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by

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Anti-Logo

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Report

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Anti-Logo

by

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The purpose of this report is to explore the intentions and inspirations involved with my studio art practice. It explores theories of reference and language, humor, abjection, reification, and the building and breakdown of meaning within my artwork.

Table of Contents

Writing About Writing.....	1
Sign and System.....	3
Semantic Satiation and Magical Theories of Reference.....	5
Humor as Abjection.....	8
Abstract/Concrete.....	11
Illustrations.....	12
Bibliography.....	14

Writing About Writing

To begin a discussion about my work I find it appropriate to address writing itself as a part of my practice. Writing functions in multiple ways in my artistic practice.

Firstly, I consider it to be a discrete work of art on its own, but it is also a helpful generative activity in that it allows for quick reorganization of images. Stringing together a series of images in written form is an efficient way to locate the type of semi-obtuse absurdity that I work towards. From this written work I am able to indirectly form images and objects that function in a similar way. Writing also acts as a type of exegesis for my visual work, creating a context for it to exist in as well as enriching it with additional references. For example:

“Last night on the train I received a call from Jennifer Aniston. She claimed she was very busy so she could not talk long. She was busy (apparently) clipping her fingernails. After she hung up quickly I was still on the train, so I looked out the window to find that I could not see anything beyond the glass. I believe this was due to the low light situation outside. Instead I saw my own face. In truth I did not recognize myself, but anyway I was wearing a dog mask. Then in a moment of extreme clarity (as if experiencing direct revelation) I found myself with the phrase “the crust may act as an obscuring device.” Fillings include: sliced glass, pregnancy, huckleberries. “

or

There is a t-shirt that costs \$10,000, which may seem expensive for a t-shirt but here is the thing it is not a normal t-shirt. According to the maker the logo on this t-shirt changes once a minute, and each time is completely original. Has never been seen by the world or by the person who wears it or even by the person who made the t-shirt. Dennis Rodman buys this t-shirt and is enamored by it; he wears it every day. Even after two years, when the fabric seems to be wearing thin, the logos are still changing. Then one day he looks down at his shirt minute after minute and is surprised to see # is still there. There is anger toward the symbol. He knows this symbol. It is the symbol for number. When he played for the Chicago Bulls his number was 91. The number of siblings he has is 46. He has always found numbers comforting for their solidity, but in this moment he is dismayed.

/

200 punks are licking the surface of the moon. A man of unforgivable stature watches them in horror and rips at his hair, his scalp forming meringue peaks. The leader of the punks (Deltoid Svennsen) approaches and spits lunar mud into the man's eyes and two lizards fall out of the man's eye sockets. "

This writing begins to expose some interests, like absurd humor, conflation, and manipulation of symbol.

Sign and System

In his novel *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* two of Milan Kundera's characters attempt to dissect the symbolism of *Rhinoceros*, a play by Eugène Ionesco:

"I'm not so sure I understand what all those people turning into rhinoceroses is supposed to mean," said Gabrielle.

"Think of it as a symbol," Michelle told her.

"True," said Gabrielle. "Literature is a system of signs."

"And the rhinoceros is first and foremost a sign," said Michelle.

"Yes, but even if we accept the fact that they turn into signs instead of rhinoceroses, how do they choose what signs to turn into?" ...

"Something just occurred to me," Michelle said suddenly.

"What?" asked Gabrielle

"The author meant to create a comic effect!" (Kundera 55,56)

Gabrielle and Michelle could have come to the historically logical conclusion that the transformation of people to rhinoceroses symbolized themes of fascism, communism, and the associated violence and conformity. They could have decided that the rhinoceros' horn implies a phallic symbol and critiqued the play from that vantage point. But instead they focus on the absurdity and humor generated by this symbolic event. This approach does not ignore the other associations, but instead chooses that those associations are secondary.

My work, which includes sculpture, writing, and drawing, plays with the notion of a “system of signs.” I am decidedly uninterested, though, in a series of signs adding up to what one might consider a understandable narrative. Instead I tempt with implications of narrative, but deny fulfillment of this impulse. I explore the tensions between signs and the possibility of dislocating a sign from its place in meaning.

Semantic Satiation and Magical Theories of Reference

Semantic satiation is the phenomenon in which a word loses its meaning through repetition. One could, for example, say the word boat until the sound of that word no longer connects to the image of a boat. In my work I have tried to see if it possible for an image or an object to no longer connect to that which it is a description of, not necessarily through repetition, but through the specificity of the way an thing looks. The challenge then, is to make something that is both instantly recognizable (like the word “boat”) without understanding exactly what it depicts.

In his essay *Brains in a Vat* Hilary Putnam explores what he calls “magical theories of reference.” He begins this exploration by thinking about the possibility of an ant’s path in the sand:

An ant is crawling on a patch of sand. As it crawls, it traces a line in the sand. By pure chance the line that it traces curves and recrosses itself in such a way that it ends up looking like a recognizable caricature of Winston Churchill. Has the ant traced a picture of Winston Churchill, a picture that depicts Churchill? Most people would say, on a little reflection, that it has not. The ant, after all, has never seen Churchill, or even a picture of Churchill, and it had no intention of depicting Churchill. It simply traced a line (and even that was unintentional), a line that we can ‘see as’ a picture of Churchill (1).

He uses this term as a way to explain the false way in which it is assumed that a representation has a connection to that which it represents. Instead, he says a line that depicts Winston Churchill is not “in itself a representation of anything other rather than anything else.” (2) This idea has been influential in the way I think about making. In drawing, which can perhaps be thought of as a direct form of representation, the line used to “depict” something is still, in itself, not a depiction of anything. What is left is gesture.

In a series of recent sculptures, I explored this idea through the letterform (fig.1). What began as simple drawings of letterforms turned into abstractions of letterforms, perhaps by adding an extra part, like an “E” with four horizontal lines instead of three. I was interested in using the alphabet as a starting point in that its forms are seemingly stuck in their own symbol-ness. It is difficult to imagine a letter referring to anything other than its use in language. So to try to distance these forms from their normal use was something that seemed productive in terms of revealing the problems associated with magical theories of reference. The final form in this series of work was objects rather than drawings. The drawn form was drastically sized-up and cut out of wood, which was then painted black, a color that has more to do with representation than naturalism. By this I mean that black refers to drawing and basic gesture in a way that is perhaps not achievable with any other color. In their final form too, these objects took on a weirdness due to the inconsistency of the edge being heightened with the process of enlargement. This edge recalls

cartoon imagery, which has a lot to do with abstraction and representation. These objects attempt to free themselves from their original forms.

The loosening of meaning occurs in my work is through a conflation of other, non-language based, forms as well. This is the case with *Catcher* (fig.2). In this piece, the images of a few forms (dream catcher, sports racquet, fly swatter, etc.) are combined to make an object. These mundane, culturally abject forms come together in a way that the meanings of them are present but abstracted and dislocated. The association of a racquet with physical activity and fitness meets the banality of killing flies with a swatter, confusing both. Like the rhinoceros in the passage from *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, these forms are used for comic effect. The forms used of course retain their associations, but by being mashed together into become comical for their incongruities.

Humor as Abjection

I've often heard my work described as "cartoony." This seemed to me, at first, to be a disparaging term, but I've come to accept it and actually think that it's quite an apt description. The surprising tension that exists within cartoons is the cohabitation of specificity and abstraction. Cartoon images are abstracted in the sense that they reject naturalistic rendering for a pared down, graphic quality. This, of course, is functional in terms of reproducibility. Within animated cartoons simple image is easier to animate when working frame by frame, as was the case in early animation. But the result is very specific, in that images are extremely selective in their descriptive qualities. A character or setting might be fairly generalized except for a few signature attributes, like Mickey Mouse's hands, ears, or outfit. These specifics become a symbol for the actions and personality of that character. In a way, this makes a character into almost a symbol for itself. It is defined by its own physical characteristics, which stand, perhaps, for its "personality". The way information works in cartoons relates to a contemporary way of experiencing information in which disparate types of things are brought together in quick succession.

The other aspect of cartoon that I like in reference to my practice is the extreme plasticity of events. In the cartoon world, adherence to laws of gravity, anatomy, temporality, and physical space is not necessary. In relation to an art practice, this parallel allows the bringing together of disparate materials, forms, and images in a way that can activate the work that might not be possible if it were to

rely on an outside rationality. This type of openness and allowance for the absurd and is crucial to my work.

When I refer to “cartoon” I think specifically about early American animated cartoons. In this realm of cartooning, there is a charged tension between subject matter and action. Beyond the interest in representation and openness in cartoons, the convergence of lightness (or looseness) and dark subject relates to my work. In early cartoons especially, prisoner characters are a common trope; skeletons, death, and crime are frequently present, exaggerated physical harm often occurs. But these things all occur within a playful, imaginary world. Exploring dark themes with a light touch distances the content from experience. Laughing at death allows one to think about death at all. Humor often functions as a façade of lightness, allowing the person experiencing humor an access point to content that might be otherwise difficult to think about.

Cartoons are, of course, closely linked to humor. Much humor comes from discomfort or from a disruption of an established order. When events occur in a way that is unexpected, or if logic is willfully confused, humor results. Humor supports a pre-analytic or anti-analytic type of experience that is productive in disrupting established systems. Horror might be the closest relative in that it produces loss of control or loss of self. Humor and horror both belong to the abject. The abject as defined in critical theory is that which is radically other, is of great interest to me. Perhaps the most important scholar of the abject, Julia Kristeva, explores the subject intensively in her *Powers of Horror*:

“The abject has only one quality of the object——that of being opposed to I.” If the object, however, through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning, which, as a matter of fact, makes me ceaselessly and infinitely homologous to it, what is *abject*, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place_where meaning collapses. (Kristeva, 2)

...

We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity.

Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it——on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger. But also because abjection itself is a composite of judgment and affect, of condemnation and yearning, of signs and drives. Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be——maintaining that night in which the outline of the signified thing vanishes and where only the imponderable affect is carried out. (Kristeva, 10)

Abstract/Concrete

As I have tried to point out, the central exploration in my artistic practice is one of loss of symbolic meaning. This to me is not merely an academic exercise, but has significant implications in terms of political and advertising rhetoric and the way in which images are understood and therefore form our understandings of the world. Both political and advertising rhetoric, including both visual and linguistic information is built on the notion that abstract ideas are fairly concrete. This type of rhetoric uses ideas of happiness, freedom, love, etc. as if they were a concrete. In legal terms, this is called the “reification fallacy” and is not a valid logical argument. One cannot, in court, claim that they were defending their “freedom” by committing an act of violence. Freedom is not a concrete thing to be measured, so it cannot be decided whether a person’s actions were advisable as a defense of this idea. Yet this type of thinking is rampant and totally accepted within most types of mass media whether it be in advertisements or in news stories. Images have great power as placeholders for abstract ideas. One may see the Nike© logo and associate it with a vague sense of physical fitness and power. But of course the logo itself has no visual reference to these ideas or feelings.

To refuse to adhere to a type of communication that involves symbol as reinforcing rhetorical device and instead treats symbol as something to be manipulated and played with, my work stands against a way of thinking that encourages sureness. Instead of being sure of an idea, I would like the viewer to be radically unsure of an idea, or unsure of the idea of ideas.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

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