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Forever Unknowing Concrete Knowns

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Abstract.

By employing absurd acts, I confront contemporary conceptions of ideals and reality. My work focuses on the human misunderstanding of where the threshold lies between the world-as-we-know-it and the world-as-it-is to foster an affect of anxious serenity, a comfort in discomfort, and ultimately bask in the void of the unknown. By exploring the facets of the absurd and act/action, it is possible to break down my studio practice and approaches to contemporary art. My goal is not to necessarily to push culture forward, but to take it to the side and dismantle it, interrogating how we interact with it and how it operates through us. I am not offering any specific answers, just a consideration for an empathetic and critical path towards a future worth living in.

Forever Unknowing Concrete Knowns

By

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B.F.A., Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania, 2012

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Studio Arts.

Syracuse University

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Rodger Mack Exhibition Space The College of Visual & Performing Arts

drunk on permanence.

All of my buckets are answers with holes in them.

Sense is what you make when you have something to sell.

The absurd act has the potential to create a moment of pause in which I ask participants to examine the way things are. This moment and these objects are not focused on delivering something novel and new. It is about revisiting that which we know so well. I am here to ask questions that are not worth asking and point to direct connection between polar opposites. My goal is choosing to be uncomfortable, existential disruption, and a recognition of universal meaninglessness through an examination of what the world is.

The absurd act is a state of being and an action.

Absurd.

This word is typically used as a dismissive qualifier. It is employed to do the heavy lifting when something is so outside of our worldview that we need a swift and deliberate word to separate it from what we think the world is or should be. The colloquial use of the word takes itself far too seriously, and simultaneously, it does not take absurdity seriously enough. Because of its use as a tool of severe rejection, it creates a barrier of othering. This allows the user to deny responsibility for that which is declared absurd and claim outright that it has no place even existing. Unfortunately, this creates a binary for the individual using the word, that which is declared absurd persistently exists. In essence, the gravity is all wrong. But in an effort to rectify the simulated gravity, I have reconstructed a quality explanation of my understanding of this word from two definitions I found online with just a bit of tweaking. I propose this shift: (original highlighted in yellow)

Absurd (adj.)

1. Seemingly **ridiculously unreasonable, unsound, or incongruous**, but actually reflecting the way things are.
2. **Having no rational or orderly relationship to human life**, which in fact, has none to begin with. So that's that.
3. Employing a separate methodology, outside of that which is commonly understood as making sense.

I added the third for good measure.

The realization of the necessity of this shift in definition comes primarily from a Milan Kundera's meandering explanation of the absurdity of life. Throughout *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera sets the stage of seemingly unreasonable human behavior, only to reveal to us that it all makes too much sense. In particular, the story of Stalin's son who spent his whole life being both the prestige and the profane in his father's eyes. He lived a life of limbo between seemingly polar opposites. "If there is no difference between the sublime and the paltry, if the Son of God can undergo judgment for shit, then human existence loses its dimensions and becomes unbearably light" (128-129.) This story is an extreme example that illustrates in a dramatic fashion the truth of absurdity. It operates outside of our societal allowances making backroom deals. It causes vibration between the poles revealing the instability of it all. It is a short circuit. It undermines the directional gravity. There is no place to put your feet. There is not leg room. There is only vertigo and a brown paper bag for us to breathe into.

In trying to reconcile everything I have ever known with where I feel I am currently and what I expect from the future, I often feel this existential vertigo. I am from the middle of nowhere, outside of a town of 800 next to a town of 600. I grew up in a weird bubble that was not too concerned with the outside world, which is not so unusual. I revel in the fractured infinity of dealing with armfulls of past to get to an unknowable future. I am defined by the reality of my past, my current actions, and a hazy ideal future. I want my work to be as present as possible, something that is exactly where it is, and I the

position that it should precisely exist at is liminal, straddling the threshold, giving a very specific and unclear critique of our cultural investment in investing in culture.

This self-imposed vertigo comes with an unpopular caveat. “We have to entertain the possibility that there is no reason for something existing,” especially us (18). This is not a popular notion because it is only glorious in a really dark and big way that is fun to poke at, but not to carry on your back, and almost impossible to sell. In addition, declaring us as innately meaningless denotes an accident. People don’t like accidents, and they certainly don’t want to be one. Is it not better to be an accident that proves it’s worth, than a pre ordained ruler who barely manages to keep the kingdom in order? Isn’t the whole idea of the mythic American Dream to say, “started from the bottom now we’re here” at the end (Drake)? Relevance is relative. Meaning is only meaningful situationally. It is manufactured out of dust and holds stronger for most people than many physical things. In this way, I see meaninglessness as a place of power, granting the ability to walk through the shadows of the meaning to draw lines between concepts and objects that appear as real and vibrant as if they were always there.

Thacker divides the world into three distinct categories: the world-without-us, which is an unknowable speculative antithesis of humanity, the world-for-us, or our human perception of how the world is structured, and the world-in-itself, which differs from the other two by being in a limbo between accessibility and not from human interaction (5-9). It is primarily the misunderstanding of the threshold between the world-for-us and

the world-in-itself that aids the discussion of the absurd, because we can almost perceive aspects of the world-in-itself. This is among the most fruitful places to find the absurd connections between objects and ideas. Also, the concept of the world in this idea can be shifted to be culture or society. I do not see these as fundamentally different in so far as they both encompass the individual who can act on them, but have forces that act almost outside of human control and in a much different way than we as individuals would expect or understand. Therefore, I incorporate this thought as part of my practice, being able to both observe and mine from the culture or society and then present works based on that.

An important nexus point for the understanding of culture-for-us and culture-in-itself is time. The distance of time from an event or character of history allows us to view them with a wider lens and more context. My blue raspberry bust of Robin Williams as Teddy Roosevelt is a work in which I play with this distance of time. Using the retrospective gaze of these two characters that we now have access to, they are both difficult characters to deal with. Teddy Roosevelt was viewed as a progressive in the government at the time, while now, 100 years later, many view him as a white supremacist. Whereas Robin Williams is the conclusion of the Pagliacci joke, the tragic clown. Both of these men were heroes of mine as a child, and both now represent a strange danger that is only apparent with a distant perspective. However, we should never confuse this more well-informed conception that is achieved by gaining distance from the subject with objectivity. Objectivity is an illusion and a tool of fascists.



It is my understanding that this is a fairly dark view, and I know the basic rebuttal to pessimism is essentially as follows, 'No one needs to be reminded to be pessimistic, because pessimism is always there' (Thacker.) I grew up in a place in this country where we just didn't talk about our feelings. So to dismiss pessimism so flippantly feels less like brushing it off and more like bottling it in. Furthermore, the desire to avoid conversation about pessimism, assumes the alternative of positivity as an ultimate

good. This idea ignores the 'violence of positivity' that leads to over-efficiency and overproduction (Byung Chul Han, 4). These problems in construction, or additive issues, neglect the negative forces, and leave people with positivity problems. For instance, everyone who purchased fidget spinners in bulk is now stuck with a mass quantity of junk, and beyond that, imagine the warehouses full of fidget spinners. This is more than a diatribe on the fidget spinners. My concern is the immediate and incomprehensible overproduction of a fad. Thus, just as positives can turn negative given some time, so can the negative turn positive. This is not a reminder to be pessimistic, it is an exploration of pessimism and how it works with humor.

Act.

This portion of the absurd act has a few variations in understanding that allow for the depth and specificity required for the structural integrity of my open practice. First, act as deed, or the doing of a thing, is a deliberate, calculated plan. Second, action or the process of doing something is where intuition lives. Action is immediate and responsive. The deed encompasses action, and should be used to understand the action and how it can best be used, but can never have life in the way that the action does. The distinction and intertwined nature of these first two is a fundamental aspect of how I understand the humanness in artwork. It allows for open contradiction that makes being and observing humans so difficult. Third, the act as a segment of a larger production. This act, such as in a play, is directly related to each expected and choreographed aspect of my artistic career. The studio visit, the exhibition, the public lecture, the thesis paper, and the review are all successive acts in my ongoing comedy/drama. Fourth, pretense, although often thought of as insincere and ungentle, is survival tactic of anyone involved in society. Be it the pretense of normality, capital structure, rebellion, or kindness, every day we are performing for the audience of society.

Through these four avenues, I am able to appropriately maneuver the absurd act to deal with my comprehension of how things work or how the world is, which makes me anxious. Humans have been falling upward and pretending like we have a clue as to why since the agricultural shift. When we decided to stop running after food and were

capable of producing a surplus, we gained a surplus of time as well. This translated into a more humans. At the root, we are doing what any good life form does, but our desire to reason and for reasons leaves us wanting more than this simple truth. It is our responsibility to reconsider the entirety of what we are facing, where we are focused, and why we are focused there.

There is a concept in philosophy from a dead philosopher whose name i have forgotten. It goes something like, 'everyone is arguing the same thing, but we are all stuck debating the semantics.' While this is particularly difficult to stomach in the current socio-political climate, I have heard a slightly different version that I am a bit more fond of:

Five blind people each independently stumbles upon an elephant, they begin exploring and describing what they have found. Each of them knows they are describing the same thing, but cannot understand why the other's definitions are so vastly different and obviously wrong. Everyone thinks they have found the truth, but no one expects the truth to be so large that it could possibly encompass all of these different encounters that seem so separate.

The end of the story, that everyone leaves off, is that each of the blind people leaves the elephant with their new found knowledge. They spread the word of their truth. They proceed to gain followers, build governments, and proclaim the other blind people and their followers as false. It escalates and everyone kills each other in the name of the

truth they all know so well. There are two aspects in which this story relates to my practice:

1. I do not trust anyone who knows the single way and is going to enlighten me.
2. I am all five of these blind people at once.

The Absurd Act I: Deed

By shifting and mismatching ideals I aim to test and reveal the structure of reality. This is a specific plan with simple rules put into place to achieve an outcome. The purpose of these constructed deeds is to arrive at an unexpected result from a place that is all too familiar, for instance, the connection of two seemingly disparate ideas. It is at its root a Dada-Structuralist approach to the an eternal existential crisis. I employ Ian Cheng's definition of ideal, "a frozen state of perfection, how the mess of reality should be for us" (36.) Ideals are inherently problematic. They are rooted in part of human experience, but they are cut short of their potential by a desire to categorize and disseminate information to others. Perfection only functions through a particular lens. It is temporal and personal. Thus it is important to understand for whom and when the ideal works/ed. This makes ideals dead things that are only animated by our involvement. Placed outside of a comfort zone, ideals begin to crack and reveal their framework.

With enough of these repurposed ideals, we can begin to understand the nature or reality, or "that which, when you stop believing in it, does not go away" (Dick 3.) This conception of reality is tricky, especially now as there are more and more things to not believe in than ever before. This issue can sort of resolve itself. There are a number of things that are not necessarily part of reality i.e. the American two-party system or microbrews. Either of these we could individually not believe in, and it would persist in its existence. Thus, the action of disbelief has to be a collective endeavor. We would

need to, in mass, decide that we no longer recognize the strict division that leads to corrupt and incompetent government where both sides are being paid by the same interests to keep laws vague and ineffective, or that the idea of microbrew is just a marketing ploy to sound more niche than what is widely regarded as corporate beers. But as long as the governing body can seem safer than change and as long as microbrews are objectively more delicious than their basic beer counterparts, they will remain a part of our reality. Furthermore, this restriction in this definition, does give us more room to play, because if we could just not believe in things and make them go away, it is likely that not much would be left. The unfortunate aspects of reality are nonetheless integral to the whole. It is up to us not to make them disappear but to make them easy to see for what they truly are.

In conjunction with this idea of restructuring ideals to get to the root of reality as a constructed absurd deed, I am continually reminded of a small part in Timothy O'Brien's *The Things they Carried*. O'Brien writes about what makes a true war story, about how some stories that actually happened are in some cases less true than fabricated stories (61.) While this idea is a bit concerning in the era of inflammatory headlines and fake news, I believe this method can work in artwork. This is a method used by stand up comics and possibly even Milan Kundera, whose story about the death of Stalin's son could be a fictitious true story. The point is that the story distills and captures a perceived reality whether or not it is based in actuality. It is a device to get an affective truth. It is a means to an end.

The societal preference for a true story has upgraded with our technology. Now the virtual/actual conversation is weirder and has made things more difficult than ever. I've been playing with ways of diving into this, and I'm quite excited by some things that have bubbled up through the Kool-Aid. Blue raspberry flavoring is based on blue raspberries that actually exist. The whitebark raspberry, blue raspberry bush, or *rubus leucodermis*, is the plant on which blue raspberry flavoring is based. I acquired some bushes and managed to kill them impressively quickly. I would like to get another, but I'm not sure that it matters. In this instance the important part is the action of blue raspberry flavoring overtaking the actual blue raspberry in notoriety and ubiquity. I am employing the flavor and scent of the virtual blue raspberry with my work to give it all the sweetness of virtuality.

Using this idea to create work that feels true, I often play with the polarities like anxiety and joy, irritation and relief, or a third pair to make this a nice triad you can get behind. I am continually trying to frustrate and entertain the viewer. These paradoxes and polar pairs are all about simultaneously playing by the rules and breaking the game. I want to play into expectations of art users as well as break from them. It is crucial in this respect to understand what people, particularly those of a typically art-going audience, want and expect from an exhibition, how a space will function, what art is, and especially what art will be 'about.' I want to ruin these expectations, and I want to foster a lack of understanding. It is important that my work get back to the basics. I want art users to be doing material mathematics in the space. I believe in a balance between easy to enjoy

and dense alienation. Essentially, this boils down to a balance of making obvious spatial observations and picking the appropriate points of focus.

Cheddar Cheese Superman, a performance in Shoppingtown Mall, managed to strike a good balance in this respect. It was undeniably performance art as I had fulfilled enough of the necessary tropes to be classified in that category. However, my performance and the structure of the piece was set up to ruin the expectations of acting in a performance. Upon entry, the smell, of dehydrated cheese powder overwhelms. People had to assess the situation. I casually chatted with them and told them that I would take a photo with them if they wanted to. Most people begrudgingly opted to take a photo with me, on the condition that I not touch them. Then they would continue on the tour of the room, commenting on the cheesy footprints leading from the back, turn the corner and find the superhero changing room, which completely dismantles the idea of a secret identity for the character. The piece was at its peak when I was alone in the room and people who were not in the mall for an art show walked by and stared. I would give a casual performer's wave and they would wave back politely.





As we test and stretch our understanding of reality, the foundation of Douglas Hofstadter's research into "analogy as the core of cognition" becomes instrumental in laying out my expectations for my audience as art users (3). Our comprehension of the surrounding world comes primarily as association and assimilation. We take in the new by defining it through our lens of what we already know. To tease this out a bit further, we can only understand the experiences of others through by testing it against our individual experiences. i.e. I can only understand your idea of childhood home by comparing it to my experience of my childhood home. Plato's theory of forms holds important, historical parallels to these arguments. Plato suggests that the non-physical form, or idea, of anything is the most accurate reality. For Plato, there are unattainable perfect forms that exist only in ideas outside of any one mind; there is a chair we all are

able to tap into when we think of and try to make a chair. As it stands, Plato's idea is more about using universals and generalizations to come to knowledge. Where as Hofstadter muddies the waters and does not allow for pure knowledge to be revealed. It is entirely dependant on comparison to personal experience. Each individual has a depository of what makes the essence of a chair and all chair-related information that they call upon when they think of a chair. This could get overwhelming to consider how anybody could read any one object in an artwork, and is certainly a hurdle and something to keep in mind, but it is not a block. It is impossible to predict all possible readings. However, the more I try to wrap my head around the different perceptions, the stronger my understanding of how objects can function together. As long as we can keep in mind that there is no way for us to directly transfer my thought to your brain, we can also know that a true dialogue is the best version of communication. Two or more parties, spending time, giving and taking, building an understanding together. While we are far from tapping into the imagined universal of Plato's theory of form, it is vital to understand that the surfaces of events can appear quite different and the core essence can be very similar.

Using this mode of understanding as the foundation of how I structure the display of my work and how I anticipate user experience, I can frame my work to deliver a particular version of events. I continuously ask users to work to interpret these events through their analogous process and to reconcile the reality I am providing with their known reality. I am asking a lot, but this is the art user that I want to attract. I am asking for

someone who is interested in actively taking part in a dialogue with my work, who is willing to read the materials and explore an installation. It is important to challenge the user, to provoke associations between what they love and that which they loath. My work is aimed at a contemporary audience who is looking for an experience.

The Absurd Act II: Action

Personal tactile interaction with objects and process-oriented making free my mind. Repetitive physical tasks often act as grounding meditation. 'Hands to work, mind at ease' which is a personal contemporary interpretation of the Shaking Quakers' common saying 'hands to work, hearts to god.' There is a calmness to the repetition that decelerates the buzzing in my brain. It allows me to own my thoughts and create a specific path for stream of consciousness problem solving that I refer to as auto-construction. Auto-Construction is an approach to working rooted in self-reliance. Armed with a collection of tools, materials, and know-how, I aim to fulfill the auto-construction dream by completing tasks with little to no professional intervention. I resolve issues with what is on hand and try to only break this rule when specific hardware is required. It enters my work through childhood memories of growing up in the country, watching my grandpa, a retired dairy farmer prone to depression, deal with everything. Of course at the time I had no idea, but with his John Wayne Stoicism, he moved through life without a complaint even when he should have had some. Working in my studio, employing this method, is a way to deal with some of the more complicated relationships in my personal history involving my hometown and my heros. My memory of my grandpa's garage working area is the basis for my studio setup. One aspect of this methodology is the desire to hoard things that may prove useful, as well as oddities, which might be an impetus for a good story. This style of working comes with an aesthetic of chaotic organization. Everything has a purpose, whether or not

anyone knows this purpose yet, including the maker. Another conception of the visuals this method cultivates is the unattended aesthetic of working on things. A table covered in tools and junk, every flat surface gets filled. It has even gone so far as to cover the steps of the ladders that are in my studio space. The issue is trying to keep myself aware but not too aware of what is happening in my peripherals. The key to this aesthetic is the 'unattended.' In this way, the absurd act rears its head. It is the way that things make sense in a very specific line of logic. There is a very small window temporally and situationally in which these specific actions make a very particular kind of sense.

In conjunction with auto-construction, many of the objects I produce are put into a sort of 'art-event-tool-kit.' This kit is what I take with me to the gallery. Through adapting the kit mentality, Ikea and consumer minimalism enters my work. The Bauhaus centered around an utopian dream, designing objects to make the best version of itself. Where this dream was crushed and dismantled in WWII, Scandinavian design picked it up and gave it a the twist. It is this mass produced utopic minimal object that has taken my interest. While there is a strange nobility associated with providing an affordable option for high-brow aesthetic, in reality it is a business move to use the visual language of utopian minimalism to sell an empty idea. Like so many of the objects from Ikea, it is little more than a veneer of cleanliness and minimal beauty stretched too thin over an insubstantial and unsupportive substructure.

I want to use this pre-existing language to my advantage. First, I want to flip the attempts at making the best version of things. I want objects that can barely be called what I claim they are. I want them to be not necessarily the worst version of themselves, but at the very least limited, flawed, and a specific version. I make objects weak that should be robust and I reinforce inconsequential objects. In addition, I want to tweak the aspect of this idea between affordable and high-brow aesthetic by almost entirely flipping it, and bringing a trash or outdated aesthetic into the realm of art objects. The most important aspect of this aesthetic is the veneer. A thin layer covering everything. Like the melamine coating on all IKEA particle board shit furniture. I see the whole world through this lens. It is not always covering an undesirable interior, but it is always there. This layer is as much a part of the whole as anything, but it is also something that can be separated and examined. It is vital to the operation of the object. It is important to the continued function of society. Every day is a performance.

Breaking down the kit into its component parts provides a continual shift in focus from micro to macro scale. It creates a similar mental effect of the Hitchcock zoom. In some respects, the units are infinitely interchangeable, and in others ways they each act as a specific unmistakable individual, each as specific and different from the one next to it. Through hand-made art units, I am able to disrupt Walter Benjamin's idea an object's loss of aura in the post mechanical age. It simultaneously destroys and declares the aura of any one object. The amount of the units both denies and acknowledges the individuality. If there is one, it is a contemplative object, but when there are many it

becomes a noisy contemplative mass. It not only allows or invites probing and exploration, but it demands it. In this respect, I am a personal mechanism of production and a failure of a machine.



Through these units I can play with the ideas of transcendence and Timothy Morton's idea of subsendence, the idea that the whole is less than the sum of its parts. I want my work to have a balance of these, because too much of either gets pretty tiresome. I am bored of trying to transcend. Paul Chan described art as, "the act of trying to make, out of what is available, something more than what is there." This is a concise summation of attempts at transcendence. We now face a stranger problem though, and this definition doesn't help. The smartphone fits this definition and succeeds extremely well. It is so much more than what is actually there. This mighty little 'device' has turned our attention away from what is actually in our hand to so many other things that are away from 'here' and exist for us as virtual simulation on a four to seven inch screen. This is neither a damnation or celebration; it is just the way it is. So, while I believe this action that Chan describes is a great definition, and that many of the works I have made strive for it and some even succeed in it.

I propose a different goal for the experience of my work moving forward. I actively engage in trying to make, out of what is available, something that is truly there. In making something that activates its own presence, that has the ability not to take you out of the moment, but to drag you into it. I think that objects and artworks can achieve being truly present. There is a back door between the transcendence and subsendence. I want my work to be the short circuit between the two.



The Absurd Act III: The Act

The structured segment of the act, such as that in a play or even in the way a comedy or music show is set set up, as a jumping off point in my art practice is extremely useful. By conceptualizing the different required tasks of being an artist -- artist talks, studio visits, exhibitions -- in this way makes understanding the expectations and subverting or at the very least taking control of them to deliver the experience I desire. This is in no way a perfect analogy. It aids to my understanding of the performance of everything and fit the structure of this thesis. The comparison of my art practice to the structure of the theatre began well before thinking of this structure for individual aspects.

The basis for this idea was seeded in my mind by working at Syracuse Stage, where I was able to be involved in the creative process of an artistic production that I had absolutely no stake in. Working long days doing menial labor, as I said before, provides me with time for my mind to relax. After putting together a few shows, I began to unpack the structural pattern of the theatre. I saw that I could conceive of my production of works and installations in the same way: scenery, props, audio, lighting, cast, crew, director, and of course audience. This is a pared down list focusing only on the production of the piece. In addition, there is the administrative work of publicity, funding allocation, finances, community outreach, etc. This conception of this structure gave me the ability to focus from different specific angles on how a work comes together. As this

works for exhibitions, this structure can similarly be applied to artist talks and studio visits.

Part of setting up an act is being the performer. There is nothing worse than a performer who directs the scene and knows everything that is about to happen. I am continually working towards the improvisational ideas of Keith Johnstone, 'the obvious over the clever' and to 'be average.' I take lessons from my ordinary experience and embracing the anxiety of leaving the front door of my home everyday in order to create something that can simultaneously fit into that quotidian and question it. Improvising comes into my practice at a crossroads with autoconstruction. Improv is adaptive. It is dependant on me making snap decisions and sticking to them. The results are never perfect. The outcome is not going to last forever. The action is dependant on me having a stockpile of material and objects that will work. It works the best if I write a script only in my head that is too long for me to actually remember. Then I rely on my inability to remember the clever things I wanted to say. Then I can just say honest things. Going into any performance with the expectation of improvising fosters the appropriate kind of anxiety edge.

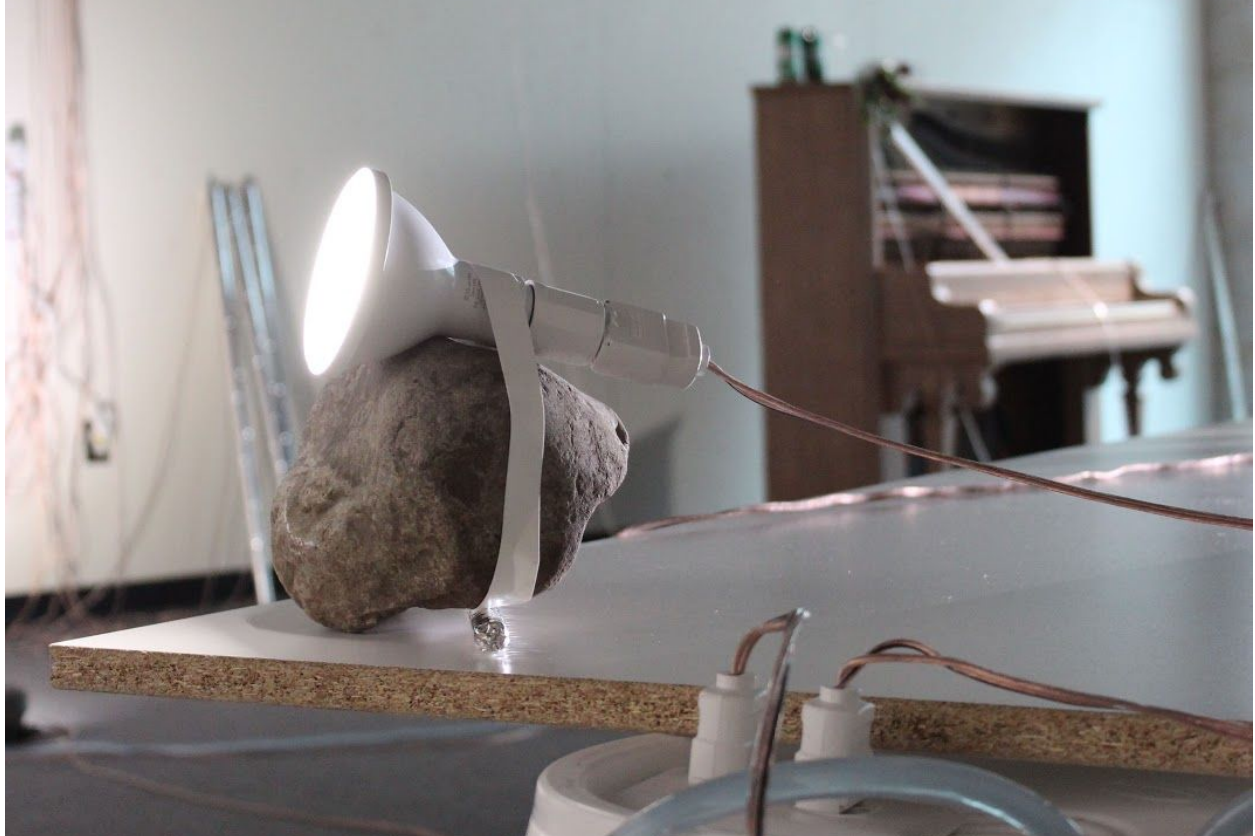
The Absurd Act IV: Pretense

The way I always understood pretense is, quite literally, pretending to know what is going on. But isn't that what people are doing everyday? We want things to be regular and regulated. We all perform normality regardless of what that means to us. The strange advancements in technology and incorporated culture means that we can go to Destiny USA and purchase a series of identities that have their own normalities, and we can shift between them like hermit crabs trade shells until we find a social skin that fits just right.

The societal need for performing normal is immense, and I want my works to explore this area. We continue to do what needs to be done when we do not know what else to do. Of course, in this case, the word need is a placeholder for 'feels normal' or 'typically should do' or 'what we are conditioned to do.' For example, the Titanic myth that the band keeps playing, while the ship is sinking. This is an absurd true story. Another example of this performance of normal is the story of the the administrative assistant on 9/11. As the fire fighters made their way through the building, they found her still scheduling meetings and filing paperwork as the tower was an inferno. Third, the lunch scene from Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*, during which there is a terrorist attack on the fancy restaurant they are eating at and they continue eating as if nothing is happening. The desire to carry on with normal while what we know collapses around us.

The pretense of normal is only observable when the context or the performance is broken, much like the Heideggerian modes of present-at-hand, making itself obvious in the world, and ready-to-hand, being inconspicuous and prepared for use. My work is trying to expose and achieve the absurdity of bouncing back and forth between the two. For instance, rock spotlights are designed as a means of highlighting one's landscaping without ruining it by placing an 'obvious' light in it. This is a perfect awkward solution that attempts to be inconspicuous but never succeeds in really looking like a rock because of its obvious light emissions. It is performing the normalcy of suburban landscaping. I have been using these lights in my work. Out of context from their natural environment of lawn ornamentation, their absurdity is easily on display. Also, by placing them with obviously handmade and altered objects, it often plays with the expectations of the audience. People frequently ask about the process of making them. The fact that they exist in the outside world and still look like a made object that fits into my practice is the kind of blurred line I am excited to work into my practice. In addition, I have made my own present-at-hand version of a rock spotlight from a simple light fixture held to a landscaping rock from my apartment complex with iron-on melamine shelf edge. This handmade version is straddling the two normals of trying to be a rock light and being an assembled handmade object. This gives it a particular vibration of awkwardness that makes its existence a perpetually stressful situation.





Somebody told me once that we invented boredom in the last century, that before then, humans didn't have that luxury. I'm pretty sure that a long time ago, we decided to do away with the problem of boredom by increasing our workload because it scared us, and the only thing we were good at was working. And now, I am pretty sure that our consciousness and technological advancements have caught up with our hands, and boredom is the answer to the question we have been asking ourselves forever. The question that we believe makes us as humans different. "What makes us so special?" We have the capacity to be bored as hell and still think we are the best. This is the pretense of importance, and it is absolutely insane how necessary it is.

The Voyager missions that launched 40 years ago by NASA are a prime example of the human desire for importance and a firm stance against meaninglessness. I consider this project to be among the most significant artworks in the 20th century. We sent a tiny metal box covered in foil blankets into the closest we can come to the nothingness of the answering machine of the gods with a recording of ourselves saying 'hi' on a golden record with a shelf life of one billion years. In a couple hundred thousand years, when humanity has either killed itself off, made its way to the next simulation, or advanced beyond our comprehension, this artifact will continue to glide effortlessly through the vacuum of space. It will patiently wait on an interstellar audience who can decipher the pictograph, which assumes a common language of mathematics and line drawings, and listen to it's hopeful and hubristic messages of peace. One of which is the American boy's voice utters a coy greeting, "Hello from the children of planet earth." All I have ever wanted is to be that boy.



The palpable anxiety in our society is perpetuated by our technological advancements. It began in the agricultural revolution, and since then, we have been continually improving our lives. We have “revved up the treadmill of life to ten times its former speed and made our days more anxious and agitated” only to become addicted to this pace (Harari 79). While it is difficult to make a case that we are not better off than we were as a species, I’m not so sure that we as individuals are. There is an implicit promise within technological advancement that it will in some way make us happier than previous generations. The idea is we will be happier because we have to do less. But less work almost inherently means more energy to do less with, which makes us believe that what we are doing must be very important. We have managed to reach a space where we are simultaneously the laziest and busiest versions of humanity to date. Our addiction to this pace has led us to favor a perpetual anxiety over the stagnation of ‘not improving.’ We are in a loop of anxiety and depression.

Loops as a visual and structural element are often familiar and disorienting. They play a key role in my work as tool for creating natural-feeling unease as they refer to life cycles and modes of thought. They provide a frame for what is going on, but fail to produce any satisfying answers. They have a power to pull people into a system, where they attempt to follow the trail to figure out how it is all connected. Loops act as a path for the performance of normalcy that can draw viewers into an artwork. Soldier ant death loops are a natural occurrence of what essentially amounts to an irreversible error sequence, leading to the demise of a large portion of the colony. Because soldier ants are blind,

they follow each other using tracer pheromones. In this bizarre occurrence, complete devoid of human influence, the ants start following and leaving tracer pheromones in a circle. As more ants stumble across the pheromones, the loop grows larger and larger, and more and more ants join the infinite march, spiraling to their death. Eventually, enough ants will die and some will break the cycle to move on in search of food elsewhere. It is easy to anthropomorphize the ants, to see this as a microcosm of human action. I hope that loops in my work can achieve the level of anxiety and mystery, the madness and the beauty that is the soldier ant death loops.

In the end, where does the absurd act get me. In large part it is art imitating life. But beyond that, it has the potential to disrupt and disquiet, to stir the pot and bring up some of what we have let settle to the bottom. Provide a spark for a conversation that is less likely to happen. Even if that is just a discussion between long-time friends about a tree from their childhood or an explanation of why something in the work is awkward and familiar. I want people to feel and think and talk to each other. I want things to be disgusting and beautiful. I want the contrary of the contrary. What brings joy mashed with what is annoying or stressful. Disgustingly beautiful. Too glossy, too shiny. A weird and disturbing object cut with a finish that doesn't fit. Glossy concrete hot dogs that sound beautiful. The desire for control and the failure to assert it. Or the ability to have a controlling influence and the inability to understand the outcomes. Alternatively, the desire to see what really happens when control is abandoned. Throwing a brick in a washing machine on spin cycle. I want my work to be too much of a good thing. I want my sweets to be sickening. I want this little light of mine to shine shine shine, but also simultaneously leave the cavity it fills with the darkness of a trapped vacuum. I want my failures to fail so hard it's hard to watch, to embrace the embarrassment felt when you just wish someone would stop doing what they are doing.

If we have enough buckets we can stay afloat.

What makes the most sense is that none of this makes any sense.

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