NON-ESSENTIALS FOR URGENT LIVING

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
San Diego State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
in
Art

by
Aren John Skalman
Summer 2014
SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY

The Undersigned Faculty Committee Approves the

Project of Aren John Skalman:

Non-Essentials for Urgent Living

Richard Keely, Chair
School of Art, Design, and Art History

Arzu Ozkal
School of Art, Design, and Art History

Katherine Midgley
Department of Psychology

David Hewitt
School of Art, Design, and Art History

5/5/2014
Approval Date
ABSTRACT OF THE PROJECT

Non-Essentials for Urgent Living
by
Aren John Skalman
Master of Fine Arts in Art
San Diego State University, 2014

The Thesis Exhibition, Non-Essentials for Urgent Living, was held between April 9th and April 17th, 2014 in the University Art Gallery in the School of Art and Design at San Diego State University. The exhibition was the culminating event in my graduate studies in sculpture. This report is an effort to discuss the influences, research, learning experiences, philosophies, and processes which have contributed to my development as an artist and scholar.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF PLATES</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 COSTLY WORDS</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 TWO CREATION STORIES</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part One</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part Two</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 BEING AND RESONANCE</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 SOUND AND VISION</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 THOUGHTS ON PROCESS</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLATES</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF PLATES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plate</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td><em>Triad</em>; Wood, Electronics, Hardware, Mylar, Sound</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td><em>Triad</em> (Detail)</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td><em>Median (Variation)</em>; Plywood, Paint, Broom, Cornstarch Pigment, Fluorescent Light</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td><em>Tributary</em>; Powder Coated Steel, Wood, Wax, Brass, Electronics, Mylar, Bricks, Bamboo, Cast Resin, Sound</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td><em>Tributary</em> (Detail)</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td><em>Zip</em>; Wood, Electronics, Bamboo, Powder Coated Steel, Electronics, Sound</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td><em>Zip</em> (Detail)</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td><em>Slice</em>; Wood, Hardware, Formica, Acrylic, Electronics</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td><em>Slice</em> (Detail)</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Installation View</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Second Installation View</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many people whom I would like to thank for their contributions to my success as a graduate student.

My wife, Rebecca Bowman, and son, James Arrow Skalman, have been great sources of inspiration and support.

My parents, Jo Dowling, James Skalman, and step-parents, Bob Dowling and Debra Morebello have been lifelong positive influences.

Thank you to my Thesis Committee members, David Hewitt, Richard Keely, Dr. Katherine Midgely, and Arzu Orkal, who have been instrumental in the development of the art and writing, and who have been excellent guides in connecting the two.

I have had the privilege of being mentored and critiqued by professors Richard Baker, Catherine Gleason, Matthew Hebert, Wendy Maruyama, Gail Roberts, and Eva Struble. I would also like to thank faculty members Dr. Jo-Anne Berelowitz, Richard Burkett, David Fobes, Joanne Hayakawa, Kotaro Nakumura, Sondra Sherman, and Tina Yapelli, who contributed their time and thoughts to the Thesis Oral Defense.

I am honored to have had the fine photographer, Rizzhel Mae Javier, document the work in this exhibition. Thank you also to Andrew, Emilie, and Mena Hunter for their support. Many fellow students, including Ainsley Buhl Kramer and Matt Picon offered their assistance and insights.

There were a number of individuals in Bengaluru, India, who became friends, mentors, collaborators and helpers. Not only were they instrumental in the completion of my project there, they made day-to-day living enjoyable and tenable for me and my family. They include, but are not limited to: Khushi Adhikari, Vineesh Amin, Tajendra Singh Baoni, Mithila Ramadas Baindur, Yash Bhandari, Preetam Casimir, Deepak DL, Nicole Faut, Pooja Hirehal Gaviappa, Suresh Jayaram, Dhanush Kiran, Varun Krishnan, Vibha Kulkarni, Anil Kumar, Aruna Manjunath, Amir Moslemzadeh, Ranjana Nagaraja, Bharath Narayan, Archana Prasad, Dhanya Rajaram, Christine Rogers, Joshua Rosario, Vijayakumar
Seethappa, Surekha, and Meghana Yeri. By extension they have had profound impact on the completion of this project.

Last but not least, I would like to thank, Jim Cavolt, Todd Partridge, and staff who keep things running well at the SDSU School of Art and Design.
INTRODUCTION

The title, *Non-Essentials for Urgent Living*, can be considered a parody of an Ikea catalog, CB2 promotional material, or a Dwell magazine feature; something that might be imagined to read “Essentials for Comfortable Living,” or “Must-Haves for a Luxurious Lifestyle.” To a degree, art is a non-crucial pursuit—in some instances a luxury—something done with abundant leisure. However, at a certain level, art making is a universal and primary human activity. For art makers, enthusiast and collectors, art can be an all-consuming focus. We have all heard stories of painters sacrificing a meal to buy paints and brushes. At the same time, art can be a powerful communicator of political ideas, a way of engaging community, a means of nurturing cross-cultural understanding, and a mode for investigating the universe and human nature. The title of this project is a way of retrospectively encapsulating and presenting a snapshot of the art making process.

The chapter, “Costly Words,” is an apology of sorts. It can be challenging to translate a visual mode of communication into a verbal one. Art is an irrational endeavor, and so to systematize and rationalize it can seem paradoxical. My art can be about obscuring communication, while the writing is an effort to clarify. However, struggling through these processes has been rewarding.

“Two Creation Stories” discusses origins of art from two very different perspectives. Part One considers ways in which art making is related to our biological evolution as humans. Some authors have proposed that our evolution as a species has contributed to the uniquely human motivation to make art.

While this proposition can shed light on the art experience, it may have limitations, and so it is important to look at the interaction between art and culture. Part Two discusses some of the artists and movements from the 20th century, such as Dada, Fluxus, Robert Rauschenberg, Dieter Roth, and John Cage, among others, that have had an impact on my thinking and process. These people have expanded the notion of what art may be, and have striven to blur the lines between art and life.

“Being and Resonance” looks at approaching art in terms of the experience of the viewer and the maker. Self-awareness can play a part in the experience, but becoming
immersed in a wider experience—where one’s own self-concern momentarily disappears—is crucial in order for an artwork to truly resonate. A shift between representative, abstract, and concrete modes of expression can affect such experience.

The work in this show moves beyond the three-dimensional and pictorial to incorporate elements of sound, light, movement, and interactivity. In particular, I am interested in the relationships and problems that arise between physical objects and music or sound. In the fourth chapter, “Sound and Vision,” I discuss some of the physical, symbolic, psychological, and practical ways in which the pieces in the exhibition deal with the relationship between sound and form.

Discussing my process in the final chapter, “Thoughts on Process,” will be an opportunity to talk directly about the evolution of the pieces in the exhibition, and the plates represented in the back of the report.
CHAPTER 1

COSTLY WORDS

As soon as we start putting our thoughts into words and sentences everything gets distorted, language is just no damn good—I use it because I have to, but I don’t put any trust in it. We never understand each other.

—Marcel Duchamp

I mistrust words. I’m suspicious of those who use too many of them. “Costly words”¹.

I admire a vow of silence. And yet I am writing this.

There is often a disconnection between what is said and what is made. Most have had the experience of reading an artist’s statement and feeling that it was unrelated to the work. Or maybe the written word did have some factual basis, but the work was really operating in some different way than described. As a graduate student in art, there has been pressure to organize my thoughts around a central theme, and then to make artwork related to that theme. But, for me, that is the tail wagging the dog. The creative process is often very different. At least, that’s not how I tend to make my strongest art.

There is the idea that a work of art should speak for itself. In an informal *Art 21* interview Martin Puryear (2003) says,

I came from a generation where the work itself was the information. Though there remains this belief that the work itself can have an identity that can hopefully speak; whether it’s through beauty or ugliness or whatever quality you put into the work, that is what the work can be about. The work doesn’t have to be a transparent vehicle for you to say things about life today or what you see people doing to each other, or things like that.

This isn’t to say that art shouldn’t be written about or can’t be approached verbally. It’s just that the art is “the thing,” whereas the writing is just that, writing about the thing. The work of Donald Judd is supported by an immense amount of prose, yet when one

¹ To the best of my knowledge, this was a term coined by my friend, Dhanush Kiran, whom I met in Bengaluru, India, while I was fulfilling a Fulbright scholarship. English is one of many languages he speaks, including Tamil, Hindi, Kannada and Urdu. It succinctly describes the circuitous and mystifying language often used by post-structuralist authors. For example, one might say, “Jean Baudrillard uses too many costly words.”
encounters a work by Donald Judd, it’s all about physical presence. There it is and there you are. And you and it are in a place. Writing and visual art function differently.

Duke Ellington (or was it Frank Zappa?) said, “Talking about music is like dancing about architecture.” The same might be said about talking about art. All of these disciplines operate in different languages and have their own virtues and limitations.

My son is one year old. He is discovering the world of things around him. He’s enamored by stuff. He doesn’t have a large vocabulary (though that is processing and forming). He points at a tree, the sky, a desk, the floor, his mom, his dad, the heater, a rubber duck. He makes a sound. He says “ball,” which means he wants to roll a ball, or stack blocks like a Constructivist architect, or more likely still, knock over the blocks. He hits a xylophone and it rings. He moves a toy tractor. His is a world of things that don’t have names yet. He rearranges things. He puts things with things to make other things.

John Berger’s TV series and book *Ways of Seeing* opens with the words, “Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak. But there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled” (Berger, 2008, p. 7).
CHAPTER 2

TWO CREATION STORIES

He who understands the baboon would do more toward metaphysics than he who understands Locke.
—Charles Darwin, 1838

PART ONE

As part of my research, I have been looking at how the impulse to make art might have origins related to Darwinian evolutionary theory. I am drawn to the idea that the drive to make art is a highly primal one, deeply rooted in the origins of humanity. It is an irrational urge that has come up alongside the evolution of our physiology and psychology. While it is said that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” or that our artistic preferences are culturally bound, there are underlying, commonly shared art instincts.

How does my own artwork relate to the subject? In the statement for my advancement exhibition Exaptation I wrote, “These pieces are my meditations on the origins of beauty. They elicit signs of shelter and danger from the horizon line. They do the ritual mating dance. They pray for rain. They moan the blues. They mimic the cuttlefish and the bulldozer. They perform the pratfall. They grovel for your attention. They remind us of the human animal.”

I am not making art “about” evolution. I’m not interested in recreating the cave paintings of Lascaux. I have no desire to make convincing pastoral landscape paintings or portraits that elicit a deep draw from the widest range of people. I experiment with formal elements—shapes, colors, textures and sounds—for expressive effect. By creating vaguely familiar, yet unexpected objects in a deconstructed post-modern mode, I am pulling on the same evolved traits of artists of the past in order to trigger sensual responses that are deeply ingrained in the mind of the viewer. I am interested in what might occur on an instinctual and cognitive level.

In the view of evolutionary psychologist, Ellen Dissanayake, visual art has developed alongside performing arts in the context of religious and social activity, stating, “the arts
arose in human evolution as adjuncts to ceremonial behavior rather than as independently evolved activities” (Dissanayake, 2007, p. 7).

The late author and art theorist Dennis Dutton felt that there is a direct relationship between art and evolved behaviors and traits. Applying this idea of interconnectedness he wrote:

as much as fighting wild animals or finding suitable environments, our ancient ancestors faced social and family conflicts that became a part of evolved life. Both of these force-fields acting in concert eventually produced the intensely social, robust, love-making, murderous, convivial, organizing, technology-using, show-off, squabbling, game-playing, friendly, status-seeking, upright-walking, lying, omnivorous, wasteful, versatile species of primate we became. And along the way in developing all of this, the arts were born. (Dutton, 2009, p. 46)

For many scientists the relationship between art and adaptation is tenuous. Correlation is not causation. Homo Sapiens emerged long before the first known artifacts that we might call “art.” However, for some researchers, the “art instinct” may be related to natural selection, sexual selection, and a process called exaptation.

In evolutionary biology, exaptation is the use of a structure or feature for a function other than that which it evolved. This can explain a major change in function with a minor change in form. Feathers are a classic example: they evolved as a means of regulating heat, then were co-opted for plumage display, and later repurposed for flight (Evolution 101, 2012). The capacity to perceive, make, and think about art may have evolved for other purposes related to natural and social survival. Stephen Pinker talks about art in terms of exapted “by-products”:

many of the arts may have no adaptive function at all. They may be by-products of two other traits: motivational systems that give us pleasure when we experience signals that correlate with adaptive outcomes (safety, sex, esteem, information-rich environments), and the technological know-how to create purified and concentrated doses of these signals. (Sacks, 2007, p. xi)

In this way, art may be a way of creating an empathetic situation for the viewer or listener: a way of distilling and presenting feelings of fear, excitement, joy, etc., without exposing them to any real consequences.

Though the names are different, many of the elements and principles taught in foundation design classes are the very same laws that governed our ancestors’ ability to perceive their surroundings, allowing them to successfully survive and reproduce. UCSD neuroscientist, V.S. Ramachandran lists nine universal laws of aesthetics that cut across
cultural barriers. They are: grouping, peak shift, contrast, isolation, peek-a-boo (perceptual problem solving), abhorrence of coincidence, orderliness, symmetry, and metaphor (Ramachandran, 2012, Disk 8, track M). For example, grouping is a phenomenon that was observed by Gestalt psychologists, is used by artist, and has underlying evolutionary function. When similar (but distinct) colors or shapes are placed in proximity, the brain interprets them as a coherent whole. Ramachandran claims this evolved as way to defeat camouflage and detect objects in cluttered scenes. “Little does the salesperson at Nordstrom realize, that when she picks the matching red scarf for your red skirt, she is tapping into a deep principle underlying brain organization, and that she’s taking advantage of the fact that your brain evolved to detect predators seen behind foliage” (Ramachandran, 2012, Disk 8, track O).

Through making art, I am experimenting—albeit in a very unscientific method—in areas of neuroaesthetics. Samir Zeki (n.d.), professor at University College, London, writes that throughout history artists, “have explored the potentials and capacities of the visual brain with their own methods… Because all art obeys the laws of the visual brain, it is not uncommon for art to reveal these laws to us, often surprising us with the visually unexpected.” I am interested in the intersection of consciousness, perception, phenomenon, experience, abstract thought, creativity, emotion, and association. Making objects that embody physical, visual, auditory, and kinetic attributes—and presenting them to an audience—is a way of investigating these interactions.

PART TWO

Long long ago, back when the world was young—that is some time around the year 1958—a lot of artists and composers and other people who wanted to do beautiful things began to look at the world around then in a new way (for them). They said: ‘Hey! —Coffee cups can be more beautiful than fancy sculpture. A kiss in the morning can be more dramatic than a drama by Mr. Fancypants. The sloshing of my foot in my wet boot sounds more beautiful than fancy organ music.’

—Dick Higgins, *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude*

Anything can be an influence. I consider everything I experience in life, both in and outside of art, to be an influence. I am often influenced by things that I don’t like, and by ideas I disagree with. But in terms of art history, the Dada “movement”, a reaction to World War I, has had the biggest impact. Artists from this group changed the art paradigm, and presented the world with a kind of art as anti-art. Dada inspired subsequent movements and
artists such as Fluxus, Arte Povera, Dieter Roth, John Cage, Joseph Beuys, Robert Rauschenberg, and others who have, in turn, influenced me. I consider more contemporary artists such as Jessica Stockholder, Robert Gober, Abraham Cruzvillegas, Nobulu Tsuchiya, Tim Hawkinson, and Charles Ray to be stalwarts carrying this tradition forward. Ironically, Dada is now a classical artistic lineage.

One way to talk about Dada might be by way of Fluxus. My initial interest in Fluxus was born out of misunderstanding, at least incomplete understanding. A few years ago I saw a show of Fluxus boxes, “fluxkits” that piqued my interest. At the time I didn’t know about the anti-art or political aims of Fluxus, or how the movement fit into the bigger picture of 20th-century art. I also didn’t realize that most of the work was actually performance based. The objects, the “left-over party favors” are what I was first exposed to and what have stuck with my imagination. The boxes had a beauty and order to them but at the same time had an inviting, mysterious quality. The fluxkits borrowed a Zen-like simplicity from Japanese gridded tea boxes, furniture making and Shoji screens. But they also had an alluring junkiness. I later learned that Fluxists considered themselves Neo-Dadaist and that their aesthetic borrowed from Marcel Duchamp’s ready-mades and Kurt Schwitter’s collages, while their radical politics, at least tacitly, borrowed from their counterparts. In early part of the 20th-century, this was shocking to the genteel tastes of the European art establishment. By the early 1960’s when Fluxus came into being, Dada had acquired a mythical status, and their “junk art” (despite intentions) may have been seen as pleasing, or at least an accepted part of the modernist visual language. By the time I saw the exhibition of Fluxus boxes in the 1990’s, grunge culture was in full swing. Dada aesthetic, by way of Fluxus, resonated with me as part of our cultural language.

Zen Buddhism has also been an influence on neo-Dadaists. According to art critic George Segal, “the ordinary is the extraordinary. The samsara world and the nirvana world are one” (as cited in Danto, 2005, p. 341). In Zen, enlightenment is not attained through esoteric knowledge or special ritual, but through ordinary practice. The Zen teacher Dr. Suzuki (who also taught in New York and inspired John Cage) recounted a story of a ninth-century Zen student who asked,

> We have to eat and dress every day, how do we escape from all that?” The Master replied, “We dress, we eat.” “I do not understand you,” the questioner said. “If you don’t understand put your dress on and eat your food.” Suzuki comments,
“There is nothing mysterious in Zen. Everything is open to full view. If you eat your food and keep yourself dressed, you are doing all that is required. (Danto, 2005, p. 341)

Similarly, it could be argued that in neo-Dada approaches, art can be achieved through non-art actions and objects. Additionally, the confounding nature of neo-Dada events and objects might be likened to Zen koans, stories that defy rational logic and are intended to shock their audience into a state of enlightenment.

A problem that I have been grappling with as an artist is how to deal with the distinction between art and life. There is something enriching about observing the world with an artist’s sense of wonder. Likewise, imbuing art with the stuff of life can enhance it. Reflecting on his experiences with Fluxus, Emmett Williams said, “I would really pity anyone who didn’t know the difference between art and life. And I participated in these ideas about art and life as some kind of a metaphor, yes, but… eh… my brain isn’t that lame, you know, I really do know the difference” (Movin, 1992). There is something interesting in blurring, but I feel that to truly overcome the gap is impossible. Shouldn’t the art I create be more interesting than the electrical outlet over which it hangs?
CHAPTER 3

BEING AND RESONANCE

Now when I say ‘I’, it seems hollow to me. I can’t manage to feel myself very well, I am so forgotten. The only real thing left in me is existence which feels it exists… a pale reflection of myself wavers in my consciousness… and suddenly the ‘I’ pales, pales, and fades out.

-Sartre

In *Nausea*, Antoine Roquentin is frequently overcome with an overwhelming unease when he contemplates the seeming meaninglessness of his own existence. Existential anxiety is brought on when he comes in contact with inanimate objects. With this feeling of “nausea” comes a detachment from his own sense of being, as well as the identity of surrounding things.

For instance, there is something new about my hands, a certain way of picking up my pipe or fork. Or else it’s the fork which now has a certain way of having itself picked up, I don’t know. A little while ago, just as I was coming into my room, I stopped short because I felt in my hand a cold object which held my attention through a sort of personality. I opened my hand, looked: I was simply holding the doorknob. (Sartre & Alexander, 1964, p. 4)

While my intention as an artist is not to induce a feeling of what Sartre titles “nausea” in the viewer, I do find this interesting. At a very basic level I am trying to elicit some kind of reaction—hopefully more positive—to occur: whether it be emotional, visceral, or something more subtle and difficult to describe. In presenting a distorted or decontextualized object, I am offering the viewer a new experience, and prompting them to attempt to understand what it is, or to learn what to do with it.

I’m interested in art that brings the viewer’s awareness to the relationship between image, object, and space: to reflect on their own presence within that triangle. The phenomenon-oriented work of artists like James Turrell and Robert Irwin succeeds, in part, because it is able to capitalize on this interaction. With my piece *Triad* (Plates 1 and 2 in the
Appendix), the viewer’s presence is integral to the function of the work. Put simply, the piece is interactive. A self-awareness\(^2\) of one’s own role in the process adds to the experience.

But is it possible that a temporary loss of self-awareness can be crucial in the experience of art? According to Jerry Farber, Emeritus Professor of English and Comparative Literature at SDSU, the removal of self-concern in the mind of the viewer is key to aesthetic experience. This applies to observation of our ordinary surroundings as well as artwork. In *A Fieldguide to Aesthetic Experience*, Farber writes, “Aesthetic consciousness and self-consciousness stand at opposite poles; as we move toward one, we abandon the other… Art, as personal as it is, as close to your own experience, as evocative of feeling as it is, becomes art only when it releases you from your self” (Farber, 1982, p. 15). In this view, the act of experiencing an artwork (or anything aesthetically moving) might be something akin to meditation or mindfulness\(^3\).

As an artist in the act of making, I alternate between making the work, reacting to it in a detached, non self-aware manner, and then stepping back and evaluating that reaction more critically. Farber describes the process like this: “I adjust, then contemplate, then evaluate the response I’ve just experienced—perhaps in relation to some intuitively sought-after effect—as a basis for further adjustment” (Farber, 1982, p. 136). One can imagine a painter flinging paint in their studio with wild abandon, then sitting back and smoking in contemplation, either deep in thought, or in non-evaluative looking. The process of creating can alternate between these activities.

To varying degrees, the pieces I make contain elements of literal representation, abstraction, non-objective presence, and the appropriation of ready-made objects and

---

\(^2\) In this chapter the terms “self-awareness”, “self-concern”, and “self consciousness” are used interchangeably to express my thoughts, and those of the authors cited. This points to an imprecision in language, but also to subtle shades of connotation. The American Psychology Association online glossary defines self-awareness as, “The top level of consciousness; cognizance of the autobiographical character of personally experienced events” (American Psychological Association, n.d.). Consciousness is defined as a “state of awareness of internal events and of the external environment.” Further discussion may be merited, but is outside of the scope of this report.

\(^3\) Bishop, Lau, and colleagues offer this model of mindfulness: “The first component involves the self-regulation of attention so that it is maintained on immediate experience, thereby allowing for increased recognition of mental events in the present moment. The second component involves adopting a particular orientation toward one’s experiences in the present moment, an orientation that is characterized by curiosity, openness, and acceptance” (Bishop et al., 2004)
materials. I’m interested in all of these modes of making, and how their juxtaposition might affect the viewer. An object may have expressive and metaphorical power in mimicking something observed in life. An object may also have a practical function. But I’m also attentive to what happens when artwork moves away from any such references. Objects and materials have their own physicality and presence, apart from what they may or may not signify.

*Median (variation)* (Plate 3 in Appendix) began as a recreation of the road dividers that I came across in India. These were commonplace street constructions there, but something exotic to my eyes. The first incarnation of the piece could have been considered a representation of a road divider, to the point of being convincing as an actual road divider. Elements of the sculpture also referenced associations with Hindu religion and social structure. But as I further refined the piece, some of the symbology was removed (at least as readable by an unprompted viewer), so that it began to take on its own formal qualities—moving away from a semiotic tool—to something with its own identity as an art object.

However, no object can be totally free from connotation. In the words of the contemporary artist Gabriel Orozco—who is interested in the materiality of objects, rather than their metaphorical potential, “There is no such thing as material without history. It doesn’t exist. Every material has history. And in a way, everything is already a product. Even if you have a piece of stone in front of you somebody cut it out, somebody transported it, there is labour and investment already in every material you use” (as quoted in Morgan & Orozco, 2011, p. 7).

“History” can be intrinsic to the material, and it can also resonate within the memory of the viewer, when not pinned down to a particular narrative or specific functional connotation. Jerry Farber gives an example of pausing at a stoplight and being momentarily absorbed in the aesthetic experience:

> In the case of the red light, what seems to happen is that the color, rather than merely becoming attached in my mind to any particular meaning or memory, is free to resonate through a whole tract of past experience, a whole range of contexts in which I’ve experienced a similar kind of color… The red light is like a sound that echoes back from countless unnamed experiences, the combined echoes giving a rich complexity and a quality of profound involvement in life. This kind of experience which I call “resonance”—lives only in the image itself and dies with it. It can never be reduced to a particular significance which could then be stated conceptually; on the contrary, this resonance stands in contrast to
recognition, which is a way of processing a perception by pinning it down to a concept, a particular identity. (Farber, 1982, pp. 53-54)

As a viewer approaches one of the pieces in Triad (Plate 1), they will encounter a glowing blue-green disk. This object may evoke a feeling of recognition, but my hope is that in some way the encounter will *resonate*, figuratively, in a similar way to what Farber describes above. And the piece will literally resonate, as the strings are set in motion and vibrations travel through the various materials and project throughout the room. The viewer-listener may become self-aware of their part in this performance, and alternately become immersed in the wholeness of the experience. Author, Brandon LaBelle’s words about listening *resonate* with Farber's ideas about looking, but also widen the possibilities for interaction:

Listening breaks apart the shell of the subject, eases the borders of identity, and initiates an interdependence whereby one is constituted by the whole environmental horizon. To listen attentively then is to become a part of things and to lessen the human agency of will, for listening is about receiving through an intense passivity all that is surrounding—the subtle sounds, the far and near, the voices of persons and insects alike, the shifting winds. Thus, listening predisposes one to be attentive to the greater context, as a lateral becoming, rather than through linear determinations of one’s own will. (LaBelle, 2006, p. 245)
CHAPTER 4

SOUND AND VISION

There is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot.
— John Cage

Over the past four years I have been experimenting with sculptural objects that include some kind of interactivity, or elements that extend beyond three-dimensionality; including light, movement, and sound. It seems natural to be working this way, when present modes of making reside in the hyper-“expanded field,” and in a world where technological activity means an ever-present combination of image-word-sound interaction. It also seems fitting to combine my interest in sound and music with physical form.

In a way, this combination extends the notion of relational aesthetics, where the participants are prompted to engage with each other in a kind interaction. I aim to encourage a playful type of communication between acquaintances and strangers, that is possibly less direct than a typical conversation, and more physical than the type of exchanges that occur through social media. My intention is to capitalize on the “white cube”—the rarified gallery space—and to build on, and challenge, people’s expectations of what may happen when approaching artwork in such a space.

I am fascinated by sound in a fundamental way, constantly tapping on objects to discover their inherent resonant qualities. I’m interested in the metaphorical resonance of visual art and the literal resonance of sound. I find parallels linking art that teeters between

---

4 The field of contemporary sculpture has expanded to include video, sound art, installation art, land art, new media, and performance, among other artistic approaches. The term “expanded field” is borrowed from Rosalind Krause’s 1979 essay, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field.” (Krauss, 1979)

5 Nicholas Bourriard (2009), who coined the phrase “relational aesthetics” gives the following definition: “A set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space” (p. 113). My approach is not to eliminate art objects or the gallery setting, rather to have physical, aesthetic objects be fulcrums on which such social interaction can occur.
possessing and lacking recognizable content, and sound that stands on the precipice before becoming music. Music might be described as organized sound.

With the works in this exhibition, sound was used as material, just as plywood, metal, paint and light were—organized in a rudimentary way by me, but then shaped by the interaction of participants, and rounded out by the incidental sounds reverberating from outside and within the gallery.

Sound is a multifaceted and interconnected experience. In the book Background Noise, LaBelle (2006) writes, “Sound is intrinsically and unignorably relational: it emanates, propagates, communicates, vibrates and agitates; it leaves a body and enters others; it binds and unhinges, harmonizes and traumatizes; it sends the body moving, the mind dreaming, the air oscillating. It seemingly eludes definition, while having profound effect” (p. ix).

There seems to be two ways to incorporate sound in an art object. One is for the sound to have a physical relationship to the material, as with a musical instrument—or something like a piece of paper to be crumpled by the audience in a Fluxus action. In these scenarios the sound needs to be initiated in performance by the maker or the audience, unless the object has some built-in mechanism for vibrating the object. The other possibility is for the object to play pre-recorded sound, it which case it is in danger of becoming a jukebox. Either way there is an element of performance. In the case of choosing recorded sound, the relationship is not relegated to physics, but can exist more in the realm of imagination. What kind of sound would this object make? Could it be something that goes against expectations? Perhaps the sound or composition could have an element of narrative or reference that is foreign to the object alone. In many of the pieces in the exhibition, an amalgamation of the two approaches was used.

Last year I resided in Bengaluru, India for six months while on a Fulbright Fellowship, completing a sculpture project. While there, I was inspired by the sights and sounds of the street—both composed and incidental, traditional and high-tech—as well as the logistical problems of transportation in a rapidly growing city. With all of this in mind I made my own version of a street chariot. This vehicle was a tribute to the locale and an homage to the devotee-pulled chariots used in Hindu ritual. While taking the vehicle on a public procession, the wheels turned, activating an arm that struck a pickle jar, a glass jar, a convection cooking pot, and metal cymbals. This clatter, served as a foundation for a pre-
recorded and re-amplified composition of veena\textsuperscript{6}, guitar, vocal and percussion. The pulling of the chariot through the streets was less a performance for spectacle-sake, as it was a way of completing the artwork, by participating in the commotion of the streets, which originally inspired the construction of the artwork. Ultimately, the sounds of the street added to the total composition. The piece, \textit{Tributary} (Plates 4 and 5 in the Appendix) is an abstracted reflection of \textit{Bengaluru Street Chariot}, reimagined for the gallery setting.

\textit{Triad} (Plate 1) is a trio of wall-mounted pieces that alternately light up and play musical sounds, in response to the proximity of people in the room. The seed of inspiration for this piece came from a concept known as the “chord of nature,” which I learned about in a music composition class, taught by Dr. Joseph Waters. This is an auditory phenomenon, which occurs when an instrument is activated. For example, if a string is plucked, the primary note will resonate. As the string divides in vibration, a hierarchy of harmonic tones unfolds. Western chord structure, major scale melody and harmony arise out of this simplicity. The individual pieces in \textit{Triad} are tuned to the 1\textsuperscript{st}, 3\textsuperscript{rd}, and 5\textsuperscript{th} notes, prominent in the chord of nature. They are also tuned to correspond with the song composed as part of \textit{Tributary}, mentioned above.

In my research, with the chord of nature in mind, I sought out a visual analogy to this phenomenon. Through experimentation, Sir Isaac Newton discovered that color in the light spectrum is a physical phenomenon—rather than simply a perceptual one—though the architecture of our eyes and neural wiring determine what we are able to perceive. Newton went on to invent a “color organ” in an effort to explore a relationship between tonal and color spectrums. Others have investigated this relationship. Oliver Sacks (2007) writes,

> For centuries, humans have searched for a relationship between music and color. Newton thought that the spectrum had seven discrete colors, corresponding in some unknown but simple way to the seven notes of the diatonic scale. “Color organs” and similar instruments, in which each note would be accompanied by a specific color, go back to the eighteenth century. (p. 177)

\textsuperscript{6} The Saraswati veena is the national instrument of India. It is the seven stringed lute often depicted being played by the goddess of learning, literature, and music, Saraswati. Veena is the older Carnatic (South Indian classical music system) counterpart to the Hindustani (North Indian classical music system) sitar. I took veena lessons in San Diego for three years under Smt. Veena Kinhal, originally from Mysore, Karnataka.
As it turns out there is no physical correspondence between color and sound. The best way to approach this as an artist may be metaphorically or through personal association. But there is another way that color and sound may be connected psychologically. Some people, as many as one in two thousand or more, have a condition known as synesthesia. Sachs (2007) says,

for some people one sensory experience may instantly and automatically provoke another. For a true synesthete, there is no “as if”—simply an instant conjoining of sensations. This may involve any of the senses—for example, one person may perceive individual letters or days of the week as having their own particular colors; another may feel that every color has a particular smell, or every musical interval its own taste. (p. 177)

While the associations of color and sound experienced by some synesthetes are often vivid, specific, and personally consistent, they are not universal. They are unique to each individual and not experienced in the same way by different people.

I am fascinated by synesthesia (though I am not a synesthete). As an artist I am interested in the potential for mixing the vision with other perceptual areas. I’m interested in terms of sensory experience, and what kind of synergistic potential there is within the response of the viewer/audience. I am interested in how aural and visual coincidences affect the working of the viewers’ mind. According to V.S. Ramachandran, synesthesia:

has proven to be an unexpected key to unlocking the mysteries of what makes us distinctly human. It turns out this little quirky phenomenon not only sheds light on normal sensory processing, but it takes us on a meandering path to confront some of the most intriguing aspects of our minds, such as abstract thinking and metaphor. It may illuminate aspects of human brain architecture and genetics that might underlie important aspects of creativity and imagination. (2012, Disk 3, track 22)

As I was working out how to make the kinetic and sound elements function within the pieces, a new class was offered called *Emerging Technologies: Tangible Interactivity*, taught by Mathew Hebert. The class introduced students, including me, to Arduino hardware and software technology. Arduino is an “open source prototyping platform” that can process input from a variety of sensors in order to actuate motors, lights, mp3 players, etc (Banzi, 2009). The maker, through programming code and wiring electronics, can control all of this. “Tinkering” is an important aspect of Arduino, with the understanding that design and intention are key to a successful outcome, but experimentation can yield unexpected results, which may be just as interesting. The learning curve for Arduino was steep, as I began the
class while developing the work and writing this report. But I think that I learned enough to accomplish what I set out to do, leaving enough bugs, jitters and false-positives in the setups to yield interesting results. The hardware and wiring ended up becoming important aspects in the function and aesthetics of the exhibition. I have made no effort to conceal the technology used, rather, allowing it to become part of the form.

(Audio recordings of the exhibition are archived at https://soundcloud.com/aren-skalman. Video can be found at https://vimeo.com/user12514064.)
CHAPTER 5

THOUGHTS ON PROCESS

Ideas develop over many projects, spanning years. Form itself is indexical.

—Michael Rock

Most often, my approach is to work directly in manipulating materials, rather than to begin at a primarily conceptual space. I begin by making, and ask questions later. The process is a metabolic one, where things and notions are simultaneously breaking down and building up, resulting in a sonic and visual radiation. My personal methodology is to negotiate concept and form gradually through the process of transforming media. With this in mind, the work can be read and felt at many different levels.

The artist Gabriel Orozco talks about the give and take between making and thinking about art: “It’s not just that you have the idea and then you, or somebody else, makes it: they go together. You are making and then you have an idea. You have the idea and then, when you are making, you have another idea, sometimes out of an accident in the process” (Morgan & Orozco, 2011, p. 106). For me, and many others, the act of making art is a chicken and egg scenario—an ongoing evolutionary process where one thing informs the other—where the origin is impossible to discern.

The pieces were begun at different times, often set aside to give attention to a new piece, then returned to be reconsidered. Rather than completing one and then the next in sequence, I worked on them, more or less, simultaneously—continuously adjusting and fixing, until the last minute before opening the gallery.

My slovenly nature and my training as an organizer of information\(^7\) are at war with each other. I’m trying to find balance between a predisposition to make a beautiful mess and a predilection to pare things down.

\(^7\) Between earning my BA in Studio Art and pursuing a Master’s degree, I completed courses in Graphic Design at San Diego City College. I also worked professionally as an environmental designer and graphic designer.
Before coming to graduate school, I spent time both as a sign maker and a sign
designer. It took experience to understand the requirements of each position. There was
mutual misunderstanding between the two groups. Designers often didn’t understand the
materials and process of making. Makers didn’t understand the problems and goals of design.
But with practice, communication, and trust in the skills of the other, these obstacles could be
overcome to produce a product that fulfilled the communicative and aesthetic requirements,
as well as physical and practical ones. And by doing both of these jobs I was on the way to
connecting my head and hand.

The integration of mind and hand is important to mental health and beneficial to the
development of both conceptual and manual skills. Frank Wilson is a neurologist who writes
on the value of skilled hand-based work. He argues,

When personal desire prompts anyone to learn to do something well with the
hands, an extremely complicated process is initiated that endows the work with a
powerful emotional charge. People are changed significantly and irreversibly it
seems when movement, thought, and feeling fuse in the act of long-term pursuit
of personal goals. (Wilson, 2000, p. 5)

He goes on to state, “Any theory of human intelligence which ignores the
interdependence of hand and brain function, the historic origins of that relationship, or the
impact of that history of developmental dynamics in modern humans is grossly misleading
and sterile” (Wilson, 2000, p. 7).

The development of tools—which aid us in interfacing with the surrounding world—
continues to be an important link between the brain and the body. Tool-making has become
integral to my process in art making. The notion that tools can become art when taken out of
context or divorced from their utility intrigues me. Often, machines and tools can be
aesthetically engaging, though they were not designed with aesthetics in mind.

There is a hypothesis that the first art object was the Acheulian hand axe. These hand
axes appear to have been made a million years before the first jewelry, Venus figurines and
cave paintings. Dennis Dutton claims that because of the quantity of hand axes, the unused
condition of a large number of them, and the non-utilitarian large size of them, that these
objects were admired as art objects rather than merely hunting or butchering tools (TED,
2010). Though this claim is unproven, I find the idea extremely compelling.

Zip (Plates 6 and 7 in the Appendix) and Slice (Plates 8 and 9 in the Appendix) both
began as tools for making art. The construction of the lute-like resonators in Triad required
the making of jigs in order to complete their construction. The body of *Zip* was used as a form to laminate wooden veneers on a vacuum press. The wedge shape of *Slice* was made as a template to cut the compound curves of the laminated pieces so that they could be coopered together, like staves of a barrel. At some point I recognized that these objects were visually interesting in-and-of-themselves, and decided to further embellish them as art objects.

Though *Slice, Zip, and Triad* are all independent pieces, they bear a relationship in shape, and a history of one being made to make the other. All of the pieces in the exhibition can be thought of as autonomous works that contribute in varying degrees to a larger aesthetic system. (See installation view, Plates 10 and 11 in the Appendix). Earlier incarnations of these works were shown in other exhibitions. In the process of installing this show, they were brought together in a unified space, allowing them to work in conversation with each other.

In some ways the pieces may still be incomplete. They may be adjusted again to work within the context of a new exhibition. By leaving some elements unsettled (though highly invested with workmanship) the viewer is prompted the complete the work in their mind.
CONCLUSION

As a graduate student I have been challenged with the task of collecting competing information and proceeding in a productive way. This is often a matter of taking conflicting ideas, shaking them out, seeing what remains, and applying those ideas to my own instincts as an artist. Often this can mean acting in uncertain territory, or accepting paradox. Usually the results are unpredictable. In this report I have attempted synthesize ideas from areas of science, philosophy, fiction, art history, and personal experience in a way that is authentic to my practice as a working artist. My hope is that some of this will ring true for other artists and scholars. Many of the assertions made here have underpinnings in the cited research. Others may warrant further investigation.

In pursuing a Master’s Degree in Fine Art I have learned the value of time management. Over the last few years I have been confronted with the challenge of balancing artistic goals, work, family, studies, and personal time. This has not come without sacrifices, and it could not have been accomplished without the support of others. Living a well-rounded, fulfilling life is more important than the pursuit of knowledge or artistic goals alone.

Language is a marvel. I am still skeptical about the ability of words to fully describe art. There is always a gap between the world we experience, and what we might say about it: between the way we find things and what they might signify. But I do not regret the task of writing this report. Writing and thinking about my approach to art has helped me to better understand it, and has possibly improved it. Making art, and writing about art, has been a reciprocal exchange, where one has informed the other.

I think of the completion of my thesis project as a semicolon. There is some finality to what I’ve learned and what I’ve made; but there is also the suggestion of potential. I have a set of tools to explore new possibilities and opportunities as an artist. Questions lead to answers, which lead to new questions.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX

PLATES
Plate 1. *Triad*; Wood, Electronics, Hardware, Mylar, Sound

Plate 2. *Triad* (Detail)
Plate 3. *Median (Variation)*; Plywood, Paint, Broom, Cornstarch Pigment, Fluorescent Light

Plate 4. *Tributary*; Powder Coated Steel, Wood, Wax, Brass, Electronics, Mylar, Bricks, Bamboo, Cast Resin, Sound
Plate 5. *Tributary* (Detail)

Plate 6. *Zip*; Wood, Electronics, Bamboo, Powder Coated Steel, Electronics, Sound
Plate 7. Zip (Detail)

Plate 8. Slice; Wood, Hardware, Formica, Acrylic, Electronics
Plate 9. Slice (Detail)

Plate 10. Installation View
Plate 11. Second Installation View