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isthmus=anchovy

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isthmus = anchovy

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
In partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
In
Fine Arts

By

Bradford Willingham

B.F.A. Savannah School of Art and Design, 2003

May, 2015

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Abstract

Interested in the serendipitous encounters found in day to day experiences, I aim to complicate the framework that we are born into through the cross pollination of commodity trends, present tense and personal narrative. While these “mash-ups” dwell in the intersections between the real, the fictive and the fantastical, they attempt to put mystery back into the things that we are familiar with. My interest in language as a constructive and deconstructive tool opens spaces where the interloping of texts and objects confuse semantic routine. My sculptures operate within systems constructed through free association, absurdity, and humor: spaces where art and life become one seamless material, not tied to the predictable and the known but to new futures.

Contemporary Art, Mystery, Semantics, Objects, Humor, Sculpture, Text, Systems, Free Association, Absurdity, The Future

“If the difference between useful inventions and artistic inventions corresponds to the difference between changing the environment and changing our perceptions of the environment, then we must account for artistic inventions in the terms of perception.”

- George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*

“A concept is a brick. It can be used to build a courthouse of reason. Or it can be thrown through the window.”

- Gilles Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*

A TAUTOLOGY

The press release (see Appendix) for my thesis exhibition *isthmus = anchovy*, is intended to clarify as well as complicate the exhibition by residing somewhere between instructions on how to read the exhibition and a poem. The literal and abstract coalesce in a proposition to envision history as if it were gum being chewed up again and again, in a state of constant flux: a fluid and constant oscillation that produces continuous reversals of meaning manifest in language. It calls for a proposition to re-define symbolic regimes, to turn them on their heads, for the will to erase and re-write, to remove and relocate the systems of objects and language around us, to complicate hierarchies and invent new association and meanings by subverting the human need to create meaning even where there isn't any. The press release is a microcosm of the larger exhibition that it represents: its purpose is to aid in creating an atmosphere where the improbable sits alongside the commonplace. The inclusion of the press release as an artwork in and of itself fulfills a role that titles often play when associated with an artwork, completing the exhibition by placing it within its own unique context. In his essay “Art And/With Language,” Patrick

Gantert elaborates on the role of press releases: “There is space for experimentation that isn’t simply aesthetic. To tweak the roles of press releases and titles is to subtly subvert a long standing model, one that drives an older economy which is increasingly irrelevant to younger artists.”¹ The literal “sales pitch” press releases of that “older economy” no longer have a place when they are assigned a role that is fully integrated into the exhibition, poised as a context, as a lexicon of its own logic; the exhibition is now a total package.

It is imperative that each individual work in the exhibition not rely on aesthetics alone. The conceptual nature that these artworks/objects take part in, or have been assigned, divorces them from their purely aesthetic qualities, placing them within systems and contexts beyond their appearances. The concept of the works, their titles, their potential online presence, and their physicality in the exhibition space are inseparable. Together they create the work; together they create spaces; together they are a tautology. This concept of art as a tautology was realized first by the painter Ad Reinhardt in his essay “Art as Art,” and later elaborated on by Joseph Kosuth in his essay “Art after Philosophy.” Kosuth writes, “Works of art are analytic propositions. That is, if viewed within their context – as art – they provide no information whatsoever about any matter of fact. A work of art is a tautology in that it is a presentation of the artist’s intention, that is, he is saying that that particular work of art is art, which means, is a definition of art. Thus, that it is art is true a priori.”²

In *isthmus=anchovy*, unaffected found or bought objects operate as art not only because they have been placed within the context of an exhibition space, but also because they have been assigned titles that further extenuate their function as art. In a play on the phrase “give an inch, take a mile,” the antique arm of a mannequin can be traded for a finger in *Give a finger, Take an Arm* (Fig.1). Or in the piece titled *Loosie* (Fig.2), a broken cigarette can be traded for a un-broken cigarette. These propositions for trade also aim to undermine the traditional roles of a commodity driven art market. Reinhardt’s claim, that the

¹ Patrick Gantert, “Art And/With Language,” *WOW HUH* (2013): <http://wowhuh.com/archives/1243>

² Joseph Kosuth, *Art After Philosophy: Collected Writings, 1966-1990* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 20.

definition of art is art, which propelled Kosuth's statement above, resonates in these works because this is a world that is systematically constructed entirely in and of itself.



Figure 1. *Give a Finger, Take an Arm: a proposition for trade*, 2015. dimensions variable.



Figure 2. *Loosie*, 2015. broken cigarette. dimensions variable.

THE EPHEMERAL

The ways in which texts can create, inform, complicate, and complete artworks and exhibitions are changing the ways in which we “read” artworks. The potential spaces that are opened resemble the worlds that are evoked when a movie or a book is mentioned: the mere possibility can sometimes be the artwork. As the modes of distribution of artwork change and increasingly coalesce with online forums, such as Contemporary Art Daily, Art Blog Art Blog, etc., the lines between image and text are merging, creating new spaces for experimentation. In “Art And/With Language,” Gantert details the forms of textual interloping that are becoming more and more common between an artwork and its potential reading: “in the circulation of contemporary art, language and text are materials that not only mediate the way works are viewed but draw focus away from or complicate an object. Artist descriptions, didactics, and gallery tags have always been rife with potential. But due in part to a turn towards the internet for image dispersion, the relationship between that language and the thing it describes is considerably more fibrous,”³ meaning that the dialogueues and the connections that language can create when associated with an artwork have the potential to be multitudinous.

The exhibition catalogue for *isthmus=anchovy* acts not only as a catalogue for the show, but as a separate exhibition all together. The online exhibition will follow suit and the works in the three different exhibitions will vary. The changing nature of this work that develops in the studio is due, in part, to the ephemeral nature of the materials that I choose and also to the continuously circulatory arrangements that the objects find themselves in, in my studio practice. In the studio, objects are constantly revolving around each other, creating relationships and malleable situations. This dialogue between the studio space and the exhibition space, the private and the public, is one that has always interested me. From Courbet’s painting, *The Painter’s Studio*, to Bruce Nauman’s video work, *Mapping the Studio*, this dialogue has been rife with potential. In the exhibition catalog there are indeed works from the exhibition but there are

³ Patrick Gantert, “Art And/With Language,” *WOW HUH* (2013): <http://wowhuh.com/archives/1243>

also, in an attempt to blur the lines between the exhibition space and the studio, many works that are either different manifestations of work in the exhibition or photographic documents of works from my past and current studio practice. The use of ephemeral objects and materials in my practice, in part, aims to acknowledge states of perishability and their relationship to meaning and value. In *isthmus=anchovy*, a fig rests on top of an electrical outlet, i.e. *fig=electricity* (Fig.3), and in the exhibition catalog, the photographic remains of a plantain rests on top of the filmmaker Robert Bresson's book *Notes on the Cinematographer* (Fig.4). Both of these works can be attributed to Bresson's filmic philosophy that actors are "models": models are visual representations of how systems work and how processes flow. In relation to these "models," Bresson writes, "make yourself homogeneous with your models, make them homogeneous with you."⁴ A plantain and a fig represent the potential visual or metaphysical homogeneity that the ephemeral has with the flow of electricity or a certain philosophy of cinematic theory. They also acknowledge the durational flows of time that are present in the lives of things and their potential permanence or decay. A film, a photograph, a painting, or a book all act as time capsules for the bygone because our systems of meaning and value, in a commodity driven (art) market, are most often concerned with the tangible. A fig, commonly used as a metaphor for wealth and prosperity, placed on an electrical outlet in the exhibition space, questions the permanence of an art object and how it effects value while it also, through its title, points to the ephemeral nature of time and the homogeneity of electricity with all that we encompass. Over time, as it shrinks into itself, the relationship of the permanent and the ephemeral, the current and the antiquated will reveal itself.

⁴ Robert Bresson, *Notes on the Cinematographer* (Los Angeles: Green Integer, 1997), 88.



Figure 3. *fig = electricity*, 2015. fig. electrical outlet. dimensions variable.



Figure 4. *plantain=Note on the Cinematographer*, 2015. Plantain, book. Dimensions variable.

EQUATIONS

The absurd equations that make up the exhibition title and an adjacent series of text-based works that are circulated throughout in the forms of bumper stickers, light box signs, and the accompanying exhibition catalogue are an extension of my interest in working with found objects and a longstanding interest in language. By treating language as found objects and grouping two disparate words in an equative logic puzzle, I attempt to create semantic collages of deliberately chosen words that play with the ambiguity and/or clarity of linguistic associations while also exploring the construction and deconstruction of language. Ultimately I aim to propose a slightly different world in which semantics become illogical and absurd and the framework that we are born into is questioned.

The disparity between an owl and an eel or esculent and et cetera, for example, is erased when proposed as equals. This erasure of difference plays an essential role when questioning these constructs because it exposes these relations as fragile or as something that can be molded, like clay. A few other examples of these semantic collage text pieces, whose dimensions read “variable,” are *socks=soliloquy*, *haute=ocean*, *gondola=guacamole* and $\infty = \&$. The opportunity to generate confusion is like reality itself. These equations are on the one hand, carefully constructed, and on the other, arrived at through exercises in free associative word play. The balance of the two is intended to confuse, to misguide and to be interpreted openly: there is no clear narrative, only a hint, which plays with our impulses to read and how that can be subverted. For the title of the exhibition, *isthmus=anchovy*, I used what I think of as a kind of metaphysical equivalent of the equal sign, which is the geographical term isthmus, meaning a land bridge between two continents.

This bridge connecting what would be two different entities, represents the space “in between” or the concept of the third object that is produced when two objects come together, creating, in a sense, what Marcel Duchamp referred to as “infra-mince.” This word that Duchamp coined stands for the almost imperceptible margins of difference between two seemingly identical things, like the warmth of a seat after someone has sat in it, or the separation of the bang of a gun and the mark of appearance of the mark

of the bullet on the target. The infra-mince qualifies a difference that you cannot perceive, but only imagine and these absurd equations aim to suggest a hypothetical reduction of the difference between two things to a non-perceptible essence, as they become amalgamated.

socks = soliloquy

gondola = guacamole

Figure 5. *socks=soliloquy*, 2015. Bumper sticker. 3" x 10"

Figure 6. *gondola=guacamole*, 2015. Bumper sticker. 3" x 10"

A GAME

The absurd equations are not only manifest in the exhibition through written language on bumper stickers and light boxes but also through the placement of found objects in the space. The structures of semantics are questioned again but the ways in which they are questioned are different now that we are dealing with objects opposed to words. Although the objects are named in the same manner, i.e. something = something else, their physical presence presents a different reading, one that is more aligned with Haim Steinbach's treatment of objects. Steinbach asserts that "an object is defined by its relationship to other object(s). Meaning is generated through the play of objects; in how they are placed, acting on one another. The viewer is engaged to complete the story, to solve the riddle."⁵ In the instance of these works which include the marriage of a lemon and a bow, a turtle shell and a giant light bulb, spring roll wraps and a bottle of Hydrocodone (Fig.7) and a human skull filled with quinoa (Fig.8), there is no riddle per se, but there is a game at play. Part of the game is that I want to show the way that things seem rather than being restricted by language and symbolic regimes. David Hume's Bundle Theory is also an interest of mine when considering the coming together of two different objects. In his theory, an object consists

⁵ Tom Eccles and Johanna Burton, *Once Again the World is Flat: The Works of Haim Steinbach* (New York: Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, 2013), 41.

only of the sum, or collection, of its properties, relations or tropes. The human skull mentioned above, now has the properties and tropes associated with that of quinoa and vice-versa: the human skull has tiny, hard, ancient but very trendy, non-gluten, pastoral herding properties too. In the conceptualizing of these arrangements it is important, like the other equations, to carefully choose things that are not so easily associated, and therein lies the other part of the game: in deciphering why these things have been brought together and how they connect. Humor persists in these connections as it does in much of the work in *isthmus=anchovy*; one can only imagine what a very relaxed spring roll that must be.



Figure 7. *spring roll wraps = Hydrocodone*, 2015. spring roll wraps, Hydrocodone. dimensions variable.



Figure 8. *quinoa = skull*, 2015. quinoa, human skull. dimensions variable.

EDITING

The strange couplings that are made between commodity trends, human skulls, turtle shells and numerous other objects also revert to an interest I have in the language of cinema and specifically in the act of editing. I refer to these couplings as splices, or edits that correlate ultimately with the editing of experience, and with the coming together of two cosmological forces that create the formation and foundation of the cosmos. These edits strive to change the ways in which we read, interact with, and see the constructed and natural worlds around us. The flows of natural resources into commodity trends is a phenomenological atrocity and wonder. The myriad array of brands, representing water for instance, spans like tendrils looping into the unknown. The debris of cultural representation floats steadily past us, hypnotizing us and numbing us of our own consumption. Within this structure of societies continuous need to turn culture, daily life and experience into commodity, there lies a need to intervene and modify the cultural forms, objects, and materials around us and to derange the known, the expected and the perceived. My goal in works such as *fettuccine=Smart Water* (Fig.9), *Lever 2000 BCE* (Fig.10) and *coconut water=electricity* (Fig.11) is to position myself as a re-manufacturer of these objects and to replicate the chosen commodity, slightly tweaking the end result and presenting it as a re-advertisement of itself.

My interest in advertising resides in the absurdity of how these products are positioned and the references that are made, constantly alluding to the sun, to freshness, to hour glass figures, to smartness and natural hydration, etc. The modifications to commodity goods represented in *isthmus=anchovy* consist of the sculpture *fettuccine=Smart Water*, in which a serving of fettuccine, perfectly al dente, is sunken to the bottom of a Smart Water water bottle, seamlessly mirroring the version found in a convenience store refrigerator, *coconut water=electricity*, in which a Vita Coco coconut water is shrunk to the size of a wine cork, and a *Lever 2000 BCE*, in which a bar of Lever 2000 soap has been enlarged to the size of a shoe box and now looks as if it was a stone sculpture excavated from a Roman ruin. These imitations, in their subtly modified states, mine the intersection of the real and the fictive, and

by residing so close to the original, they present an element of surprise that has been a preoccupation of mine for some time, when concerning art making. This surprise element that is supported by a sense of uncertainty is, for me, where art's "stuff" resides.



Figure 9. *fettuccini = Smart Water*, 2015. fettuccini, water bottle, resin.



Figure 10. *Lever 2000 BCE*, 2015. wax, pigment. 7"x 4"x 3"



Figure 11. *Coconut Water=electricity*, 2015. ink-jet print, encaustic wax. 2.5"x 1"x 1"

PACKAGES

The anthropomorphizing of objects and food has consistently been an interest of mine and finds itself in this exhibition in more direct ways than the aforementioned suggested cozy spring roll. In the work *Coconut on Cocaine* (Fig.12), a coconut sits atop 3.5 grams of cocaine. The use of the word “on” in the title creates a double entendre that can either mean the coconut is physically on top of the cocaine or the coconut is literally under the influence of the drug. In another past work, a wedge of brie cheese listens to Pharoah Sanders played from an iPod, on a pair of headphones, recalling the Japanese tradition of playing symphony music to the cows to produce Kobe Beef. In a more recent work, titled *Vacation*, a taco reclines in a hammock. Because of its extremely relaxed state, its contents, lettuce, tomato, cheese and meat are spilled onto the floor below. Instead of the hammock scenario though, the taco found itself in *isthmus = anchovy* perched upside down on the head of a small replica of the ancient Greek statue *Venus de Milo* with its contents spilled at her feet: the name changed to *Venus de Taco* (Fig.13). The *Venus de Taco* stands upon a miniature pool table which is yet another thematic thread in the exhibition: that of the idea that art is a strategy and a game to be played, a conversation and a system of “moves.” This work speaks to a couple of different interests that will be a jumping off point to discuss further works in the exhibition.

One interest is tied to the idea expressed in the press release of re-writing history, of peeling it apart and playing with the things that we trust and understand to be as they have always been. The other deals with how the past manifests itself in our contemporary lives, existing in very different forms than it originated. An example of the latter would be two pieces in the exhibition titled *Excalibur=Three Musketeers* (Fig.14) and *Satyricon=Sushi* (Fig.15). In both of these pieces, the past sustains itself in the form of historical dramas on DVDs, candy bars, and grocery store lunches for the masses circulating in their fast paced, on-the-go lives. In the instance of *Satyricon=Sushi*, the DVD version of Fellini’s *Satyricon*, an erotic tale set in Rome during the days of Emperor Nero, lies embedded in a grocery store to-go sushi container complete with Japanese-made faux sushi rolls, chop sticks, wasabi and soy sauce.

This packaged experience is further revealed by the label on the outside of the container which fuses together the synopsis of the film with the description of the fresh fish it contains. The idea of a packaged or curated experience is present here and in the next series I will discuss called Flash Drives. It can also be associated with the *isthmus=anchovy* as a whole.



Figure 12. *Coconut on Cocaine*, 2015. coconut, 35 grams of cocaine. Dimensions variable.



Figure 13. *Venus de Taco*, 2015. statue, pool table, taco shell, taco fillings. dimensions variable.



Figure 14. *Excalibur = 3 Musketeers*, 2015. DVD, 3 Musketeers bar. dimensions variable.



Figure 15. *Satyricon = sushi*, 2015. DVD, soy sauce, chop sticks, to-go container, wasabi, ink-jet print on sticker, plastic grass, faux sushi rolls. dimensions variable.

SPACES

The interconnectedness of the artwork, its title and its life in the gallery space and online, is behind a series of works in *isthmus=anchovy* called Flash Drives. Speaking of the medium of documentation, which propels an artwork to exist outside of the traditional exhibition format, Loney Abrams states, in her essay titled “Flatland”, that “if the Internet is the main space in which art meets its audience, then documentation media must be considered an artistic medium in its own right, the most consequential representation of an artist or curator’s work. Artworks exist not as physical entities, but as JPEGs, and their visibility relies not on their physical presence within a gallery but on their online accessibility.”⁶ With this said, it seems more and more that the actual exhibition’s purpose is that of a photo shoot, a constructed backdrop to display artworks whose lives will continue on online platforms.

The creation of these spaces, as exhibits in and out of the gallery space, was the impetus behind a series of works in the exhibition called Flash Drives. Flash Drives is a series of flash drives on which I have uploaded an array of different files, ranging from a jpeg of *The Ambassadors* to an obj. file of salmon to an avi. file of *Fata Morgana* by Werner Herzog. Some, but not all, of these drives rest at the bottom of different liquid consumer products such as Copa White Zinfandel, Vigo olive oil, Epic vodka, or Purell hand sanitizer. This attempt to destroy the digital container and its contents reduces the space and the things that it potentially “holds,” to nothing other than language: a suggestion. The choices of these consumer products reflects my interest in the present manifestation of the past: a topic that I discussed previously and an ongoing interest when thinking about the persistence and ever changing packaging that consumer products have adopted.

⁶ Loney Abrams, “Flatland,” *The New Inquiry* (2013): <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/flatland/>



Figure 16. *flash drive = Copa White Zinfandel*, 2015. flash drive, jpeg, avi, stl, white zinfandel. dimensions variable. flash drive contains: • social security card.jpeg (print & redeem)
• a mirage.avi • chewing gum.stl



Figure 17. *flash drive = adaptor*, 2015. flash drive, adaptor, 2 jpeg, mp3, obj. dimensions variable. flash drive contains: • Hans Holbein's "The Ambassadors".jpe • a metallic taste.mp3
• 1 gram of heroin.obj • a salmon. jpeg

The contents of each drive are curated individually, as a sort of packaged experience that is often imagined with an absurdist or humorous intention, acting as suggested extensions of the physical artwork in the exhibition space and as something that can potentially be experienced outside of the exhibition. The idea is that each drive can hypothetically be taken away, out of the exhibition space and its contents downloaded, being projected back into the world, out of the digital container and exhibition space that it was once held within. For the drives submerged in liquid, though, their digital contents have been destroyed. This suggested space and the propositions within it reflect my interest in the creative and destructive nature of language and the ways in which meaning is clarified and obfuscated by content, or the lack thereof. The object that was once something that could be bought and its contents hypothetically downloaded and made physical again, i.e.: a social security card, lies in digital ruins at the bottom of olive oil: it has now been reduced to language alone, a suggestion. The curation of something like heroin, valium, or a mirage onto these drives is also an attempt to reduce these objects again, to language. The impossibility of actually materializing valium out of a digital container, submerged in hand sanitizer or not, suggests that these spaces can be used in artworks as vessels for poetry, as propositions, and as extensions into other spaces, like books, movies, etc.

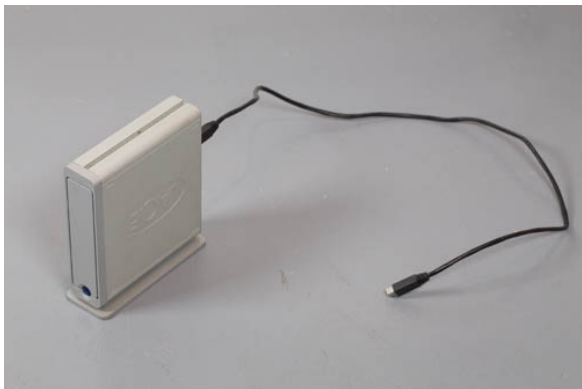


Figure 18. *Lacie External Hard Drive containing:*

• *a film about a prodigy yodeler who hangs around the wrong crowd, starts huffing gas, and becomes a scat singer.avi* • *the soundtrack for the scat movie (which is 90% yodeling).mp3* • *chinese horoscopes for ox and tiger.docx*

A BALANCE

The practices of the 1960's and 1970's conceptual movement, especially the early works of Robert Barry, have had a great influence on my artistic practice. Barry, like many of the Conceptual artists, produces semi-non-material works: works whose subject matter is non-material but that exist physically, i.e. text on walls or a photograph of a gas, etc. (the distinction between non-material works and semi-non-material works in the realm of conceptual art is made by Dorothea von Hantelmann in *How to Do Things with Art* when she differentiates Tino Sehgal from the conceptual artists of the 60's and 70's). These works attempt to escape the physical limits of the art object in order to express the unknown or the unperceived (Fig.2). Instead of a gesture, like those of the Conceptualists, against what they perceived as the increasing commercialization of the art object, I believe that a work of art must be a balance between a visual image or an object and an idea.

To exemplify this I created a series of works that consisted of taped or painted borders, creating simple geometric shapes. In the title of the artwork, I would list different ideas, ephemera, and concepts that could potentially be present within the border, by mere suggestion. This was similar to Robert Barry's piece that consists of a typed paper with the words, "Something which can never be any specific thing." The artwork itself consists of a suggestion about immateriality. For example, in a group show at The New Orleans Museum of Art called *Reparation*, I showed a small green rectangle painted onto a small stretched canvas. The title read "A 3"x4" area containing one or any combination of the following: a charity organization, clear gel deodorant, a metallic taste, an ear worm, perfume, a diegetic sound, a rain forest, a postulate, or a phantom limb."⁷

⁷ Luciano Benetton, Diago Cortez, Miranda Lash, *Reparation: Contemporary Artists from New Orleans* (Italy: FABRICA, 2014), 366 – 367.

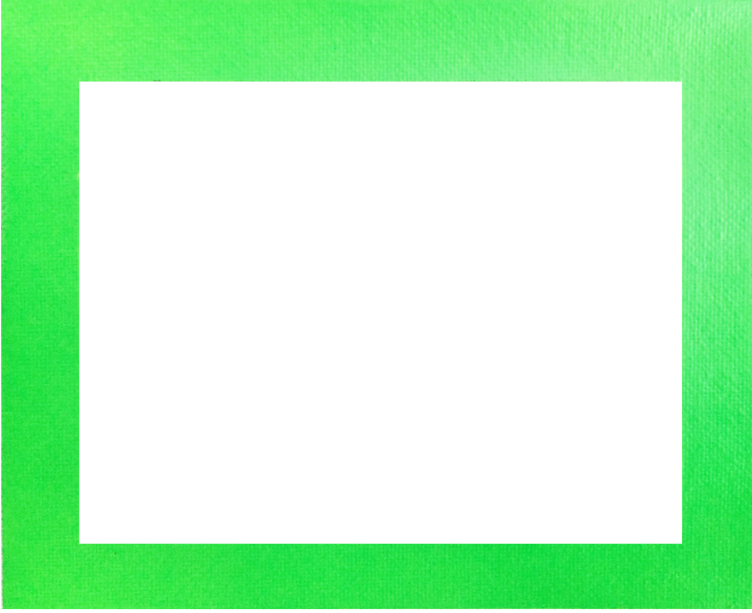


Figure 19. *A 3"x4" area containing one or any combination of the following: a charity organization, clear gel deodorant, a metallic taste, an ear worm, perfume, a diegetic sound, a rain forest, a postulate, or a phantom limb*, 2014. Air brush on canvas. Dimensions variable.

An early work by Michael Asher, from the *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/ Materials* show at the Whitney Museum of American Art, in 1969 touches upon the experiential and invisible nature of an artwork that I seek to create in series of works that I will discuss next. Asher's installation at the Whitney consisted of an air vent that he placed in the passageway between two rooms in the gallery. It would blow air on unsuspecting visitors as they passed. Many would not even realize that this was part of the show. Robert Morris touches on the nature of the concept behind this piece in his "Notes on Sculpture," a 1966 – 1968 series of articles published in *Artforum*. For Morris, "minimalist sculpture forced the spectator to account for the entire viewing situation, in which the artwork figured as part of ambient conditions rather than isolated objects."⁸ This removal of the object from the white cube of the gallery space is also a defining factor of Asher's installation at Pomona College in 1970. In this installation, Asher removed a wall of the gallery to expose the outside, turning the viewing experience inside out. Asher's removal of the object

⁸ Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture," in *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 231.

directs the viewing experience solely to the surrounding space. For Asher, the viewing experience in relation to an empty gallery is key in turning the viewer's gaze to what is outside opposed to what is inside, so the viewer will coexist with the gallery space. This is Asher's attempt to erase the traditional gallery experience of viewing artwork in an institutional facility and, as Kirsi Peltomaki puts it, in *Situation Aesthetics*, "Asher's installation ranged from immateriality (when the artist eliminated the discrete art object altogether) to experiential tangibility (in which the space produced physical effects in the spectator)."⁹

THE ABSURD

This gesture of re-directing the viewer's thoughts, even if momentarily, from inside the exhibition space to outside by displaying commonplace objects found in and around our everyday lives is exhibited in numerous works throughout the exhibition. It first appears in a series of bumper stickers that I have appropriated as "new age" pop culture references. These seemingly readymade products are appropriated and re-designed, as an exercise on the malleability of our surroundings. One of the appropriated bumper stickers is one that is often seen on car bumpers, spelling out the word "Coexist" in white religious symbols on a blue background. My version, on the other hand, uses the same religious symbols to spell out the word "Coagulate." I have also added the phrase "Believe in it," to further accentuate the absurdity. Other bumper stickers include "Move it or Lose it" and "Which Hat Aren't You?" which play with, in the case of "Move it or Lose it," the real life bumper stickers that confront different issues about saving the world and in the case of "Which Hat Aren't you?," the online personality quizzes like "which hat are you?" and "which celebrity are you?." That I've chosen to use the format of bumper stickers could be

⁹ Kirsi Peltomaki, *Situation Aesthetics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press) 2010, 31.



Figure 20. *Coagulate, Believe in it.* 2015. Bumper Sticker, 10” x 3”



Figure 21. *Move it or Loose it,* 2015. Bumper Sticker, 10” x 3”

Figure 22. *Which Hat Aren't You?* 2015. bumper sticker, 10” x 3”

traced back to a number of art movements with the intentions of making art and life autonomous, including the historical Avant-Garde and Institutional Critique. It also comes from an interest in the presentation of seemingly readymade products to create a confused, absurd and referential narrative of mass consumption. These products and/or situations have been slightly modified from their “normal” existences in society and through these modifications, they function similarly but change reality ever so slightly. Focusing on how the commonplace can function as art, it is essential to locate and appropriate un-resolvable points of intersection within mixed messages. This is fully realized when the manipulated bumper stickers, for instance, are distributed back into the settings in which they came. Acting as visible quotation marks, they frame, without a moral stance, the modes that they were made to critique.

These seemingly readymade products, things we see in and around our daily lives, are not only represented here by bumper stickers, but also include a hand sanitizer dispenser, a donation box and a bar of soap. *For a Charity that Metabolizes Lactose* (Fig.) is the first piece one would see as they enter the

exhibition space. This piece consists of a plexiglass donation box, resin, pigment, vinyl lettering, and donations, and is placed on a white laminate shelf. The pristinely sleek setting is made to replicate the donation boxes seen at the front counter of non-profit museums and institutions so that patrons may support them. As for the charitable organization and the improbable nature of its cause, the aim is to defy what a charity can actually do by suggesting the absurdity of a charity that can metabolize lactose. This completely useless charity creates an air of disorientation induced by the collision of a certain moral principle that a charity inherently requests, and in the same instance, its negation. The act of giving has now become a participation in the perseverance of the absurd. Like the donation box, a hand sanitizer dispenser is installed in the exhibition with the intention of blending in to the surroundings, creating again, a situation in which one could overlook it as an artwork. Like the donation box again, one detail provides the clue that it is in fact an artwork. In the case of the hand sanitizer dispenser, the Purell label indicates what has been modified. Instead of saying Purell Hand Sanitizer, it has been modified to say Purell Instant Karma, an appropriation of a song written by John Lennon and Yoko Ono, released in 1970. The appropriation of this song evokes a certain mood of the late 60's free love generation that is referenced again in the text piece/bumper sticker *free love=pad thai*. These pop culture meshes, pulling from seemingly opposite ends of the spectrum, the intervention and modification of the pre-existing to create an unstable and uncertain ground where the cultural form and references mingle and allow for humor and surprise. The ridiculousness of the idea that instant hand sanitizer will bring instant karma actually isn't that far fetched; you could imagine something like this existing in the world.



Figure 23. *For a Charity that Metabolizes Lactose*, 2015. plexi-glass donation box, resin, pigment, vinyl lettering, donations. 6"x 6"x 6"



Figure 24. *Purell Instant Karma*, 2015. hand sanitizer dispenser, hand sanitizer, vinyl decal.

CONCLUSION

In his book *Air Guitar*, Dave Hickey refers to a quote from Ed Ruscha that articulates what it is that transports them when it comes to creating and/or viewing an artwork. It reads: “I was always looking for something fresh and disconcerting. To borrow Edward Ruscha’s expression, I wanted to achieve “Huh? Wow! (as opposed to “Wow! Huh?). I wanted that subtle jolt of visual defamiliarization as a prelude to delight.”¹⁰ This “subtle jolt” or element of surprise that Ruscha and Hickey recognize corresponds with the creation of, and the possibility for, a transportive element that is an immanently present ingredient in the recipe of art. The ingredients of art, or the “stuff” of art, as Joseph Kosuth refers to it, are conceptually tied to the Duchampian gesture of questioning the nature of art. Kosuth elaborates on this inquisition by recalling a gesture, or a proposition, that helped define the conceptual nature of art: “The event that made conceivable the realization that it was possible to ‘speak another language’ and still make sense in art was Marcel Duchamp’s first unassisted Ready-made. With the unassisted Ready-made, art changed its focus from the form of the language to what was being said. Which means that it changed the nature of art from a question of morphology to a question of function. This change – one from ‘appearance’ to ‘conception’ – was the beginning of ‘modern’ art and the beginning of conceptual art. All art (after Duchamp) is conceptual (in nature) because art only exists conceptually.”¹¹ The Duchampian gesture of questioning the nature of art permeates deeper to the questioning of reality itself. When we reveal our findings, we become aware of the other possible worlds that are lingering behind the “real” world. We reveal holes that open up in the fluid flow of time and space and by doing so, create that jolt, that asks that we look at the world around us differently. Reality is a dynamic relation of balance and tension between the visual and the verbal, the actual and the virtual, and the imagined and the real. The points of intersection between

¹⁰ Dave Hickey, *Air Guitar* (Los Angeles: Art issues, 1997), 62.

¹¹ Joseph Kosuth, *Art After Philosophy: Collected Writings, 1966-1990* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 18.

these relations are spaces to be excavated, questioned, turned around, and played with. To quote Kosuth once more, “the very stuff of art is indeed greatly related to “creating” new propositions.”¹²

¹² Joseph Kosuth, *Art After Philosophy: Collected Writings, 1966-1990* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 18.

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Appendix

Press release for *isthmus=anchovy*:

The title = the work, and vice versa: they are inseparable. A fig and electricity are also equal. Free love and Pad Thai, and so on. Nothing erases/creates meaning better than language. Construct a world where nothing takes precedence, where the monuments turn to chewing gum. The shape of time will appear much different when it's been chewed and rests again upon its plinth. A position is a position, among many, to be erased and re-written. What is it besides what it isn't? Language inverts language: the birds chew gum.

VITA

Bradford Willingham was born in Ruston, Louisiana. He obtained his Bachelor's degree in Film/Video from the Savannah College of Art and Design in 2003. He Joined the University of New Orleans fine art graduate program to pursue a MFA in 2012.