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APPENDIX TO RENE GORTAT'S ARTWORK: THE PROCESS IS IMPORTANT, BUT SO IS THE RESULT

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Abstract:

The purpose of this thesis paper is to reveal the importance of the process Rene Gortat's artwork. Gortat sees quality, craftsmanship, effort, time spent, and attention to design and esthetics in the work as a form of care, which he wishes to share with the viewers of his work. His obsessive approach to making shows an inherent need to create objects. This paper will also show the artist's decision-making process by following his journey through the Beetle project. It includes relevant tangents that inform the work and show how Gortat's mind wanders as he creates the work. The research was conducted in and outside of the studio, through careful and mindful study of materials and mining through personal and family history to help explain the creation of the artwork. In conclusion, Rene Gortat's work is a revelation of his personal struggle and dedication to the process. The Beetle project was chosen for this thesis as it is a great example of Gortat's process, planning, idea development, and execution.

APPENDIX TO RENE GORTAT'S ARTWORK: THE PROCESS IS IMPORTANT, BUT SO
IS THE RESULT

By

Rene Gortat

B.A. Lycoming College, 2012

Thesis

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

Syracuse University
August 2019

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“Care and Quality are internal and external aspects of the same thing. A person who sees Quality and feels it as he works is a person who cares. A person who cares about what he sees and does is a person who’s bound to have some characteristic of quality.” — Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry Into Values*

It was a very long and exhausting day. One of those days that completely beats you up, physically and emotionally. I had no energy, no desire to do anything. I laid down in bed, but was too tired to fall asleep. In order to exhaust myself even more, I started thinking. Over the years, I have become very good at visualizing three-dimensional objects in my mind. I laid there for a minute or two and thought about the artwork I’m making, the fact that I will be done with school in a few months, and that I will be moving back to New York City—which means no space or time to work on my art. So, naturally, I became worried and anxious. But, I also realize there is always a way to make things work.

Feeling slightly better about my abstracted future, I slowly started falling asleep. Then, out of nowhere, an image popped into my mind: a beautiful, stripped, white Classic Volkswagen Beetle body, on a dolly, with a neon pink fleece sculpture inside. I laid there for a few seconds intrigued, thinking about it, visualizing it from different angles and decided, *Yes, I’m doing it!* I opened my eyes. At that point, I knew this was going to be a long night. I also knew what the next couple of months would look like. This project needed to get done and I would do whatever was necessary to make it happen.

I have an obsessive approach to making work—it’s all or nothing. That’s just my personality. Dedication and overwhelming trust of the artwork is my motto. I allow the work and ideas to come through naturally from within myself and my subconscious; this way, everything I make

originates from direct personal meaning. Following this sequence, it did not take long to determine the origin of the Beetle project: a carefully restored hard metal shell protecting the soft delicate fleece on the inside—this was a family portrait of sorts, or at least a display of my desire for love, connection, and protection, which I lacked as a child.

Now awake and excited, I sat up in bed, took out my phone, and started looking for old Beetles for sale in the area. Within minutes, I found one. I messaged the owner and foolishly awaited a response in the middle of the night. In the meantime, I started watching videos on how to take the Beetle apart: how to remove the body from the pan; how to remove the fenders, seats, and dashboard; how the engine was bolted on. I made a quick list of supplies needed for this project but didn't order anything yet, in case the Beetle sale fell through. I wished I could just get out of bed and go get this thing, park it in my garage, and get started. I'm very impatient when it comes to these things. I always have been.

I came up with a quick plan. First, the Beetle would be delivered to my garage. I would take it apart, sell what I didn't need, build dollies, strip the paint off, then get it to the school. Once in the metal shop, the rusted spots would be fixed, a new frame or roll cage put on the inside to stiffen it up a little. I would fill, sand, and prep the body surface for painting—then paint it a Cadillac pearl white. Then I'd work on the fleece for the interior and most likely redo the dollies to fit better with the look of the car. This is a good, solid but flexible plan. I can't think about it too much—the more I think about the consequences, the less likely I will want to do it. What will I do with it after I'm done at school? How much would storage cost? I hope I'm correct in thinking it probably doesn't cost much in Syracuse. I may need to put all my stuff in storage for a

while after I finish school. My girlfriend and I will be going on a road trip and we don't know where we'll live. *Jesus, I can't believe it. Another move. I'm sick of moving. I am only 28 and I already moved 24 times in my life.*

All of this moving created a lack of permanence and belonging. I have never spent enough time in one place to become a part of something, to feel at home, to be connected to a location or the people living there. I always feel disconnected from where I live, especially knowing that I will most likely move again. Moving boxes and suitcases is the only constant in my life. (Although at this point, I have the whole system down. Pack everything into small, same-size boxes. This way they aren't too heavy to move and are easy to stack and arrange. Bigger objects go into bigger boxes. Curtain rods go with lamps and other long things. Shrink wrap, tape, and plastic sheets ensure the boxes are taped well so they don't come apart.) At the same time, moving so much has encouraged me to explore, hence all the road trips. Come to think of it, this is why I always pack my work. Each piece gets its own custom box. After college I got a job as an art handler, where I built museum-quality crates and packed artwork, so crating my finished work also feels natural. It continues the idea of care in my work, which starts with the obsessive attention to detail and high level of craftsmanship.

I kept looking at the pictures of my hopefully-soon-to-be Beetle with excitement. I've always wanted one of these cars and now was the time. My mother always wanted a VW Beetle. I wonder how she's doing—I haven't seen her in a long time. She moved back to Poland and we don't really keep in touch, not even through email. A few years ago, my girlfriend noticed something, and so did my brother's girlfriend: my mother rarely smiled in family photos and had

a very distant look in her eyes. And I don't mean staged photos. I mean the candid ones, of her holding me on her lap as a baby. And so I grew up in a household of distance. As a child, I don't think I received deep attention, love, or care. There was always something missing.

The next morning, I woke up before the alarm. I checked my phone in hopes of seeing a response from the current Beetle owner. It was still too early. So, I continued searching for and messaging other potential sellers, in case this one fell through. I found a few autobody supply stores, made a list, and started calling as soon as they opened. I had many questions for them. I called the steel place to make sure they had what I needed and if they didn't, how long of a wait it would be to order. By now the guy at Klein Steel knows me and is very nice about explaining the technical side of things. I always assume that construction men are assholes. I just have this automatic assumption that comes from going to job sites with my father, the contractor. At least that's what I assumed until I realized that those men weren't the assholes (not all of them, anyway) but he was.

I am constantly wrong about this stereotype of masculinity. I had a weird experience once in Marfa, TX. I was on a road trip by myself driving from Los Angeles to New York in my little 2002 Volkswagen Golf. I was on the road for a long time that day and just wanted to get something to eat. Before going to the campsite, I went to a bar to get some quick food. I was by myself, eating at the bar, and there was a group of local construction guys talking loudly about a project they were working on. These guys looked rough and overworked. Their party fizzled out and one guy stayed behind to finish his beer. We ended up talking and it turned out he was a super nice guy. He had a shop down the road and invited me to come drink with his friends the

next evening. I pulled up to his shop in my little Golf and parked between huge lifted welding pickup trucks. The Golf fit perfectly between those trucks, and I in my obnoxiously bright t-shirt and skinny jeans fit in perfectly with those burly welders. Just like the fleece will fit perfectly into the Beetle shell.

Finally, the Beetle owner responded. We agreed on a price and a date to meet. Within a few days, I drove up north for an hour and a half to see the car and meet the owner. We previously agreed that he would deliver the Beetle that day and I would follow him back. It was a cold and rainy day. I arrived at his house and saw the Beetle in the overgrown driveway, hidden behind other half-fixed cars. We talked for a bit and I examined the Beetle. Being from 1968, I was not surprised to see all the rust. The engine didn't turn, the tires were flat and dry-rotted, the paint was chipping off, and there was no interior or floor for that matter. There were wasps in the gas tank and layers of rat shit everywhere. *This is perfect!*

I paid the guy, helped him load the Beetle onto his trailer, and followed him back home. I could barely keep up with him on the highway. I am not sure if I was more excited to buy this or if he was to sell it.

We got to my house and started backing up the trailer. After a few tries he got the trailer close to the garage and we muscled the Beetle off. There it was—I own a Beetle. I got inside, sat on the damp smelly seat, closed the door, fiddled with the pedals and the stick shift and grabbed the steering wheel as if I was going to drive off on one of my roadtrips. Maybe I can drive to California, through New Mexico and Arizona. I can go to White Sands, up to Arches, or even all

the way down to Key West. That would be nice. I can camp along the way, maybe stay with some friends. Alex and the cat can come; we can be modern-day hippies. Get a roof rack and pile our stuff up there. Stay in the right lane and take our time. I wonder how many miles per gallon this thing gets. I looked back towards the engine and realized I'm not going anywhere. This was a different kind of journey.

I wanted to strip the Beetle in my garage, get it down to just the metal body, then bring it over to school. I have no tools at home, it's dark and cold in the garage, and I can't make too much noise because of neighbors. However, I didn't want to deal with the politics of the school shops. I wanted to sell the pan, engine, and possibly the doors, fenders, hood and deck lid. I didn't want to do that at school. Also, I was going to use a heavy-duty, very potent, toxic paint stripper and didn't even want to think about what the rules for that were at the school. But, most importantly, I didn't want people bothering me. I hate it when I am completely engaged in the process, in the flow, and then being stopped by someone. It is a lot easier to do the thing, then present it finished. I remember countless times when I would get really into playing with Legos or building weird little things out of scraps and my father would say, "*Oczy w dupe ci wejda,*" which translates to, "Your eyes will go into your ass". You get the gist. Just let me do my thing.

The parts came off fairly easily, considering it was an old and rusty car. Wearing layers of hoodies and socks and two pairs of gloves helped to keep the cold away. I try to work systematically—I've learned that it is the quickest way to work. All of the fenders came off first, then the bumper brackets, followed by the driver's side door. I wasn't able to get the passenger side door off because the Beetle was parked too close to the garage wall. That screwed up the

system. I tried pushing the car over, further from the wall. The doors have to be open all the way to get to the hinge screws, but it was too heavy to move with no air in the tires. Sometimes, I get stuck on this system thing, and it becomes an obstacle that wastes time.

The hood was next, which revealed more work. Then came the deck lid, gas cap cover, and glass. I ripped out what was left of the interior. Wrestled out the rotted seats. The garage was a mess. I was too into the work and everything needed to come off now. This happens a lot: I ignore everything else until something is finished. I become obsessive. Finally, after tripping over one of the bumper brackets, I decided to take a break and clean up a little. I moved all the parts behind the garage. This was it, I'm one of those guys now. One of those hundreds of guys I see on my road trips and wonder, *Why do they have so many car parts in their yard? What's wrong with them?* Taking this car apart to its bare shell was so satisfying. To see the foundation, the base of the car. Even though we all own cars, we barely get to see the shell. All the details, the bends, the hours spent in designing are hidden with carpet and plastic.

Once everything was removed, it was time for the body to come off of the pan. There were two bolts in the front of the car under the gas tank and two bolts at the back of the car in the wheel wells. I got under the car and unbolted the body from the pan. Most of these bolts broke off but the body was free. I lifted up the back and moved the body left and laid it on the engine. Then went to the front, lifted the front, moved it to the right and rested it on the wheel. I was able to shimmy it off and eventually drag it out of the garage it into my driveway. With the body in the driveway and the pan in the garage I thought, *Yep, definitely one of those guys.*

Things were getting a little too spread out. The body in the driveway, the pan in the garage, and fenders, doors and other crap behind the garage. I needed to get rid of the pan ASAP. Plus, I wanted to make some money back, so I decided to post the pan for sale. But first, I had to remove the engine.

I spent six hours trying to remove the four bolts that held the engine to the transmission. The top two came off with no problem, but the bottom two were stuck. The engine didn't turn, which means water got into it and rusted things shut. Also, the engine canalivers off the back, so all that pressure is on those two bottom bolts. I got a jack under the engine and lifted it up a little to get the pressure off of the bolts. That didn't do anything. I couldn't even get the bolts to turn. I got a little propane torch to heat up the area around the bolts. I got a pipe to use as a lever to pry the engine off, and finally a hammer. Nothing worked. All I managed to do was scratch, bend, and break a few pieces of the engine. But, I was in too deep to give up now.

I came back the next day and continued. I got a flathead screwdriver and hammered it between the engine and transmission. After a few hours I got the parts to come apart. The weight of the engine helped to get the top to give first. The bottom bolts were still stuck. I was finally able to get some movement on the bottom bolts. With the engine hanging off a little I put two screwdrivers as low as I could in the gap between the engine and transmission. Got the jack under the back portion on the engine jacked it up, this released pressure from the bottom bolts and pried the engine off. *Finally.*

At this point I wanted nothing to do with the engine—it was too big of a job to do at this time. I hid the engine under a tarp and was able to sell the pan very quickly. By selling them separately, I could get more money. I posted the engine online and sold that too. But, funnily enough, I ended up selling it to the same guy that bought the pan. So all that work for nothing. Although, now I know how it all goes together.

In a rushed, rat poop-covered frenzy to get the body stripped, I got to know this car pretty well. I knew what bolt sizes held the fenders in place... I also knew what bolt sizes should have been there—it looks like someone tried to restore this Beetle at some point. There were welds that looked like they were done by a blind dog. There was bondo all over the body. Whoever tried to restore this car did a very poor job and didn't care about what they were doing. "If it's worth doing, it's worth doing right." I have heard that before many times. Where is the craftsmanship? Where is the love?

Speaking about love, I learned something about myself recently. There are five love languages—ways that a person communicates and receives affection—and each one of us speaks one or a few most fluently. Mine are: acts of service, quality time, and physical touch. Considering this, it all makes sense. It makes sense why I choose time-intensive work and why I value craftsmanship—this is the way I show care. This is why I value deliberate actions more than words. This is why my work is process-based with an intention to produce a well-crafted object.

I spread the paint stripper over the paint with a brush, covered it with some plastic, and waited. I was excited to scrape the paint off with one swift motion of the putty knife, just like in the

videos. Nope, just some paint came off. Layers and layers of “restored” paint don’t make this task easy. I spent hours on this. Brushing on a layer of remover and scraping it off. The surface area is pretty large, so there is no down time; by the time the last area is covered in remover, the first spot is ready for scraping. I tried focusing on one area at a time but that doesn’t really work. It’s hard to predict which spots will come off easily. There is rust under the paint that creates a bond between the paint and metal. Actually there is a lot more rust than I thought there would be. There is so much hidden just underneath the paint. I remember a man much smarter than me saying, “People don’t change, they are only revealed. But, once revealed there is potential for change.”

Initially I thought I would need a few days and one can of paint stripper to remove all the paint. But even two weeks weren't enough. I have gone through four cans of stripper and even had help from a friend for a whole day. That was nice. I was joking that I talk about my process so much and people just see the end result, but no one really gets to experience it for what it is. And unfortunately it isn't very exciting.

The more paint I scrape off, the more I see. The original color was this creamy off-white, which even after fifty years, is still hard to get off in places. There are many little dents on the roof. And a big one on the side. Sometimes the paint comes off easy and reveals the pristine metal underneath. Other times, only one layer comes off at a time. The progress is slow, very time-consuming, uncomfortable, smelly and toxic, but very satisfying. I decided to do this project, so now it's just a matter of doing it—no matter how much time it will take.

Initially, I got only 48 feet of 1-inch square tubing. It was barely enough to make the boxes for the dollies, and not enough to create structural supports or the brackets to reach the bottom of the car body. So, I ended up going back to get more metal, twice. I kept miscalculating—plus metal is pretty expensive.

During shop hours I started working on the dollies. I found two good pairs of brackets on the body where it was used to attach it to the pan. I got the measurements and went to get the casters. I started welding the dollies. In total, I used 96 feet of 1-inch square tubing. The dollies took me a few full days to weld. I was using a tig welder, which is super precise, clean and beautiful. This method of welding is very slow, which added a lot of time. But, it was a challenge to myself.

Why do I do this to myself? It's just like that time I went hiking with one of my college friends. I hadn't been hiking in a very long time, and he's pretty athletic and goes hiking at least once a week. I was a little worried I wouldn't be able to keep up. This was in California, part of the John Muir trail. The plan was to hike 24 miles in four days—take it easy the first day and do four miles, then continue on the next day for eight. Get to a lake and the next day do the same thing backwards. We were joking that I should start a “off the couch and onto a mountain” hashtag. We did the first part with ease, carrying a thirty pound bag, climbing up 2,600 feet. I decided we should continue until we get to a spot where we could set up camp. Then we got there, tired and out of breath. I decided we should continue to another spot further up the trail, and this happened a few times. We ended up hiking 12 miles with a 4,100 elevation, up two passes.

Unfortunately, some of the metal I got was dirty, and even grinding, washing, and prepping didn't help from the welds becoming dirty. So, I moved to MIG. I got the boxes of the dollies and brackets done. I took everything to the garage and lifted the body one end at a time and slid the dollies under. Then worked them up to where the brackets met and bolted them on.

Once the Beetle is moved to the school, all of the paint is scraped off, and the rust grinded away, the body work will come. There are a few parts I want to alter. Some areas are completely rusted through and will need to be cut out and re-fabricated. I got 20 gauge cold rolled steel. It's thin enough to manipulate using hammers and the English Wheel, which I have never used.

Next will come filling and painting. I absolutely love this part. Spending hours and hours filling, then sanding it down over and over to make a perfect surface for paint. This process is very tedious but very satisfying. It may not look smooth, but if you swipe your hand across it, it is perfectly smooth. Also, there is usually some dust on the surface and that feeling of swiping my hand across a smooth surface with that dust feels so good and satisfying. It feels like all the work put into it is worth it. I love homogenizing everything, making it look like one cohesive unit. But, also knowing that it is done well, that there is no rust anywhere.

After the body of the Beetle is all fixed up will come the neon pink fleece interior. I will need to order about 725 yards. The fleece is delivered from an online company based in California. I actually ended up meeting the business owner and got a personal discount code for the website. So, instead of buying the fleece for \$9 a yard from Joann's Fabrics, I get it for \$2.75 per yard. I have come to learn that materials have meanings, references, and feelings ingrained within. And

the choice of materials works in both ways: it can be used by the artist to communicate or the material can communicate and reveal something about the artist, which is a great way to learn about yourself. At a certain point in graduate school, my work became flat, unapproachable, cold, and sad. I was using metal and concrete. Through the process of making, I realized that the pieces were a reflection of myself; I too have become cold and distant. And so, I decided to find a material that was soft, approachable, open and inviting. I thought of baby blankets, hence the fleece.

For now, the plan is to fill the Beetle with layered fleece which will stop where the windows start. The fleece will not go all the way to the ceiling. I want the viewer to be able to peek inside. However, this idea may change as I work on the project. I am very stubborn about my ideas and I will protect them from other people's suggestions or "assaults" as I see them. But, I am also flexible and allow it to go places it wants to—I try to get out of the way.

The fleece arrives in 20 yard increments, it is folded in half to make 30" wide rolls. I place the rolls on one end of a large table, set up a cutting guide, and cut the fleece into even pieces. This is a very repetitive, systematic, and quite boring job. Yet, with every cut I learn a little more about the fabric. It stretches in one direction more than the other, sheds fibers that stick to the scissors, and if dropped picks up all the dust off of the ground. Repetitive, nearly mindless motions create an opportunity for self reflection, which some days can feel like Chinese water torture. Each cut can feel like a drip, which doesn't seem bad at first. But, it continues on and on, cut after cut, quickly taking its subject to an empty place. Maybe that's where my mother was in those photos. The emptiness is one thing, but the anticipation of an impossible solution is

numbing, which quickly turns into anger, resentment, and frustration. With hundreds of yards to cut, the physical aspect of doing is easy, the mental is a challenge. But on other days, the repetition is meditative and takes me to Cape Cod, swinging on a hammock back and forth under the crooked pine trees with the sun flickering through the needles.

The Beetle isn't big for a car, but the interior is quite large to fill with fleece. I will cut the fleece to the largest interior dimension and start filling the Beetle a few layers at a time, trimming the edges as I go. The fleece is barely an eighth of an inch thick so with 40 inches to fill, that'll be about four hundred layers. There are two sides to the fabric, one is a little more hairy and softer than the other. There is also a direction the fibers face. I try to face and orient all the layers of the fleece the same way. It is important to keep the the layers uniform because once the fleece is layered, the sides are visible like plies in plywood. With more layers comes more weight, and the lower layers start to get squeezed a little which is noticeable when cutting, but thankfully not so much to the eye.

I don't actually remember if I had a baby blanket. I do remember my brother having one. And I think that after all these years and all the moving, he may still have it. When we moved to the States, my mother and brother made the journey first and my father and I followed, arriving a few months later. I remember the day we all met up at the airport. I saw my brother way down the hallway and I ran to him as fast as I could and he ran towards me. Then we stopped right before reaching each other. I didn't know what to do and I don't think he knew either. Some lady came up to us and said "Hug!" but I didn't speak English then, so my aunt quickly translated. I don't remember what happened after that and I don't think that's important. That damned

distance has been between us since then. It's like putting the same poles of magnets together. There is an invisible force, it's not violent, it's not harsh. It's soft as if it was there to lessen the impact of reality.

Finally, the finished Beetle will get packed away into its own Beetle-sized crate. It may be a good idea to have it ride on its side rather than upright. This means creating a front-load crate where the back lid comes off or a full breakaway. Foam on 2x4 structures and braces will hold the Beetle in place and I'll have to come up with a clever way to keep the fleece in place so it doesn't slide out. But I always figure it out—there is always a way to make things work.

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