

FIXATE

by

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I will provide a brief history of consumer culture and the mechanisms by which it operates: such as the aestheticization of the factory, including the illusions that remove evidence of process from production, a propagated fear of the body, and a cultural rejection of the unfamiliar, the difficult, or the old. Connecting them to ideas in both Art and consumerism, I will poke and prod at the mythologies of progress, dematerialization, and the Orphic complex. In exploring theories of doubt and skepticism, I will suggest an alternative perspective on the body, one that considers the mouth as the entrance to the self (rather than the eyes) and personal experience as a compass for subjective direction (in the form of expression). Finally, I will explore complexity (created by depth, layers and juxtaposition), decoration, and gradient as concepts that are of both visual and conceptual concern.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
ABSTRACT	v
LIST OF FIGURES	vii
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER I: CLASHING LOGIC	3
CHAPTER II: CONSUMPTION – ADVERTISING AND PATTERN	11
CHAPTER III: TRANSCENDENCE THROUGH PLEASURE	28
CHAPTER IV: DOUBT AND FLUX – THE MOUTH AS THE GATEWAY TO THE SELF	44
CHAPTER V: BEAUTY AND ANALOGY AS EXPRESSIONS OF COMPLEXITY	56
CONCLUSION.....	66
REFERENCES	68

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.	Kelly Cox <i>Fixate</i> (Installation view) 2015	5
Figure 2.	Meret Oppenheim's <i>Breakfast in Fur</i> 1936.....	8
Figure 3.	Kelly Cox <i>Fixate</i> (detail) 2015	15
Figure 4.	Tiled garden walkways of the Taj Mahal circa 1648.....	16
Figure 5.	Kelly Cox <i>Fixate</i> (four pointed star pattern detail) 2015.....	17
Figure 6.	Kelly Cox <i>Fixate</i> (false meander pattern detail) 2015.....	19
Figure 7.	Pattern on a Paleolithic mammoth ivory bracelet from the Ukraine	19
Figure 8.	Robert Arneson <i>Head Mined</i> 1983	24
Figure 9.	Robert Rauschenberg <i>Trophy IV</i> 1961	33
Figure 10.	Kelly Cox <i>Fixate</i> (detail) 2015	36
Figure 11.	The Limiting Matrix of the Popular Imagination Graph	37
Figure 12.	Valerie Jaudon's <i>Gold leaf, Red and Black</i> 1981	40
Figure 13.	Interior view of the Alhambra 11th century	41
Figure 14.	Kelly Cox <i>Fixate</i> (detail) 2015	43
Figure 15.	Kelly Cox <i>Fixate</i> (detail of wedding ring pattern) 2015.....	52
Figure 16.	Mel Chin's <i>Revival Field</i> 1991-ongoing.....	58
Figure 17.	Nam June Paik <i>TV Garden</i> (detail) 1974/2000.....	60
Figure 18.	Nam June Paik <i>Buddha Watching TV</i> 1974/1977.....	60
Figure 19.	Kelly Cox <i>Fixate</i> (detail of <i>the Conductor</i>) 2015.....	63

INTRODUCTION

In *Fixate*, I pose the idea of the gradient as a blending of, and the idea of pattern as a friction/balance between, designated but somewhat arbitrary opposites. Collection and handmade creation are important poles within this work, as is the dichotomy between consumer/environment and absence/presence. Through my use of pattern, *Fixate* investigates the figure/ground relationships and reversals inherent to painting and drawing, but integrates them with the spatial relationships of sculpture in order to draw parallels between conversations in Art about figure and form, ground, and space with my own concerns about the consumer and environment. The perspective created by the lines of the TVs and the lean of the pelican-vessels tease the viewer by invoking a desire for linearity to find a passage within a repetitive and circular structure. TV static with its motionless motion, its energy without reception, and its sound of rushing water fizzles somewhere between gradient and pattern, agitation, and serenity. There is a tension in *Fixate*, between passivity and action, movement and stillness, the fearlessness of apathy, and the tender position of trying your best. With *Fixate*, I argue for the authority of personal reflection and for an aesthetic that is residual of experience, rather than curated to fulfill a stylistic, material, or genre-based set of expectations. I am making and presenting this work from a position of vulnerability as a parallel to, and in resistance against, the restrictive and wasteful cycles of mass-consumer culture, a repetitive,

churning pattern of exaltation and negation that repulses, yet binds me into complicity through the everyday acts of fulfilling of my own needs, both social and physical.

Fixate juggles many conflicting logics. These logics-at-odds are yet combined in a patchwork way through a seriality of production, collection, and reassembly. I imagine a whole that is amassed by modular units collecting, as though by birds flocking in murmuration, or a school of fish swimming close to form the looming mass of a whale. Part of the intention of my practice is to realize this imagined whole by constructing a series of separate pieces that interrelate (unity through repetition with variation). The formation that I have created alludes to the collected environments of a city dump or a pile of swirling ocean plastic, but also to the social gatherings of individuals amassing in a public space, such as a theater or a convention hall. The resulting layered shape resembles a precarious ceremonial or domestic structure and/or a rich but polluted ecosystem where buoyant bodies are frozen in the act of gliding across the surface of water.

Ceramic bird-vessels, TVs, and patterns are all clichés. In *Fixate*, I am using a language of cliché's because I believe that language and Art are made from and rely on clichés. I enjoy the tension between meaning (the recognizable) and meaninglessness (the beaten horse). *Fixate* is designed to be a visual/bodily experience, to be reacted to in a guttural, physical way. I intend to engage the (embodied) mind, but in a way that leads to a failure of information (alluding to the brink between meaning/meaninglessness, a precipice between the power of understanding and the vulnerability of confusion).

CHAPTER I: CLASHING LOGIC

My graduate work has centered on bodies and earth as primordial-soup-like sites of creation, termination, and fixation on the many imprints left by physical experience. *Fixate* is about the vulnerable position of living in a body, in a world that you cannot control or understand, as represented by ceramic pelican vessels that have mouths open as wide as they can go. *Fixate* is also about living within a media environment that provides the illusion of information but doesn't follow through and is indecipherable, as represented by the patterned TVs. The tension between the two types of objects, one collected and one made, one boxy and the other gestural, represents the experiential and formal disconnect between media and physical environments (within and without).

To create a narrative of precariousness, I have used the fragility of handled and fired clay. Clay possesses its own memory. It records physical impressions and atmospheres and is receptive and fluid, fragile and enduring. I have also used a form of representation that presents an object for what it is (a clay vessel) but that also has the appearance of something that it isn't (a bird). Televisions act both as mirrors that reflect the viewer and as portals that reveal/create the viewer's social, cultural, and economic environment. The clay pelicans are symbolic of the vulnerability of organic bodies, whereas the televisions are symbolic of a gateway "to the outside world" inside. An outside world that is filtered by a consumer logic that presents an illusion of understanding, reasonableness, and progress. Both types of object allude to an internal

reception of exterior information, as well to different modes of serial production, each with their own set of aesthetic codes.

By employing the same slip pattern treatment on both TVs and pelican-vessels, I am visually blending two antithetical forms. By doing this, I am not allowing for a purity of vision with regard to the ready-made or the handmade, the literal or the representational, the mechanic or the organic, the discarded or the precious. In connecting them, I am making a statement that both are made, material receptacles and are subject to “cultural” and “natural” cycles of creation, value, rejection, fragmentation, and recycling. In *Fixate*, I combine elements of transience (obsolete TVs are something that have been cast out of the home, unfired slip patterns are temporary and fragile, pelicans are a migratory bird) with an attempt at creating permanence (firing clay to transform it from a plastic to a vitrified material, plugging in and arranging stacks of heavy objects). There are many types of logic at work in my project that are meant to conflict/blend within a flickering stillness.

The viewer is meant to fixate on their desire for a movement toward integration of the clashing forms and logic. My work has always explored the concept of a dichotomy between the animal and the machine in our cognitive patterns. The machine is what I associate with the “disembodied” Cartesian reasoning that we are taught in school, which is privileged by our society and is exemplified by the figure of the engineer. The animal describes the impulses and compulsions of a more intuitive, reactive, and physical nature. The animal is the part of us that is unpredictable and not completely within our control. Mechanical thinking prioritizes product and ideals, whereas animal thinking prioritizes survival and reproduction.



Figure 1. Kelly Cox *Fixate* (Installation view) 2015

In *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Charles Taylor warns about the ecological danger of privileging mechanical reasoning over other forms of logic:

Instrumental reason has also grown along with a disengaged model of the human subject, which has a great hold over our imagination. It offers an ideal picture of human thinking that has disengaged from its messy embedding in our bodily constitution, our dialogical situation, our emotions, and our traditional life forms in order to be pure, self-verifying rationality. This is one of the most prestigious forms of reason in our culture, exemplified by mathematical thinking, or other types of formal calculation. Arguments, considerations, counsels that claim to be based on this kind of calculation have great persuasive power in our society, even when this kind of reasoning is not really suited to the subject matter, as the immense (and I think undeserved) saliency of this type of thinking in social sciences and policy studies attests... We might think of this mode of reasoning as an achievement worth aiming at for certain purposes, something that we manage to attain part of the time, even though constitutionally our thought is normally embodied, dialogical, shot through with emotion, and reflects the ways of our culture. Descartes took the step of supposing that we are essentially disengaged reason; we are pure mind, distinct from body, and our normal way of seeing ourselves is a regrettable confusion.... This explains why so many people find it quite unproblematic that we should conceive human thinking on the model of the digital computer. This self-image is enhanced by the sense of power that goes along with a disengaged instrumental grasp of things.... It is obvious that part of

what is going for instrumental reason is that it enables us to control our environment. Domination does speak to us, whether just because it fits with some project of self-determining freedom.¹

I am drawn to art that attempts to reimagine an artistic practice according to logic of a more bodily, emotive, and intuitive nature, or to capture the friction of attempting to live and think like a machine when one isn't. In *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt*, Thomas McEvelley discusses Hegel's conception of nature and culture as a kind of clashing but interrelated logic in connection to the interpretation of the sculptures of Marcel Broodthaer. Through arrangements of found and altered objects such as opened egg and clamshells, Broodthaer represented nature as a generative but nonsensical visual experience that is able to disrupt all of mankind's efforts to understand or control it.

Many of Broodthaer's works focus a critical eye on the Hegelian distinction between culture and nature. Hegel calls culture "Work" because it is under human control, supposedly, and, also supposedly because it has a purpose. Nature, on the other hand, he called "Madness" because he saw it as heading in no direction, and under no humanly accessible control. Broodthaer suggests that the madness of nature may be saner than the work of culture.... Human work—the human effort to control and manipulate nature—is seen as itself rooted in nature, dependent on it. Culture is proposed as a disguised and unrecognized natural process.²

McEvelley references Broodthaer's *A Shovel* from 1965, a spade that was presented as sprouting up from the ground instead of shoveling, in accordance with its prescribed purpose. This piece employs an object that represents itself, signifies its use function, but is altered/disrupted so that it acts as a symbol of an idea. According to McEvelley, Broodthaer uses the shovel to create a physical manifestation of an abstract

1 Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992), 101-102.

2 Thomas McEvelley, *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt*, (New York: School of Visual Arts, 1999), 79.

inner vision, one in which the phenomenon of instrumental reason (a tool for environmental domination) emerged, like a small seedling, from larger and more chaotic whole (one that due to its largeness, is difficult to conceptualize). *A Shovel* exposes a power upset (within the imagination of the viewer), in that the form is presented as if birthed from a pregnant, chaotic earth, rather than in the position of tearing up the earth according to human intentions.

Two other works that McEvelley describes as exploring the tensions of clashing logic (between the animal and the machine within) are Meret Oppenheim's *Breakfast in Fur* and Francesc Torres's *The Head of the Dragon*. With *Breakfast in Fur*, Oppenheim combined a mass-produced object of culture with an animal texture in a way that was both sensual and disturbing, to highlight a contradiction between the man-made and a larger world of non-rational happenstance that is always on the verge of engulfing it. In the process, the purpose of a functional object was made absurd and irrelevant (except within the arena of the human imagination).³

³ McEvelley, *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt*, 276.



Figure 2. Meret Oppenheim's *Breakfast in Fur* 1936 Available from galabent.wordpress.com (Accessed on January 4, 2015)

To create *The Head of the Dragon*, Torres strapped a battering ram to the front of a toy train so that it repeatedly smashed against a door behind which waited a live snake. The piece was symbolic of the evolutionary stages of the human brain (the ancient and violent reptilian brain stem and the more advance cerebral cortex) co-existing somewhat dangerously. The train and snake, separated by a door, are bound to collide. The implication is that the logics of machine and animal influence our behavior simultaneously, creating in us a confusing bipolar experience of instincts and urges.⁴

The aesthetics and concepts that comprise *Fixate* were influenced by my childhood exploration of a town built atop a marsh and in several boggy places, receding

⁴ McEvelley, *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt*, 313.

back into it. The city (Madison, Wisconsin) and the swamp interpenetrate and break down the integrity of one another. The clashing growth patterns of urban planning in an Isthmus city, and the damp drifting puffs of water-plants and fowl, helped to form my early visual language. When I was thirteen, I took an underwater photography class in one of the lakes. From down there, you could look up at the tall buildings through the waves of brown water. The only living things that I encountered to photograph were one crawdad hiding in an old cinder block and the undersides of duck feet flapping against the surface.

By contrast, scuba diving in the Caribbean Sea gave me a high standard for visual richness and the pleasure/fear of encounter (with a marlin or hammerhead shark), the freedom of suspended gravity (buoyancy control), and the introspection of listening to myself breathe for an hour. Submerged, it is impossible not to feel one's own bodily position of total immersion in an exterior material, one with its own density that presses in increasingly as one descends. This density interacts with, but is held at bay by, the resistance of one's own internal pressure, so that there is a consistent fluid tension that pushes against both sides of one's membrane, a membrane that separates yet *feels* the exterior condition. The gear involved, a prosthetic technological apparatus allows for this experience, but through use is ultimately revealed to be both fragile and ridiculous (because of the complete lack of its integration with the body). In order to enjoy the experience, one must come to terms with reliance on gadgetry, a trust in human tinkering and maintenance. In attempting to find fluidity in this unintuitive merging with an unwieldy contraption, one becomes aware of one's most basic situation and needs.

I have been scuba diving semi-regularly for almost twenty years (since 1996) and during that time I have witnessed a lot of ecological change. The reef is a war of overlapping corals and sponges in a hodgepodge of colors and textures that reach out at night to consume worms and strangle one another. The reef crusts and blooms out from the old pilings of piers and other sunken remains of “culture” such as ships, airplanes, tires, and tangles of broken fish traps. In the sea, there is a feeling of potential in the particles of blue that drift by, as though the cruising spores of life are just waiting (encapsulated) for a chance to burst forth like a sea-monkey on the crumb of some nutrient or scrap of infrastructure. But the reefs also reveal the crush of decline, the bleaching and broken corals coated in films of algae, and the desperate migrations of fish. The visual relationship between my hometown and its poisoned lakes is mirrored on a global scale by expanding, sloppy cities, and nitrate-polluted seas.

I worry that the destruction of the ocean ecosystems will lead to the collapse/alteration of the Earth’s atmosphere and eventually to the end of humanity, and that this demise will have been the result of our inability to properly conceptualize ourselves and our relationship to a wider ecosystem of which we are a small part. Part of this failure of vision seems to be an over-confidence about humanity’s ability to control the environment, a faith in the direction of technology and “reason,” and a fantasy of disembodiment that distances people from the tenuous physicality of their position on Earth.

CHAPTER II: CONSUMPTION – ADVERTISING AND PATTERN

Fixate is also a portrait of a binge and purge pattern of consumption and waste that reflects American cycles of status, desire, and junk. By using the objectified receptivity of the vessel, I am creating an alternative portrait of the American consumer as powerless. In *Captains of Consciousness*, Stuart Ewen describes a 1920s corporate campaign to unify the diverse populace of the United States by rewriting the varied priorities of immigrant communities in order to create a predictable mass culture of consumers. The ensuing onslaught of advertising replaced values of thrift (conservation) with ones of possession (waste) and folk aesthetics and reasoning with marketplace logic.⁵ In the wake of this deluge, the topography of the American cultural landscape was transformed and sealed like an inflatable snow globe where all the bits try to escape but they get sucked back in to swirl around forever in an absurd up/down and around spiral. William Leach also describes the historical narrative of this cultural change in *Land of Desire*, painting a picture within which twentieth century businessmen, bankers, and marketers directed the economy of the United States toward a currency of fantasy and dreams, counter-intuitively at odds with the autonomously productive and therefore creative potential of individuals and communities.

Indeed, the culture of consumer capitalism may have been among the most nonconsensual public cultures ever created, and it was nonconsensual for two

⁵ Stuart Ewen. *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), 54.

reasons. First, it was not produced by “the people” but by commercial groups in cooperation with other elites comfortable with and committed to making profits and to accumulating capital on an ever-ascending scale. Second, it was nonconsensual because, in its mere day-to-day conduct (but not in any conspiratorial way), it raised to the fore only one vision of the good life and pushed out all others. In this way, it diminished American public life, denying the American people access to insight into other ways of organizing and conceiving life, insight that might have endowed their consent to the dominant culture (if such consent were to be given at all) with real democracy.⁶

This cultural campaign in advertising coincided with a nationwide attack against artistic diversity and alternative media outlets of any sort. In order that a new media conglomerate might dominate and homogenize the areas of “public” speech, small newspapers and radio stations across the country were purchased by, and adjusted according to the needs of the growing corporate network. The only employment opportunities available to artists in this landscape of monopolized public attention were within the realm of corporate advertising. Thus, the creative and emotive energies of the nation were funneled toward the purpose of manipulation and propagandizing. Ewen refers to this process as resulting in a monopolization of the image of “Truth”:

For many, the conscription of the arts by the industrial machine was a personal crisis. But perhaps more importantly, it represented a broad cultural tendency that was central to the ideology of consumerism—the eradication of indigenous cultural expression and the elevation of the consumer marketplace to the realm of an encompassing “Truth.”⁷

Wealthy industrialists of the time such as Edward Filene (of Boston Store) argued for the need to conduct consumer campaigns in the field of education, by aestheticizing the factory and the urban environment at large and by indoctrinating young people in the

⁶ William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), XV.

⁷ Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture*, 67.

harsh but unquestionable realities of production and profit “within which the element of conflict was eradicated from the world of knowledge.”⁸ According to Filene’s model, logic and reason were separated from classical skepticism and replaced by the “facts” of production and commercial exchange.

This new media of mass-manipulation in the name of education aimed to turn American children (of the 20th century) against their parents, their family traditions of craft, and localized agricultural knowledge. Anything that could be construed as old was declared outmoded and thrown out in the name of the New. The complex, subjective insights of actual people were discredited and discarded from the cultural narrative. According to Ewen, the American worship of the New, and the “wisdom” of youth, began as a strategy for breaking down existing social bonds, undermining alternative systems of value or authority such as that of family elders or cultural leaders:

Beyond this, and perhaps more important to the consciousness of many, were the indigenous networks of social structure that carried premises and values which generated mistrust or open opposition to the corporate monopolization of culture. Traditional family structures, agricultural lifestyles, immigrant values which accounted for a vast percentage of the attitudes of American working classes, and the traditional realms of aesthetic expression—all these were historically infused with an agglomeration of self-sufficiency, communitarianism, localized popular culture, thrift and subjective social bonds and experiences that stood, like Indians, on the frontiers of industrial-cultural development. It was these subjective experiences of traditional culture that stood between advancing industrial machinery and the synthesis of a new order of industrial culture. And it was incumbent on industry, in formalizing the new order, to find a means to sacrifice the old. It was within this historical circumstance that the creation of an industrialized education into culture took on its political coloration.⁹

⁸ Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture*, 55.

⁹ Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture*, 58-59.

The notion of obsolete (beneficial in so many ways) was invented and run like a windmill, endlessly turning out husks of burnt out people and junk driven by the psychotic winds of corporate interest. Ewen refers to the “passing of gray into beige” as a continual ceremonial necessity that through a parade of novelties in technology and fashion, allows for the illusion of freshness and progress and a limited decompression of the social tensions that well up against the glass ceilings and other invisible but compressive barriers.¹⁰ Aesthetically, I express this aggressive appropriative parade in *Fixate* by slapping a binary pattern (of positive/negative space) onto the surface of the televisions and pelicans alike, thus superficially imposing an alternative and seductive logic on what in *Vibrant Matter* Jane Bennett refers to as “a culture of things.”

Pattern is up for grabs, available to be stolen by anyone for any purpose and layered on top of an object to dominate and classify it (creating a tension between surface and form). It also (through its ties to fashion) dates an object (but at the same time, doesn't, because patterns are old, global, and come back around. They are adopted, discarded, and altered, and so have histories that allow one to track the progress of cultural influences across time and space.

¹⁰ Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture*, 87



Figure 3. Kelly Cox *Fixate* (detail) 2015



Figure 4. Tiled garden walkways of the Taj Mahal circa 1648. Available from <http://2.bp.blogspot.com> (Accessed on January 18, 2015)

They are cultural fossils and as such can be used to alter our perception of both the (excitingly) current and the (depressingly) obsolete. I chose geometric designs that I appropriated from modern textiles, for which they had been appropriated from Islamic and Indian tile patterns, Paleolithic carvings, pottery banding devices, quilting patterns, Chinese latticework screens, and Pythagorean mathematics. I stenciled them on the beaks of the pelicans in bold, hot or primary colors to fit my vessels into styles of aggressively nostalgic fashion. By doing so, I have created another layer of consumer portrait, that of the popular inhalation of The Now as represented by the superficial distinctions of novelty.



Figure 5. Kelly Cox *Fixate* (four pointed star pattern detail) 2015

In this process of rotating fashion, a sense of reality and meaning are held hostage, endlessly dangled like a carrot to provoke consumption, but continuously jerked away at the last second. In *Land of Desire*, William Leach describes the “cult of the new” in modern America as a kind of cultural divorce between the pleasures of life and a concept of decay and death, even though a social conception of mortality is one of the important roles that people have traditionally looked to culture to provide.

But the new market notion of democracy had many advocates and quickly rose to prominence. Democratizing individual desire—rather than wealth or political or economic power—was perhaps one of the new culture’s most notable contributions to modern society, and this achievement had many consequences. It acted as a spur to effort, forcing people to compete, discipline themselves, and deny present comfort for future pleasures. At the same time, it often set husbands against wives, children against parents, and friend against friend. It fostered anxiety and restlessness and, when left unsatisfied, resentment and hatred. And because of its association with the new and its attachment to fantasy, it tended to reinforce the American refusal to face death as a fact of life, to divorce desire from death, longing from dread. In most cultures, acceptance of desire and

longing has ordinarily been intermingled with acceptance of dread, the passage of time, and mortality. But in the United States, and especially in this cultural context, many of the writers who tried to set the tone took the dread and fear – or as the country’s foremost writer of children’s stories, L. Frank Baum would say, “the heartache and nightmare” out of desire, and gave life a happy face that would never grow old.¹¹

This cultural churn of novelty is reflected in American Art. In *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt*, Thomas McEvelley describes Art as a dialectic culture that “always involves the negation of what is there in favor of a new development.”¹² According to McEvelley, older approaches and materials (from past movements) must be accepted and included, even if they are done in an earnest rather than an ironic manner or else Postmodern artists have fallen into the same trap as the rigid traditionalists against which the original avant-garde rebelled.¹³

The weakness of post-Modernism is its tendency to betray its own premises by becoming a new orthodoxy that excludes the elements of tradition it rebelled against....For a condition of pluralism to continue, there must be no hardening round a new consensus or canon that, merely by existing as a canon, becomes exclusionistic.¹⁴

Ideas do not follow on the heels of one another in a linear, left to right progression toward the promise of some future plateau of perfect understanding. Concepts are not skins that you have to shed one after another. It is for this reason that I attempt to collapse the distinctions between old and new in my work. The patterns that I have employed have been used to create commodity illusions of the new and current, but all of

11 William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture*, 7.

12 Thomas McEvelley, *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt*, 313.

13 Thomas McEvelley, *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt*, 388.

14 Thomas McEvelley, *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt*, 382.

them date back to the earliest form of artistic expression, painted on ceramic vases and cave walls some as early as the Paleolithic period.

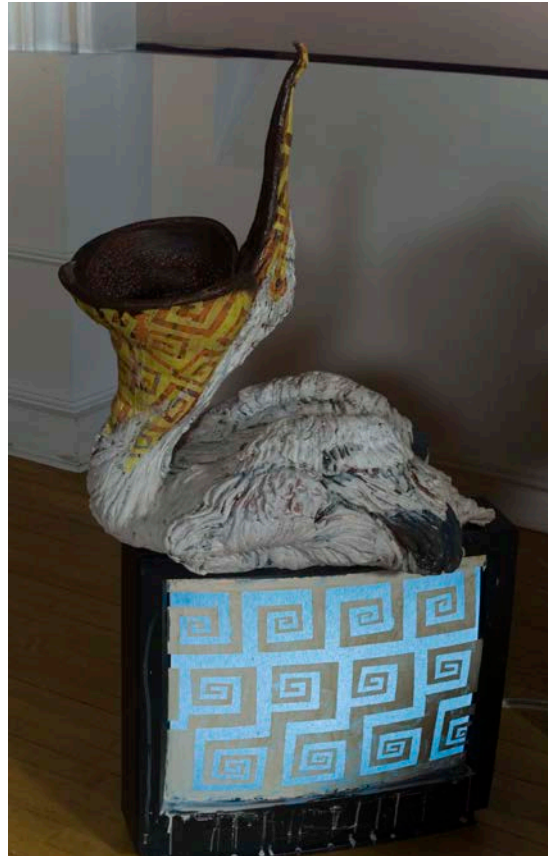


Figure 6. Kelly Cox *Fixate* (false meander pattern detail) 2015



Figure 7. Pattern on a Paleolithic mammoth ivory bracelet from the Ukraine
Available from: www.wumag.kiev.ua (Accessed January 4, 2015)

In Art and consumer culture, those who engage in “backwards” thinking or traditions may be accused of nostalgia. But the past, the old, the obscure, the broken, and

the “obsolete” people, places, and objects of the world exist still despite a constructed veil of disregard, and they do have a message, a warning... “No matter how much you try to pretend otherwise, one day you too will be used up, washed out and discarded.” In *Fixate*, my display of boxy, aged TVs are meant to carry such a message. They have been rendered meaningless by the stampede of technological advance. I have captured these TVs during their moment of public visibility (on the curb) before they have been made to disappear by the trash disposal system.

Ewen states in *Captains of Consciousness*, and I have felt, growing up in the United States, that through a ubiquitous landscape of advertising, the directors of mass culture employ the imagery, language and promise of liberation and indulgence to repress desires for social change and cultural meaning. This state of repression is all the more binding because of the confusion generated by the duplicitous language of propaganda that spins frustration in order to usher that energy back into the repeating patterns of consumption.

In a century in which political, social and sensual realms have been exploded by revolutionary resistance, the “mass culture” is a symbolic acquiescence, by capitalism, to what Freud termed the “return of the repressed.” Western civilization in general and capitalist society in particular have maintained their guards on the political and social frontiers of freedom, yet the significance of the “mass culture” has often been an offering of “escape” from these controls and from the material immiserization and restricted sensual life that they have entailed. It is not uncommon for advertising to depict an exchange process which, despite its concrete limitations, contains the mortar of gratification. The linking of the marketplace to utopian ideals, to political and social freedom, to material well-being, and to the realization of fantasy, represents the spectacle of liberation emanating from the bowels of domination and denial.¹⁵

¹⁵ Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture*, 200.

With *Fixate*, I have used vessels to illustrate my feelings of objectified vulnerability and complicity. The form of the vessel is well suited to frustrations of expression because it can only receive (consume) and not expel. It has only an entrance and no exit and is passive, designed to be filled for the use of others. In order for the contents of a vessel to be expelled, the vessel has to be picked up and dumped out, by another, they have to leave the same way that they went in. There is no passage through a vessel. A vessel is a one way street that leads to a dead end. But there is a function to a vessel, to accumulate and contain. This is also the function of the nonproductive consumer citizen.

In advertising, the mechanism by which the consumer campaign functioned was a transformation or harnessing of popular dissatisfactions with the monotony, ugliness, and dehumanizing qualities of the industrial environment and workplace into a support of the industrial ideology through the purchasing of goods that promised a remedy. Americans of the 20th century were schooled to believe that the fault (or source of dissatisfaction) lay within themselves and that they, rather than the systems of production, needed to change in order to “fit in.”¹⁶ Ewen quotes an ad for Listerine that intended to terrify the audience with paranoia about halitosis (bad breath), so that one might worry about losing his job in an industrial workplace where the worker was deskilled and expendable in order to be exchanged for a new employee without odor.

When a critical understanding of modern production might have helped many to understand what actually stood “between them and greater business success,” this ad attempted to focus man’s critique against himself-his body had kept him from happiness. Within the worldview of a society which was more and more divorcing men from any notion of craft or from any definable sort of product, it

¹⁶ Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture*, 36.

was also logical that “you couldn’t blame a man for firing an employee with halitosis to hire one without it.” The contingency of a man’s job was offered a nonviolent, apolitical solution. If man was the victim of himself, the fruits of mass production were his savior. Ads constantly hammered away at everything that was his own—his bodily functions, his self-esteem—and offered something of theirs as a socially more effective substitute.¹⁷

An environment of bodily mistrust (even loathing) has thus been woven from the myriad threads of advertising jargon. Within this climate, all truths of bodily experience are denied and assurances given that to survive, one must harden and armor oneself with the material weapons necessary to construct and maintain a “public face.” Bodily mistrust has been powerfully internalized by American youth. One only needs to witness a non-choreographed dance to regard the enactment of an agonizing degree of physical repression. One can argue that they are repressing themselves and it is true, they are! Perhaps, it is the rational machinery within that constricts the animal flailing of free motion. How sad it is, and to what purpose? I do not believe that engaging in war with one’s own body is conducive to a healthy lifestyle. It seems as though self-loathing and shame are weapons that are used to corral and control people, by directing their social and economic frustrations (that stem initially from a desire for empowerment, for control over one’s own situation so as not to be used and objectified over and over again) to face inward. To find fault with the animal chaos there, the bodily funk, rather than outward where it might combine with the frustrations of others toward a cultural problem that might be addressed. Thus, a kind of isolationism is constructed from the social anxiety of bodily mistrust.

17 Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture*, 46.

It was because of their irreverent disruption of this repressive climate that I relate to, and have been inspired by the Funk Art Movement as an alternative to the cold perfection championed by proponents of Conceptual Art. Funk Art developed around the campus of UC Davis during the 1960s. Funk artists incorporated a variety of materials as well as humor, narrative, cartoon logic, junk, and autobiographical toilet humor in an anti-art movement that rejected the seriousness and simplicity of Formalism. The term Funk was appropriated from jazz terminology where it had been used to describe the idea of personal musk as a celebration of the improvisational and irregular nature of the body. The movement's insistence on an "absurd playfulness"¹⁸ took historical inspiration from Dada and Marcel Duchamp, but Funk subject matter was often personally or socially charged. Funk Artist Robert Arneson used clay's ability to record violence, attention, and atmosphere as a way of expressing his personal anxiety, his feelings of powerlessness living beneath the looming threat of nuclear war.

¹⁸ Mary M Tinti, *Funk Art*. (Oxford Art Online: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1/2.



Figure 8. Robert Arneson Head Mined 1983 Available from: <http://www.georgeadamsgallery.com> (Accessed on January 18, 2015)

By contrast, according to Sol Le Witt Conceptual Art expresses one idea (isolated from anything that might confuse, multiply or distract from a singular message). This relies on a process of production that minimizes or circumvents the idiosyncrasies and imperfections of the body, in effect denying that the body is the mind, or even the avenue, the ultimate tool through which all cognition must be interpreted and realized. Sol Le Witt first used the term Conceptual Art in an essay that he wrote about his work in 1967. In the essay, he describes the supremacy of idea (of the original “intuitive” intention behind the work) around which all of the other aspects of the work (process, skill, scale, form, narrative, representation, emotive potential, and material) are subordinated.

The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.... It is the objective of the artist who is concerned with Conceptual Art to make his work mentally interesting to the spectator, and therefore usually he would want it to become emotionally dry.¹⁹

However, Sol Le Witt also writes in this essay that his thoughts are a reaction to the canon of Abstract Expressionism in the vein of the reductionist considerations of the time, and that it is not his intention for anti-expressionism to become a new canon.²⁰

The desire to be more like a machine (calculating and standardized) is a purity-complex with roots in classical and biblical promises of transcendence from the body, and denies that machines are imagined, designed, built, and currently maintained (through regular servicing) by bodies. In my work, I strive to re-engage the authority of the body in the processing of sensory information by triggering a response to muscle memory and the gestures of body language, sound, and spatial navigation. Sculpted clay affects the viewer in a way that is beyond semiotics but relies on empathic sensibilities to provide a complex bodily experience. Sculptural installation creates an environment that is meant to be spatially and sensually immersive according to an alternative, more intuitive logic than that which is normally provided by humanly constructed spaces.

American consumer culture has an agenda, ideology, and aesthetic that has been imposed upon the daily life of the American (and increasingly global) people over the course of the last century, in the name of and with the language of choice, individual desire, and freedom, in order to shape the behavior of a consuming public into predictable patterns that can be planted and then reaped by corporate sociologists. Thus,

19 Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," in *Artists, Critics, Context: Readings in and around American art since 1945*, ed Paul F. Fabozzi et al, (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2002), 181.

20 Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," in *Artists, Critics, Context: Readings in and around American art since 1945*, ed Paul F. Fabozzi et al, (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2002), 181.

consumption (within the democratic and capitalist vision of America) is seen as coming from within, stemming from individual needs and desires, and under the control of individual selfishness; but from a historical context, it can be seen as an imposition from without, from a constructed climate that directs and then “appeals” to the tastes of individuals, making the individual complicit (through the fulfillment of his or her own needs) and then shames the individual for their bodily functions and excess, in order that they may be further controlled by the predictable patterns of self-loathing and penitence (through a redemptive work ethic).

There is a foie gras force-fed-goose kind of violence in our endless collection of products (material or otherwise), the soaking up, brimming over, and leaking out style of consumption that seems to have a terrible momentum all of its own. The pelican-vessels in *Fixate* are allegorical portraits of the consumer citizen described by Ewen in *Captains of Consciousness*; one who doesn't make or actively contribute to their culture but only consumes it. In an essay on toys in *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes describes French toys as miniature versions of the objects used by adults, tiny kitchenettes, and fire trucks and the like, which work to indoctrinate children into a world where such things are naturalized and given.²¹ He says that toys of a more amorphous material such as clay, or “building blocks” allow children the empowered position of imagining and constructing their world but are becoming rare.²² As a result, modern French children have become severed from the pleasures and empowerment of discovery, creation and tangibility previously inherent to the activity of play.

21 Roland Barthes and Annette Lavers, *Mythologies*, (New York: Hill and Wang: 1972), 53.

22 Roland Barthes and Annette Lavers, *Mythologies*, 54.

However, faced with this world of faithful and complicated objects, the child can only identify himself as owner, as user, never as creator; he does not invent the world he uses it: there are, prepared for him, actions without adventures, without wonder, without joy. He is turned into a little stay-at-home householder who does not even have to invent the mainsprings of adult causality; they are supplied to him ready-made: he has only to help himself, he is never allowed to discover anything from start to finish.²³

Within the modern construct of American “culture,” the consumer is regarded as powerful, but I feel that in actuality they are a kind of slave, to their own needs, and to the dictation and provisions of a larger ecosystem. In *Fixate*, I am exploring this dynamic through the use of a relationship between the crafted pelican-vessels (consumers) the pre-made televisions (environment) and the repeating, cyclical patterns that connect them in an interlocking relationship.

²³ Roland Barthes and Annette Lavers, *Mythologies*, 54.

CHAPTER III: TRANSCENDENCE THROUGH PLEASURE

I feel that visual representation and imagery are important to explore, to tug on, in order to loosen and make more flexible the rigid fantasies of Ameri-mass-culture because the danger (to the consumer) stems from an inability to imagine, see, or feel the precarious powerlessness of their position and thus protect themselves. Another strategy of advertising is to construct illusions, specifically ones that distance the product from the circumstances and consequences of its making (by people) as well as from the pollution generated (poisoning people), resources mined (by people), and energy generated (displacing and/or poisoning people), as well as the trash created by packaging and the product's future status as obsolete.²⁴ Ewen references Barthes' theory of "a new phenomenology of assembling," described in *Mythologies* as a system of naturalizing and mystifying industry as though (after the cultural shift beginning in 1890) products just appear, as though the qualities of a genetically modified potato are *innate*.²⁵

It is as if one progressed from a world where elements are welded to a world where they are juxtaposed and hold together by sole virtue of their wondrous shape.... Within such a world, the product takes on a mysterious reality impervious to the understanding or action of the population.²⁶

24 Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture*, 78-80.

25 Roland Barthes and Annette Lavers, *Mythologies*, 88-89.

26 Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture*, 105.

Recently, I was watching a clip on the Internet, a segment from Mister Rogers where the production of crayons is shown. In the episode, Mister Rogers invites the audience to step into a painting on his wall where the magic and truth of production are both “revealed” to you. One follows the progress of the yellow crayon through the smooth transitions, from molded forming, to a mechanized swaddling in paper, to the sorting that sends the yellow crayon gliding into its rightful place amongst its waxy kin in the box. There are no workers in the video. No people at all or even hands pulling at levers or pushing buttons. There is no thumping and pumping of motors, instead the crayon’s progression is set to a soothing orchestral score. At the finale, the video insights morph back into a picture on the wall, a picture drawn with crayons. This is an example of the type of educational programming that was prescribed by businessmen like Filene. It appears to take the form of art, to reveal the truth, the “facts” about production, but in aestheticizing industry it removes the physical experiences and consequences of making. Mister Rogers presents to us a fantasy of transparency, in the name of understanding and truth. By cloaking this illusion in the guise of art, he makes art complicit in the propaganda of industry, or he invokes a mistrust of representation. Either way, Mister Rogers has robbed art of any power to offer an alternative vision of transparency, truth, and production while at the same time peddling crayons to us in the name of art.

The crayon video was beautiful in a too good to be true sort of way, by using an aesthetic that connects commodity-objects to a promise of slick transcendence (of physical limitations and non-market costs). I see a parallel here with the concept in art of a distancing of the object from the hand of the maker, from the strokes of process. Revealing and reveling in the evidence left by such gestures of construction then fits into

another art concept, that of “exposing the support” (the support of the human labor, the time and activity of the body engaging with a material).

The combination of an “evidence of the hand” sculpting and surfacing style and hand-cut stencils (an old technology for hiding the evidence of hand) creates a game of hide and seek in *Fixate* whereby the body is ultimately revealed as having a “hand” in all processes technological or otherwise. In the article *Super Objects: Craft as an Aesthetic Position*, author Louise Mazanti asserts that within the history of Craft, fingerprints have been regarded as a manifestation of the “human imprint” and a sign of “authenticity.”²⁷

According to Mazanti, since the nineteenth century craft has been seen as a harmless practice because of its concentrations on the aesthetics of specific, traditional materials such as wood, fiber, and clay, but it has the potential to address material culture, social relations, and avant-garde theory. Not only was the Arts and Craft Movement a reaction to the mass production that occurred during the Industrial Revolution, it was also a reaction against the elitism of visual art, particularly the German Idealism of Immanuel Kant, which described aesthetic knowledge as a separate, privileged field of study (which paved the way for modernism and l’art pour l’art). Mazanti argues that craft practice creates a new art/life praxis that situates it within the goals of the avant-garde.²⁸ She defines successful craft as Super Objects (a term that she appropriated from Garth Clark) because they both participate in and critique consumer culture and thus act as contemplative “wormholes” that follow their own agenda,

27 Louise Mazanti, “*Super Objects: Craft as an Aesthetic Position*,” in *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, ed Maria Elena Buszek et al, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 59-60.

28 Louise Mazanti, “*Super Objects: Craft as an Aesthetic Position*,” in *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, ed Maria Elena Buszek et al, 74.

aesthetic, and system of value. She states that Super-Objects act as objects of desire within consumer culture and at the same time reveal the systems of logic behind consumerist values, thus they create their own aesthetic autonomy as well as forge new systems of value by challenging the seamless circle of production and consumption.²⁹

I consider craft and skill to be a kind of luxuriating in the act of work, an endeavor that is beneficial to the practitioner and to the people around them. I benefit from and appreciate the skills of many, and I would like to think that I am able to make a contribution in return through my care and effort. The logic behind *Fixate* stems in part from, but does not totally mesh with, the logic of Craft theory described by Mazanti. The figurative bird vessels are a kind of craft cliché that, separated from one another and their TVs and incorporated into homes of owners where they might be used for some arbitrary purpose (such as an umbrella stand), would fit within the art/life praxis of the Super-Object. By contrast, the televisions, although I altered them using the craft logic of decoration and an evidence of the hand style which, according to Mazanti creates a sign of authenticity, have been taken from their use in the home. As revamped trash, they are an art cliché with ties to a different, more Rauschenbergian history.

In *The Disappearance of Objects*, Joshua Shannon places four New York artists (including Robert Rauschenberg and Claus Oldenburg) into the environmental context of a sloppy, debauched city morphing (patchwork) into the shiny, cubicular dream of corporate urban development. This transition toward a Newer New York, left the old city (very much still apparent) without meaning, a ruin to itself, existing everywhere but left

²⁹ Louise Mazanti, "Super Objects: Craft as an Aesthetic Position," In *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, ed Maria Elena Buszek et al, 67.

behind, somehow both more and less real in contrast to the logic of eternal perfection and efficiency championed and standardized by architectural planners. A new fear arose within this hodge-podge landscape, of being left behind amongst the decay, of failing to get on board with progress. Shannon describes an obsession with the obsolete as “an anxiety about a material world populated with objects failing to signify.”³⁰ Shannon further connects this disorientation from objects to the concept of the “soft-sell,” a device in advertising that connected products to promises of affect, rather than to use value, and so “loosened the connections between material objects and their meanings.”³¹ Shannon describes Rauschenberg’s *Trophy IV*, the assemblage of a broken umbrella and a boot, as an attempt at rescuing discarded objects from their meaninglessness.³²

Rauschenberg imagined a symbolic value for trash that called on the viewer’s familiarity with their past their usefulness, their anxiety about waste and the obsolete, and proposed a redemptive role for formal beauty. Such a practice situates the artist as a mushroom within the culture, recycling and reassigning value to society’s waste:

By running discarded objects through a context that both gives them meaning and shows them to be without it, Rauschenberg emphasizes the broader cultural relevance of his deployment of philosophical tensions between the pictorial and the literal, between meaning and sheer materiality. The industrially produced objects of consumer society are seen to be very much like the very specialized matter of paint used in painting: they do have meanings related to their forms, but those meanings are perpetually at risk of changing or of simply dropping off. Just as paint can be made to give way to meaning only in limited and flawed ways, so too, the manufactured commodity objects of America’s postwar abundance

30 Joshua Shannon. 2009. *The Disappearance of Objects: New York Art and the Rise of the Postmodern City*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) 130.

31 Joshua Shannon. 2009. *The Disappearance of Objects: New York Art and the Rise of the Postmodern City*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) 130.

32 Joshua Shannon, *The Disappearance of Objects: New York Art and the Rise of the Postmodern City*, 130.

oscillate between sustaining the functions and meanings claimed for them by advertising and returning to mere obdurate stuff.³³



Figure 9. Robert Rauschenberg Trophy IV 1961 Available from www.sfmoma.org (Accessed on January 4, 2015)

In the context of advertising culture, an object can no longer represent only itself, with a kind of stubborn literalness, as it perhaps once could. However, this multiplicity of meanings is a new kind of language that I feel opens the doors for anything, a creativity that might reflect/promote a flexibility of signification in general.

By contrast, the trend in Art of championing de-materialism seems to close doors on possibility and to recoil from the confusing complexity of embodiment. In *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennet argues that consumer capitalism is in fact a result of *antimateriality*.³⁴ Ecosystems, networks, cultures (Bennet refers to them as Assemblages) are localized platforms of interlocking and conflicting forces. Some of

³³ Joshua Shannon, *The Disappearance of Objects: New York Art and the Rise of the Postmodern City*, 142.

³⁴ Jane Bennet, *Vibrant Matter: a Political Ecology of Things*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) 5.

those forces have a visual form and others require imagination and meters to detect. Of these forces, human intentions are neither dominant nor isolated. Humans as living things are receptive to the multiple “actants” around and within our bodies. Bennet suggests that if humans recognize the “vibrancy” of matter, and begin to conceptualize our relationship to material more “horizontally” that it would take humanity in the direction of greater ecological responsibility.³⁵

It hit me then in a visceral way how American materialism, which requires buying ever increasing numbers of products purchased in ever shorter cycles, is *antimateriality*. The sheer volume of commodities, and the hyperconsumptive necessity of junking them to make room for new ones, conceals the vitality of matter.³⁶

Bennet reminds us that we are heavy, aqueous, mineral beasts.³⁷ Somehow our cultural vision of progress involves a transcendence of that weight, in favor of becoming beings of light, digitized angels, faster (instant!), dematerialized and increasingly airborne soul-products. De-materialism is another word for disposability, for “hiding the support system,” aka the giant “physical” databases that support the internet, the overseas manufacturing that supports the “de-materialization of labor,” our trash disposal system (out of sight/out of mind) and certain unfortunate oil spill dispersal tactics. Effects are made even more dangerous by being rendered invisible. Historically, these patterns have been used on human beings as readily as on objects. The cultural illusion of de-materialism acts to hide the material consequences of our incredibly wasteful way of life. Hence my attraction to stubbornly grounded materials and massive “present” objects.

35 Jane Bennet, *Vibrant Matter: a Political Ecology of Thing* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 10.

36 Jane Bennet, *Vibrant Matter: a Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 5.

37 Jane Bennet, *Vibrant Matter: a Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 11.

De-materialization in Art uplifts as a conceptual mistrust of objects and the physical world at large (connected dubiously to ideas in physics about the tenuous nature of reality). I see a cultural trend connecting issues of material trust to the bodily loathing established by advertising, and the classical desire to escape from earthly limitations. In *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt*, Thomas McEvelley refers to this disembodiment fantasy as the Orphic complex and traces its path back through “Western” history as a recurring ancient promise of bodily transcendence. The Orphic Complex represents a desire to escape from the uncertainties and violence of the physical world³⁸:

The fundamental idea is that the soul, or that part of a human being that supposedly survives the death of the body, originated in another world beyond the sky from whence, perhaps as a shameful exile, it descended here below to be imprisoned in a material body which, subject to the humiliating bondage of the law of gravity, lacks the ability to return to its home in the sky. Its goal is to disentangle itself from the webs of daily concerns that bind it to the here below and prepare for the moment of release from the present body, when the soul, if it remembers its way back and shakes off material concerns, will return over the back of the world (as Plato described it in the *Phaedrus*) to its place of origin, where it will reclaim its true nature. This idea system has something in common with the Christian mythos of the soul and its afterlife destiny, due to the fact that St. Augustine derived the Christian doctrine in part from his reading of Plato, who in turn had incorporated Orphic elements from his Pythagorean preceptors.... Periods of massive social and historical stress and disruption tend to foster Orphic thematics; a promise of potential escape from worldly chaos into a beyond that is still characterized by unchanging verities. It serves thus as a mediating device between change and changelessness, a proposed avenue of spiritual escape from processes of uncontrollable and frightening social and political change.³⁹

I feel that it is only possible for people to believe in a separation between themselves and the earth because of our upright stature, one that allows for most of our body to be in space, isolated from all but air, with only two small points of contact with

38 Thomas McEvelley, *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt*, 230.

39 Thomas McEvelley, *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt*, 230.

the ground (our feet), and those cushioned (ideally) by cloud-like soles. In contrast, a snake moves along in full earthly contact, shifting through the dirt with a thousand belly clenches. But, air is just another material, thick with the expelled carbon of our released fat cells. We pass through it, and it us, but we somehow pretend (because it is invisible) that it is of no substance, little consequence.

In popular imagery and classical symbolism, birds represent escape and our imagined future transcendence of bodily weight, the day when our souls unfurl their little wings and fly away. In *Fixate*, bird exteriors (wings tucked in save for one) are juxtaposed with cave-like interiors stained with iron (alluding to the core of the earth).



Figure 10. Kelly Cox *Fixate* (detail) 2015

The gullets, iron-stained concavities funnel down into the earthy substance, contrasting directionally and symbolically with the bird as a symbol of an evolution that leads away from the earth and into the sky. The avian subject presented cannot be idealized or separated from vessel, material, process, surface or context. This creates a

complex series of codes that is meant to be reacted to instinctually, on the level of a body reading a gesture or terrain.

Transcendence is a desire to rise above the limitations and banality of the everyday. In a TV show that I was watching recently, *The Walking Dead*, a guy insisted that all art is made through the desire for transcendence. There is a possibility that the television character is correct, but only if a form of transcendence can be imagined that doesn't give up on the beauty/despair of the everyday, the physical world, the body and the ground.

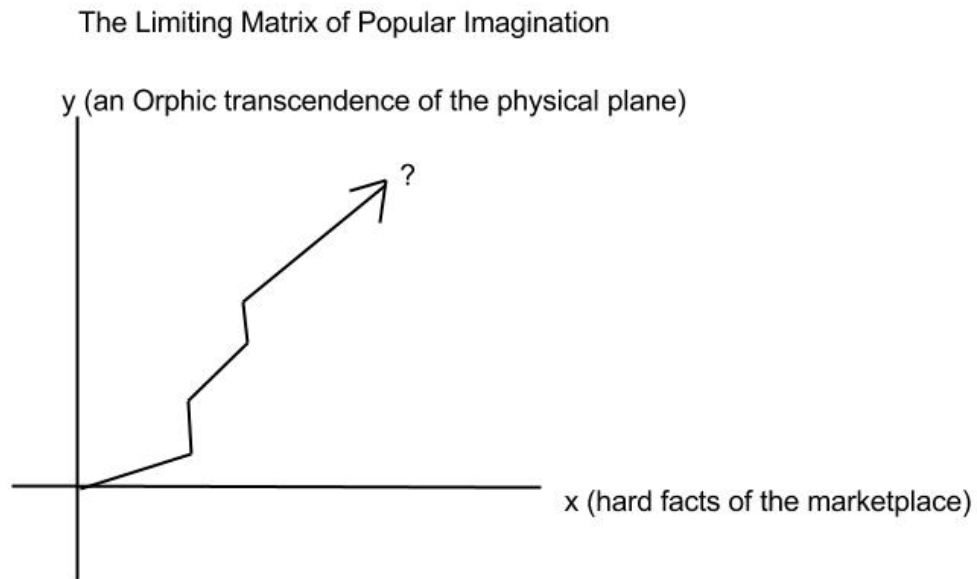


Figure 11. The Limiting Matrix of the Popular Imagination Graph

Can one imagine a kind of transcendence (of the hard facts of the marketplace) that is an embrace (like a snake feeling its way along) of an alternative perception of the

physical, rather than a desire (like a bird soaring above) for separation from the activities of the earthly pleasures and limitations of material life?

I feel that the binge/purge cycle of sacrifice and consumption is ideological rather than hedonistic. I sacrifice so I deserve to consume, I feel guilty for consuming so I sacrifice. I believe that a more hedonistic model of existence that was built on satisfying the needs and pleasures of the moment as directed by the sensations of the body might help one to escape from the binge/purge cycle. (If one eats what one wants to and works when one wants to, and then doesn't feel bad about it.)

In *Feeling Luxury: Invidious Political Pleasures and the Sense of Touch*, Dean Mathiowetz links luxury to touch, a physical experience that operates outside of the realm of semiotics. He defines traditional hedonism as the pleasure of tactile experience and sensation and says that it can be practiced alongside the fulfillment of basic needs, but only if one is able to “pay attention to the pleasurable object, process or event”⁴⁰:

And this attention is required because we are stimulated first, and foremost, by change—so all pleasure depends, in some respect, upon our prior experiences and memories. In luxury, we confront not just the pleasure, but rather the cultivation of the capacity of the body to be pleased alongside the meeting of these needs. It is in this sense that luxuriating in a meal or in a bath may be less about the squander of the time implied in these activities and more about the expansion of this capacity for pleasure that they entail.⁴¹

Mathiowetz also writes that anti-hedonist ideals (luxury leads to ruin) originally stemmed from a classically inspired English Protestant tax law.⁴² Moralizing arguments about utility, the fulfillment of needs, and democratic distribution are constantly used in

40 Dean Mathiowetz, *Feeling Luxury: Invidious Political Pleasures and the Sense of Touch*, (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011), 11/16.

41 Dean Mathiowetz, *Feeling Luxury: Invidious Political Pleasures and the Sense of Touch*, “ 11/16.

42 Dean Mathiowetz, *Feeling Luxury: Invidious Political Pleasures and the Sense of Touch*, “ 9/16.

critiques of the arts, painting them with a brush of ridiculous frivolity instead of as a valid pursuit that has been practiced in some form by every group of humans in every type of economic and social situation ever since the dawn of time.

With *Fixate* I am attempting to create an experience that fosters and rewards attention, by engaging the audience through complex beauty and a multiplicity of meaning toward the contemplation of stillness, so as to contribute to the cultivation of pleasure. Pleasure in art was taken up as an ideological mission by the Pattern and Decoration Movement of the 1970s. The movement was a reaction against the reductionist push of Minimalism, and the Conceptual Formalism then championed by Clement Greenberg in New York modernist painting.⁴³

43 Anne K. Swartz, "Pattern and Decoration" (Oxford Art Online: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1/3.



Figure 12. Valerie Jaudon’s Gold leaf, Red and Black 1981 Available from www.moma.org (Accessed on January 4, 2015)

Patterns are visually engaging in ambiguous way that rewards attention and encourages focus. I enjoy the exchange process made evident by the tracing of patterns. Patterns can be created, appropriated, and altered in a fluid way that draws connections between influences and imprints them. For example, Pattern and Decoration Artist Valerie Jaudon’s work was inspired by a trip to Spain where she experienced and was inspired by the geometric tile work and Islamic architecture of Alhambra.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Anne K. Swartz, “Pattern and Decoration” (Oxford Art Online: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1/3



Figure 13. Interior view of the Alhambra 11th century Available from <http://www.julierosesews.com/2014/05/favorite-spaces-alhambra-palace-at.html> (Accessed January 19, 2015)

There is the danger in allowing oneself to be influenced (by that which appears desirable and powerful) of cultural appropriation. Anne K. Swartz argues that the Pattern and Decoration Movement helped to promote the importance and potential of non-Western, folk and craft art through a series of articles and conventions.⁴⁵ “They were not decadent, simply looking for imagery to plunder, instead, they sought options, which they celebrated and acknowledged.”⁴⁶ I do not think that anyone should just be limited to the aesthetics of the place they were born. There is a mass global flux of cultural exchange

⁴⁵ Anne K. Swartz, “Pattern and Decoration” (Oxford Art Online: Oxford University Press, 2007), 2/3.

⁴⁶ Anne K. Swartz, “Pattern and Decoration” (Oxford Art Online: Oxford University Press, 2007), 2/3.

currently in motion. That being said, there are certain boundaries that I think should be respected with regard to cultural significance and the translation of that significance into profit.

In *Fixate*, I used pattern on my pelican-vessels and risk accusations of the decorative. Decoration fabricates unity where there isn't any. Modern designers, artists, and architects have often rejected decoration for this reason. Embellishments of design doctor up harsh industrial environments and provide citizens with a "dishonest" sense of pleasure. But isn't there honesty in exposing our desire for a visual pleasure that is missing? In a way, isn't decoration transparent enough in its mission that it reveals in the environment a lack, and in the desire for more, the falling flat of that desire? Perhaps the reason that decoration has been rejected isn't because it is dishonest, but depressingly, embarrassingly honest about the current state of man, the complex and layered disparity between his/her fantasies, needs, projections and a reality that is often lackluster and/or gross. Decoration makes us look weak, like we can't deal with the world that we created. It makes us look like wimps (because we are) who are trying all the time to create unity out of the pathetic fragments of the "real." A facade is often best at revealing the tiny "wizard" within. I feel a connection to ideas from the Pattern and Decoration Movement about the empowering potential of pleasure. *Fixate* combines this intention with the confrontation of sculpture, the spatial relationships of installation, and the complexity of multiple meanings and double entendre literal/symbolic representation.



Figure 14. Kelly Cox *Fixate* (detail) 2015

CHAPTER IV: DOUBT AND FLUX – THE MOUTH AS THE GATEWAY
TO THE SELF

When I first became interested in building forms in space, I wrote in my artist statement that the construction of three-dimensional objects helped me to see the back side of my own brain (the secret part). Nobody understood what I was talking about, but it felt really important. I could never explain what I meant, partly because it felt so obvious that I couldn't understand how to make the problem tangible for those who were not already fixated on it. In *The Primacy of Perception and its Philosophical Consequences*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty explores the difficulty of knowing that there is more surrounding you than what you can see/experience at any given moment (such as the backsides of form in space) as well as the problem of “reality” as something that is collectively agreed upon but sensed and interpreted individually, leading to a failure of communication, or disconnect.⁴⁷

Perception does not give me truths like geometry but presences.... Thus I should not say that the unseen sides of objects are simply possible perceptions, nor that they are the necessary conclusions of a kind of analysis on geometrical reasoning.... It is rather, a kind of practical synthesis; I can touch the lamp, and not only on the side turned to me but also the other side; I have only to extend my hand to hold it.... What prohibits me from treating my perception as an intellectual act is that an intellectual act would grasp the object either as possible or as necessary. But in perception it is “real”; it is given as the infinite sum of an

47 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “*The Primacy of Perception and its Philosophical Consequences*,” in *Artists, Critics, Context: Readings in and around American Art since 1945*, ed Paul F. Fabozzi (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall. 2002), 294-295.

indefinite series of perspectival views in each of which the object is given but in none of which is it given exhaustively.⁴⁸

According to this description, perception is open and relies on a blending of disjointed sensory information from past and present, in an attempt to construct a unity. Thus, day-to-day perception is dependent on imagination and memory. Merleau-Ponty suggests that this position contains a paradox of information, a friction between the recognized (What he refers to as “immanence”) and the allusion to some larger unseen (what he calls “transcendence”).⁴⁹ Merleau-Ponty describes this paradox as a presence/absence. Experiences of the “real,” as well as attempts to communicate that experience to another through the abstractions of language, cannot escape from the complexities and friction of that paradox.

The idea of going straight to the essences of things is an inconsistent idea if one thinks about it. What is given is a route, an experience which gradually clarifies itself, which gradually rectifies itself and proceeds by dialogue with itself and with others. Thus what we tear away from the dispersion of instants is not an already-made reason; as has always been said, but a natural light, our openness to something.⁵⁰

Fixate as an installation explores a series of repeated but varied forms, the making, collecting, altering of which has recorded my shifting self. In order to read *Fixate*, the spectator must shift (both literally and figuratively) through multiple perspectival views, each painting their own portrait of the totality. The arrangement of

48 Maurice Merleau-Pont, “*The Primacy of Perception and its Philosophical Consequences*,” in *Artists, Critics, Context: Readings in and around American Art since 1945*, ed Paul F. Fabozzi, 294-295.

49 Maurice Merleau-Pont, “*The Primacy of Perception and its Philosophical Consequences*,” in *Artists, Critics, Context: Readings in and around American Art since 1945*, ed Paul F. Fabozzi, 296.

50 Maurice Merleau-Pont, “*The Primacy of Perception and its Philosophical Consequences*,” in *Artists, Critics, Context: Readings in and around American Art since 1945*, ed Paul F. Fabozzi, 300.

the stacks implies a kind of faith in some larger unknowable unity that is beyond the limits of perception, but is contained within the imagination of the body (because of its capacity to tie together a collage of disparate instances of sensation). Merleau-Ponty also asserts within the same essay that one cannot separate rationality or universal ideals from an anchoring in bodily experience, and that the only philosophical certitude is doubt, so one must accept that the human condition is paradoxical.⁵¹

Within each person records of and lessons learned by experience are sliced up in a disjointed way by the filter of bodily sensation (actively acquired information) and what the media presents as true (*homogenized* passively acquired information). Within a climate of consumer culture, anything that provides an aesthetic or narrative alternative to the corporate mirage has been painted as no longer real by the standards of the market. In this way, all personal narratives are discredited but also sold back to the public larger than life and directed in the form of “reality” television.

Each time that the Coca-Cola Bottling Company informs us that their product is “The Real Thing (copyrighted),” implicit is the message that it isn’t the real thing after all; and what is more, people do feel the need for the actual real thing. To the extent that an ad, or the corporate interest that it represents, speaks for something meaningful, it does so within a context of extreme tension. There are wishes and needs which are generated in spite of the marketplace, yet the marketplace purports to address them. In a Coke ad, there is the understanding that the demand and struggle for something real will be diverted, defined as subversive or folly, and that “The Real Thing (copyrighted)” will serve as an acceptable embodiment of the impulse for something more real, more gratifying.⁵²

51 Maurice Merleau-Pont, “*The Primacy of Perception and its Philosophical Consequences*,” in *Artists, Critics, Context: Readings in and around American Art since 1945*, ed Paul F. Fabozzi, 300.

52 Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture*, 189.

As far as I can see, there is no “real” and no “artificial,” only a myriad of individual impressions (some of concrete experiences and others, ephemeral visions) of a complex and hybrid surround system (some of which is tailored for the purpose of control). In order not to lose myself within the cacophonous landscape of marketing, I try to imagine that my subjective filter is a prism, and that it has the empowering potential to break open and scatter the meanings of each force-fed message into a thousand irrelevant permutations of possible signification.

In *Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord connects what he refers to as “the spectacle,” a disembodied, cinematic construct that he saw as increasingly replacing life with its own representation (a propaganda of life), to the supremacy of the visual in “Western” culture, a depressing vanity of appearances around which everything seems to be organized, styled for and appealed to:

The spectacle is heir to all the weaknesses of the project of western philosophy, which was an attempt to understand activity by means of the categories of vision. Indeed the spectacle reposes on an incessant deployment of the very technical rationality to which that philosophical tradition gave rise. So far from realizing philosophy, the spectacle philosophizes reality, and thus turn the material life of everyone into a universe of speculation.⁵³

This problem of life transforming into a photoshoot seems to have only exacerbated recently with the advent of camera phones and social media. I view it as a problem because it falls in line with the pattern of disembodiment, a tendency to separate oneself from experience (during the very moment of the experience) through the process of documentation, as though viewing one’s situation (particularly the pleasures and the beauty) through a screen rather than fully feeling the blindness, the commitment, the

53 Guy Debord, 1994. *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994), Paragraph 19.

limitations, the fear/euphoria of immersion in one's own precarious and precious situation. This feeling of separation between the visual and the physical is similar to what Jean Baudrillard termed the "simulacra," a propagandic fantasy that is imposed (and currently updated through a diversity of regular media posts that reconfirm the mirage from every angle) like the "spectacle" on top of the visual logic and interpretation of the everyday cultural experience. In *Simulation and Simulacra*, Baudrillard describes the agenda of the space program, specifically the lunar landing, as the beginning of the age of simulacra or what he also refers to as the illusion of the end of *chance*⁵⁴:

The exaltation of the crowds was not a response to the event of landing on the moon or of sending a man into space (this would be, rather, the fulfillment of an earlier dream), rather, we are dumbfounded by the perfection of the programming and the technical manipulation, by the immanent wonder of the programmed unfolding of events. Fascination with the maximal norm and the mastery of probability....The vertigo of a world without flaws. Now, it is the same model of programmatic infallibility, of maximum security and deterrence that today controls the spread of the social. There lies the true nuclear fallout: the meticulous operation of technology serves as a model for the meticulous operation of the social. Here as well, nothing will be left to chance, more-over this is the essence of socialization, which began centuries ago, but which has now entered its accelerated phase, toward a limit that one believed would be explosive (revolution), but which for the moment is translated by an inverse, implosive irreversible process: the generalized deterrence of chance, of accident, of transversality, of finality, of contradiction, rupture, or complexity in a sociality illuminated by the norm, doomed to the descriptive transparency of mechanisms of information.⁵⁵

I am not sure whether the "real" exists on a large scale but I do believe in large-scale ecological limitations and consequences and that there needs to be a way to communicate to one another about important dangers. It seems to me that the only way to approach a global human problem is with a strategy of representing the fundamental

54 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994) 34-35.

55 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994) 34-35.

vulnerable position of living within a body, one that opens to the world by mouth (also through pores but the mouth is more obvious) through which the necessities of life must pass in order for that life to continue. By patterning the gullet of the pelicans and the screen of the TVs, I am calling attention (through ornamentation) to the doorways of the body/object. The portals into the body are most commonly imagined as the eyes (our windows into the soul) and so our culture is arranged for visual consumption. Light, although interpreted by the body, doesn't normally infiltrate, and so this idea of visual digestion is tied into an idea about the mind's ability to filter through information from a protected distance (the information doesn't penetrate). The mind is able to collect and order the bits of light without being taken over by it.

If the mouth were culturally regarded as the doorway to the self, our ideas about ourselves would be much different. Nutrients, fats, water, bacteria, air, conversation, viruses, bodily fluids, toxins, fibers and dirt, all of these externalities pass through the doorway of the mouth and are processed, discarded or incorporated (blending and bleeding into our makeup) by the body unconsciously (as in, without our control or even our awareness). To acknowledge the mouth as the portal of the self, one would have to discard notions of control and separation, and to regard oneself as a (highly vulnerable) container or membrane for one's immediate environment. This can lead to a certain type of "paranoia" ("What is my body up to?"). It is for this reason that we are taught to trust our minds (with the exception of people with Alzheimer's, schizophrenia, Parkinson's, who have a brain tumor or have suffered a stroke because we feel as though we have control over them, but distrust our bodies and view them as the other (because we don't know or understand what they are doing and they don't ask our permission for stuff)).

Let me tie this concept to the context of a physical experience and sensation.

Shortly before entering the graduate program, Eric and I were backpacking around Japan (March 2011) and experienced some of the Fukushima crisis. At the time, I was 9 weeks pregnant. Travelling back up to Tokyo in the days following the disaster, it was difficult to know what the situation was like there (as far as the radiation oozing out of the destroyed nuclear power plant) and thus determine if it was a danger to the fetus. Trying to decipher the “reality” of the situation from the combination of sensationalist American news coverage and vague nationalist Japanese media, was impossible. I felt that the world was volatile, that humans had created new poisons and were careless with them (so that they leaked out everywhere). I miscarried on the bus ride to the Miho Museum in Shigaraki (a museum dedicated to the “Cult of Beauty”). But the fetus didn’t come out and I thought maybe there was something still alive in there? But I couldn’t tell. I didn’t know what was going on inside for another two weeks. Back in the States, an ultrasound revealed that I had indeed miscarried, that I had been unable to expel my contents and would require surgery.

Since the pregnancy was an accident, the miscarriage was an accident and my body was unable to properly process the miscarriage, I was left feeling differently about my body. My sense of control was eroded. Since this personal crisis corresponded with a natural and nuclear disaster, I was left feeling differently about my world. (My sense of safety was eroded.) For me now, the stillness of beautiful objects, a painful bus ride through the mountains (during which, an old woman gave me rings of interlocking paper triangles), concerns about radiation poisoning, a confusion caused in part by my own reproductive system and in part by an indecipherable media “information” extravaganza,

all are facets of a micro/macro crisis that is locked inside of my subconscious (bubbling out occasionally in the form of strange visions).

Culturally, I do not have a productive way of processing this experience other than to pretend that it didn't, that stuff like that doesn't, happen. A cultural supremacy is given to the concept of intention. There is a pressure to be in control of your conceptual, emotive, reproductive, and physical assemblage in order that you might package it behind a facade of cool, objectifiable perfection. But my experience in Japan, rather than causing an increase in paranoia, or a newfound fear of my body and environment, led to an easing away, a letting go of certainty and an acceptance of the unstable, the volatile, temporary and dangerous ground that is both within and without. In order to shift in synch with this changing ground, I am no longer able to believe in the mythologies of control, safety, promise, technology, or information. Human mastery over the Earth is a cheap, sad, and dangerous illusion that needs to be discarded if humanity is to survive. I reject all aspects of craft or concept that contribute to the delusion of mastery. Humans cannot control or predict the impulses of their own bodies let alone a wider environment. It seems to me that the denial of climate change is ultimately a rejection of human powerlessness, our inability to understand, repair or construct the micro/macro complexity of a functioning ecosystem.

Fixate is an expression of doubt and flux, made from a position of vulnerability, one that symbolically poses the mouth as the gateway to the self, that the inside (figure) is open to the outside (ground) and that both contain the same overwhelming mystery of creation, termination, and exchange. Visually this idea is expressed in my work through the use of gradients and hybrid forms. Gradients portray a transgressed liminality, a

blurring and blending of one thing into another, a process that can be regarded as either a contamination, a transformation or both at once. I find gradients pleasing both because of their value as a principle of design, and because I link the concept with a visualization that I have of the constant exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.



Figure 15. Kelly Cox *Fixate* (detail of wedding ring pattern) 2015

In the landscape, places of visible leaching (such as where pollutants slowly trickle down from the landfill to pollute the drinking water, or where the black oil seeps out from its confines, and begins to amass, and cloud up into the ocean blue) are associated with our (my) deepest ecological fears about an environment that is shifting to

become less and less habitable. Allegorically, fears of contamination and lost boundaries apply to ideas about purity of self, or of a set of values, or of a “culture” that is constantly threatening to be dissolved into an abyss of meaningless objects and information, or unintentional biological or meteorological happenstance.

This diffused position of perpetual questioning seems to mesh with the theories of an ancient Greek Philosopher named Pyrrho who initially contributed to Plato’s theories about skepticism and reason. Pyrrho’s theories, according to McEvelley’s narrative in *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt*, inspired the shift in Marcel Duchamp’s work from cubist painting to Ready-Made sculpture:

Crucial to the Pyrrhonist position is a notion honored by both logic and metaphysics as the “law of the excluded middle,” which holds that any proposition must be either true or false—that there is no middle position between yes and no, this and that, true and untrue, and so on. Pyrrhonism confutes this so-called law, establishing a position that is neither affirmation nor negation but a kind of attention that is neutral and impartial while remaining alert and vivid. Pyrrho’s central concept was the “indifference” (apatheia) that would lead to “imperturbability” (atrasia). He recommended, for example, an attitude of indifference toward not only philosophical questions but also the entanglements of everyday life, which are based on hidden philosophical presuppositions. It seems that Duchamp had a natural sympathy for this stance, and that Pyrrho articulated it for him, providing it with an intellectual basis.⁵⁶

McEvelley describes a history of figurative sculpture that attempted to reveal the soul within, rather than reveling in the presence and form of the body, even though the sculpture may depict a body. McEvelley describes sculpture as inherently more confrontationally material and present than the illusionistic escapism of painting because objects exist in space and thus affect the flow of bodies around them. Duchamp’s application of Pyrrho, according to McEvelley, involved an invocation of nature through

⁵⁶ Thomas McEvelley, *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt*, (New York: School of Visual Arts, 1999), 55.

chance by attempting to minimize the presence of his own intentions, by presenting what exists (rather than making something) and thus an expression of a disbelief in the “essences” of things. The intentions behind Duchamp’s ready-made sculptures were to reveal that the appearance of the everyday world was reality rather than a promise of something more, by not allowing them to be a stand-ins or fronts for higher universal ideals. The difficulty in this stance is that the objects still represented something beyond themselves, invoking a kind of literalness, which has become the new universal expectation for the language of art. But, by presenting the things themselves, rather than a representation of them, Duchamp may have been suggesting that objects offer no transcendence, no promise beyond the value of their physicality. Likewise, if one abandons the idea of a soul, humans are just bodies, organic objects that are electrified by coded networks of memories and impulses. If one lets go of all promises of transcendence, the “meaning” of life is contained solely within the small, private pleasures of living: work, food, water, sex, sleep, companionship, conversation, and walking around looking at stuff. In letting go of certainty, it becomes difficult to make a definitive statement about anything and language and art become interesting for their ability to juggle layered and multiple meanings.

There is meaning, but no one meaning in a work inspired by Pyrrho. Apparently, Duchamp enjoyed puns and double entendres, and although he engaged in the pleasures of everyday conversation, he attempted to avoid making opinionated statements or “assumptions that might limit reality.”⁵⁷ Following in this vein of reasoning, *Fixate*

57 McEvelley, Thomas, *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt*, 57.

contains a conflicting position of investment and indifference, of optimism (do your best!) and cynicism stemming from a rather bleak view for the future of humanity. The conceptual makeup of *Fixate* is that of questioning. Can one act from a place of confusion? Can there be a poetics of not knowing (beyond personalized philosophies drawn from bodily sensation)? What connects the selves to one another—the bodily memory? How does one categorize/determine which information is generated and which interpreted? Does one ever get to decide anything for one's selves? Where do one's selves begin and end?

CHAPTER V: BEAUTY AND ANALOGY AS EXPRESSIONS OF COMPLEXITY

The pieces that comprise *Fixate* are meant to be simultaneously beautiful and unsettling. Analogy and beauty are tools for expressing and appreciating complexity. There is loveliness in accepting that you are not large enough to understand the influx of information that you are privy to. This doesn't mean shutting off or shutting down but a kind of opening up to a diverse and conflicted perception, one that involves a letting go of the illusion of control. In *Fixate*, I use the symbolism of an animal that is associated with purity but is distorted by its habits of consumption. Each pelican vessel acts as a portrait of a destructively receptive subjectivity that is only open but not creative, collecting but never expelling. I feel that this symbolism is particularly effective because white birds (such as the swan, dove, stork, crane, albatross) normally have associations with conception and hope. Pelicans are large, global, migratory beasts whose form is both familiar (current) and foreign (prehistoric), so their existence is a kind of collapse in the aesthetic division between old and new. Birds in general are cliché, soothing icons of freedom and Orphic transcendence (put a bird on it). Their image (made generic and powerless) has been totally subsumed by the decoration (DIY) movement. Such associations add friction to the reading of *Fixate* but are ultimately violated by the lurid sexual or consumptive openness of the beak.

By combining figurative sculpture with found and altered televisions, I present a dual position of the literal and the symbolic as a kind of binary collapse/blending/balance.

Analogy is a tool of the mind that allows one to juggle abstractions. I feel that conceptual complexity, or multiple meanings (double entendres, puns, poetry) are an important way of addressing, but then expanding upon Duchamp's objects-as-objects, literalist sculpture. I have an attachment to a type of play whereby one traces patterns through all of the things in visual/haptic/conceptual evidence, weaving a ubiquitous tapestry within which, one may hang suspended as if in a fabulous hammock.

The visual world that we live in is crowded with signifiers, often (in the case of advertising) intending to manipulate and corral people like so many cows into the barn. But ultimately, those signifiers are vulnerable to a diverse wealth of possible interpretation. Personal experience then becomes key to deciphering and/or reimagining a smorgasbord of potential meanings. Therefore, in order to be empowered by one's ability to conceptualize a semblance of totality, one must attempt to engage in a type of play involving layers of conflicting, often absurd signification. Duality and multiplicity are important because they allow for literal and analogous meanings to overlap, opening the door to mental connections between the similarities of disparate things.

In *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt*, Thomas McEvelly links Mel Chin's *Revival Field* to an ancient Sumerian document called the *Emerald Tablet* that "posits the idea of a structural correspondence between macrocosm and microcosm—that is, between the patterns of order in the cosmic world and the inner ruling principles of both society and individual life here below."⁵⁸ Chin planted a special type of corn (that was engineered to

58 Thomas McEvelly, *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt*, 251.

suck heavy metals up out of the soil) in a garden plot that was planted in the shape of concentric rings on top of a severely polluted landfill in St. Paul Minnesota.



Figure 16. Mel Chin's *Revival Field* 1991-ongoing Available from www.sparkleberrylane.com (Accessed on January 4, 2015)

The target-like circular ripples of corn represented a layered world where above (air) and below (the earth) rub against one another, exchanging information but remaining inexplicably separate. This work infuses the ecological mission of cleansing the earth of pollutants with a global spiritual imperative that is rooted in both mythology and science but is ultimately cross-cultural and unifying.⁵⁹

Chin's work is social or communal in that it characteristically compares and conflates different cultural versions of humanity's biggest ideas, those which model man's relationship to the universe. At the same time the work is individual or even, in a sense, autobiographical in an odd way, based on the macrocosm-microcosm idea, which implies that one's personal experiences and

⁵⁹ Thomas.McEvelley, *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt*, 258.

reflections are cosmic in structure or reach, and that the biggest cosmic ratios are contained within oneself.⁶⁰

In *Revival Field* corn is corn but it is also symbolic of something else. The corn acts as corn in the world, with its own corny agenda, but there is a scientific/spiritual/cultural/personal meaning invested in the corn's ability to cleanse the soil. It is this juggling of meanings that is interesting to me because it allows for a kind of flexibility, a freedom from fixed signification by entrance into a language in flux. I feel that bodily memory is a filter that cannot be denied or escaped but that the "self" is a sponge-mirror that reflects/absorbs externalities. All information is colored by the dual baleens of outside and inside. There are no universals...only personal impressions of universal impressions of the personal. I don't understand how one can discuss the concept of the personal from an objective position. That seems dangerous to me. In order for concepts to avoid being severed from context and artificially universalized, they must be embodied within the time/place/experience/feeling from which they stemmed.

Although I only encountered their work while researching *Fixate*, my installation owes an art historical debt to the collaborative efforts of artists Nam June Paik and John Cage. Nam June Paik is a South Korean artist credited with inventing video art, who created several installations of televisions in various arrangements and states of alteration. The climax of this series was in 1963 with the exhibition titled *Exposition of Music- Electronic Television* at the Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal. In conjunction with the TVs, Paik presented videotapes, sculptures, houseplants, synthesizers and other musical contraptions, robots, paintings, laser projections, documents, and prints. Some of the

⁶⁰ Thomas.McEvelley, *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt*, 258.

televisions were hollowed out and filled with melting candles, live goldfish, and piles of junk.



Figure 17. Nam June Paik *TV Garden* (detail) 1974/2000 Available from <http://myemail.constantcontact.com> (Accessed on January 18, 2015)



Figure 18. Nam June Paik *Buddha Watching TV* 1974/1977 Available from <http://vmfa.museum/collections/art/buddha-watching-tv/> (Accessed on January 18, 2015)

My favorite of these TV works are a series of solitary Buddha statues, some laying in repose, others disintegrating into dust, all facing their televised image. There are many similarities between my and Paik's use of TVs as material, including a playful

sacrilegious style, but the historical context for my use of the televisions is different. In the 1950s, televisions were shiny and new, a promise of an Americana consumerist future woven into homes around the world. Now, in 2015, they are as other things before them, obsolete. A member of FLUXUS and a self-proclaimed Neo-Dada-ist, Paik presented televisions-plus as a valid medium in the creation of “artificial landscapes” and collaborated with artist-composer John Cage in several sound performances.⁶¹

John Cage’s most known work was comprised of four minutes and 33 seconds of silence. The intention was that the listener be made aware of the everyday sounds around and within (such as the hum of blood pressure) themselves. The piece illustrated the pregnant tension between intention and an openness to disorder that is always contained within the act of composition, musical or otherwise. In an article about the work entitled *Experimental Music*, Cage wrote that this endeavor was an expression of appreciation for life:

This play, however is an affirmation of life—not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply a way of waking up to the very life we’re living, which is so excellent once one gets one’s mind and desires out of the way and lets it act of its own accord.⁶²

My use of static as a compositional device is meant to foster attention and focus, to help the viewer to establish presence. Static has a soothing absence/presence (as a white noise, it blocks out other noises) that gives the sensation of a watery surround sound.

61 Mick Hartney, *Paik, Nam June*, (Oxford Art Online: Oxford University Press, 2007) ½

62 John Cage, “*Experimental Music*,” in *Artists, Critics, Context: Rreadings in and around American Art since 1945*, ed Paul F. Fabozzi et al, 100.

The aesthetic of *Fixate* is rooted in my childhood impressions of the astrophysics lab at the University of Wisconsin where my dad worked. My memory of that space is of a collage of graphs and charts tacked up beside photographs revealing the romantic splendor of supernovas, both with a backdrop of institutional architecture, the clicking and whirring of 1980s–90s technological contraptions connected to jumbles of multi-colored wires, oversized ducts and vacuum tubes, panels of dials and blinking lights, giant magnets exerting forces, levers, mirrors that faced inward, exhibiting an infinite reflection, the rush of steam pushing through vents and the smell of burnt coffee. I don't think that one can get more literal than expression through logistics. Logistics are everything in physics. They are the point. But there is also this quest for knowledge behind it, this reaching into the unknown and encountering distant stars slowly exploding into forms and colors, each unique and beyond "the powers of ordinary perception." Yet the romantic sublime of a nova is then transformed into the mundane sublime of data, of graphs and charts and sequences in order so that it may be represented human-sized and imagined on the same level as logistics. The infinite ground of space is thus transformed into figures, so that humans may size themselves up against them. I am curious about the process of using romance and logistics simultaneously to represent the unknown, acting together but ignoring one another, negating and enforcing each other in a push/pull.

The Conductor is the most recently made pelican of the series and is different enough from the rest that it constitutes a separate work. *The Conductor* stands as a counterpart to, and perhaps as a key for the viewer to rethink or layer their interpretation of *Fixate*. This last bird is also a vessel, but one with a more closed opening, whose form is stretched outward and upward instead of tucked in and rearing back as if in submission

like the others. The body of the vessel is lifted up on legs and the wings are unfurled so that the shape interacts more with the surrounding environment.



Figure 19. Kelly Cox *Fixate* (detail of *The Conductor*) 2015

The Conductor claims space and so is more activated. However, the geometric pattern on the gullet links it into the cycle of repetition that is formed by the group. It is unclear whether the pelican is fighting against or wearing the entanglement, but what is clear is that the knot constricts its implied (through the repeated directional force of my hand gestured feathers) potential for movement in any direction. In the context of the Orphic complex, the cords represent binding earthly tethers. The ceramic material of the bird also grounds the piece with weight, fragility, and a connection to the earth. The

degree to which *The Conductor* is touching a foreign material (an environmental element) could be seen as a kind of intimacy or embrace but it also (because of the constraining element) provokes sympathy on the part of the viewer. The consumer portrait presented by *The Conductor* is both more overt and more complex than *Fixate*, creating a pregnant tension which I hope will result in an eerie beauty.

Pelican bodies and obsolete televisions are both grotesque in their transparency of purpose and yet beautiful in a way that does not allow for simplicity or elegance. I do not understand their shape. I fixate on that which I do not understand. I try to comprehend the form through the process of touching/making/altering them with my hands, a kind of masticating, a kind of mental and physical grasping, a manipulation of my external reality in the image of my internal fixation. I sculpt additively, building upwards in hollow cross-sections like artists have done for thousands of years, like a 3D printer but faster, bigger and sloppier. Through building comes understanding. When the clay slumps, I prop it up with a stick. Gravity makes a mark on that which has mass. Collaring the forms inward is a physical battle. I coerce the material into unlikely positions. I build twisted, oddly weighted forms that I know will shift in the kiln, thus working with chance, with the limitations imposed by gravity, rather than fighting against distortion and material flux.

The resulting aesthetic is residual of process, of the gestures of bodily and atmospheric narratives. Claus Oldenburg argued for a residual aesthetic in his 1961 essay *I am for an Art...*

I am for an art that embroils itself with the everyday crap & still comes out on top.... I am for an art that takes its form from the lines of life itself that twists and

extends and accumulates and spits and drips, and is heavy and coarse and blunt and sweet as life itself.⁶³

I can throw all of my dominance into the clay and I will not dominate it. I possess instincts (or desires) to both build and to fight, but there is nothing obviously productive for me to direct my energies toward. There is already a surplus of fighting and building. In art, it is possible however abstractly, to fight and build culture, and in so doing resist if in the softest of ways, the stifling restrictions of the contemporary situation and with it, the codes for how you are allowed to express yourself, and thus relate to your body, others and place. Entrenched within a visual cultural environment that is layered and abstract, I cannot see the danger in contributing to the language of layers and abstraction, only in refusing to navigate complexity.

63 Claus Oldenburg, "I am for an Art....," in *Artists, Critics, Context: Readings in and around American Art since 1945*, ed Paul F. Fabozzi et al, 56-57.

CONCLUSION

Fixate is made, collected, altered, and arranged from a position of vulnerable uncertainty, with a residual aesthetic that argues for the authority of personal narrative and that attempts to imagine an alternative definition of transcendence, one that looks to, rather than away from, the ground, the body, the intuitions of mass, the beauty of the pleasure/fear behind everyday activities, and the constant exchanges of information within and without. *Fixate* is about stillness/change, appreciation/fear, desire/regret, and the relationship/friction between possibility and material limitations and boundaries. Through the making of this work, I am exploring arbitrary/concrete distinctions and the longing/anxiety for a smooth gradient of flux between them. As an installation, *Fixate* is meant to be confrontational, in space, in its material presence, in its obdurate fixedness that is symbolic of feeling trapped within repeating patterns of consumption, teetering on the edge of the trickle-down effect, with an oral fixation that is hard to swallow, grounded by the hand of the maker, with the flock mentality of having put a bird on it while trying to make the most of a language of clichés.

I do not believe in a singular logic, history, dream for the future, legitimate art form, or meaning behind any sign. (I do not believe in belief, as it is a restricting construct.) I attempt to make distinctions between information that I feel, that I imagine and that I am told, and to keep that information within its context. It seems necessary to me to develop a personal matrix of information management governed by a sense of

individual transparency and humor (acknowledging that it is incomplete and will never be perfect) in order to be able to act/speak. What concerns me is the empowering potential of personal expression and bodily engagement. Expression is an outlet. Outlets are necessary to health, one cannot just accrue and consume. I feel that it is vulnerability, introspection, and personal authority/priorities that are the cultural weapons of a fearless practice.

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