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Shangles: A Stream of Consciousness

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Abstract: The purpose of this thesis is to explore the Shangle. Shangle is a term devised by my grandfather during the course of a practical joke. Years after his death, I look to define and explore the ramifications and possibilities of a shangle. I describe how the pursuit of a shangle has allowed for an evolution of my art-making methodologies and concerns. My artwork draws from my interests in humor, culture, materiality, personal anecdotes, and a pervasive need to find the edge of my artwork. My artwork toes the line between fictional narrative and the violent reality of everyday life. I believe artwork has the power to shift how people see the world, but in order to do so, the experience and process of making an artwork needs to first change the artist.

Shangles: A Stream of Consciousness

By

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B.F.A., University of Maine in Orono, 2018

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Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Studio Arts.

Syracuse University

May 2021

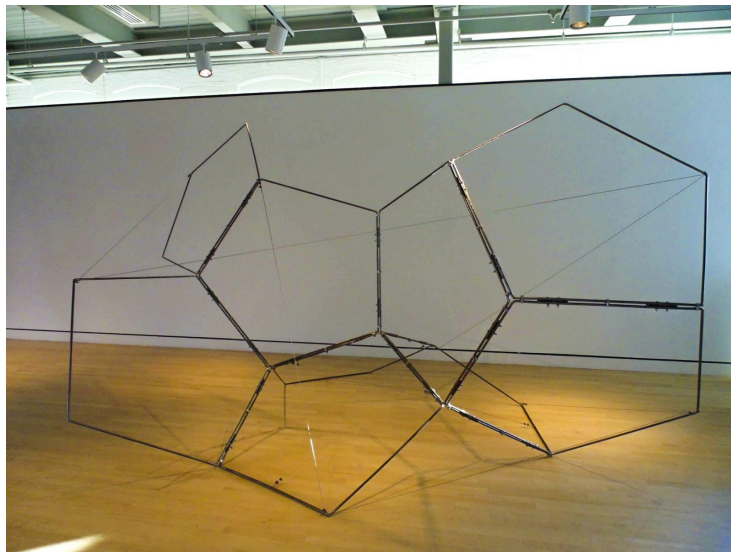
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As an object maker the perception of value in my work has fluctuated over time. I don't mean the value in making objects, but the question of what is driving my research. When I began my graduate research I was enamored with finely crafted large scale sculptures and objects.

Connections (2017) was the culmination of my undergraduate research and ideas of space and



Connections, (2017)

style the year before. Over the course of my graduate study, I have become disenchanted with the finely crafted aesthetic object for object's sake, the pretty thing that doesn't really mean anything but is nice to look at. That isn't to say I cannot appreciate, and love to see, quality craftsmanship. But

how does the craftsmanship inform

the content of the art object? The process of how the object came into existence is just as important and has evolved in my work to become even more important than the final result as an installation, image, or performance. I believe that the beauty of an artwork isn't only in what is on display but is also in how it got there. It is with this mindset that my practice has turned to shangles.

The shangle is a unique ephemeral experience that infuses humor into the pursuit of something. Making a shangle is autotelic; it is not the result it is the journey toward that result that creates its value. I have grown less interested in creating art objects built to sell and stand the test of time - capable of standing years untarnished - and instead focus on the performative act of making something and sharing that experience through temporary performances, installations,

and other documentations. I hope that through recentering my practice on this idea of a “shangle” I can reorient the focus people have on my work toward the subtleties of time and process that highlight the performative act and labor inherent in everyday activities. As I will demonstrate in the following story, documenting my first encounter with the “shangle”, the shangle as tangible reality could never ultimately be made.

When I was a kid, probably 9ish, I went camping with my grandparents.

As my grandfather unpacked the car he looked at me and said, “Hey, why don’t you go up to the corner store and get me some shangles?”

I said, “You mean shingles?”

“No, SHANG-guls.”

“There’s no such thing as a shangle,” I said

“Just take your sister, go to the store, and get me some shangles. Just ask them at the store when you get there.”

I scooped up my bike, made sure my sister was behind me, and set off on my quest to find these “SHANG-guls”. The store was uphill around a quarter of a mile away.

When I got there I asked the clerk for a shangle. He asked me to repeat myself several times before I gave up. I must not have heard Grandpy right. So back down the road I went to figure out what I had missed.

When I got back, I noticed my grandfather had made considerable progress on pitching the tent. “Did you get the shangles?” he said.

“No, they said there’s no such thing as a shangle, just like I said.”

“Well of course there is, that’s why I sent you to the store to go and get them.”

“But there isn’t - there are shingles but there is no such thing as a shangle.”

“Joshua, I need those shangles.”

“Fiiiiiiine. I will go back to the store to find your shangles.”

Off I rode on my little mountain bike, sister in tow the entire time, just happy to be there. I was somehow convinced through my grandfather's persistence that shangles must be real.

Slowly I plodded my way up that steep dirt hill and pulled up to that campground store once again. This time, I walked in more confidently. I said, “My grandfather is sure, he wants me to get him some SHANG-guls.” The store clerk cracked a little and then just started LAUGHING. The audacity. Here I was trekking all this way to try and find some bloody shangles and it hit me. I had been tricked, bamboozled, hoodwinked, set on a meaningless quest for something that didn’t exist. I had simultaneously been vindicated and made into a fool.

I sped off on my bike. When I arrived back at camp, the tent was finished and my grandfather couldn’t stop laughing.

I wrote that story down for the first time in the fall of 2020 while trying to describe a new gestalt of work that surprised me in how removed it felt from the body of work I had been building. This story and the question of “What is a shangle?” opens up a new way for me to think about object making - highlighting the necessity to engage with a task as much as with finishing that task. I want to maintain the spirit of the original shangle, written above, during my research. This has created a tension and problem in my practice where I set myself toward finding a thing that I can’t find, but have to knowingly try and find, even though I know it’s impossible. I didn’t understand that I couldn’t find the object of my pursuit in the original story,

so how do I now engage with trying to actively do something that I know is impossible? Shangle manufacturing and research is still a very new and fresh discovery to my art practice. As such, I cannot yet claim success at crafting the shangle secret formula, or that I've successfully made a shangle experience at all, but I can explain how I got here. My shangle research began as an extension of making my *PineApple Tree* (2020).

The inspiration for the *PineApple Tree* was a corny joke my dad tells me every hunting season. Before the season starts, you can put food out for deer but you can't hunt over it when the season actually begins (called baiting)¹; this doesn't include hunting over naturally occurring food areas like a corn field or an apple tree. Every year we would go into the woods to feed the deer in the off season² with some salt blocks or a small assortment of apples. When we would splurge and put out apples for the deer my father would frequently put them under a bunch of pine trees - more or less because they are just everywhere in Maine. The first time Dad took me out as a kid I stumbled across some of these apples. Confused, I asked him, "Where did those come from?" Straight faced, my father pointed at the fruit and then at the pine tree. He said, "That's a pineapple, this is a grove of Pine-Apple trees."³ It was one of those experiences where you have to be there to appreciate the joke and its delivery. The first half of every year my father planted apples and the second half he was harvesting deer. After years of telling me he was off to tend to his PineApple trees I decided I should make my own.

I nailed about three dozen apples to some 2x4's and stabbed those apples with branches from a pine tree. This created a series of crushed yellow and red balls, sprouting one perky pine branch each, smeared across the wood and floor. The fruits of my labor were assembled and left

¹ In Maine you cannot feed deer from June 1st - December 15th.

² Because this is something taken very seriously back home, I would like to state for the record that yes the food was always gone by the prohibited feeding period, and yes we would always follow the laws and guidelines put in place by the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries of Maine.

³ In a very Maine - ask a stupid question get a stupid answer - kind of way.

to rot on the gallery floor like a fallen tree. From the 2x4s, I constructed the rough silhouette of a tree to lay upon the ground acting as a platform for the pun - directly translated from the apples and pine branches - and gives a visual weight and importance to the PineApples.



PineApple Tree, (2020)

The 2x4's and pine plywood under the apples have had subtler, but more aggressive, treatment to reference the violence from hunting that gave rise to the original joke. I textured some of the 2x4's using a small hatchet. *The hatchet has no place in hunting except to clear brush, though it is frequently used to hunt trees. I don't think anyone could make a credible argument that hunting isn't violent. I have always been fascinated by the different perspective's meat eaters have about their food. I think people who actively hunt and prepare their own meat have a very different understanding of the world than those who solely purchase meat in a store or already cooked. Having grown up with hunting and fishing as such an intrinsic part of my childhood, I wonder what psychological effect such experiences have on how I process violence and death in a general sense. I also wonder how the collective experiences of individuals in these situations translates to the health of communities where*

hunting is as common as breathing. Anyway, I used this hatchet to create a barky texture similar to that of - you guessed it - the bark of a tree. Achieving this effect required hacking away at the boards for upwards of 10 minutes per foot. *I spent hours listening to a cacophony of rhythmic thwacking in my head and my shoulder. I*

think it's important when I work to sometimes work harder than smarter. It sounds counter intuitive and creates an excessively tedious and stupid process that leaves me very sore and questioning my choices; but I think it can be important to the resulting work. There are easier ways to texture and destroy a piece of



PineApple Tree, (2020)

wood, but the labor of assembling and detail chopping the wood conveys a deeper passion and conviction to the act of its making. To me, using a power tool or machine would feel cold, quick, clinical, and passionless. I wanted to include the humanity found in the labor and the texture of the hatchet marks. The humanity, imperfection, and varying depths of my strikes reflected not just the physical, but the mental focus coming and going throughout the laborious process.

After assembling these chopped pieces of wood, I soaked them in apple cider and burned them. The burn marks reference the coloration of knots found in the 2x4's and the gently cooked⁴ apple cider gives a shine similar to pine sap. The apples and pine needles are brightly colored and aromatic - immediately drawing the viewer's attention; they are, after all, the visual indicators of the pine and apple pineapple joke. But the background scars and burns of the wood are what give the pun a story and tie it to my sense of reality. When I asked people for their thoughts on the tree, the PineApple tree was frequently compared to a Christmas tree and happy

⁴ Using a blowtorch

memories of apple picking and pine forests, in spite of the rotting and beaten materials. The hatchet marks went largely unnoticed. *Reflecting on how easily such intensive forms of labor go unnoticed I am reminded of the hidden labor that takes place in the world around me every day. In conjunction with the morality of hunting for food, I think about the meat in the grocery store so far removed from an animal's life or the slaughterhouse; or more importantly the human that endures killing so many animals each day. Similarly, I think about the removed quality of the lumber I used to build my tree and in the building surrounding me, feeling removed from the trees that were originally cut down and shaved smooth to construct my reality, the reality of needing something else to die to sustain life.*

"Maybe I'm just saying that we're all corrupted in a way; life itself is corrupted, and that's the way we like it." - Maurizio Cattelan⁵

Two days before making my chunky rotting homemade hammer applesauce, I found this quote while reading *Maurizio Cattelan: Infinite Jest* by Tom Morton.⁶ It was reading this essay that kicked off my sudden gestalt of humorous works. I've always wanted to be funny. I tell jokes⁷ at every opportunity I get. Humor has always been how I try to process my emotions and connect with others - similar to my art. In response to Morton's essay on one of the biggest comedians in art, I made a series of small jokes including a knock off *Comedian* (2019).⁸ I have remained fascinated with *Comedian* since it blew up in popularity in 2019, never quite knowing if I loved or hated it. Inspired by this quote⁹, I took a piece of scotch tape and the smallest french

⁵ Tom Morton, "Maurizio Cattelan: Infinite Jester." in *The Artist's Joke*, ed. Jennifer Higgie (Slovenia: Whitechapel and The MIT Press, 2007), 205

⁶ Tom Morton, "Maurizio Cattelan: Infinite Jester." in *The Artist's Joke*, ed. Jennifer Higgie (Slovenia: Whitechapel and The MIT Press, 2007), 205-211

⁷ This mostly consists of a string of never ending puns.

⁸ An artwork by Maurizio Cattelan made famous for its appearance at Miami Art Basel in 2019.

⁹ "If Cattelan here made an art institution his accomplice in a crime, he did something similar with the Italian police in his *Unfitted* (2002). Having failed to make a new work for an upcoming exhibition, the artist went to a local police station on the night before the opening and reported that a non-existent sculpture had been stolen from his car. Defeated long ago, perhaps, by the efforts of a thousand small-fry insurance fraudsters, the duty officer typed up a report, which Cattelan then framed and hung in the gallery the following day." I did not discover the similarity between my work that day and this quote until some months later.

fry I could find in my lunch of McDonald's and attached it to the wall. In pencil I titled my greasy potato piece *small fry* (2020). *small fry* surprised me the more I stared at it. It reflected back to me my experienced feelings of insignificance and isolation. I couldn't help but laugh at how stupid it felt labelling it and emotionally relating myself to a tiny piece of potato taped to a wall. It felt as though I was strapping on a facade of spectacle or glorious purpose over a singularly stupid and now functionally



small fry, (2020)

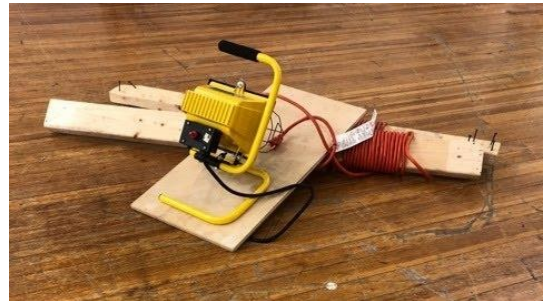
useless piece of potato just by taping it to a white wall and naming it. Thinking about the absurdity of taping that french fry to the wall and having an emotional connection with it still makes me laugh. I realize more clearly now the value of making an art object, no matter how simple, that you can think back to and enjoy even for the sake of a laugh. The importance of the object, and objects like it, isn't in anything that it can represent or become; it's just an irreverently placed french fry taking up space on a fine art white wall of a gallery. The idea of searching for high minded ideas on a wall and finding something so small and stupid as that french fry is hilarious to me. People sometimes undervalue the importance of surrounding themselves with ideas and things that make them laugh for laughter's sake. Humor is one of the most beautiful things life can offer even if you're laughing at yourself. The beauty in *small fry* isn't its color or meaning. It's in the simplicity of an action and the laughter it provides. The ability to find value in the simplicity of my own personal experiences making work began a little over a year earlier.

I had been transporting some materials across town for an installation. During one of these trips I came across this moving thing in the middle of the road which, I soon discovered, was a cat experiencing its last moments of life. It was a cold night, and the cat had been hit by a car. I have experienced plenty of animal deaths in my life; I've accidentally hit squirrels, caught fish, and I shot my first deer at 12. But this moment was different. I tried to comfort the animal, felt it breathe under my hand, felt its slowing heartbeat, and then just warm fur. It wasn't an instantaneous death, I was witnessing the prolonged passage from life to something else. I was reminded of being, I think, 13, petting my 14 year old dog, watching as the vet put her to sleep, similarly feeling the last shudders of life in my old dog holding on, then nothing. After the cat passed away I went door to door, but no one knew whose cat it was. With each house I was told it was probably a stray and could see the tension in people's eyes relax. The cat had no one who cared for it or missed it, and that was a comfort for people. I climbed back into my car and drove away, leaving the corpse of that cat on the cold snowbank of a street that didn't care.

The rest of the evening I couldn't stop thinking about that cat. What life had it lived and what owners might it have had? What would become of the body when the snow melted? I am a sentimental person by nature, but my brain doesn't usually cling so desperately to something involving the death of an animal so far removed from my daily life. Unable to focus, I scrapped my original plans for my installation and instead built three small memorials of discarded objects. The sculptures exist as sites of labor and snapshots of work no longer in use. Collectively, the three sites are where I reconciled my emotions for what I had just witnessed. Each of the three sculptures contained one worklight, which to me was a personification or symbol of life or energy. One light was set onto a piece of plywood, which was on top of 2x4's wrapped together by extension cords, and facing its own plug. The second worklight was on a

wall made of cut up 2x4's screwed together but left with a shattered glass lens. The third and final piece was this 2x4 structure that formed nothing recognizable while suspending a worklight by its unplugged extension cord. All of the lights were off.

I had been working and reworking those materials into pop up sculptures and installations for the better part of 6 months. My original fascination with these materials had grown from their ubiquity and the way they reminded me of my childhood growing up in a house under continuous renovations for the better part of 17 years. I was also working as a carpenter and reflecting on the views I had of my father when I was a child, a man I adore, who did most of that construction and how I was rapidly



plug, (2019) Top; left, (2019) Bottom

approaching his age at the time of my birth. Those sculptures were not the representation of that cat. I had never intended them to be. But my mind was on the process of transitions and conclusions. How things like construction, labor, periods of life and life itself, come to an end. That's all a little overly existential and romantic maybe, but that was the day I was having.

What that experience of making taught me was the value of the backlog of material studies and labor hidden behind the making of art objects, how the history of experience with materials translates to how they operate within the art objects I make. It wasn't the mastery in the sense of finely polished craft and craftsmanship that propelled those objects, but the familiarity with holding them and employing those objects to operate their intended function and then resist it. To understand the environments those materials naturally belonged within allowed me to



untitled, (2019)

create a sense of finality to their purpose and allowed me to lay those materials to rest. Like the french fry a year later, when I walked away from those memorials of labor I felt a weight lift off my chest. The french fry evoked my sense of laughter, but those 2x4's provoked my feelings of finality and rest; labor ended. I think the

PineApple Tree lacked this quality due to the scale of the project. The *PineApple Tree*'s size and subject pushed me away from the humble and quiet feeling found in the memorials.

This all leads back to the post-shangle discovery practice. The *PineApple Tree* has been made, the shangle story remembered and recorded, now I need to figure out how I will use this shangle methodology to propel my practice forward. My first attempt to put the shangle into practice resulted in a 22 hour performance.

My interest in performance had been resurging for some time. I had experimented with performance only once before in the form of a foot washing in which I lathered and bathed people's feet while I talked with them. That piece had been about connection and intimacy in a non-sexual but physical way between people. The process of that piece had been so overwhelmingly different from my usual work that it scared me and I backed away from anything close to it for over a year. But I could feel this welling desire to get back into a performance driven experience. This desire had been bolstered by the shangle. It seemed like the most logical and direct way to make art about the performative act of making art was to try and make performance art. To find out, I devised a plan to perform for a combined total of 24 hours

within one week and tried to use the pressure of the performance and a live audience to fill as much of that time as possible.

On one side of the room I pushed a pedestal against the wall to hold my laptop, camera, and an amp. On the other was the couch from my studio. Between them was a stool and a homemade side table using an old garden column and a slab of wood. Between the pedestal and the couch I would perform with a microphone and whatever other objects I brought into that space. I had originally scheduled 24 hours of performances that were supposed to take place from Thursday to the following Wednesday.¹⁰ For the first three scheduled 4 hour sets I intended to improvise my performance, monologuing personal experiences of embarrassing moments in my life and anything else that came to mind. The idea was to imitate the performative acts of the standup comedian.

Some professional comedians talk about how their process of writing jokes includes a lot of experimental monologuing on stage. They don't really know where they're going, but figure it out along the way through the audience; it sounded to me a lot like this shangle thing I was going for. The monologue, and occasional dialogue, between the comedian and audience was used as a process of developing new content for a tighter and longer routine of new material. Jim Carrey mentioned in an interview¹¹ that he once did a new completely improvised set every night for 6 months, reusing none of his previous night's material. He saw it as a kind of performance art exercise for refining his craft. What I quickly discovered while doing my first series of performances is that I am in fact not Jim Carrey.

It is important to realize that I do not have Jim Carrey's stage presence. Furthermore, I do not have Jim Carrey's extensive background experience in engaging with an idea and an

¹⁰ Excluding the Saturday and Sunday. I fell short of this original goal by 2 hours after a particularly emotional set where I felt the need to end the performance early and regroup - feeling overwhelmed.

¹¹ Marc Maron, interview with Jim Carrey, *WTF with Marc Maron*, podcast audio. June 16th 2020

audience through the emotional rollercoaster that is a live show. Thirdly, most of my performance was done to a video camera and an empty room. About 90% of the time I was performing and working through my material I was talking to myself. I came to realize that part of the art for me was playing with that space of inexperience. If I am in front of a large audience or have those refined skills then the performance becomes more about the content of what I am saying and doing while I am on stage. Jim Carrey has crafted his personality and stage presence in a way that allows for creativity and nuance in his delivery of material. People know he knows what he's doing. On the other hand, my inexperience puts the focus on my lack of skill and lack of nuanced understanding of performing. The materials I am making an artwork through are the emotional stressors of performing, feeling myself lose control of an audience, lose control of the headspace I need, and other unskilled moments. That's not to say the content of what I'm saying is to be completely ignored. But the thrust into the unknown is where the real work of art began to take form as a shangle. It's a method of art making with a very finite shelf life. Like the original fluxus artists, you can only stay unskilled at something for so long before you inherently have to gain some level of practice and skill at the thing you're doing. You cannot remain a novice at one thing forever if you actually do it. But I'm not trying to be a fluxus artist or develop a new form of performance art - I'm trying to make a shangle.

The next try at a shangle was through the repetition of an action. I had no end goal in mind, only a single word - bottle. I would say bottle for 4 hours straight at various cadences throughout. The skills required here were patience and to do something mind numbing for hours on repeat until it was over. While it made for an occasionally funny endurance piece it, and the remaining performances of standing still, chatting with my audience, and performing actions offscreen, did little in the way of making a shangle. What I had done was put the focus of my art

into the endurance and process of performing an action for an extended period of time. What I had not done was create the sense of wonder and wholesome good natured entertainment that was found in the original story. Even without the feeling of being duped or misguided, the fact was that I bonded with no one through those endurance performances, they were not successful attempts at a shangle. The *PineApple Tree* and *small fry* had allowed me to bond with others through humor when I was in the gallery, and they contained stories of me being deceived and laughing at myself, but they still lacked the emphasis on labor like I had found in the three labor sites the night the cat died or in my endurance performances. What I want to do is find a way to merge all those ingredients together to try and find a shangle.

As much as the shangle story speaks to the gullibility of a 9 year old boy's trust in his grandfather, it is also a story about a grandfather bonding with his grandson. Through the facade of a joke and an unknowingly unretrievable object, I embarked on a journey that my family and I have bonded over for well over a decade. An innocuous prank played by my grandfather to keep me entertained for an hour while he pitched our tent unbothered has now spurred the creative processes and curiosity of his now 26 year old grandson for quite some time. My grandfather had a gift for introducing wonder into the everyday through equally spontaneous and sporadic storytelling with his sense of humor. His deadpan humor, which my father developed into a style of his own, has shaped my own humor sensibilities and my own mechanism for bonding and connecting with others. What I want to do is replicate that ability to entertain and connect with people. If I can accomplish anything with my art, I want it to provide a site of bonding and entertainment for people. I want to introduce a bemused curiosity and renewed sense of wonder in the everyday through everyday materials and language. I want my art to be a distilled slice of life that accepts the humor, the pain, and the absurdity of what it means to be human. Humor,

particularly humor that makes you laugh with others, is a bonding experience. The pursuit of that bonding experience will drive my work after graduate school.

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