

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: DEDICATED SWITCH-HITTING, RISKING SAFETY, EMBODIED TRANSCENDANCE AND OTHER APPARENT CONTRADICTIONS.

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My work reflects a long-standing attraction to the material and experiential imperfections that emerge through a collision of physical and cultural reality. My use of biological materials such as feathers in tandem with rigid systems exaggerates this contrast. It suggests the divide between a linguistic, conceptual space and an inherently organic and unpredictable physical space. While experiencing the work, the viewer is enveloped in a responsive environment of sound and that reveals the constantly shifting nature of their personal, physical experience of the environment. While embarking on what seems at first glance a practice that fits in with modernist ideals of truth and the progress of human knowledge, I do not seek to reinforce these ideals. Rather, I use humor to subvert modernist hierarchies of aesthetic value. The work borrows from a diverse range of sources such as Greek mythology, contemporary advertising, camp, cinema, art history, and representations of technological progress.

DEDICATED SWITCH-HITTING, RISKING SAFETY, EMBODIED
TRANSCENDANCE AND OTHER APPARENT CONTRADICTIONS.

By

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Introduction

What follows is what has become for me, a somewhat bewildered attempt to unravel some of the connections between works of art. They seem at times in opposition to each other, at others the product of distinctly different artistic identities, and most of the time just plain ridiculous. What does remain consistent in my work is a rejection of the easy answer, an interest in the hidden, the invisible, and the seemingly contradictory.

For the sake of clarity, I have provided an analysis of each signifier that emerges upon an experience of the physical work. The entries for each concept shed light on the multiple meanings of their corresponding, albeit inherently limited signifiers. The separation of each term for analysis should not be viewed as a totalizing gesture or an attempt to sever these signifiers from the text as a whole. Rather it can be viewed as an attempt to underscore the experiential nature of their existence. These concepts are inextricably linked to a physical environment via the "work." Each entry addresses how the signifier in question manifests in the physical object and whether this manifestation resides in the viewer experience, my own experience, or some combination of both. Within this space they function as descriptors and detractors, as if to leave any fractionally true meaning in the constantly shifting interstices of my idiomatic vocabulary and its material manifestation.

My practice to date has always traversed the boundaries of the conceptual/linguistic world and the physical world. I have had a long-standing attraction to the material

imperfections that emerge through a collision of these two modes of experiencing reality. My use of biological materials such as feathers, in tandem with rigid systems exaggerates this contrast, suggesting the divide between a linguistic, conceptual space and an inherently organic and unpredictable physical space. While experiencing the work, the viewer is enveloped in a responsive environment of sound that reveals the constantly shifting nature of their personal, physical experience of the environment.

While embarking on what seems at first glance a practice that fits in with modernist ideals of truth and the progress of human knowledge, I do not seek to reinforce these ideals. Rather, I use humor to subvert modernist hierarchies of aesthetic value. The work borrows from a diverse range of sources such as Greek drama, contemporary advertising, camp, cinema, art history, and representations of technological progress.

Feathers

Quite literally, feathers are epidermal outgrowths that occur exclusively in birds.

Biologically, they insulate from heat and cold, and are instrumental in achieving and controlling flight.

Feathers also have a history of ceremonial uses in various traditions, where they are generally associated with ascension or growth. In shamanism, feathers are linked with the ascent into heaven, where they are imbued with the power of second sight and divination. In this case, they are used to open a conduit between two worlds, one profane and the other sacred. In Mayan and Aztec cultures, feathers are associated

with the natural growth of plant life, and thus have a similar symbolic function as hair, grass and rain.

It is difficult to view the work with out recalling the myth of Icarus, who fell back to earth when his waxen wings melted from the heat of the sun.

The work specifically employs ostrich feathers. Starting in the 18th century, they have been used primarily for ornamental purposes. In contemporary society, they are most often seen employed for purposes of erotica or in campy references to their former symbolic power. (See Figure 1)



Figure 1 – This image shows a Barbie doll modeled after the pop star Cher in her “vegas” period.

I have previously employed feathers in my work in order to explore their dual role as an object of symbolic power and an object of frivolity and artifice. In my video work entitled “Making Waves” (See Figure 2), the feathers function first as concealment through the closed gesture of my body. With my body concealed, the viewer is left to notice the hypnotic quality of their gentle undulations in slow motion video to a soundtrack of lapping waves. Subsequently my arms swing open, the water crashes in, the video shifts to real time, and various birds squawk angrily at my revealed breasts.



Figure 2 a,b – “Making Waves” video stills

In a sculptural work dated 2007, I mechanically animated a feather boa with a wire mesh substructure. Points attached to its mechanical substructure, which caused it to

flit about, pulled up the boa. The points were pulled up in a 4/4 beat, beckoning the viewer visually. The noise provided by the motors and chain drive provided a tortuous counterpoint to the feathers gentle flipping motion.



Figure 3

In my current work (See Figure 3), the feathers are festooned around the bottom of 8 structural arms. Their orientation on the structural arms reference their various biological functions (See Figures 4 and 5). Their attachment to the vertically reaching arms suggests flight (See Figure 4), as does the suspension of the structure. The feathers are also present in the center of the structure (See Figure 5). In this deployment, their presence both conceals and functions as an under covering for the interior of the structure.



Figure 4



Figure 5

The specific choice of the white ostrich feathers in all of my work involving feathers subverts their former symbolic power through references to camp, erotica and feminine interiority.

Satellite Dish

The work's structural components are modeled after the concave parabolic curve of a satellite dish. The substructure has been fabricated from aircraft grade aluminum.

Although it could potentially function if surfaced with a suitable material, its scale greatly limits its practical use. Most contemporary satellite receivers are less than 2 feet in diameter. Dishes on the scale of the structure present in the work, which reached the heyday of their utility in the 1960's and 70's are finding their way to scrap heaps with steadily increasing frequency. According to Moore's Law, which applies specifically to integrated circuits, the rate with which processor speed doubles increases exponentially with each iteration. Kurzweil's Law extends this cycle to technological innovations in general. Thus, it should come as no surprise that technological detritus pervades our landscape, whether in the form of space trash, decommissioned governmental research facilities, or the disposable nature of media culture.

The satellite dish is a ubiquitous symbol of modern technological progress. Our entire media culture and most of our knowledge of outer space owes its existence to the development and deployment of satellite communication technology. The use of satellites to establish communication with the ether, and their ability to reach out into space by receiving emissions from far away phenomena recalls the use of feathers in rituals to communicate with supernatural powers. Through the progress of

technology, society has transferred our collective desires from the spiritual to technologically enabled knowledge.

The dish is also, of course, a vessel form.

Surveillance Cameras

Another ubiquitous technological development has been the integration of surveillance technology into our daily lives. This technological fact of life has also been brought into the cultural mainstream through so-called “reality TV” and webcams. Seldom do we have any physical or visual cues to tell us that we are being watched or observed. We could be present in multiple forms, and our knowledge of that presence is not required for others to have knowledge of it. As surveillance of the static environment increases, other’s knowledge of our movements within certain spaces increases. For now, most data gathered on bodies in public spaces is anonymous. With the increase in handheld devices that travel with the body such as cell phones and PDA’s, that data is becoming increasingly less anonymous.

In the work, I use surveillance cameras to track the viewer’s movements within the installation space. The viewer’s movements are then translated into sets of coordinates that control the frequency and amplitude of four sound channels. In essence, I have created an interface that reacts to changes in physical position within the space like a Theremin.

Theremin

Invented by Leon Theremin, the Theremin has long been a staple of science fiction b-movies. Ironically, it has also been used in a self-serious way by the avant-garde music scene rather consistently. It's presently manifesting in the New Music scene as Circuit Bending. Through software such as processing and Max/MSP/Jitter, it's now being extended into software patches such as the one that I have developed. Its previous use was limited to physical hardware manipulation with one's limbs, but with flexibility of input enabled by software simulation of the bodily interaction. The body's presence is no longer required for the user to experience physical feedback. In the work, the viewer must make significant changes in position to experience fluid feedback. The unexpected largesse of the physical interactivity creates a playful atmosphere that encourages the viewer to assume an active role without didactically presuming an outcome. In other words, the viewer is not enabled to meaningfully change the structure of the environment. Rather, it should catalyze the viewer's awareness of the limitations of the interaction's structure. This peculiarly modernist ideal is also a type of artifice, part of the revelatory quality of camp.

Historically, the use of the Theremin in the Ed Wood movies, "Mars Attacks!" and other camp classics suggests the relationship between camp and science fiction. It demonstrates the limitations of its own instrumentality by reflecting the simplicity of its physical interaction. With a limited number of variables for interaction, the work eventually resides in the realm of the static when the subject is made aware of the possibilities for that interaction. Although the interaction is transparent, the conflicting cultural signifiers contribute overall to a hopeful aura of mystery.

Conclusion

Although fundamentally elegiac in its nature, the work is not intended to shrug off the questions it raises. Rather, my goal is to open up a space that rides on the edge of two opposites, and playfully pokes fun at our collective tendency to view things in discrete and oppositional categories. By immersing the viewer in a kinesthetic experience that is sensually and culturally confused, I hope to have the work open up a space for creative thought that is not completely of my own making. By leaving the work open to various contextual and cultural interpretations, it leaves space for the viewer to reflect on how technology, material, and media culture affect their own lives.

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