

OBJECT TO IMAGE: AN ARTIST'S EVOLUTION FROM
MATERIAL-BASED SCULPTURES TO DRAWINGS WITH TEXT

by

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Foreword

My sincere gratitude goes out to the University of Georgia faculty, staff and students who have challenged, guided, and enlightened me during my graduate studies. I would like to extend a special thank you to Larry Millard for being an invaluable resource to me as I navigated the UGA and Athens communities; to Imi Hwangbo, for being a devoted mentor and unconditional advocate of my creative pursuits; to Steve Arnold, for his friendship, generosity, and technical expertise; to Mark Callahan, for his wisdom regarding professional and career matters; to Martijn VanWagtendonk, for modeling excellence in teaching; and to my friends and family, whose love and encouragement have sustained me through all my endeavors.

Introduction

While a Studio Art major at Davidson College, I made sculptures that adhered to a set of principles strongly influenced by the work of Tara Donovan and Andy Goldsworthy. My materials were found objects with simple forms, such as hair combs, pencils, balloons and buttons. These objects were manipulated in ways that distanced them from any obvious cultural connotations. After hundreds or thousands of a found object were manipulated in a like manner, the multiples were amassed into a form that emphasized the relationship between the parts and the whole.

Entering the University of Georgia's Graduate Sculpture Program, I challenged myself to find ways to transform and combine materials outside of making multiples that were then "knitted" together. Over the last three years, I have learned to make artworks in which a variety of materials serve an idea, versus one material being the cause and effect of an idea. My research led me to work in a variety of media, including installation, performance, video and drawing. The following pages chronicle my journey.

Installation

The first artwork I made at UGA was an installation titled *Philosopher's Room*. A pole with a ringed end hung from the ceiling of the South Thomas Street Gallery. The ring supported a horizontal glass bottle. On the floor below, an open-sided box contained a miniature version of the pole and bottle and their reflection in a one-way mirror. This

installation was significant not only because of its primacy, but also because it prompted a question that I spent the next three years exploring. In *Philosopher's Room*, there were three levels of understanding. The life-size pole and bottle were visible to viewers from anywhere within the gallery. The life-size and miniature versions could be seen from a few locations. Only one vantage point gave a clear view of the life-size, miniature, and reflected versions. I pursued this idea of multiple truths in subsequent works. However, whereas in *Philosopher's Room* one perspective was privileged, I challenged myself to create an artwork in which several points of view were equally valid.

Performance Art

Two personal matters compelled me to try performance art. While attending Davidson College, a friend's passion for music and theater instilled in me the desire to incorporate these art forms into my work. Performance art became more than a passing fantasy when my hand was injured during the summer of 2009. Coordinating staged events presented a practical solution to creating art while my hand healed.

I approached performance as a sculptor. I decided that the performers would never speak, and that their movements would be limited to repeating a single action, either operating a tool or interacting with an object. Restricting the freedom of movement and silencing the voices of the performers reduced them to "living material." The only markers of identity were visual, including gender, costume, and the action being performed. This method of

communicating information anchored the performance in the realm of visual art, outside of theater.

The idea of the performer interacting with an object or tool stemmed from a sculpture I made at Davidson College. The sculpture, titled *Push*, was a giant compass in which a graphite point attached to a bronze and steel arm rotated around a fixed, steel base. My plan was to draw with the sculpture on a large piece of paper; however, the mechanism ended up being too heavy for me to move on my own. Although the performance failed, the idea of making man-powered sculpture continued to intrigue me. I came to understand the relationship between the performer and the object as bilateral: the performer made the object move, and in turn, the moving object defined the performer's character. The object and performer gave each other meaning.

My first performance, *Echoes*, used an abandoned poultry genetics lab to inform the content of the work. Staged between two empty chicken coops, a male performer used a cast-iron paper cutter to methodically chop squares off a roll of single-square graph paper, which spooled out of a box eighty feet away. This performance commented on the inhumane production, confinement, and slaughter of chickens. Ultimately, I realized that *Echoes'* message of animal cruelty was isolating to many viewers, and that if I truly wanted to make a difference in chicken's lives, I should quit art and become an activist. My performances needed to grow beyond making political statements.

Graveside Performance, another site-specific piece, took as its subject matter the larger theme of death from *Echoes*. I staged a funeral beside a grave, but instead of human mourners, a crowd of pedestals with buckets as heads was in attendance. During the ceremony, water drained from two holes in each bucket, making the buckets appear to cry. The irony of the emoting buckets "coming to life" during a ceremony about death did not affect viewers as I had anticipated. The performance, envisioned as a celebration of emotions, was perceived as reducing mourners to objects that cry. I believe the sacredness of the gravesite made viewers particularly sensitive to the imagery.

Looking for more neutral territory to explore in terms of content and site, I turned my focus inward and staged a private performance at an indoor labyrinth. For *Purge*, I walked a labyrinth while pushing a "weeping" bucket, which represented my grief. When I reached the labyrinth's center, I abandoned the bucket and retraced my path unencumbered. The performance was about letting go, literally and figuratively. Afterwards, I was inspired to examine the conflicts from which my sorrows had originated. Thus, I investigated personal grievances in my next three performances.

With this new direction in my content, I was able to evolve beyond site-specific performances and develop performances for the gallery, which gave me more flexibility as an exhibiting artist. I no longer relied on place to direct the content of the art. *Conveyor* was staged in a dark room. Two female performers operated a conveyor belt that popped breast-like balloons, symbolizing the self-destructive behaviors of women. The action took place behind a large, backlit screen, which served two purposes. First, it

reduced the performers to silhouettes, thereby suggesting the superficial way in which the female body is portrayed. Second, the screen defined the limits of the performance, making it more object-like. Subsequent performances would become increasingly sculptural.

In *Focus*, several components from past performances were re-envisioned to create an image with a strong physical presence. Two larger-than-life wooden boxes transcended props and framed the scene as sculpture. Housed in the smaller of the two boxes, a female performer improvised on the violin. Whereas the composed music in *Graveside Performance* captured the tension between life and death, the improvised music in *Focus* demonstrated a young woman's autonomy. Light, which had illuminated the screen in *Conveyor*, also played a new role. A stage light in the larger box illuminated a mask of the performer's face that was affixed to the smaller box. Representing the public eye, the stage light became a main character in a young woman's struggle to balance public and private agendas.

A girl's independence was also threatened in *Deep Seat*. For the duration of the performance, two female performers sat motionless, the older one atop a stool made of brooms. It was implied that the women were mother and daughter and that the mother, twine in hand, was frozen in the act of tying the daughter's hair to match the brooms. The still image suggested a mother literally and figuratively grooming the daughter to assume domestic responsibilities within the familial structure. By eliminating the action in *Deep Seat*, it became a "living sculpture," or tableau. Whereas my previous performances

represented ongoing narratives, *Deep Seat* was a live event that portrayed a moment suspended in time. The tension between transience and permanence heightened the conflict between past tradition and future possibilities.

Deep Seat was my last performance. Allowing viewers to experience the events after they occurred became logistically problematic. Searching for answers, I attended the exhibition *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present* in May 2010 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. There, I saw photographs of Abramović's past performances, which had only a fraction of the power of her live performances taking place in the museum. If Abramović, the “Grandmother of Performance Art,” had not figured out how to properly document her performances, I doubted that I could.

Video

During Fall 2010, I began considering video art as an alternative to live performance. For my first video, I filmed myself repeatedly writing and erasing the word “stone,” changing one letter at a time until the word spelled “water.” The first and last words were inspired by the Old Testament story of Moses drawing water from a rock. Unlike my performances, in which individuals battled their impulses or desires, the video documented the metamorphosis of one entity into another, defying the laws of nature while following a pattern of language. The transformation was logical and illogical, ordered and random, natural and unnatural.

Chaos and *Window* continued the idea of metamorphosis. In both videos, one scene faded into another, while a performer straddled both worlds. In *Chaos*, a woman wearing high heels paced in a field that became a hallway. In *Window*, a silhouetted female figure laid in a window that became a field. The performers' true locations remain ambiguous. Whereas in my performances people assumed the identity of the objects with which they interacted, in these videos, human identity was informed by place. The women were associated with the natural world and the domestic realm. The implied conflict was of women being trapped in the home and longing for escape.

Drawings

At the same time I was creating these videos, I began reading postmodern literature, including Jenny Bouilly's The Body: An Essay. I was inspired by how Bouilly and the other authors considered the visual impact of the text on the page. Creating a work of visual art in which image and text were equal seemed like a daunting task, but the power of the books I read led me to believe that the results might be worth the struggle.

My solution was to treat words as a material by manipulating their spelling, orientation, font and context. In my first drawing, *Knife*, the title appeared upside-down and backwards. Reoriented on the page, the word became an object directed towards a pair of feminine hands that both reached for and restrained themselves from the potential weapon. Similar to my performances, the drawing depicted a human's almost-interaction with an almost-object.

Circumstance harkened back to the first video I had made. Centered within an equilateral triangle was a list of handwritten words that began with "loss" and changed one letter at a time. Unlike the list in the video, this list in the drawing had two possible endings: "safe" and "rape." The viewer had to decide whether to protect or hurt the protagonist. The resulting image was moralistic, since clearly, there was only one right answer.

In *Rope*, viewers were provided with the first and last words to a narrative they had to imagine. Near the top of the drawing, a white string glued to the paper formed the word "rope." Near the bottom of the drawing, "rape" was written in pencil in the same font. Between the two words was a series of concentric circles, whose shape was both vaginal and suggestive of a coiled rope. Thus the innocent "rope" became associated with a sexual crime.

Knife, *Circumstance* and *Rope* suggested violent narratives that implicated viewers. In subsequent drawings, I preserved viewer involvement but avoided an ethical dilemma in favor of psychological tension. I began dissecting words so that the remaining letters could spell two or more words with opposite definitions. In *Under Construction*, "heav" could be the beginning of heaven, heavy, or heave. In *Tomorrow*, "FUT__E" could spell future or futile. I also played with complete words that have multiple meanings. In *LIE*, "lie" could suggest lying in bed, telling a lie, or both. Tension arises from letters that are simultaneously meaningful and meaningless, solid and empty, physical and abstract.

Conclusion

My sculptural background is present in the recent drawings. Already, the graphic representation of the words takes on a three-dimensional quality, such as the beam-like letters in *Under Construction*. In *Relief* and *Tomorrow*, letters are embossed and engraved, respectively. In *LIE*, the letters appear out of plaster-hardened fabric. *LIE* and *Tomorrow* are also more sculptural in terms of scale. Despite these three-dimensional qualities, the drawings still read as two-dimensional images. My next challenge will be to make a sculpture with words that may be activated when viewed from multiple perspectives, even when text lends itself best to a frontal vantage point. I believe the marriage of object and words could be a fruitful one, and I am excited to explore this possibility.

Appendix: Guiding Principles

I. Concept

Developing a work of art is like writing a paper. The artist begins with a thesis, or question. Then the supporting evidence is presented. Any visual information that has not been considered by the artist is a "non-choice" and potentially weakens his or her argument. It is important for the artist to build a solid case without providing an answer to the question. The artist should allow viewers the freedom to make their own decisions.

II. Conflict

A good work of art must have conflict. Just like in a movie, if there's no drama, the plot will be boring, and the story will fall flat.

III. Relativity

Sometimes a concept requires realistic imagery. Other times, the imagery may remain more abstract, getting at the essence of a person or thing. I like how set designer Simon McBurney explains the power of relativity:

In "Mnemonic" we had to represent a 5000-year-old corpse that emerges brown and wrinkled out of a glacier in 1992. It became clear to us that any literal representation would be more than faintly ludicrous. The words alone that described his appearance were stronger than any banal prop. But something had to stand in for his presence. So we used a chair. But the chair was more evocative if broken. So we used a broken chair. But then we felt it would be marvelous if it could move in some way. And so it was transformed by a puppet maker into a "chair/man"—a chair that also evoked the space and limbs of the iceman when operated like a Bunraku puppet.