story and what events lead up to his realization? It is not until one endeavors to write such a story that the daunting scope of this task becomes apparent. With this newly discovered perspective, I began to wonder whether these things are truly necessary in relation to relaying the desired messages contained within the narrative’s primary motivation. I found that the important details of any story that could be written based on the story’s underlying concept were already present in the idea of the story itself. Writing a plot full of twists and turns, establishing characters with personalities and quirks would only stand to complicate the message behind the words. This led me to the conclusion that what is essential to
the work is presenting the idea of the story and allowing the witnesses of that idea to write the plot themselves.

The piece that stands as the eventual result of this conclusion (which has no title) can physically manifest itself using any number of materials and thus is not defined by any single material. Some pieces, though, may require a specific amount of a particular material in order to act as the vehicle for a given idea. My process then acts to distill out any materials that might draw attention from the concept and concentrate only on what is essential.

*Same Clothes For One Year* began with the intention of exhaustively documenting each article of clothing each day of the performance using still images. The precedent for this method of strict, consistent photographic documentation within a durational performance was set by Tehching Hsieh in his series of works from 1978-1986. In his *One Year Performance 1980-1981*, Hsieh employed a camera setup in conjunction with a time clock to capture a single frame of film every time he punched the clock. He punched the time clock every hour on the hour for the entire year. His continual, sustained commitment to the concepts and parameters governing each of his works functioned as a framework through which my work can be viewed. Without his having established a tradition of working with yearlong performances my own work would not have the rich pedigree that his work has provided.
Adopting the still image methodology used by Hsieh would allow each day’s experiences and unique moments to be recorded in an individual image. With more consideration, though, it is evident that all of those moments would be recorded within the clothes themselves and that the strict photographic documentation was not necessary. All of the essential information gained through having lived the experience of the piece would end up contained within the clothes, making them a powerful object in and of themselves. I decided to allow this performance to be represented here by two still images from both the first and last minute of the project. The four images act as second-hand documentation of the performance, with the first pair giving a frame of reference through which to view the second pair. These last two “after” images act as all of the still images potentially available throughout the year, combined into one photograph. The year compressed into a single frame. All four of the images were shot with the body square to the camera. The figure is in a resigned pose to cause as little distraction from the clothing as possible. I wanted for the clothes to be the focus of the images. I hoped to almost fade out of the images, as a mannequin might become secondary to the clothing it displays.
I realized that the clothes could embody the work far more honestly than any photograph. This is not to say that the influence of Hsieh’s work ends at thinking about photographic documentation. In fact, the devotion, conviction and complete resolve with which he, and others artists whom I admire, works is something that I aspire to.

Leo Steinberg once said about Robert Morris’ *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making:*

“"A plain wooden box and a tape recording of the sawing and hammering that put it together. The work strips the adverb from the definition of art. A thing done-period."” (Molesworth 25)
The matter-of-fact language with which he describes the piece echoes the simple, purpose-driven creation of it. Steinberg aptly points out that the work exists exactly how it is. There are no frills, neither bells nor whistles. Concentrating on what is essential in a studio practice facilitates a concept’s path to fruition through the most direct, necessary steps. Everything is done with a purpose. Each move is deliberately designed to carry out a specific function. Tasks are carried out for as long or to the degree that the concept requires.

I approached the series Name Written 8,783 Times with a very specific set of parameters. The repetition of my name (formatted in the generic Last, First MI.) was an attempt to eliminate the baggage that comes along with a person’s moniker in hopes that it would allow the written name to become more of an image than a symbol. As Denise Riley points out:

“Repetition is never an inert affair, despite its mechanical fidelity. Say it, read it, echo it often enough and at short enough intervals, and the word suffers a mutation, its thingness abruptly catapulted forward. It begins to look somewhat comical or grotesque in its isolation…Is this strangeness only in the violent decomposition of the word, all meaning evacuated, into its typological clusters of characters in their graphic shapes? If one were to think, conventionally, of the word as animated solely by its meaning, then through the process of reiteration alone, one would be suddenly confronted by the word’s corpse, or its waxwork. Whether by the enforced prominence of its sounds, or the odd look of the letters themselves, to see a word printed many times over on a page makes it start out, and this exposed arbitrariness is indeed queer.” (Riley 122)
In this series, each time my name was repeated, it lost a measure of its inherent symbolic weight and therefore its personality. This figurative eradication of meaning was accompanied by a literal obstruction or destruction of its legible coherence. A defined end in each work interrupted this phenomenon of obliteration. A distinct change in format in each of the three versions set them apart from one another. The materials utilized were simple: pencil, paper, and the written version of my name. The name was to be written 8,783 times for each piece according to the days I had been alive and even the format that the name took was specific to the concept, each resulting in an interesting visual residue.

In the instance of *Name Written 8,783 Times (2 of 3)* the act of writing my name in this repetitious fashion in the same space literally wore through the paper on
which I was writing. The writing began with two sheets of paper and whenever necessary, as dictated by the pencil tearing through the top sheet, a new sheet was added to the bottom of the stack.

The repetition of the written name - be it consecutively, directly on top of itself, or huddled inside a cramped space - could have created perhaps a more formally pleasant image or composition had it been explored. However, the concepts of the work resided not in the way that the resulting things looked but in the fact that they had been done. As Sol LeWitt has said “Banal ideas cannot be rescued by beautiful execution.” (Stiles and Selz 827) I could only set myself up to do what needed to be done and I trusted in the making to handle that which I could not control.
CHAPTER 2

COMMITS TO THE OBSTACLE

Dead Bird, 2007 (fig. 10)
In late 2006, I made a painting of a bird on an unprimed wooden panel. The bird is lying on its back at the bottom of the composition with a red string wrapped around its neck. The string is trailing from a tree above where it is tangled amongst the branches. The bird is dead. At the same time I was painting this somber situation, I was trying to understand my attraction to its imagery. I had figured out the narrative of the scene, but not necessarily its motivation. In my head, the bird had become entangled in the string somehow and it had been wrapped around its neck in its struggle to escape. It occurred to me that this bird would be hung if it didn’t keep flying. The string was not long enough to reach the ground and, for whatever reason, I had decided that the bird could not rest on the branches. The only way for the bird to survive was to keep flying. As long as it persevered and kept itself in the air, it could not die. The bird controlled its own fate. Survival meant success and death meant failure. If the bird kept trying, it could not fail. I realized recently that maybe this bird painting was a metaphor for a phrase that I keep in my head daily and which I have integrated into my practice: Commit to the obstacle.

I overheard this phrase spoken near me by a woman in undergraduate school as I was waiting for a class to start. The phrase was the only part of the conversation that I unintentionally eavesdropped on and is the only part that I remember. I’m not sure of the context in which it was used or the meaning it held for its user at the time, but I latched onto it and made it my own. I read the phrase as being a focused, deliberate decision to overcome. Not necessarily to overcome anything specific, just whatever is standing in the way. I’ve applied it to my life as well as my working
process and I employ (consciously or unconsciously) a series of simple steps when it becomes necessary:

1. There is an obstacle
2. Stop fighting the obstacle
3. Step back
4. Acknowledge the obstacle
5. Recognize the obstacle
6. Analyze the obstacle
7. Embrace the obstacle
8. Commit to the obstacle
9. Make the obstacle work with you, work for you

This phrase has been valuable to my practice. To some degree, I seek out obstacles in this world as something against which to push. This may help to explain why some of my works have resulted in extreme, visceral, and physical actions. I look to find resistance in the world around me, which allows me to fulfill my need for “real” experiences with direct bodily and material interactions.

It has become clear to me that too often people shy away or blatantly avoid having to feel anything real at all. They seem to avoid pain and sadness in favor of ignorant bliss, wanting life to be easy and absent of anything negative or “hard.” However, is a life without the full spectrum of emotions or feelings available to humans, positive or negative, not a life less lived? While I desire happiness and feelings of security like any other, I also desire to feel pain, deep sadness, and loss, not because I love pain but because I feel that I should experience all emotions, not
just the ones that I like. I want to struggle to know what it feels like. While in no
way do I consider myself a masochist, physical pain does play a role in certain works.

Knuckle Performance, 2005
(fig 11) I sat in a chair in the center of an empty classroom. In front of me was a cinderblock sitting on top of a stool. To my
right there was a pile of 10,000 sheets of white copy paper. I began the performance by picking up a sheet of paper and placing
it on top of the cinderblock. I then dragged the knuckles of my right hand across the surface of the paper. The sheet was then
placed on the floor to my left and the process was repeated. After dragging my knuckles across 12 sheets of paper they began to
bleed. When this happened I started a new pile of bloody sheets next to the non-bloody pile. I repeated this process over and
over again from 9:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M. without stopping. At 5:00 P.M., I stood up and left the room. In 8 hours, I went
through approximately 6,000 sheets of paper.

Knuckle Performance is a work that was designed to allow direct, repeated
interaction (between my bare knuckles and a concrete block) for a prolonged period
of time. As opposed to seeking out a situation that would present resistance, I instead
created a surface that I chose to push against in a very deliberate way. A large part of
the work involved the conscious decision to repeatedly interact with the material in
front of me, constantly choosing to subject myself to the pain that the work called for.
It is this commitment that allows me to place myself into such extreme situations
involving physical pain, hard labor, long duration and endurance without the need for
a tangible result.

I can function within such dramatic situations by letting the work exist as its
own reward as opposed to expecting an object or image to be that reward. In
reference to this notion, I operate with the mindset that there are several different
ways that the process of work can exist based on what the intention of the making is.
I’ll outline two: means to an end, and what I call “means to a means.” The latter of
these two is work for work’s sake. This process does not rely on the need for an
object or image as a reward or outcome of the process like a means to an end might.
In fact, whereas a means to an end process of making might result in a tangible
aesthetic reward for the viewer, a “means to a means” process might result in little or
no reward for the viewer but a degree of non-object based reward for the maker.
What a “means to a means” process yields is much less physical and perhaps more
psychological or mental. Means to an end creates and functions alongside the “made”
while “means to a means” draws its benefits from the making.

*Singing Like A Blues Singer* falls under the category of functioning less as a
means to an end in that it does not result in a physical, referential object. Its
importance lies in its making, not its resulting “made.” The performance transpired
without producing any concrete residue that can be experienced as a part of the
physical world. This might be seen as troubling for some, or even as a waste of time
as no commodity is produced. However, if an artist seeks no commodity but is primarily concerned with the conceptual progression of his or her work then the work could be deemed of great intellectual value. In these cases, the inherent value of a work is its ability to further the discourse around conceptual strategies in contemporary art.
CHAPTER 3
THE MAKING, NOT THE MADE

“He embraces the idea that one can do phenomenal things instead of making objects. His work almost takes you back to the tradition of oral history and the idea that important things don’t have to exist as objects.”
- Franklin Sirmans, curator of Contemporary Art at the Menil Collection, on David Hammons

David Hammons’ *Concerto In Black And Blue* and his staging of a 3-on-3-basketball game at PS1 both posit the possibility that action can function as art. In *Concerto In Black And Blue* visitors are handed blue LED flashlights and encouraged to explore a completely dark gallery space. The work exists in innumerable ways, as every experience within the space differs depending on the group of people present at any time.

Another artist, Tino Sehgal, uses action not only as the primary but the only material for his work. Sehgal sets up situations in which the work begins and ends with the engagement of a viewer with an employed “actor.” In a 2007 interview with Sehgal, Tyler Coburn describes what transpired in his work *This objective of that object.*

“When visitors entered the upper gallery of the ICA during your 2005 exhibition, they were confronted by a group of interpreters who chanted, "The objective of this work is to become the object of a discussion", whilst walking backwards towards them. In this scenario, visitors really only had two choices: if they explicitly commented on or responded to the scenario, the interpreters would begin a verbal discourse that seemed far more like a lecture than a discussion; if they failed to react, the interpreters would wither to the ground.”
Each piece is activated when a visitor unknowingly says a particular word, or even just enters the space and carries on until its termination, as dictated by a specific set of parameters and rules set forth by the artist. Sehgal does not allow for any sort of recording of any of his work, be it video, audio or still images. His art exists in real-time, as it is being made.

The impetus behind my recent work has been an investigation into how to stretch and re-imagine the definition of what making is and can be. This exploration has yielded both physical and non-physical results and as many questions as answers. The physical manifestations of some ideas are of value to me. However, it is those works that have focused on the making as a concept (as opposed to the made as an image or object) that have really piqued my interest. Historically, these making-centric pieces have allowed for my process to be explored as the prime content of my work.
(fig. 12) The first version of this piece was performed in Philadelphia and began at the entrance of a freight elevator. To begin I wrote the date and time on the floor in chalk. Underneath that I wrote the words: “I AM A MAKER.” I then moved to the back left corner of the elevator and began to write on the floor. I wrote: “THIS IS ME MAKING.” over and over again with chalk creating rows of text working from the back to the front. Once I reached the front of the elevator I walked back to where I started and began to smudge out the chalk with my hand. I proceeded to smudge out the chalk until I again reached the front of the elevator. At this point I picked up the chalk and again wrote the date and time. Underneath that I wrote “THIS IS WHAT I’VE MADE.” This ended the performance.

(fig. 13) This piece was performed for a second time in Columbus using a wall as opposed to a floor. The higher portions of the wall were reached using a rolling ladder. Instead of the space being entirely covered in words before their erasure, the phrase “THIS IS ME MAKING” was erased during the writing process. I wrote the phrase, erased it, and then wrote it again.

*MakerMakingMade*, performed on two separate occasions to date, eliminates the idea of the artwork as an image or object (static or moving) and places the importance and focus of the piece on the act of its making. In the typical evolution from an idea to an artwork, the made acts as the tangible manifestation of the making, allowing for the making not to have been in vain, but in the interest of a future function. It’s a tangible *thing* that exists as an entity in the physical world. It is a thing that can be appropriated, analyzed, or referred to as needed. However, if the intent is for the making to be the made, then the referential manifestation of the
making cannot be anything tangible, as making only exists in the present. But the made, by definition, must exist somewhere. By no means does *MakerMakingMade* resolve the need to locate the making, but it is a strategic move in the right direction. It is a demonstration of how a work can exist solely as an idea, the making as the made.

Like *MakerMakingMade*, the tangible objects or images that my pieces sometimes result in also come from an often-intense making process. Despite the dynamic situations from which the objects are derived, the objects themselves don’t always reflect such beginnings. In fact, the emphatic nature of presence that exists in the making of the work is countered by a muteness of presentation once the work is done. This muteness has a buffering effect on the work, allowing it to remain accessible and engaging to a viewer without being intimidating. The palpable, visceral atmosphere present when I am “inside” the work is often not visible when the work is shown. However, in some cases, the object is imbued with some level of embodied knowledge or residual energy from its making that results in what I consider to be “power objects.”

While they may have different names in their respective cultures, the existence of power objects is found in many different societies throughout South America and Africa. For example, in Mali, they are referred to in the native language Bamana as “boli”.
The Malian, Bambari people believe these objects accumulate and are spiritually charged with energy from the natural and spiritual worlds. Consisting of wooden bases wrapped in cotton cloth, boliw (the pluralized form of boli) are repeatedly coated in clay mixed with substances such as animal blood, plant matter, and honey, all thought to contain "nyama," a naturally occurring life force. As layers of these substances are added over time, a boli is seen to increase in power. ix This theory can be applied to contemporary art as well, an example of which can be seen in Jay DeFeo's painting "The Rose".

"The legend of The Rose emanated organically from the union of the artist and the work; it sprang from a painting that manifested DeFeo's life force and literally radiated a purified energy back into the world." ix (Green and Levy 22-23)
Over the course of seven years DeFeo obsessively applied layer upon layer of paint to her 128 inch x 92 inch canvas until, at the point of its eventual completion, it was 11 inches thick and weighed close to a ton. Just as the Bambara of Mali increase the amount of spiritual energy within a boli through addition and layering, DeFeo compounded the power of her painting through her devotion to its perfection.

This is not to say, however, that a long duration or deep-seated spiritual or conceptual basis is necessary for something to resonate as a power object. David Ireland is perhaps most well known for his “Dumb Balls,” created by the artist tossing wet blobs of concrete back and forth between his hands until they hardened into perfect spheres.

(fig. 16) Ireland, David. Dumb Balls.

Despite Ireland’s claims that these spheres are devoid of intelligence (intentionally so, in fact), I personally regard these objects as contemporary power objects due to the humanity and personality that is embedded within each one through its accumulated interaction with its materials.

While I can hardly claim that an object or image resulting from one of my works is imbued with such a spiritual significance, some of them do capture the energy of their making within them such that viewing them can provoke the affect
present during their production. *Name Written 8,783 Times (2 of 3)* is one such example.

![Image of writing on paper](image)

*Name Written 8,783 Times (2 of 3), 2007*  
*(Fig. 1)*  
*Detail*

The visual impact of this second iteration of the *Name Written...* series is quite powerful. The repeated writing of the name in the same space resulted in a dark, graphite-stained hole that looks like it may have been burned into the paper rather than simply worn through by the pencil as it, in fact, had. Upon closer inspection, the realization is made that it was not with an instantaneous burn but a slow, calculated repetition of writing that the paper was perforated. The level of intensity present in the small site, underscores the compression of time contained within such a small space and the impact that a seemingly benign act (writing one’s name) can have once a commitment is made to follow the task through to fruition. That devotion comes to the surface of the work and gives the piece its own aura.

This same aura also has a profound presence in the clothes worn during *Same Clothes For One Year.* The clothes not only visually reflect their yearlong journey through time and space but also have a charged quality to them. Much like the narrative holding, accordion-style strip of paper that served as Carolee Schneeman’s *Interior Scroll* was informed by its role in her work, the events through which the clothes lived have given them their own unique presence in the world.
The history of the clothes works to transform the back-story created by the piece’s motivating concept and execution, allowing it to straddle the line between fact and fiction. The question is raised whether the objects really participated in such a journey or whether they have become part of an accepted lore. In this way, the clothes are also converted from everyday, commonplace commodities into objects of power. The clothes not only act as evidence of and visual reference to the work but as a corroborator of their own storied history. They exist as objects in and of themselves as well as functioning as an image of the idea that they embody.

*godpainter* is another piece that explores the notion of something existing as an image of an idea. When I look at *godpainter* I don’t read it as a document of an action. Having experienced the making of the work first-hand, the image registers in my mind and recalls that experience but I don’t necessarily read the figure in the image that now stands as the piece as being myself. It is a figure, but it could be any person. I see the whole composition as an image of an idea. *godpainter* was a big step for me in terms of experimenting with how a concept can become manifest and different modes of making could be employed to visualize a concept in many
different ways. The freedom that godpainter gave me to see concepts in less concrete
terms led me to step back and take a look at earlier performance works and analyze
them using a different perspective, eventually resulting in a series of painting based
works which are called Reassessments.

The Reassessments that have been completed as of this point are based on
three already finished performance pieces that were revisited in order to reassess their
motivating concepts. Each Reassessment was an attempt to investigate the work's
concept using an alternate mode of making. I chose painting as the primary mode of
making for these new pieces partially in an effort to re-insert the hand back into the
work. I recognize that many modes and media are capable of doing this. However,
painting, as an action, also lent itself to being manipulated in terms of how I wanted
to craft the piece's form both technically and conceptually.

In each work, an image was chosen from the performance it referenced and a
line drawing was made. This line drawing was then transferred onto plywood in
white acrylic paint and ink using a specific number of panels relative to an element
derived from the original piece. For example, Same Clothes For One Year
(Reassessment As 365 Layers Of Paint) involves a single 9 inch x 12 inch panel
containing two figures being painted with 365 layers of paint, once for every day of
the original performance, while Learning Process II: Trumpet (Reassessment In 750
Pieces) is made up of a 48 inch x 10 inch panel painted with an image from Learning
Process II: Trumpet which was then cut into 750 pieces (one piece for every minute
of the performance) and reassembled without a visual reference.
Same Clothes For One Year (Reassessment As 365 Layers Of Paint), 2007
(fig. 19). The image in this piece was derived from a photograph taken in the first minute of the performance Same Clothes For One Year. I translated the image into a simple black and white line drawing, which was transferred onto the 9 inch x 12 inch plywood panel using white spray paint and ink. Then, using a paintbrush and white acrylic paint I painted the clothes onto the figures in the drawing. Once the paint was dry I painted another layer on top of it. I repeated this process 365 times; once for every day of the performance.

Learning Process II: Trumpet (Reassessment in 750 Pieces), 2007
(fig. 20). I created a black and white line drawing from a still image taken of the performance Learning Process II: Trumpet. I transferred the drawing onto a 48 inch x 10 inch piece of plywood using white acrylic paint and ink. This painting was then taken to a woodshop and cut into 750 pieces, one piece for each minute of the performance. The vertical cuts were made using a saw with a 1/8 inch blade and the horizontal cuts were made using a saw with a 1/16 inch blade, resulting in a loss of wood during each cut. Once the painting was cut into pieces I painstakingly reassembled the painting. As no pictures were taken of the painting prior to its being cut, this was done without any visual reference. After all 750 pieces were correctly placed the panel was encased in clear resin to underscore the loss of material that was part of the process.
Not only did the application of the paint to the panels reflect the concept but also the parameters of the painting itself. These Reassessments became images of ideas and provided a new way of looking at the concept behind these works that allowed me to engage them from a different vantage point and with a different strategy.

Focusing so intently on the act of painting and its implications played a major role in the creation of This text is painted with white paint that became another image of an idea albeit a more literal manifestation of this notion. This painting consists of a plywood panel and black and white acrylic paint. The panel functions exactly as its text states. The panel was painted entirely black. White paint was painted over top of the black, excluding the area inside of the text. The text was defined by the white paint. This self-referential painting serves to cause viewers to stop and evaluate what they are seeing without dismissing it and moving on, much like Magritte’s famous painting Ceci n’est pas une pipe. (This is not a pipe.).
Magritte’s work shows

“...a carefully drawn pipe, and underneath it (handwritten in a steady, painstaking, artificial script, a script from the convent, like that found heading the notebooks of schoolboys, or on a blackboard after an object lesson), this note: ‘This is not a pipe.’”¹¹ (Foucault 15)

Both works have the potential to be scanned and passed by as each of the paintings could be initially seen as a “one-liner;” that is, quickly and easily understandable on the surface but lacking in greater conceptual content. In order for comprehension to occur, though, the viewer is forced to disengage their normative “autopilot” and attempt to actively confront the reality with which they are presented. They must realign their focus and devote their attention directly to seeing, not assuming. In This text is painted with white paint, the idea behind the piece is laid bare in the meaning of the text that constitutes it. The message in the work is the substance. It is literally an image of an idea.

This text is painted with white paint. afforded the opportunity to utilize the literality and the ambiguity of language as well as the possibility for the work’s witness to activate the work and give it agency. It became possible to question what the making was within the work and where it was located. A work introduced earlier involving the phrase “I want to write a story about a man who realizes that he is god.” pushes this notion even further. It can exist as an abstract proposed idea that can be
projected or transferred to any number of surfaces (both literal and metaphorical) over and over in many different contexts. However, its function can be abstracted even more than that. This piece, by its nature, is not only a proposed idea but also the proposal of a proposed idea. The idea of the work is one layer of removal from the concrete and the wording of the phrase is a second layer of removal. This multi-layered removal stands to further complicate the question of where the making is located within the piece and what constitutes that making. Does the making exist in the thinking up of the phrase by me? Is the making located in the writing of the physical text? Or, is all of that just preparation for the time when someone else reads the text? Is the making the interaction between the reader and the writer? What if the making is the realization that the reader may in fact be the subject of the story? This piece allows for all of these possibilities without deciding on one in particular. The answer could be all of those options, or none, or any number of solutions that I have not listed.

I value the open-ended questions and potential that this new work has brought forth. It has not only provided me with insight valuable to making new work but also has produced fertile ground in which to cultivate future explorations. Armed with these questions and strategies, I look forward to exploring the concept of making and all that it entails. I think that I have established a conceptual and literal framework for making that is rigid enough to keep me focused but open enough to propel me forward.
Were this never read,
could the claim even be made,
that it ever was?
LIST OF REFERENCES


ii Quoted by Keith Antar Mason in Keith Antar Mason: Toward a culture of Resistance. Revolutionary Worker 875 (September 29, 1996)


