

THE THEORETICAL BASIS OF AN INTERMEDIAL ART PRACTICE:
AN ARTIST'S STATEMENT

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

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To Ryan

To take a photograph is to hold one's breath when all faculties converge in a face of fleeing reality. It is at that moment that mastering an image becomes a great physical and intellectual joy.

To take a photograph means to recognize – simultaneously and within a fraction of a second– both the fact itself and the rigorous organisation of visually perceived forms that give it meaning.

It is putting one's head, one's eye, and one's heart on the same axis.

Henri Cartier-Bresson

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GROUNDWORK

Art as responsibility

The world is elegantly complex, intricately layered, and webbed with structures wildly beyond our comprehension. Yet as sentient beings, we have the ability and the responsibility to seek meaning; to give shape to this existence. Endowed with empathy, we are compelled to listen and to feel. Possessing language and visual culture, we have the ability and responsibility to speak; to give form to our thoughts.¹

Artwork is a product not only of the artist's hand, but also of the culture in which it is produced. Artwork that has lasting impact, paradoxically, is usually keyed directly to the specific cultural milieu in which it is created. The human condition, it would seem, is more permanent than our brief and limited window of perspective. Today, we live in a highly politicized world. This may portend human cultural evolution or it may portend dissolution and decay. In either case, artwork must respond to this aspect of our existence if it wants to have long-term relevance. Yet at the same time, artwork that has a political basis can easily become polemical, single-dimensional, and thereby short-lived. Artwork that does not reflect the multiple dimensionality of the world in which we live – artwork, in other words, that allows only one point of view – quickly loses its relevance. The best artwork then, serves as witness, either directly or indirectly, to the complex, interconnected and multi-dimensional condition of its time. It approaches the universal through a close examination of the specific. It frames the condition. It does not provide answers but rather raises questions.

A brief history of new media

Not only does artwork need to respond to the socio-cultural milieu of which it is a part, but it also must take into account contemporary media and the effects these have on our perception of reality. As Marshall McLuhan asserts, the medium itself is loaded with meaning.

The social and cultural effects of new media both positive and negative, are extensive and irrevocable, “it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action.”² Our current worldview has been shaped in scale and form by the emergence of several new media.

Photography

Since the dawn of human history, painting and sculpture as art forms have formed the foundation of our visual culture. In the mid-19th century, a new tool was added to the process of image creation, photography.³ The image of reality heretofore created by the placement of pigment onto a substrate could now be represented by the chemical reaction of silver compounds with light. By the late 19th century, photography gained the simulated representation of motion. When presented with photographic images at a rate that exceeds the human physiological “persistence of vision,” the human mind creates the continuous (analog) perception of motion from a series of discreet (digital) images.⁴

Videotape

The photograph, even though it is the result of a chemical process, retains its material status. The photographic print has a presence as an [art] object in the physical world. The discreet images that make up a motion picture, although typically enlarged and projected, can each be viewed as independent physical images. In the early 1950’s, however, videotape began the process of dematerializing the photograph.⁵ The photographic image, the result of a reaction between light and chemicals, is stored upon a physical substrate. With videotape, the image does not exist as a physical entity. Rather, the image is encoded as impulses on a magnetically sensitive tape. There is no way to view these images without the intervention of a machine that can decode these magnetic impulses. The introduction of encoding/decoding machinery into the process of image creation creates our modern definition of the term mediation.

Digital art

The computer completed the dematerialization process begun by videotape. An image no longer needs any physicality at all, whether emulsion on paper, or magnetic pulses on tape. Instead, the image is defined as an ordered series of logical true/false states, represented symbolically by the binary numbers 0 and 1. There is no conceptual limit to the medium on which this sequence must be stored. It can be stored as holes punched in a paper tape or as the directional spin axes of polarized molecules. Thus, two-dimensional imagery can and does now exist in a world parallel and distinct from the world of physicality. With the pace of technological change increasing by Moore's Law⁶, three-dimensional objects will soon follow in this same path of dematerialization. The difference between then and now is only a matter of the degree of resolution. As technology improves – which is an overarching narrative of our existence as a species – the mediation and dematerialization of objects will become more refined. Technology will provide ways to incorporate the full range of human sensory experience. And with history as a guide, this will resolve someplace beyond the capability of human perception. When the simulation exceeds the original, which is real?

Cyberspace

In 1990 hyper-text markup language, the language of the web was developed and in 1993 NSCA released its Mosaic browser for popular computing platforms.⁷ By 1994, with the first International World Wide Web conference held at CERN, the Web as we know it was firmly established.⁸ The hyperlink and the URL give us the ability to access knowledge from around the world in a way analogous to the working of our minds. It has, quite literally, connected our individual brains into a single expanded intellect of global scale. This constitutes both a quantitative and qualitative paradigm shift in our way of being – it is arguably the single most fundamental change of our contemporary era. For an artist to ignore this is foolish.

Conceptual art

Parallel to the development of technology that dematerialized imagery, Marcel Duchamp opened the door to expanding the work of art into the realm of thought. He blasted apart the idea that meaning was contained within the art object itself. Others followed his lead into this expanded field, each one chipping further away on the idea of art being contained in a physical form. The physical object made room for the concept. The concept did away with the need for a physical representation of itself. The locus of art meaning shifted away from the object, toward the mind of the viewer. There was no longer any need for a physical object to serve as a stand in for the concept. The physical object became an anachronism.

The artist is dead. Long live the artist.

Roland Barthes did not kill the artist, he just pointed out what was obvious to anyone who looked. If the meaning of art is not contained in the object, but in the mind of the viewer, then the viewer creates the art [is the artist]. The artist, in its previous definition – a definition connoting a patriarchal ‘author of meaning,’ with the etymologically related terms authority and authenticity – is dead. While this would appear self-evident, it leaves those of us who desire to be artists in a bit of a quandary. It forces upon us the questions so eloquently addressed (but not answered) by the work of Bruce Naumann: “What is an artist; What does an artist do; What is it that makes it art?” A simple answer to this question is that the artist frames questions. Defining precisely what is meant by this is not simple.

The work of the artist in the age of electronic reproduction

Now that the physical object of art is a relic; now that the author [artist] is dead; now that Postmodernism has informed us that there is no universal Truth, Beauty, or Morality; now that we can be connected across the globe in real-time, visit the Louvre, look at Times Square through a web cam, join a discussion group with participants scattered to the far reaches of the

earth, view and interact with poetry, become a disassociated consciousness floating through the cyberspace, send avatars into simulated universes, what is left for the artist to do?

Today, we live in a world of technological miracles, yet this does not diminish, nor render unimportant, the experience of sitting across from another person in a specific place and time, engaged in discussion, or not; simply experiencing a shared moment. And there is a resounding depth to this moment, the subtle interplay of environment and presence. This is the same “now-ness” that performance artists tap into, that Henri Cartier-Bresson was able to capture in his photographic imagery, that the artist working in physical media can render. There is a reason that we stubbornly hold on to the physical art object and the process of its creation. The physical object has an aura; it is direct, and honest; it is tangible; it is sensual; it holds out for us the possibility of a transcendental aesthetic experience.⁹

The work of the artist in this age is as it has always been, to give form to thought. The only change is that today this form need not be material. Marshall McLuhan, in an interview with Dick Cavett in 1970, stated that “ecology was created by the first image of the earth from space.”¹⁰ McLuhan’s essential point is that as we expand our field of vision, we expand the ways in which we are able to think about our world. By approaching the new media with openness, denying neither its flaws nor its power, we expand our field of vision on our key endeavor as artists – the creation of visual culture. Expanding our field of vision, in turn, expands our thoughts, while expanding our thoughts expands our art.

Intermedia art

Intermedia art is a discipline. It is neither an art form, nor a medium; it is a way of thought. The focus of Intermedia is research and exploration. It stresses the concept as the generator. In other words, the physical follows the conceptual and takes whatever form, uses whatever media is most effective in embodying the concept. In some cases the best form might be no form. The gamut of Intermedia art is as broad as the artists that practice it. In my version of

Intermedia art, concept and form are of equal importance. The concept is the generator but form delivers the concept. Viewed this way, concept and form are inseparable – they are simply two parts of a whole. It is impossible to assert that one has dominance. Yet it is a mistake to think that form itself is necessarily material.

Intuitively, material and immaterial art, like two parallel railroad tracks appear to vanish in the distance as separate entities, never to cross. Yet by the nature of its existence, this dichotomy provides a conceptual universe that is extremely rich for exploration. The interdisciplinary nature of Intermedia art, its impetus to research and explore the liminal – the threshold between apparently dichotomous states – makes it an ideal discipline for this exploration.¹¹ The new media, in fact, allow the possibility of breaking down this barrier between material and immaterial. Whereas Alan Kaprow questioned and blurred the boundaries between art and life, showing that this boundary was arbitrary and artificial, the new media, using an intermedial approach, allow us to question and blur the boundary of material and immaterial in the same way. They illuminate the arbitrary and artificial nature of this boundary.

My Intermedia

The best artwork is engaging and immersive. It is stimulating not only sensually, but also intellectually. Based on a solid concept, and in a form that supports this concept, it also needs to be aware of each aspect of the the viewer’s experience of the artwork. As an Intermedia artist, I would hesitate to define what I do in terms of any traditional art media, painting, sculpture or even video. Yet within the broad-ranging field of Intermedia, I could easily identify myself as an installation artist. Installation art allows the artist to create and control not only the totality of a three dimensional environment – space | negative space, light | shadow, sound | silence – but also the fourth dimension, which consists of the viewer’s movement through space over time.

My interest in installation art and the form that it takes grows out of disparate influences. I am fascinated by the installations of the “Light and Space” artists James Turrell and Robert

Irwin. I have a deep respect for the concepts of the Minimalist artists Donald Judd and Richard Serra. I am awed by the content-rich work of installation artists such as Ann Hamilton and Pepón Osario, by the explorations of human/technology relationships in the work of Nam June Paik, by the images of Sally Mann and Henri Cartier-Bresson, and also by the work of Kiki Smith. Yet if I had to identify one artist as the ancestor to my lineage of thought it would be Bruce Nauman.¹²

Nauman's working method is all about exploration. Although his work is conceptual by nature, Nauman 'thinks with his hands.' and making the piece is part of his conceptual approach. He gives his conceptual ideas physical form and tries them on to see if they fit. There is a bilateral give and take between the concept and the form. There are multiple levels of meaning encompassed in even the simplest of Nauman's works and they require an active willingness on the part of the viewer to search them out. Nauman's work draws you in by its surface simplicity. However, with an investment of time and thought, an alternate and deeper interpretation reveals itself. The resolution of this alternate meaning leads to still other interpretations and soon the simple interpretation that was provided at first glance mushrooms into deeper and broader meanings. Jane Livingston expresses this phenomenon succinctly when she states that Nauman's works have "the peculiar attribute of being able to hide their own primary meaning through, not obliquity nor abstruseness, but their very straightforwardness and their paradoxical conceptual transparency."¹³ I feel a kinship with Nauman's working method: his bilateral approach, the embedded levels of meaning in the work. But I tend to produce artwork that is more overtly political.

WORK AS RESEARCH

This thesis up to now, has been concerned with the theoretical basis of my approach to art. In this last section I would like to turn attention to the art itself by presenting a few selected works, mostly installation art, that have grown out of this theoretical underpinning.

There is a anecdote among students of architecture that the architect, Le Corbusier, after laying out “The Modulor,” his intricate proportioning system based upon the human body and the Golden Section, concluded his work by saying, “I reserve the right to change my mind.” And in his later work he did. More important than any theoretical underpinning is the urge to authenticity. This urge requires constant reconsideration and revision of the underlying theoretical basis. However, since the term ‘authenticity’ is rather ambiguous, let me provide a metaphor. I love sitting by the ocean. The ocean-washed pebbles are like prayer beads in my hand, their smooth surfaces polished by untold eons of existence. The smell of salt and seaweed is heavy enough to taste. The sun is warm on my skin but the breeze cool. The waves create an infinite variation of sound within their unchanging pattern, as soothing as breath. This experience is authentic.

The Heart Project-Part 1



Figure 1. Video stills from The Heart Project-Part 1

A single-channel video project, the Heart Project - Part 1 was conceptually wrapped around a birth-life-death narrative and informed by the death of my father-in-law at age 65 from a heart attack. The chanted phrase, “the human heart is fragile, imperfect, and destined to fail” overlays the video image of a train passing over the viewer and the screeching of the train’s

wheels. The advent of my father-in-law's death, the derailment of his future plans, his unfulfilled potential, played a large role in my decision to seek an MFA.

The Heart Project- Part 2



Figure 2. Installation view, detail, and video still from The Heart Project-Part 2

This project approached the same subject matter from a slightly different perspective. It was presented as an installation with video. The installation consists of 3 anthropomorphic stands each of which holds video “heads.” The “heart” of these anthropomorphic forms is a VCR that provides the image to the video monitor. The video shown on each of the monitors was a closeup of a droplet of water forming and dropping off the end of a piece of wire. Taped in real-time, this process created a 5 minute looped video. The video soundtrack is a heartbeat that abruptly stops when the droplet falls. Each of the videos is played at a slightly different speed causing the images and the heartbeats to phase in and out of synchronization. Lit backdrops were created by oiled cloth draped over a rebar frame.

Not a Specific Object

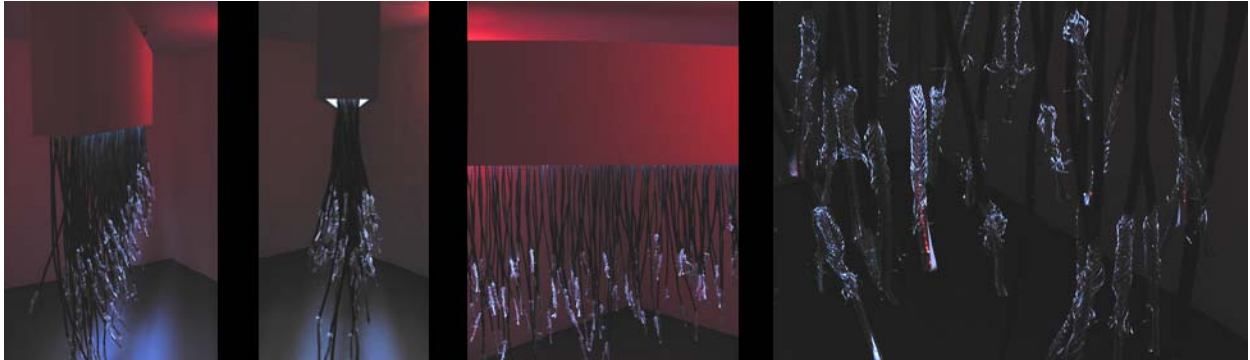


Figure 3. Not a Specific Object Installation View and Detail

The title of this installation pays homage to Donald Judd and his idea of the specific object, yet simultaneously provides the disclaimer that this object, while stylistically minimal, is loaded with references. Short strands of coaxial cable hang from the bottom of a rectilinear box. The ends of the cable are stripped to expose the shielding. A blue light from within the box illuminates the ends of the cables. Additional low-level illumination is provided by two red bulbs in the corners of the room. In addition to the conceptual content, this piece researched the perception of the object in the low light situation.

Standing Wave

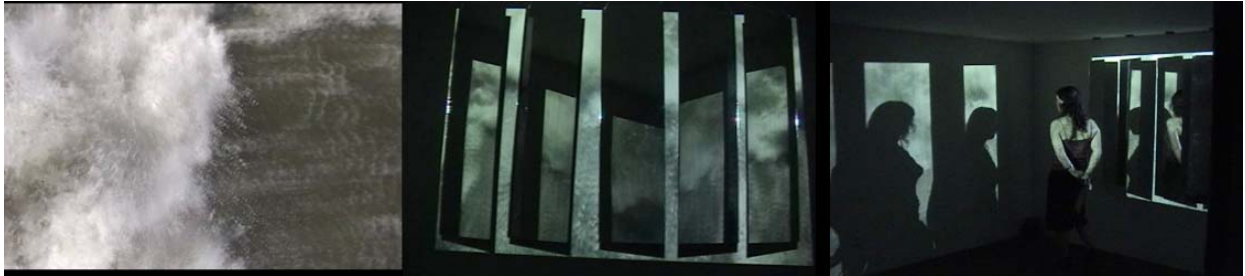


Figure 4. Video still and installation view of Standing Wave

This installation, utilizes a video of a “hydraulic,” a feature in fast-moving water where as water drops over a ledge, the empty space created by this drop is filled in by water flowing upstream. When this happens, the water forms a standing wave of currents flowing simultaneously upstream and downstream. In the installation, this video is projected onto 5 mirrors that are suspended near a wall. These mirrors reflect the video image to other walls around the room. Wind currents generated by a fan cause the mirrors and the corresponding reflected image to lightly sway. The installation utilizes multiple speakers to amplify sound of the rushing water, to which has been added barely audible subliminal voices.

1096 [As of October 13, 2004]



Figure 5. 1096[As of October 13, 2004] Installation view and details

As a way of visually comprehending the scale of American lives lost in the Iraq war, this installation made use of 1096 burnt matches inserted standing up on a gray field. Each match corresponded to an American life lost in the conflict up until the time of the installation. A single light illuminated the matches creating an interplay between light and shadow. A proposed correlative piece would be to represent the loss of *Iraqi* lives in the same conflict. Such a piece would require a field at least 50 times as large.

Delineation



Figure 6. Installation view and detail from Delineation

Delineation consists of an archimedean spiral built from thin vertical strips of wood. A abstracted video of the blades of a rotating wind-powered generator shot at night is projected through the structure and onto the opposite wall. A shirt hangs on the inside edge of the spiral illuminated by a single bare lightbulb. The archimedean spiral is a mathematical construct in which the turns of the spiral are equidistant. Spirals that occur in nature, on the other hand, are logarithmic – each section of the spiral is larger than the previous one. This installation explores the idea of time as a human construct, and of our role within this matrix of time and space.

Monument Garden



Figure 7. Monument Garden three installation views

Monument garden is a “sentient” artwork in that it responds to the presence of an audience. Five deflated monuments sit on concrete bases that contain small fans. As a viewer approaches, a motion sensor activates the fans and the monuments inflate. The monuments are comprised of plastic shopping bags imprinted with an American flag and the phrase, “God Bless America.” The bags are sewn together with the flag inverted. As the viewer leaves the area (or stands very still), the motion sensor deactivates the fans and the monuments slowly deflate. Monument garden critiques the conflation of religion, commerce, and patriotism in our current political system in a playful way. The suggestive shape of the monuments relates to the aggressive foreign policy stance that this conflation produces. And while the structures are nominally permanent, they are constructed of air. The inverted flag references the distress signal used by our armed forces.

Flag [International Red]



Figure 8. Flag [International Red] Installation view and detail

This primary element of this installation is a painting of red stripes on a 7'6" x 4' canvas. The painting was created with the aid of a "spud-gun" constructed for this purpose. Potatoes were hollowed out, filled with international red paint, and shot at the canvas. The painting is a result of their explosive impact with the canvas and their subsequent drip. For the installation, the painting was hung on a 10' cruciform base and lit theatrically with a single spotlight. This installation owes a great deal to the premises in Robert Venturi's seminal postmodernist architectural book "Learning from Las Vegas."¹⁴ Excessive and melodramatically theatrical, the main idea was to represent the symbolism of the American flag from the eyes of a non-American.

Well



Figure 9. Well Schematic and Installation View

For this installation, the gallery is converted into a labyrinth with walls of translucent plastic. At the center of the labyrinth is the “Well,” a video monitor recessed and facing upwards in a box. The box is lit from below. Baffled frames in front of the monitor increase the sense of depth. The monitor is playing a video of pulsating feedback patterns, with the recorded sound of Tibetan Buddhist monks chanting the prayer “Sangva Duva” filling the room. The main idea behind the installation was to create a cult aura around an object that was itself completely a product of a technological process; in other words, an object without an “author,” an object that was infinitely reproducible.

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NOTES

¹ The approach to this thesis is being modeled after that of Bruce Nauman, who through his work asks and attempts to gain perspective on the questions: “What is an artist; What does an artist do; What is it that makes it art?” The fundamental answer to these questions – an artist creates art – leaves the most significant part of the question, the question of how, unanswered. The answer to this part of the question can only be addressed through exploration: putting something out, evaluating it honestly, looking for recurrent themes. The purpose of this thesis is exploration of the concepts that serve as the basis for my artwork. In an attempt to explain the theoretical basis of my work, I hope to understand better what I, as an artist, am trying to do.

² Marshall McLuhan, "The Medium Is the Message," in *The Newmediareader*, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003). p. 203

³ *Maison Nicéphore Niépce: The Reference Site About the Inventor of Photography* (10/30/2005); available from <http://www.niepce.com/pagus/pagus-inv.html>. While the camera-obscura had been around since the 17th century, the first negative, with ability to capture and store the image chemically was developed in 1816 by Nicéphore Niépce.

⁴ “Persistence of vision” is the physiologic property of our visual perception that causes us to perceive an afterimage after the stimulus has been removed. When presented with a new image before the afterimage of the first has faded, we perceive continuous motion.

⁵ *Broadcast History Timeline*; available from http://www.tvhandbook.com/History/History_timeline.htm.

⁶ The original statement from Gordon Moore, a cofounder of Intel, is from *Electronics Magazine*, 19 April 1965: “The complexity for minimum component costs has increased at a rate of roughly a factor of two per year ... Certainly over the short term this rate can be expected to continue, if not to increase.” The extrapolation that computing power therefore doubles every eighteen months has been termed “Moore’s Law”

⁷ Robert Cailliau, *A Little History of the World Wide Web* (W3C (The World Wide Web Consortium), 09/28/2005 1995 [cited 10/3 2005]); available from <http://www.w3.org/History.html>.

⁸ CERN, "History of the WWW," review of Reviewed Item, no. (November, 2004), <http://public.web.cern.ch/Public/Content/Chapters/AboutCERN/Achievements/WorldWideWeb/WebHistory/WebHistory-en.html>.

⁹ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*; available from <http://bid.berkeley.edu/bidclass/readings/benjamin.html>.

¹⁰ UBUWeb. <http://www.ubu.com/sound/mcluhan.html>

¹¹ Dick Higgins, *Modernism since Postmodernism : Essays on Intermedia*, 1st ed. (San Diego: San Diego State University, 1997).

The former Fluxus artist Dick Higgins is one of the most prolific writers on Intermedia and its theory.

¹² This list of influences would be incomplete if I did not acknowledge the installation work of my committee member David Dunlap

¹³ Bruce Nauman et al., *Bruce Nauman: Work from 1965 to 1972* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Praeger New York, 1973), p.9.

¹⁴ Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge, Mass.,: MIT Press, 1972).

In this book, Venturi seriously/ironically explores the vernacular architecture of Las Vegas and allows that we can learn from some of the principles embodied therein. Venturi is probably best known outside of architectural circles for turning the famous Mies van der Rohe dictum “less is more” into his own aphorism “less is a bore.”