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by

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In the House of a Stranger

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In the House of a Stranger

by

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Report

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Dedication

This report is dedicated to my friends, family and peers who have offered me their unwavering support throughout my time at UT Austin.

Abstract

In the House of a Stranger

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2017

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This Master's Report follows the thread through the development of my research, ideas and sculptural objects over the course of my three years at the University of Texas. My work, in its broadest terms, has an invested interest in the quiet complexity of the familiar object, the seemingly benign material things that inhabit daily life. These objects are anchors, containers filled with fragments of time and place, they help orient oneself spatially and emotionally. The objects I make cull from a visual and material vocabulary that is familiar, but this familiarity becomes more complicated and uncomfortable as the objects begin to turn on their functional and material expectations, leaving a rift between the thing known and the thing experienced. In my work friction forms as objects get cut up and recast, as touch and matter and intimacy accumulate on their surfaces

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Figure 1. Reclaiming Bucket no 1. Oxbow, Michigan 2016

Lining the perimeter of a ceramics studio, set on the banks of Lake Michigan, were 50 gallon bins teeming with objects. In each was a soup of discarded clay mugs, cups, vases, plates, failed sculptures. The forms in these containers occupied a full spectrum of legibility, from the recognizable, the warped and melting to the gooey mass into which they all were slowly descending. Uninitiated to the ceramic process, or to the general nature of the way clay functions as a material, the movement inside felt alive and powerful. Over the course of a couple months I would return to these containers, cracking their lids to note what had changed, what had been added and what had subsumed. What sustained my attention was the bizarre shift from form to formless happening inside, the clay inhabiting any number of avatars before returning back into a unified puddle.

The process of recycling clay is marked by its sheer simplicity, the introduction of water to dry clay acts to catalyze its decomposition, rendering the used reusable. Observable in real time, these objects were leaking, spilling into each other, transgressing their own boundaries. Since this initial encounter, the process of reclaiming clay has come to sit at the center of my artistic inquiries. What makes this so conceptually nutritious is that it proposes ideas that both conflict with and grow out of the ways in which my previous work functioned, marking a shift in how time, touch, intimacy and value is embodied and experienced in the sculptures I make.



Figure 2. In the House of a Stranger (cont.) Installation View. 2017



Figure 3. In the House of a Stranger (cont.) 2017, detail 1



Figure 4. In the House of a Stranger (cont.) 2017, detail 2



Figure 5. In the House of a Stranger (cont.) 2017, detail 3



Figure 6. In the House of a Stranger (cont.) 2017, detail 4



Figure 7. In the House of a Stranger (cont.) 2017, detail 5

Looping

As a form, a loop is a line that doubles back on itself. As a system its open-ended, an important distinction to make, because it leaves room for the possibility of additions, losses, repetition; change. As bodies moving through the world, our lives are constructed around these overlapping patterns of looping; internalized in our habits and routines, how/what we encounter and consume performed and re-performed with regularity and slight variation. I've come to think of my current work in terms of a loop, a system that circulates, decidedly not resolved, constantly in motion. The exhibition is populated with

objects destined to decompose and liquefy, only to be remade into new forms; much of the material has in fact already been other objects, in another artwork. The act of recycling renders these forms provisional, foregrounding the function of time within the work as non-linear, a force that undercuts stability and through which value is reoriented to privilege both its doing and undoing; lacking any clear punctuation that marks where this making begins and ends.

Fundamental to the loop is a return, strung together in a series of recurrences that can warp the manner in which the passing of time is perceived, simultaneously stretching it out and freezing it in place. What is the affective potential of a loop ? This question is prominently posed in relationship to various types of media, specifically film, video, and the digitally animated GIF. A loop has the ability to produce a trance-like state, a cognitive stupor, overriding the perceptual system by temporarily shutting down emotion and cognition.¹ The result of such a state can be pleasurable, but becomes disconcerting when a viewer is arrested in this passive state with no release. Affect itself has been described as a moment of incipience, a state of suspense or potential disruption; a temporal sink or a hole in time.² In a different way, a diffuse cloud-like network of sensations, a network that is deeply rooted and preempts language, only later to be crudely defined as an emotion.³ To experience “In the House of a Stranger (cont.)” is to encounter just one moment, a pause in a process that is slow but not static; one encounter, although similar, is never the same as the next. The component objects in the work always remain in various stages of disappearing, some a liquid puddle, others lining

¹ Sally McKay “The Affect of Animated GIFs (Tom Moody, Petra Cortright, Lorna Mills) Arts and Education.

² Brian Massumi. “The Autonomy of Affect.” *The Politics of Systems and Environments*. p. 86

³ SILLMAN, AMY BORDOWITZ, GREGG. “Between Artists.” Sillman, Amy & Gregg Bordowitz. New York: A.R.T. Press, 2007. p.11



Figure 8. In the House of a Stranger, Installation View. 2016



Figure 9. In the House of a Stranger, Detail. 2016

the edges of the space in waiting. It is reasonable to read this disappearance as melancholic, a sense of loss brought on by an image of degeneration, but this is not a tidy. The reappearance of forms, duplicates filling the void left by their half-melted doppelgängers, indicates a process that is equally generative as it is entropic.

The Familiar Object

Familiarity is about proximity, nearness rendering the things closest the least visible. My work both past and present, has an invested interest in the quiet complexity of the familiar object, the seemingly benign material things that inhabit daily life. These objects are anchors, containers filled with fragments of time and place, they help orient oneself spatially and emotionally. Embedded into a coffee mug are bits of everyday data, pieces of memory interwoven with the sensation of lips pressed against a glazed ceramic rim. The objects I make cull from a visual vocabulary that is familiar, but this familiarity becomes more complicated and uncomfortable as the objects begin to turn on their functional and material expectations, leaving a rift between the thing known and the thing experienced. The forms used range from personal and domestic to the emotionally cool and institutional; couch cushions found on the curb for trash collection, a baby bath, surplus construction materials, a vibrating neck pillow.

By pushing what is familiar into the unknown, the past is renegotiated through the present; suspicion following recognition, doubt following certainty. This haunted middle ground of not-quite-knowing is a generative space to move within; a space where one is confronted with the reciprocal relationship between subject and object, where objects are not merely a site to be acted upon but embody and augment the environment in which

they reside. This sentiment is expressed quite beautifully throughout the essay “An Inventory of Shimmers,” co-authored by Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg⁴:

“Cast forward by its open-ended in-between-ness, affect is integral to a body’s⁵ perpetual becoming (always becoming otherwise, however subtly, than what it already is), pulled beyond its seeming surface-boundedness by way of its relation to, indeed its composition through, the forces of encounter. With affect, a body is as much outside itself as in itself-webbed in its relations-until ultimately such firm distinctions cease to matter”

My work lives in this slippery state of in-betweens, swaying between a warm body and architectural space, interior and exterior, the physical and the psychological. They mingle in and around architectural forms that bear resemblance to furniture, or a wall, or a bathtub; made with a perverse sense of ergonomics, measured in units of a body rather than for a body. What is found in this essay, and more broadly in the writing around affect, is a set of linguistic and conceptual tools to account for all the interactions both micro and macro, the grand and the mind-numbingly banal.

The richly complex way the action of touching, along with its perceptual companion feeling, is formed through language helps bring this reciprocal web-of-relations into focus. We can reach out and feel something, grasping it in our hands, or in turn have feelings for it, or even get a feeling of it. The it can remain nonspecific and elusive, because whatever it may be (a leather shoe, a shitty job, a lover, a rock) the

⁴ Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, “An Inventory of Shimmers,” *The Affect Theory Reader*. (Duke University Press: Durham and London, 2010) 3.

⁵ Bodies are “defined not by an outer skin-envelope or other surface boundary, but by their potential to reciprocate or co-reciprocate in the passage of affect.”

gesture of touching illuminates our own permeability, flowing externally/concretely in feeling or internally/metaphorically in feelings. The role touch has played in my studio practice is both conspicuous and abstract, operating as a means of intimacy and desire, distance and displacement. Comprised of things found and fabricated, the sculptures possess a tactile intensity that makes discerning the hand-made from the ready-made difficult, or rather unimportant. The objects arrive through a process of accumulation—layers of plaster, joint compound, resin and paint building up into rigid skins. As a method of making this process is defiantly slow; each layer added, refined and repeated, modeling the surface of the work into an archive of caresses and sedimentation. This transformation through repetition is a parallel to that of semantic satiation, when one repeats the same word continuously until its old meaning is exhausted, leaving in its place a strange new object; simultaneously familiar and unrecognizable.

Craigslist's free section, second-hand stores and my neighborhood's curb-sides are sites that I visit regularly, sites that function as an evolving catalogue of material excess, the over-used, the unwanted. What feels important and necessary about these spaces is the way in which they reflect the cultural body that creates them, signifying what a place deems valuable or garbage. The objects they house are embedded with the residue of their former lives; the smells, stains and skin cells of other bodies. Culturally these things get cast as vaguely threatening in their potential to harbor the bacteria and germs too small to perceive or account for, assigning them to the periphery of the spaces we inhabit. My work re-centers these objects, using their speculative history as a site for intimacy, a foundation for social communion.

Before even setting foot in the room you can hear them, their sound pronounced, whirring steadily and synchronized. Three large dehumidifiers run constantly, tirelessly wicking and collecting the moisture from the air, which contains more water vapor than



Figure 10. A Subtle Vibration, Installation View. 2014



Figure 11. A Subtle Vibration, Detail. 2014

their capable of gathering. The collected water dribbles and leaks, finding its way into tubs filled with dry clay objects, catalyzing the recycling process. Their presence in my current work signals a turn in the way touch operates, no longer indexed in surface or read narratively as a linear progression of actions; through the use of these dehumidifiers touch is made complicated and abstract, dislocating a more obvious relationship to the hand (my hand), replacing it with body heat and breath and seasonal weather patterns.

By implicating the air and its moisture as part of the sculpture, its physical and conceptual footprint expands outwards to fill every gap and crevice of open space, rendering the work boundless and immersive; touch becoming a social, environmental and destabilizing force.

More than any other instance in my studio practice, my current work sets up a condition in which the relationship between an art-object and its audience is addressed directly; proposing, albeit subtly, a collaboration through mutual presence. I can't help but reflect on my own experience as a viewer of art, and the frequency in which this experience of looking is met with complete indifference, from the work and its institution. In moments this indifference feels aggressive, asserting the art and architecture as a thing that exists outside of time, my sad time; in other moments manic and delusional, expressed out of necessity in an act of self-preservation. This is not a polemic on art institutions, or art as a commodity, or the practice of cultural preservation, but to illustrate how this work proposes a circumstance between itself and its audience that privileges this presence, considering the potential for the social act of looking as an occasion for making; a force of encounter. The art opening becomes such an instance, the compounded body heat and breath and sweat in the air is collected by the de-humidifiers, funneling it into and infusing it within the material.

Clay-Bodies

There is a debate within the ceramics community on the role bacteria plays in the process of clay recycling, one I've watched unfold on a number of public message boards dedicated to the subject. The debate is about how to achieve an ideal plasticity, to find a sweet-spot where the clay can be its most pliable and structural. Vinegar, milk, beer and urine, among others, have been proposed as a means of achieving this idyllic state of materiality, promoting and employing the bacteria that feed on these organic substances. It is not surprising to see this same conversation unfold in the context of our own bodies, the bacteria in our guts evolving from the status of menace to ally within my own short lifetime. This is my justification for the frequency in which I eat full-fat yogurt, in what would otherwise be indulgent or gratuitous- ingesting it in good-faith, to promote the positive effects of bacteria.

Terminologically, clay is referred to as a body itself, a clay-body, which sets up a metaphorical foundation for the way objects, material and audience become entangled within my current practice. The relationship between bodies (our bodies) and clay is grounded in a history that is long and multifaceted, developing simultaneously out of a utilitarian necessity and as a vehicle for representation. Chemically altered with heat in a kiln or replaced altogether for something more durable through casting, clay as a raw material often occupies a peripheral status as a means for representation. As an open ended and ongoing series of sculptures, "In the House of a Stranger (cont.)" turns toward unfired clay to examine this potentially rich metaphorical intersection between these two types of bodies.

To speak about the degree in which an individual can empathize is to consider their ability to navigate perspectives, in effect to think metaphorically. When empathy is pulled apart etymologically, you arrive at the greek word *empathia*, made from the two

units, em- for “in,” and -pathia or pathos for “feeling.” Placed in these terms empathy can be understood as spatially metaphorical, where feelings themselves take on a physicality, become a site that one can enter, be inside of. The desire and willingness to bridge the distance, to fully inhabit an others feeling space is where metaphor has the potential to shift to metonym, where like feelings become embodied or contiguous feelings. In a political climate so focused on defining and policing boundaries and spaces, it is somehow helpful to think about empathy's potential to be a combative and transgressive tool. I've been considering these ideas in the studio when I plunge unfired clay objects into water, about the satisfaction I get in seeing things completely lose themselves, totally dissolve into one another. I wonder if this could be a radical form of empathy? A space where self and other merge.

The work advocates for the use of metaphor as a tool for critical thinking, positioning poetics and critical analysis as two mutually supportive, rather than mutually exclusive functions of thought. As a tool it seems so fundamental, one of a number we come hard-wired with to help make sense of and transmit all of our difficult and intangible encounters, to buttress the patchy connections between our eyes, ears, hands and brains. In the same way that any tool is defined by its implementation, metaphors can be deeply incisive and in turn vulnerable to abuses. In “Reconsidering Metaphor and Metonymy: Art and the Suppression of Thought,” Charles Gaines casts suspicion on the exactness and testability of metaphor, specifically in its “indeterminate relationship to established knowledge,” through which one can distance themselves from the cultural and political circumstance in which the work exists. The paradox housed within this proposition, one that Gaines acknowledges, is how deeply ingrained metaphors are in the way we conceptualize and move through the world; how this indeterminate relationship to knowledge can serve to both suppress and produce new ideas. This does not discredit

or diminish its power, but does ask for a shared responsibility/accountability in how we choose our words and actions. I align my own beliefs with what I feel is a shared sentiment among many of my peers, which champions the fact that everything is messy, that an either/or binary is an unsuitable model for the way we think and speak; about language, about bodies, about desires, about politics, about our work.

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