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Shadow of a Memory

A Thesis

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

Master of Fine Arts
In
Fine Arts
Digital Media

by

Julie Lynn Hindman

B.F.A. Louisiana State University, 2007

May 2011

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I would like to thank my sponsor, Doyle Gertjejansen for his patients and support, Cheryl Hayes for all of the emotional comfort, and the faculty of UNO for the opportunity to explore new media.

Dedication

Dedicated to my mother, if not for her support and enthusiasm, I would not have stayed committed to fine art.

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Abstract

I have gained control over a whole space through the use of video projections, soundscaping and various other materials including some interactive media, enabling me to give the audience a fuller sensual experience. Multi-media has made it possible for artists such as myself to create artworks that require more than a visual conversation with the viewer. The manipulation of memory by time became a physical manifestation in the environments that I create with the use of multi-media installations.

Keywords: soundscaping, sound ecology, installation, performance art, ephemeral art

Introduction

The intent of my work is to create a visceral response in the viewer that is based on the visualization of an encompassing sensual experience but is not limited to the visual. The main concept branches off into other interests, but the environments I build were meant to create an immediate, emotional response from the viewer/participant. Work that is intended to never be recreated and is meant only for a temporary experience is also an essential component of my work.

Engaging multiple senses and creating an environment that engulfs the participant is the vehicle through which my ideas are communicated. Multi-media installations allow me to manipulate the whole environment with ease and place the conceptual nature of the piece into a contemporary dialogue. The foundation of my work focuses on circular and meandering thoughts based on spontaneously occurring ruminations. I capture the passage of time and how time can alter the recollection of events, hopefully triggering the contemplation of an enigmatic and complex thought process. The metaphor for the underlying ideas mentioned above is expressed through complicated layering of visual effects. When viewed as a whole, each facet of the installation becomes as important as any other part.

Using new media has become essential when trying to communicate these multi-layered ideas. I engaged multiple senses by simultaneously using video, installation, and sound. The installations were tailored for the space and made up of several panels of fabric suspended from the ceiling that draped down, creating hallways the audience walked through. The installations required the viewer to be involved with the video

projections inside the space. A video loop was projected through the back of the fabric layers and a projection through the front, creating layers of light, images, and shadows of the participants. The fabric panels were close together making tight corridors, forcing the people to touch the material. The sound was tailored to engulf the space and created a soundscape that brought the installations to life.

Video elements in Installation

The absence of color is essential to the images I have chosen for the videos. Restricting the image to black and white allows for a more personal imaginative interpretation. The black and white imagery in Elias Merhige's 1991 art film *Begotten* had a significant influence on my current body of work, particularly the video elements. I am interested in the forms of nature mirroring the human body and movements, which is a direct reference to the video in my installation *Shedding Memories, 2010* (fig 5). Even though the theme of Merhige's film *Begotten* (fig1) has no relation to my work, the visual aspect has been influential for me. The stark black and white forms that are often unclear give the film an abstract quality. Merhige has been quoted describing his film; "A Rorschach test for the eyes." The viewer can't clearly make out what is going on visually but can still get a basic sense of what is happening. Many of the images that flash before your eyes are depictions of torture and suffering with periods of rest and peace that creates a heightened sense of contrast.

Shadow of a Memory, 2011, following *Shedding Memories* and the next step or layer in the series of work, incorporated a new level of video (fig 6). The installation

included a live feed of the audience as they were entering and was projected through the front layers of fabric dangling from the ceiling. A computer captured these images and the participants were invited to capture small video segments of themselves. These segments will be used in later video loops (*see fig 6*) in the back projection that also acts as the light that casts the participants' shadows on to the fabric. The interactivity involved strangers in the front video projection and was a shared experience between the public and myself. The metaphor in the layering of video and other materials is about time altering our recollection. Each layer of fabric changes the video and is abstracted when the projection hits the last layer of fabric that is hanging from the ceiling. The video has little color and the fabric is also white, emphasizing the high contrast. The participant can continue through the environment without having to fully engage the entire film; they can literally become a part of the experience as their shadows are cast upon the panels of fabric.

In Shadow of a Memory, the participants' shadows were not the only element involved because their figures were also projected onto the fabric of the front section of the installation (*see fig 6*). Monitors capturing their movements as they entered the installation were fed through digital projectors. The spectator became part of the video projections, bringing the interactivity to a new level and diluting the personal nature of the piece. The video projections doubled as both the light that created the cast shadows and the primary movement inside of the installation. Without the active participation of people the production would not have related to the human connections I am referencing. In addition to the movement I intended for the viewer to experience a

lingering feeling of something important taking place, but not fully realized. Since my work borders on a personal memoir, it is important to not show an over personalized story to the audience. I was eager for the piece to function as a space that is conducive to the movement of time and memories without reference to any concrete story or narrative.

In *Shadow of a Memory*, 2011 and *Shedding Memory*, 2010, the participant wanders up and down corridors or hallways of fabric. Their shadow is cast upon the many layers of fabric, ultimately combining with the video projection. This is obviously a moment experienced by the individual walking through the space that cannot be repeated. The constant obstruction and revealing of the images supported the intent of an ever-changing environment. Layering remains the analogy for the complexities of our memories and thoughts, which is why the actual images being projected are intended to be insignificant. There are some snippets that are recognizable, and may even spark a specific memory in an individual, but the main point of the projections is to provide the light that illuminates the fabric, and gives only a hint of a beginning and end through the motion of the video.

Rethinking digital theory and practices

Video, animation, interactive technology and AV equipment are essential for communicating my ideas. Artists are more frequently using new media as technologies become more available. Contemporary issues of using digital media are addressed in the installations *Shedding Memory* and *Shadow of a Memory*. The work is only meant to

exist at the moment of activation and ends with deactivation, which requires a person to trigger. It is not to be documented and reshowed as a single piece of artwork. Any video documentation of the interactive installations is unacceptable because this cannot become the artwork. It is imperative that my work is experienced and viewed only as it happens. The artwork only exists in the space that I have chosen for the public to interact, otherwise the piece no longer stands as an ephemeral, momentary experience that speaks about the ubiquitous, non-descript moments in life that define our memories.

The recording of a live performance or installation is often viewed as the artwork instead of the performance. Inherently, the digital recording becomes the art that is criticized and the performance is overlooked. The documentation of art becoming *the art* is a downfall of the digital revolution that the art world is just now beginning to question.¹ Video is a documentation of any live performance or installation and not a piece of artwork. Matthew Barney's *Cremaster Cycle* (fig. 3) is an example of the artist "cashing in" on the fact that the documentation is viewed as the art. His elaborate installations and live performances were a massive and expensive production held in the Guggenheim in New York City (see fig. 3). However, there was no live audience and the video was sold as the work of art. "No matter what, the moments recorded are not the same as the moments playing on stage with the live performance."² Digital recordings of the installations can easily become the art, and is why I choose not to make documentation of this work readily available. Video documentation has no relation to my

¹ Dixon, Steve *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, Installation*, Cambridge, MA).

² (Dixon, *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, Installation*, pg 126,).

installations as artwork and only function as record keeping. I support the theory that the documentation should not be viewed as the art but does become attached to the art. Documentation of my work will only be given out selectively.

Dixon poses a question in his book *Digital Performance: History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation*; is video hidden? You can only view video when shown, but a painting is always visible. Generic Art Solutions and digital artist David Sullivan also brought up this point when discussing video work (fig. 2 interviewed October 2010), David Sullivan is perhaps best known for his digitally rendered moving 3D paintings. Video requires a person to turn it on, so the question posed, when does the piece disappear and does this disappearance become a part of the artwork? The non-existent portion becomes important when the piece cannot just exist in a space without assistance, such as a painting, which can always be viewed and does not require human assistance to “turn on.” All of my installations require being turned on and are not complete until the final element of people interacting with the art is introduced or happens. I fully embrace and support the theory that the inactive portions of the work are just as important as the activated installation.

“An Artist has to be engineer, programmer, graphic designer, and hardware constructor all at one.”³ Bentowska believed that technology becomes part of the process just as in painting, sculpture and more traditional art practices. Once in the computer, the space is unlimited and the artists is no longer concerned with where and how the work will happen or restricted by the lack of space. Therefore, the work can be

³ (Digital Visual Culture: Theory and Practice, Bentokwaka-Kafel, Gardiner, Hazel, pg., 33)

more experimental and the artist freer to explore other options, giving the work a different aesthetic not experienced before. I have found this to not be true as supported in the writings. The artists is still thinking about the final product and how the work will be presented and this compels the artist to be equally restricted as with any other art form. From the very beginning of my process, I have a specific site in mind and this becomes my canvas.

New media has made my vision accessible, allowing me to layer many elements at once to create a clear metaphor of time and memory. Digital elements in the projections, the cast shadows of the participants, and the interactivity, would not be able to become part of the artwork without new media. I would not have as much control to add layers of other figures as I do with the video cast upon the people that walked through the installation. I film people interacting with elements of the established installation and then use that as part of the digital projections in subsequent video projections. *Shadow of a Memory* has excerpts from the previous events that were filmed, as did the former and so on and so forth. Layering images from previously executed performances acts as a symbol of the complication of memories overlapping each other.

Ephemeral Art: visualizing time

Ephemeral art has traditionally been linked to earth works and performances staged outside. Over time the work will cease to exist and is not meant to be archival. Ana Mendieta had the most influence on me as an artist in this chosen form of transient and momentary artwork. Her series, *Earth-Body Sculpture*, performed from 1972-1985,

Mendita writes: "I have been carrying on a dialogue between the landscape and the female body (based on my own silhouette)... I am overwhelmed by the feeling of having been cast from the womb (nature). Through my earth/body sculptures I become one with the earth... I become an extension of nature and nature becomes an extension of my body..." These pieces were purposely meant to exist only for the live moments of the actual performance. For instance the ocean seen in the figure below eventually washed the sculptures/performances away (fig 4).

Upon entering the rooms of my installations the participant/viewer was immediately greeted with scent and sound, and then the visual components entered their cognitive process. Essentially the mood of the environment is established before the person actually sees anything. The visceral component of the installation was created out of a space where the viewer had an immediate physical reaction upon walking into the room. The emotional bond with the piece is shortened because of the transitory nature of the installation, causing a heightened initial reaction. "Each of us exists within a visceral world. We are wrapped among a simultaneity of physical experiences: our perceptions of sound, light, temperature, touch: our responses to the threat of danger, or the expression of a desire become memory: entering into a shifting fabric of what we have known. The specificity of a particular site/location is a woven container of association... a fluid mix of the physical, emotional, personal, social, and political. The fabric is nonlinear; extending inward, and out. The present is written upon by its inhabitants; all of us containers ourselves."⁴

⁴ (*Space, site, intervention: situating installation art*, Suderburg, pg. 158 quote from installation artists John Coleman)

In the future, my work will change from one installation to the next. *Shadow of a Memory* and the other installations required the participation of the public and are impermanent. They were not disintegrated into the earth or washed away by the ocean, but the installations have been dismantled and will change to adapt to a new interior space. The pieces existed in the moment; even the subtle movements of the fabric were fleeting and not repeatable. The medium of installation created a sense of momentary existence because of the materials I chose, the layering of light, sound, and the limited duration for the entire piece. This layering of video allows for me to freely express the metaphor of time moving as it continuously changing our perception of the past.

Shadow of a Memory ended and was dismantled, remaining in the memories of the observers and the subsequent stories of those individuals as they remember interacting with the installation. It is not necessary that the viewer fully realizes all of my intent, but rather grasps the “feeling” of being in limbo and in the physical presence of memory and the energy of the subconscious. From the beginning I was faced with the concepts of time as I manipulated moving pictures in the process of video editing. Using time-based media inherently makes ephemeral artwork accessible to me during my process.

Using Nature as Another Figure

The movement in my video represented our unavoidable tie to our surroundings or nature. Using projected figures that *fall onto* the live audience created an illusion of interaction, and more importantly, images of random scenes of nature were shown in

the video projections in the installation. “In the light of the current destructive capacity of civilization and the disequilibrium it has engendered within the biosphere, the obvious human need to reaffirm connection with the non-human world presents an ironic challenge.”⁵ A common thread of thought among my peers is being aware of our surroundings and once again becoming sensitive to nature. The principal view of my peers revolves around leaving the selfish tenets of the past and entering a more holistic approach to technological advances in contemporary society. This layered ideology is incorporated through the interactive element combined with natural smells and artificial pheromones in *Shedding Memories*, 2010. *Shadow of a Memory*, 2011, was more focused on the active participation of an occurring event, using nature as the backdrop, making the installation more human focused. The piece becomes less grounded and creates an ethereal experience, which relates more to cerebral recollections.

“There is a long tradition of viewing art as a mirror of nature... Nature as subject in contemporary art acts as a barometer of ecological attunement, while correspondingly artists contribute to a progressive shift in how we relate to and envision nature (excerpt of contemporary art historians and curators based in Budapest and London from Maja and Reuben Fowkes).” In this millennium sound, video and other technological advances, have been an influential instrument for artists who are trying to express the idea of oneness and communion with nature. David Dunn’s *Wilderness as Reentrant Form* supports this research and also states that artists as “system thinkers. Even though the general public is unaware of what radical artists are doing, within this

⁵ (*Wilderness as Reentrant Form: Thoughts on the Future of Electronic Art and Nature* Author(s): David Dunn Source: Leonardo)

planetary electronic culture, the artist becomes the fabricator of feedback that challenges the ideologies of the status quo.”⁶

Sound as Form

There is a difference between music/scoring and adding sound to a space for the purposes of informing the audience. In recent years sound has become accepted as a form of art that can be manipulated in a space just like any other art medium. It is assumed that "music" must function in the traditional and orderly sense that we are used to, which early sound artist John Cage challenged.⁷ Sound is becoming more accepted as a viable art form because of early pioneers such as John Cage.

Technology is making it possible to manipulate more than just the visual for artists and myself.

The use of sound is essential in my installations. I am constantly revising my choices to find a balance between sound tracking and sound that belongs with the whole piece, functioning as art. Using source material from everyday life and keeping with the confines of minimalism encourages the audience to interpret the sound as an integral part of the artwork. I rely on low frequencies and familiar noises so that the sound not only functions as a backdrop but also adds to the whole experience. The sound used in *Shadow of a Memory* had elements from everyday life as well as manipulated synthetic engineered tones. Sound art pioneer Le Monte Young perfected this technique known as fluxus and minimalist compositions in the late 1950s. Le Monte

⁶ (Dunn, *Wilderness as Reentrant Form: Thoughts on the Future of Electronic Art and Nature*, pg. 380)

⁷ (Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art, Brandon Labelle.)

would take everyday sounds and manipulate them into a musical composition, sometimes distorting the sound into an unrecognizable form. The mid nineties knew this form of sound engineering as acoustic ecology or soundscaping, although was already established by early pioneers such as John Cage, Phillip Glass, and Brian Eno.

The philosophy of soundscaping is the exploration of living things and the sounds of their environment, taking ambient sounds and using them as compositional elements in a piece of sound art. “What acoustic ecology reveals, and must contend with is the full body of sound in all its beautiful and terrible dimensions, from the deafening to the hauntingly attractive” (Background Noise: perspectives, pg 215). In Young’s piece *the Vision*, he took the sound of a chair sliding across the floor and emphasized that sound by drawing it out, similar to how minimalist painters would focus on one shape or color. “...Sometimes regarded as an affront to the ear can actually be quite beautiful if one concentrates on listening to the, pushing and dragging ordinary, readily available furniture across an engaging floor surface.”⁸ The whole 25-minute sound loop in *Shadow of a Memory* had one element linking it together which was a low tone that was also felt through the vibrations caused by the subwoofers but had previously been the sound from an ordinary object that I manipulated digitally. The software was able to generate a random pattern for the rest of the sounds that I captured, such as a crowd in a café, dogs barking, snow plows, etc., which was then layered on top of the constant low tone. The seemingly random nature of the sound speaks volumes to the whole

⁸ (La Monte regarding Poem performed January 1960, from *Four Musical Minimalists, La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass, Keith Potter*, Keith Potter, Cambridge University Press 2000)

concept of the installations being temporary and a metaphor for arbitrary memory recall.

Conclusion

The use of digital projections and large interactive installation is essential to the success of relaying my intentions. My installations within the last year have proven to me just how important it is not to have video documentation become the artwork. Creating an environment where there is a visceral response is my ultimate goal. Using multiple mediums at once has given me the best way to communicate my ideas to a diverse audience. The more esoteric element of my work regarding the fragility of life is a supportive element and is represented in the chosen fabric. Low frequencies in the sound serve the purpose of creating an enclosed comforting space, not unlike being in a womb, with the intent of assisting the viewer in feeling welcome to stay inside the space. The fact that the participant can see himself or herself in the space is an obvious attempt at making the experience more personal for that individual. Many other artists have successfully created temporary and interactive installations, exploring new media, and I intend to continue this discipline and further push the boundaries of new media and interactive live installations.



figure 1 stills from Elias Merhige "Begotten" 1991



figure 2. still from *Sunset Refinery* David Sullivan 2008



figure 3 still from *Cremaster Cycle*, 1995



figure 4 Ana Mendita "Earth-Body Sculptures"



figure 5 *Shedding Memories* 2010 southwest corner



figure 5 continued northeast corner



figure five continued



figure 6 *Shadow of a Memory*

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Vita

Jules Hindman is from Canal Fulton Ohio and currently resides in New Orleans, Louisiana. She departed from the arts and worked for several years in emergency medicine in Ohio before returning back to fine arts and visual communications, beginning her academic studies at the University of Akron in Ohio. Her background in medicine has given her a unique perspective in the arts and is still a source of inspiration in her work. She completed her B.F.A. at Louisiana State University and is currently pursuing her Masters in Fine Arts with a concentration in Digital Media at the University of New Orleans.