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What Kind of Thing are we? Our unrelenting Demand for Self-Significance

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ABSTRACT

My work is motivated by my struggles to cope with the absurdity of my own existence. I am investigating the essential property of our personal identity through ephemerality, memories, and the similarities between man and machine. Using the body as object and context, I use humor and absurdity to ease the burden of my haunting realizations, and allow my creations to be enjoyed simply through comedy or visual allure. I offer these social disturbances as mementos of the idea that it is impossible for the evidence-based understanding of ourselves to ever merge into the realm of the ethereal, but as it chips away at what we are not, a more thoughtful image of what kind of thing we are might start to emerge. I suggest we give our ethereal selves too much credit, and that even the ever-shrinking magic of who, or what we are is still enough to intoxicate us.

What Kind of Thing are we?
Our Unrelenting Demand for Self-Significance

by

Marilyn Koch

B.A., California State University, Sacramento, 2014

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in *Jewelry and Metalsmithing*.

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August 2018

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Uniquely Human

We are able to haphazardly distinguish ourselves from others with the advent of taxonomy. The quintessential notion of the 'self' is hardly definitive and when introduced to the complexities of time and lineage, become even more elusive. We see evidence such as tool-making, ceremonial burying of the dead, and self-awareness and somehow attribute these qualities to be distinctly modern human without acknowledging our predecessors and animals that have similar if not more distinctly 'human' qualities than we do. At what point in the span of our species do we begin to prescribe autonomy and the existence of the non-physical self as an essential property of personhood?

We connect evidence of modern man with unambiguous artifacts of abstract and symbolic thought, but as in discovering a message in a bottle written in a foreign language wherein the self-referencing message is trying to tell its reader what language it was written, we cannot decode that which we are not already familiar. Despite all the miraculous abilities of sentient creatures- past or present- no achievement will ever be more valuable than being human. After all, humans **are** the best at possessing a string of particular qualities that best resemble the human.

In viewing our linear genealogy of the modern human, we are seemingly unwilling to entertain the notion that we are the sentient, conscious winners of history by accident and

much rather prefer that we are the winners by aptitude and blessings- Despite not fully understanding the value of being blessed.

After working with diamonds, gold, and other valuable materials, I started to wonder why we considered these things valuable. The desire for authenticity holds a qualitative value, but it also holds something special. The object, like us, is the embodiment of its history that cannot be replicated. It's natural imperfections and perfections are genuine, unique, and are a physical manifestation of its story. We value ourselves –physical and otherwise- because they are special, but within the preciousness, there is a burden so heavy to as to become toxic. Our value becomes a catch 22 where electing to fully utilize our insurmountable potential involves doing something too dangerous, or too stressful, or requires luck that will never manifest. We have been given empty promises of historical acclaim in exchange for effort, and have been told time and time again that 'There is nothing worse than being ordinary'.

1. Ordinary: The Belly Button Factory



Figure 1: Belly button buttons

I started creating, in mass, replicas of my belly button. They are all relatively similar, but the color and form of each are slightly different enough to note they were made one-by-one, each by hand. So, in a very real sense, they are unique objects- just like the one before, and the one after, but more importantly they represent the moment of detachment- the moment¹ when something that was created by the most fundamental biological coding was given autonomy -when one became two, and when one will again become two. It is a cycle that is perpetuated without permission to the newest contestant. It's a cycle I never asked to be a part of, but while I'm playing, I might as well enjoy.

¹ *Be it incremental, or instantaneous is symbolized by a belly button.*

These, much like most of my work, are absurd, small, and rest in the valley of the uncanny. It's the uncomfortable place between life and non-life, synthetic and original. A place where there is so little distinction between robot and human that even for a moment, we might come to terms with the notion that something synthetic could produce the ability to sense and experience things as we do- That we are authentic, but artificially reproducible.

In an effort to want to continue my legend –sort of speak- I continue to create more belly buttons but unlike nature, my production line is linear.

2. Year 30: Age Brooches



Figure II: Selection of Year 30: Age Brooches

In continuing to work with body as object, I made a series of 30 brooches displaying several physical signs of aging such as wrinkles, grey hair, sun-spots, moles, bruising, and enlarged pores. They are enclosed in golden 1" frames and are very alluring objects. A few months earlier than their creation, I turned 30. Thirty is the age in which we are young, comparatively speaking, but no longer young in the vague sense of the word. I find it odd that somehow in our age, we ignore our developing qualities like confidence and wisdom, and convince ourselves that youth is still something to be longed for- a task for Sisyphus. Since I consider self-acceptance an award for acknowledging and accepting the aging process, I wanted to recontextualize the contents of the brooches to allow the viewer to contemplate why these inevitable physical attributes are deemed unsightly. Unsightly perhaps, because they tell us of our own physical inevitability. That because even though our personal identity is an essential property that is preserved through time, the vessel we have gotten to know is an impermanent and fluctuating thing that challenges our own idea of ourselves as permanent, physical entities.

We believe both concepts knowing full well the paradox of our physicality. Who I was as a child is still who I am today, and who I will continue to be, and yet like the ship of Theseus, I am constantly being rebuilt. I have already owned a completely new body, complete with a new heart, skeletal structure, and hair. The growing and sloughing process is so seamless. At age 50 I will have likely owned 2-3 full bodies including hundreds of skin-suits, and shoulder-length hair for at least 17 people and yet, I still have a strong sense of ownership for this body as a unit.

It functions like a machine, a farm, producing and pruning elements that make a strong ecosystem. And like a farm that utilizes the properties of nature that go without ownership, so too do we utilize parts of ourselves that go unattached to our image of the self. How does it feel to know that four pounds of bacteria are relentlessly working inside of you tending to you as though you are the ecosystem? And why have we not claimed ownership? Surely anything that is internally required to keep us alive should be more than just a symbiotic cohabitation, lest this thought get uncomfortably close to jarring our definition of being 'whole'.

And so, we are comforted by our own existence resting in the crease between physical and not. Our memory of only knowing this body is the key to linear consciousness. Even then, confidence unravels when our memories fade, our consciousness slips, and we begin to fail to recognize who we are. We become lost. The question of whether or not we *have* a body or *are* the body, becomes even more difficult as the self-referencing 'I' becomes muddled in forgotten memories.

In the case study commonly referred to as *The Lost Mariner*, Oliver Sacks tells of an older man who fell victim to severe memory loss after his time in the Navy. His name was Jimmie G., and he was lost in a single moment of time with no past or future. Without the ability to permanently retain a single memory, Jimmie puts into question our own beliefs regarding personal identity as being explained through linear consciousness as series of memories that could connect itself back to our creation. But this ability, or lack there of, is neurological and grounded in our physical existence and if we consider our bodies to be something to be owned, something that we *have*, then we don't consider memory to be an

essential property. We are, in turn, calling it an accidental property- one in which can be taken away without making us a different thing. However many of us fundamentally believe otherwise. 'You have to begin to lose your memory, if only in bits and pieces, to realize that memory is what makes our lives. Life without memory is no life at all...our memory is our coherence, our reason, our feeling, even our action. Without it, we are nothing.' -Luis Buñel. So we come to realize that we are believing in a paradox. A paradox which we are happy to believe until it becomes apparent that there is a disconnect between our physical selves and our non-physical selves and watching our bodies age is unsettling reminder of that fact.

3. Anus Necklace: Disgust and Legacy



Figure III: Anus Necklace

Perhaps, at times, it is better that we view ourselves as ethereal things taking residence in a physical realm. We can be so willfully in denial of the elements of our bodies, that even a particular component can evoke a sense of disgust.

So, in yet another tongue-in-cheek piece, I cast my own rectum and made a piece that would be unavoidably noticeable when worn. It is a large, thick necklace that sits high on the collarbone. It is strung with large orbs and five bronze anuses embedded with glittering diamonds that rest in the center of the sphincter where the exact point at which

the body opens itself to the world is censored. When we consider the components we are made of, there is undoubtedly a hierarchy where, from head to toe we use our bodies as vessels that enact our autonomy. We eat because we have to, but we pardon it because we want to. As if to declare 'I *only* eat because I want to'. But the consequence of eating is having to do this smelly, disgusting, act that results in this smelly, disgusting thing. There is a sense of shame with doing something so preposterously normal, that while our ethereal sense of self is such a small sliver of our identity, it has an equally preposterous amount of power over our physical selves. We have become disillusioned in what we are, and what we are capable of. We can even begin to think that anyone can be a hero, that if we work hard with good intentions we can be remembered.

Like anyone with an inflated sense of self-importance, I want to be separated from the drudges and honor myself like many other figures in history. I declare that I, too, have a legacy, but my sarcasm is a thin façade as I lament the fact that I earnestly want to be another immortalized asshole.

I am stuck in my own monotony, and coming to terms with my personal insignificance through humor helps me see the phenomena in the mundane. I remember growing up reading whimsical stories of heroes and villains and wondering if my path would ever be as epic. I get why people would want to see the fall of humanity; to be a part of something so much more profound. But that option isn't entirely up to us. It is possible being a hero was never in our future, or worse yet, As Joseph Campbell writes in a Hero's Journey "Walled in boredom, hard work, or 'culture,' the subject loses the power of significant affirmative

action and becomes a victim to be saved. His flowering world becomes as wasteland of dry stones and his life feels meaningless-“ (pg 49), it’s possible for the hero within us to never come to fruition. Yet for some, destiny has chosen for them, as was the case of the Arabian Nights adventure of the Prince Kamar al-Zaman and Princess Budur. Where the two of them had the desire to fulfill only their own interests, but successfully merged Persia and China. And as it is written in the Koran: “Well able is Allah to save.” Our mystery is in understanding how the mechanics of the universe will unfold its miracles. Until then, I’m trying to accept my lack of profoundly epic journeys as I accept that the hero isn’t the recipe; it’s the main ingredient. It’s the rationale that puts the phrase ‘lifting yourself up by your own bootstraps’ into question. We put determination to the test and size our willpower up against external influences and declare with confidence that we will not look down.

4. The Nipple Necklace: And the Elephant in the Room



Figure IV: Nipple Necklace

In another effort to demonstrate power of will, we have developed a structure of social niceties, and have condemned certain actions such as staring down at a woman's chest to be lewd. I made a nipple necklace that challenges those norms and forces us to resolve an awkward scenario using only one of two unpleasant ultimatums: Acknowledge the nipple. Or don't. The nipple pendant is a hyperrealistic replica of a female nipple which hangs very low around the neck, and at 48" long, it rests at crotch level to the average woman. The chain it hangs on is thick, and bright gold, and is a direct invitation to follow it's line right

down below the waist. C'est n'est pas une mamelon, none-the-less the wearer is hypersexualized. With an invitation to take a short glance, or otherwise , at a region of the body still labeled as 'private', it is using the same socially conditioned urge we get when confronted with a woman's cleavage to look as a body part even more intimate. It is an affront to social decency to look down. It is similarly distressing to avoid mentioning the piece as the deafening silence indicates an internal struggle for power.

The piece is made even more ridiculous depending on the action taken beyond the visual spectacle. The nipple itself is battery operated, and when stimulated, a radial light from inside the pendent, turns on. There is a momentary-on switch directly behind the nipple and when pressure is introduced, and not-so-inadvertently the pelvic region of the wearer, it may be the case that more than one thing gets turned on. I find it striking to think that we can, at times, be reduced to simple if-then conditions.

5. Self-Portrait 001: The Self-Aware Machine.



Figure V: Self-Portrait 001

This was made in 2017 as an honest homage to my psychical workings, but not without a dash of humor. As I started to see myself as more machine than anything else, I started to lament that the perspective of being the most complicated, incredible machine ever, was

seen with such aversion. My self-portrait wasn't intended to solve the mystery of who we are, but to engage in the magic of the question. In some painfully trivial sense, it was aware. If you walked by it, it would respond by talking to you. If you left, it would stop. And would wait until another passerby got close enough to engage. It's a big, clunky, awkward thing that when its motion sensor would activate, it would start to turn its motor, and through a series of rudimentary engineering, would make a replica of my tongue move in a reciprocating motion- a motion that, in theory only, looked as though it was talking.

It's a simple machine, one made simpler with parts exposed to see its inner workings, but as machines get more complicated their status becomes more convoluted. Self-referential entities such as computer code, people, or even the phrase "This sentence is a lie." can complicate our system of beliefs as we introduce paradox through self-awareness.

The T4 virus is an excellent example of a self-aware non-sentient entity. It is a self-referencing, self-actualizing, and self-reproducing virus capable of rewriting its own DNA code without enacting the part of the code reserved for bypassing access to the DNA of an unassuming cells to be attacked. It is essentially writing instructions for itself to follow.

This is by definition is self-awareness and is exponentially more interesting when we are incapable of claiming the T4 doesn't have a free will.

As one of my favorite modern thinkers, Douglas Hofstadter states, "The more explicit the self-reference is, the more exposed will be the mechanisms underlining it." (495) A part of me wonders if we, not unlike the T4, are capable of looking at our own code and altering it to better suit our needs. That when we grew safe and comfortable grazing on our planet,

we involuntarily altered our own code to invent, and invest in fantasies that gave us purpose.

Trinity: The Object. The Wearer. The Viewer.

Jewelry- the placard for the self, is a marker of identity and a demonstration of our desire to tend to our appearances. Without the body, jewelry acts as a relic of a past performance.

As a wedding ring when worn, the performance isn't a spectacle, but rather a way of acting. We act as a spouse acts, and if untethered by morals, one would play the role of a cheating spouse, but a spouse none-the-less. We put ourselves in character depending on how we will be seen. What we wear triggers a persona. Even our names can suggest our likelihood of being ordinary- we intrinsically and immediately judge a person's competence and sustainability based in names and appearances.

During my residency in Berlin, I wanted to induce a sense of mental vulnerability through my jewelry. I wrote small notes with large lettering and pinned them on the breast of my jackets or coats as I went about my daily business. They were diary entries such as "Acid brought me closer to God than church ever did." Or "I want your empathy. Not your fucking sympathy." I wore dozens of these. Eye contact from strangers was typically painfully averted, as these pieces created a tension in my surrounding environment of awkwardness,

vulnerability and at times, aggression. I thought it important that in a time and location where we are getting more and more comfortable alienating others and fending for only ourselves, forcing myself be honest, allowed others the opportunity to engage with a stranger. It was a raw and genuine performance enacted by three: the viewer, the object and the wearer.

The object provokes a psychological relationship of power as the wearer and the viewer grapple with the direction of their gaze as they digest the scenario. Both are cognizant of the others gaze, and both realize the power is held both with the one wearing the object of tension, and also, to some extent, with the viewer that is capable of judging the performance and the performer. That moment allows for the jewelry to create a complex orchestra of friction rather than deliver a monologue into the other, and gives us an extended experience of approach and avoidance. As John Berger from *Ways of Seeing* (9) puts it, "Soon after we can see, we are aware that we can also be seen." The inherent quality of jewelry is that they live in relation to the human body, hence the object of tension fails to function once it is removed from our gaze, making realistically wearable pieces a common denominator for my jewelry.

Wearability is vital, if the social tension brought on by the object is just as important and the object itself. As jewelry, my work has the unique privilege of being seen by those willing, and not willing to see it. It's subtle, yet invasive and allows for the spreading of ideas in an almost viral manner. However, while I would like to believe that my ideas are steadily attached to my work, I understand that might not be the case.

The Role of the Maker

As with anything that has a 'maker' - us included, they have a way of drifting off and developing a narrative beyond that of the maker's intentions. While I don't trivialize our intentionality, I am aware that there is only so much leverage we have in giving our objects meaning. We create heirlooms and fetishes in which their concept is only partially satisfied by the artist. "What may start with the maker as a brave emotional exposure, or a discussion of a treasured theme, or an act of provocation, or a joke, soon acquires archaeological deposits of other thoughts about it." (maker-wearer-viewer pg XI). Immediately after they are in the possession by one other than the artist, the narrative of the object changes as it develops its own timeline of events where a piece can shift to symbolize, a lineage of owners, a historical or memorable event, or a culture en-masse, leaving the original intention potentially lost in time. In allowing my work to be seen as absurd, haunting and aesthetically pleasing, the appeal is multifaceted and open to diverse interpretation.

Conclusion

My work is a reflection of how I see us. We are similarly absurd, haunting, and beautiful creatures, with extremely complex and diverse explanations for who or what we are.

As I deliver my thoughts as physical manifestations bound for misinterpretation, and reinterpretation, I still can't help but skirt around the most basic questions: What exactly are we, and why we have been given the capacity to wonder why we're here in the first place? Just as with scientific exploration, there exists an asymptote, an invisible boarder that prevents complete understanding of what it is we research. As every new discovery begets a new mystery, our every identifiable marker of our own personal essence is seemingly grounded in reality. But mystery will always pervade so in an effort to remain validated, we stake claim to something ethereal. And like a diamond whose value rests between useless and priceless, our ethereal selves might be dubiously valuable, but it doesn't matter as long as we want it.

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2015 Old Gold Boutique, Sacramento CA

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2012 – 2014 California State University, Sacramento CA

Exhibitions

- 2017 Milling, Shoppingtown Mall, Syracuse, NY
- 2017 Comfort Zone, Random Access Gallery, Syracuse, NY
- 2017 Waiting For The Walls to DryHaubrok Foundation, Berlin, Germany
- 2017 Axis, Kreuzberg Pavillon, Berlin, Germany
- 2017 Meet Your Critics, Kreuzberg Pavillon, Berlin, Germany

- 2016 Cheeky Cheeky Cheeky, Apostrophe'S Gallery, Syracuse, NY
- 2016 Fair Exchange, Leeds College of Art, West Yorkshire, England
- 2016 Dry Sweat, Smith Hall, Syracuse University, NY
- 2016 Future Fear, Michael Sickler Gallery, Syracuse, NY
- 2015 OpenSTUDIOS, Coyne Gallery, Syracuse, NY
- 2014 Juried - Moments of Impact, Else Gallery, Sacramento, CA
- 2014 Penland School of Crafts Auction, Penland, NC
- 2014 Roseville Rock Rollers "NATURE'S WONDERS" exhibition, Roseville, CA
- 2014 Sacramento State University Senior Show, Else Gallery, Sacramento, CA
- 2014 Juried - Student Purchase Awards, Union Gallery, Sacramento, CA
- 2014 Juried - CSUS Student Awards Show, Else Gallery, Sacramento, CA

Awards

- 2017 Spring Berlin Artist Residency, Syracuse University
- 2016 \$500 Syracuse University Creative Opportunity Grant
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- 2014 Penland Summer Sessions Work Study Scholarship