Determining Process: An Analysis of Corridor #1

Thesis

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By

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Abstract

As a conceptual artist, I am constantly searching for a material form for my ideas. As a result, my portfolio appears inconsistent across materials and processes. In this thesis document I argue for a conceptual process by reading the thesis exhibition, Corridor #1, against a previous work, A Gesture Towards Zero. Articulating this approach is crucial to the progression of my practice beyond the Master of Fine Arts degree.
Dedication

Dedicated to Amanda, George, Mom, Marissa, and Gary.
Acknowledgements

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Composition of The Thesis Document

This thesis document is divided into several short sections. The first of which discusses my thesis exhibition, offering a detailed account of the thesis installation, *Corridor #1*. The next short section offers some musings about the content, form, and process involved in making the installation. I then frame the installation using a comparative analysis of a previous work, noting commonalities in my conceptual approach. A recurring footnote is one designated *Idea#*. *Idea#* is a method for proposing additional artworks to be made in response to the text. *Idea#* is like drawing an idea without ever intending to enact or build it. It is a matter of form. In summary, the footnotes are a formal method of disrupting the structure of this thesis. But they also act as a creative outlet in what is an otherwise routine document, meant to fulfill a bureaucratic agenda.
A Detailed Description Of The Installation In All Parts

_Corridor #1_ is comprised, essentially, of two elements. Polystyrene, molded into the form of beverage coolers, are stacked, alternating in opposite directions. The first cooler is stacked upside down, then a cooler facing up is stacked atop that cooler, then an upside-down cooler, then another cooler facing up…

Figure 1: Rae, Julie (Photographer). (2016). Installation detail of the southern wall of coolers.
The adjacent columns are stacked in the opposite manner, so that if one column begins with a cooler facing upside down, then the bottom cooler of the neighboring columns will be right side up. Coolers as stacked in this fashion to form two walls, facing each other.

![Image of coolers stacked to form walls](image)

Figure 2: Rae, Julie (Photographer). (2016). Installation view looking towards the southern wall of coolers.

The coolers comprising the south wall are tapered along the western portion of the gallery. The north wall is tapered on both ends, reaching its maximum height in the center. The maximum height of both walls is eleven feet, the height of the gallery’s
lighting structure, less than one foot from the ceiling. The tapering south wall reveals a
grid of news prints mounted to the gallery walls. This wall also creates an intimate
viewing space. The curvature of the walls accentuates the intimacy of the space. When
standing in the interior space, the wall wraps around the viewer simulating an embrace, a
cozy blanket, or the womb. This aspect is an important mechanism in viewing the prints
on the wall. The prints on the wall correspond to the facades of some of the coolers
stacked in the wall. A wood-burning tool was used to etch text into the facades of the
coolers. The coolers were then used to make relief prints on newsprint. A selection of
those prints are mounted to the wall and viewed from the interior space described above.
Although the prints can be seen when passing through the installation, they are meant to
be seen from inside the embrace of the coolers. I will further address instances of viewing
the prints while passing through the installation, below. However, for now I will
elaborate more on the idea of viewing the prints from within the interior space
demarcated by the coolers curving, south wall.

The prints offer a braided narrative, two distinct voices, or narratives, woven
together to form one narrative/voice. The texts are anecdotes from my experience of
growing up along the Houston Ship Channel in Pasadena, Texas, and facts concerning
that place. These two voices offer two truths about a specific place, one truth told
subjectively, and the other truth revealed through data. For instance, the former can be
read in one of the prints, “Bubba’s dad, Ron, asked if he could tell the guys at the AA
meeting that I was his son” and the latter in another, “The per capita income for my neighbor, adjacent the Houston Ship Channel, is $19,000.” Juxtaposed, these prints are in a tense dialog that suggests a correlation, or some sort of relationship. The prints tell my personal story, revealing a history of abuse, poverty, and melancholy events. As an artist and human, I feel vulnerable and exposed by the work. The curvature of the wall and the resulting interior space are meant to suggest privacy and intimacy. The interior space invokes comfort, a sense of intimacy and calls for a considered reading. Reading is a slow act; it is labor. In exchange for their labors, I offer viewers an intimate portrait of an influential personal experience. I do not wish to alienate my readers through my writing; rather, responding to Barthes’ critique of post-revolutionary writers articulated in Degree Zero, I seek to position them within my politics, directly inserted into the reality of my formative experience. My language does not rely on metaphor. However, a metaphor is revealed through the form of the installation.
When a viewer moves through the corridor of coolers, she may choose to enter or read as she passes from one gallery to the next. Viewing while passing through the installation recalls for me the condition of sitting on the banks of the Houston Ship Channel, watching containers carrying goods, foreign workers pulling ropes, a silhouette of the captain guiding the massive ship between the shores. Time is measured by the bend in the Ship Channel. I can observe this ship for a moment that equals the distance between here and the bend in the Ship Channel. I look at an old man standing on the deck smoking a cigarette. Our perspectives shift with every passing second. Opening my installation to movement is a reflection on our modern condition. New technologies allow us to read by glancing. Our attention is quantified and sold. We pass from the here to there and back.
Each time, we return to the webpage, someone profits from our cognitive labor. The viewer may take the installation in at the pace of a glance. This is her prerogative; it is more like the default viewing mode now. Corridor #1 embraces this condition while still allowing for a more intimate, considered reading.
Two Pipes

Polystyrene is a cold inorganic material. Its cellular structure can be molded to any form, deconstructed and molded into a different form. Polystyrene is a versatile, industrial material easily discarded and lasting, potentially, forever. The prints, however, are delicate. Newsprint is a cheap form of production, used for testing in printmaking, or for cleaning windows. Over time the paper yellows and becomes ever more fragile. The prints are finite while the etchings are forever.

The form of the cooler determined the length of the texts.
Precedent Within My Practice

This section addresses how I understand Corridor #1 within the context of my artistic practice, citing a specific example from my portfolio. This section discusses how I move from idea to form across a variety of materials. I will read Corridor #1 against a previous project entitled, A Gesture Towards Zero. In doing so I will develop a working model of my practice (albeit through disparate methods) that addresses material and content through form.

In Corridor #1, I have used the cooler as a tool, repurposing its first utility without negating its first utility. It is still a cooler but it bears the mark of the artist, of the human. It is unknown how long polystyrene takes to decompose due to the limitations of time; we have not lived long enough to see it decompose. There is the potential that polystyrene may never decompose so that when the human species is extinct and this paper and it’s digital copy are destroyed for all time, polystyrene plates will lay beneath the earth’s crust, waiting for some new organism to multiply, develop intelligence and attempt to make sense of the coolers. Like minerals, the coolers are inorganic, lacking carbon and living matter. In a contradictory way, the coolers are fragile and resilient. The form of the cooler (a modern form, a human form) is delicate. Too much weight and it will easily break. Due to the granular nature of the expanded polystyrene, it can be broken apart but not broken down. The smallest parts seep into the land as our planet
becomes a plastic one. *Corridor #1* was an effort to contrast inorganic materials, polystyrene, with metaphorical materials from an organic source, the human memory, specifically, my subjective memory. The choice of the cooler was deliberate, invoking social class and a relationship to consumption. I wanted to interrogate the relationship between this toxic, modern material and the human body through the memory of place. To do so, I used the scale of the cooler, which corresponds to the scale of the human hand. Indeed, the coolers have molded handles for carrying. I am seeking an acknowledgement to the body, to the human hand. Ironically, the human is often forgotten in the newly classified Anthropocene. Millions of humans in the Global South suffer from our inexhaustible consumption of the machines that are made there—the machines that propel fantasies of our relationship to “nature,” of becoming animals, of eventually becoming machines. The utopia of the Western Anthropocene survives only due to a brutality enacted upon the Global South. My practice references the body as an act of remembering the human in this epoch of forgotten humans.

In *A Gesture Towards Zero*, I continued to pursue the remembrance of the human condition. I came across a set of tourist books published by a corporate publisher in the late 1970s and early 1980s. They were photo books for US citizens, firmly settled in the suburbs, looking for experiences abroad. I approached the books as an atlas, as a view of the world. A viewpoint placed upon the world and absorbed via economic exchange, tourism. The visual representation was not of diagrams or lines demarcating borders but
of images demarcating expectations for people and places, demarcating an economic other. The people and landscapes were there to be metaphorically consumed via economic exchange. The tourist books present a fantasy of sandy white beaches, ruins of antiquity, rolling green hills, mountain passes covered in snow, Mexicans dancing in the street, Greeks working fishing nets, and busty German women delivering giant glasses of frosty beer. They were Nanook reincarnate 50 years on. I wanted to make a gesture upon these books that would alter the narrative and propose a new atlas, not one of experience via economic exchange but one about the human condition, the human process of seeing. I erased the content of the image except for the sky, a basic element of human experience. We look, bow and kneel to the sky to give thanks, ask for forgiveness, place our dreams. The sky is the source of our myths, where our mystical beings originate and dwell. The sky is a place of mobility and free movement: actual movement, as in the case of migratory birds or imagined movement like the dreams of humans before the Wright Brothers or myself as a poor child dreaming of fleeing home. The sky is a dynamic and complex ecology for projecting individual dreams and collective myths. Yet, these books represent a very United States-centric view of the world which I, and likely anyone my age heard repeatedly growing up: we can go to these places; we do not go to those places. In this series of books I have not found one on Africa (the first AIDS epidemic was beginning in the 1970s), Russia (the cold war was still ongoing), Cuba, Chile (where the United States installed dictator Pinochet), or El Salvador (where the
United States was also intervening), etc. The books represent a very specific atlas, a very specific geographical and cultural representation of the world that glosses over brazen and grotesque political conflict instigated by the policies of the United States. In remaking the book, I wanted to turn it into an atlas of the world that extends beyond borders and allows space for the human condition. The new atlas is anti-border.
Conclusion in Three Sentences

My process seeks to give form to my ideas through materials.

I determine a response to the conditions of a material through form.

The marriage of concept, materials, and form is the ultimate goal of my process.
References

