AN AMERICAN SELF REFLECTION

A CREATIVE PROJECT

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Statement of the Problem

An “American Self Reflection” is a sculptural installation that deals with several things that I have identified as problems in our contemporary society. These problems I have reflected on from my own point of view. With each part of my installation, my hope is the viewer will become aware of their personal situation and reflect.

This installation has six sections, each presenting a problem. The sections deal with consumerism, stereotypes, class separation, slothfulness and a false sense of entitlement, all which are presented from my point of view as a white twenty-seven year old American male.

With each section of the installation the viewer is drawn to the artwork by the glow of a neon or LED sign. This initial hook grabs the viewer’s attention and upon further investigation they become aware of my personal reflection.

With this installation, my hope is the viewer leaves with a self-reflection of their own habits, beliefs and ideals. Good or bad I believe that self-reflection is the only way for personal development as well as society’s.
**Influences**

While I was an undergraduate my artwork was made with blown or cast glass. Upon entering graduate school I was challenged to make art with different materials. This challenge caused a break from the glass art world to investigate artists working in other materials. Two very influential artists have been Mark Dion and Chris Burden, Dion from an ecological and collection stand point and Burden through his performances. These artists have shown me that art does not have to be presented through a traditional object formalized on the pedestal nor the framed object on the wall.

**Mark Dion**

*Tate Thames Dig*

*Tate Thames Dig* is a representation of postmodern art or post-postmodern, depending on your opinion of whether we are still in the post modern era or not. It challenges the space that is the museum and redefines the way in which art is viewed. This artwork existed in three distinct parts, the dig: the categorizing, and the display cabinet which is the final step in the process of the *Tate Thames Dig* installation. The first two steps only remain in the minds of the participants and some photographic evidence, which is not displayed with the end product. The end product is a large two-sided cabinet that contains archeological, sociological as well as ecological subjects that were recovered from the dig.

The presentation of the work seems easily interpretable. It is a double-sided cabinet; one side contains objects collected from the site of the Tate Gallery, the other side contains objects
collected from the site in front of the Tate Modern, both in London. I believe this display is a desire by Dion to have his audience understand the work on their own terms. This is further shown by the fact that the represented objects are not labeled and the cabinet drawers can be opened for closer view, unlike in other exhibitions where the viewer cannot touch the artwork (Vilches). This work also is a critique of the museum institution itself by challenging the status quo of what a work of art in a museum should be and how it should be viewed; especially at the Tate, which is an internationally known museum. In an interview Dion said:

The core of my work is really around issues of looking at the history of natural history. Looking at the culture of nature and often that involves aspects of interrogating our politics of representations and how our ideas about nature affect our behavior about nature (Bad at Sports).

Dion is exposing the history of natural history in *Tate Thames Dig* by taking the Thames River, a natural habitat and excavating it. The public is allowed to view what has been deposited over time.

The *Tate Thames Dig* started with two river banks. The first, Millside, located in front of what is now the Tate Britain museum, formally the Tate Gallery, and the second is Bankside, located in front of the Tate Modern museum, which was under construction at that time. Mark Dion began digging with a team of two groups of volunteers, one group under the age of 18 and one group 65+. Dion wanted this dynamic of age between the two groups to get different opinions on the same objects (Bad at Sports). Both groups dug and collected everything man-made they could find from the riverbed. This was the first segment of the piece. The second was a tent set up on the lawn of the Tate Gallery where all the collected materials were cleaned and categorized. This segment took several months to complete during the summer of 1999. The
objects discovered from the digs were then arranged in the installation according to several
different formulas: color, material and object were some of the categories. Because these objects
were related to the lives (past and present) of the surrounding dwellers (food containers, bottles,
newspapers etc.), the gallery installation became a kind of curio cabinet, an avenue to determine
and rediscover what the city has lost and discarded. This gives the work its social aspect, what
was cast away by society. In an artistic way, Dion brings issues of littering and planned obsolesce
to the attention of the viewer if they choose to investigate and interact with the artwork (Klösel).

By carrying out the project in two locations (an established and a newer site), it was a
way of trying to connect the older and newer art institutions. When asked about making work
that takes place in the “field” and generally creating a sculpture for an exhibit Dion responded:

One of the biggest problems with this kind of practice,
which some call contexte-kunst, is that it is virtually impossible to
track the conceptual development of an artist. Normally, each show
is a work rather than an exhibition of several works, which makes
it difficult to compare and contrast one project to the next. All of us
work in relationship to a site, but we don’t necessarily work site-
specifically. Someone like myself or Renee Green, we try to use
each exhibition opportunity to engage our previous projects and to
address past mistakes or problems (Mark Dion).

Due to urbanization, it was necessary that the institutions’ past culture fit into the development
plan of what the Tate name was evolving into, which is why this project was commissioned to
link the past to the present. Dion’s work introduced Tate Modern to the public so that they were
more accepting of the new institution, which was opened in 2000. Through his presentation of
“historical” objects in a way that is easily accessible to the public, it causes the viewers’
memories to activate from seeing that any random individual object in the cabinet can take the
viewer back to a different time. This artwork also allows the viewer to hope for a better future;
better objects, better consumption and environmental habits (Klösel). It allows people to come to
terms with what they have lost or forgotten, for example an old brand of medicine in a glass
bottle found at the dig, and connect with their histories. Therefore individuals may feel
encouraged to alter personal behaviors and participate in the overall development of their
surroundings.

Chris Burden

At the age of 12, Burden was in a motor scooter accident on the island of Elba, Italy. He had to
undergo an emergency surgery on his left foot without the aid of anesthesia. Burden says that
this was a formative experience (Schjeldahl). I believe that this experience was crucial in
developing Chris Burden the artist. He underwent a surgery with no anesthesia, later becoming
an artist and masochist, finding pleasure in suffering. Finding pleasure in pain is evident in most
of his performances from 1971 to 1975. During the recovery process from this injury Burden
developed a passion for photography which enhanced the documentation of many performances
(Schjeldahl). Along with a relic, ("critical artifacts that remain after the conclusion of his
performance pieces and are intended to 'point to' these social actions") several well-planned
photographs are usually all that remain to document Burden’s performances (Ayres 74).

The first performance where masochism is evident is Five Day Locker Piece, which was
Burden’s MFA thesis from UC Irvine. The following is Burden’s description of Locker Piece: “I
was locked in locker number 5 for five consecutive days and did not leave the locker during this
time. The locker measured two feet high, two feet wide, and three feet deep. I stopped eating
several days prior to entry. The locker directly above me contained five gallons of water; the
locker below me contained an empty five gallon bottle” (Burden 48). Willing to sit in such a cramped space for five days with no food shows that Burden gains some sort of pleasure from suffering. This conceptual sculpture is a precursor to *Doomed* (described later). Burden uses his ability to be uncomfortable and do nothing for days on end to an extreme in *Five Day Locker Piece* and while preparing for *Doomed*, Burden must have thought about his time in that locker.

Another performance, *Shoot* is described by Burden: “At 7:45 p.m. I was shot in the left arm by a friend. The bullet was a copper jacket 22 long rifle. My friend was standing about fifteen feet from me” (Burden 53). This piece displays masochism, allowing yourself to be shot for the sake of art. In an interview Burden defined art as “a free spot in society, where you can do anything” (Schjeldahl). With this artwork Burden achieved national attention, and I think realized that his masochistic style was his way into the public eye. Burden had found his “free spot” and was going to use and exploit it for the next four years.

What Burden was trying to do in *Shoot* was put the viewer in an awkward situation. Fred Hoffman a biographer of Burden said “Chris Burden engaged with issues concerning the fragility and preservation of one’s psychological state within the context of real, lived experience” (Hoffman 17). The viewer would see someone in danger and want to help, but also not want to interfere with art. In most of Burden’s art works, from *Shoot* until *Doomed* in 1975, he puts the viewer in this situation. I believe this also ties back to a masochistic attitude. He enjoys himself in pain but also enjoys putting other people in this slightly painfully awkward situation. Burden brings his masochistic work to an end with *Doomed*, which took place at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago on April 11, 1975. Burden uses this performance as a way to end his works of art in which he puts himself in peril. Here is Burden’s description of *Doomed*:
My performance consisted of three elements: myself, and institutional wall clock, and a 5’ X 8’ sheet of plate glass. The sheet of glass was placed horizontally and leaned against the wall at a 45 degree angle; the clock was placed to the left of the glass at eye level. When the performance began, the clock was running at the correct time. I entered the room and reset the clock to twelve midnight. I crawled into the space between the glass and the wall and lay on my back. I was prepared to lie in this position indefinitely, until one of the three crucial elements was disturbed or altered. The responsibility for ending the piece rested with the museum staff, but they were unaware of this crucial aspect. The piece ended when Dennis O’Shea placed a container of water inside the space between the wall and the glass, 45 hours and 10 minutes after the start of the piece. I immediately got up and smashed the face of the clock with a hammer, recording the exact amount of time which had elapsed from beginning to end (Burden 74).

Burden additionally said “I was prepared to lie in this position indefinitely, the responsibility for ending the piece rested with the museum staff but they were always unaware of this crucial aspect” (Ebert). When asked why he had made Doomed, Burden responded “to unmask the absurdity of the conventions by which, through assuming the role of viewers, we are both blocked and immunized from ethical responsibility.” (Schjeldahl). In the forty-five hours Burden was laying motionless on the floor, he had no food or water, he even soiled his pants, and nobody cared to help him until Mr. O’Shea put a glass of water in his reach. When asked about his thoughts during the performance, Burden said “[o]n the first night, when I realized they weren't going to stop the piece, I was pleased and impressed that they had placed the integrity of the piece ahead of the institutional requirements of the museum. On the second night, I thought, my God, don't they care anything at all about me? Are they going to leave me here to die?” (Ebert). With this artwork Burden is putting the museum in the painfully awkward state, not knowing that to end the performance they need to interfere, going against the rules of the museum. What would you do as a viewer? Would you interact or watch a person lie on the floor motionless for
forty-five hours? By making *Doomed*, Burden could put a period at the end of his performances in which he put himself in peril. His masochist performance art could be over and it was.

I believe that Burden was growing tired of causing himself injury for art. One can only go so far down that road before it becomes too much, and Burden used *Doomed* to sum it all up and show the art community what its limits were. An analysis of Burden’s “[u]ltimate limits were discovered, most pointedly by Burden, whose influence on conceptual and installation artists, to this day, is immeasurable”(Schjeldahl). If Burden had attempted another body performance after *Doomed*, I believe that it would have been hypocritical and not received well. Burden took performance art to a new level with his ground-breaking works of art and I think it all stems from that motor scooter accident and surgery as a boy.

Since stopping the personally dangerous performances in 1975, his masochism is still evident in his body of work. Burden has been and is still making extremely detailed and highly worked sculpture. This type of work requires many hours to complete with little details tuned for days on end. I believe that only a masochist could subject themselves to this type of activity and still make art everyday. Taking this route of obsessive making is the only route that Burden could have taken after his performances from 1971-1975. Still needing an avenue for his masochism, Burden chose a much safer outlet to exercise it.
Description of the Artwork

Can You Spot The Difference

I have spent several years living in large cities with populations over half a million people and have always been interested in the class separation that can happen in just a few blocks. Going from well-kept neighborhoods with expensive houses to extremely littered and rundown neighborhoods just blocks away, it seems that in most cases each group of people sticks to their own neighborhood. The Broken Window Theory states:

Consider a building with a few broken windows. If the windows are not repaired, the tendency is for vandals to break a few more windows. Eventually, they may even break into the building, and if it's unoccupied, perhaps become squatters or light fires inside. Or consider a sidewalk. Some litter accumulates. Soon, more litter accumulates. Eventually, people even start leaving bags of trash from take-out restaurants there or even break into cars. (Atlantic Monthly)

I believe that this theory is evident in both well-kept and rundown neighborhoods.

With the piece “Can You Spot The Difference” I am presenting both extremes of the class separation. A well maintained lawn with a nice cedar picket fence, opposing that is a chain link fence that is partially filled with litter. Above both yards I am asking the viewer, with a neon sign “Can You Spot The Difference?” This question is rhetorical. With this question I hope to make the viewer think about the visual circumstances that lead to judgments about class in our society.
More

As Americans we are constantly being bombarded by advertising in our daily lives. Always trying to convince us that we need to try some new product to upgrade our older models for faster and better new ones, this perpetual assault has given us a MORE mentality.

Consumerism is king. Even as children this motto is driven into us, if you do not have the right shoes or a shirt with the right symbol on it, you are ostracized.

This segment of the exhibition is entitled “MORE”. Over the period of two months I collected items from the free section of craigslist.org, accumulating the outcast objects of our consumer driven society. Most people posting things in the free section have upgraded, gotten their new couch or television and want nothing to do with the old, unfashionable product. Using our society’s outcasts I built a monument to this cycle.

The objects in the monument include a broad range of items including a hot tub, truck cap, three reclining chairs, two big screen televisions, the front door to a bank, a queen size box spring, a queen size bed frame, a toilet, fifty cans of bamboo shoots in pineapple juice and two garbage bags of children's toys. Stacked, these objects are topped by a flashing neon sign reading “MORE”.

I have surrounded the stack with a privacy fence, attempting to hide the shame of this accumulation. The fence also serves as a barrier, enticingly keeping the viewer separated from the art.
Iran/USA

On September 11th 2001 the stereotypes of Middle Eastern people changed forever. In my mind, being a fifteen year old male in a 99.9% white farming community, I had never really thought much about Middle Easterners, if ever. After the fact, even though I was raised to treat everyone with respect, I would be suspicious of pretty much anyone with brown skin. It was pounded into us through the media. Even though it was an extremely small percentage that had committed these acts, we were told and conditioned not to trust them.
In 2012, I was selected as a representative of the United States for the 5th Beijing International Art Biennale. Included in this show were 400 people from 80 different countries. At the opening reception I met a group of artists from Iran and within minutes we were all laughing and talking like we had been friends for years. It was at this point I fully realized something I thought I had already known. We are all the same.

After returning from spending a week in Beijing with my new Iranian friends, I wanted to share the experience I had. I hosted a party over Skype, starting at 2:30 PM in Muncie, Indiana, 10:30 PM in Tehran, Iran. We drank, smoked cigarettes, laughed, and discussed art as if we weren’t living different lives, thousands of miles away. During this time I was photographing the party in Muncie, while the Iranians were documenting theirs.

The culmination of this performance resulted in a video installation of our Skype party, a grouping of the Iranian photographs, a grouping of the United States photographs and two neon signs representing each country’s name and flag colors. The groupings of photographs and the neon signs are separated by a fence. The glow of the neon bleeds to the opposite sides of the fence. My hope is the viewer will see the similarities of our cultures and reflect on their own stereotypes.
The Hulu Trio

The Hulu Trio accounts for much of this body of work “An American Self Reflection”. I believe the Hulu issue affects myself and peers most frequently. People my age waste countless hours watching television and movies on the internet, either with Hulu, Netflix or one of the many illegal streaming services online. My vice is Hulu.

The Hulu Trio includes “Get Paid”, “On September 2nd” and “You’re Wasting Your Life”. They allow the viewer to experience my slothfulness, see the amount of time I have wasted and join me in my actions against Hulu. All of which relate to my overall theme of “An American Self Reflection”
“You’re Wasting Your Life” allows the viewer to experience the slothfulness of mindlessly sitting and watching television in the context of a gallery, on a comfortable couch.

The glow of the neon sign “You’re Wasting Your Life” on the wall behind the television is a reminder that most people already know. Mindlessly watching television is a waste of time. This confronts the viewer, causing an internal debate. Do I continue to waste my time or do I stop watching this show? It also reminds the viewer of their own television watching habits.
On September 2\textsuperscript{nd}

“On September 2\textsuperscript{nd}” continues the triptych by including an ongoing list of everything I have watched on Hulu as well as an LED sign accounting for the number of minutes I have spent watching Hulu. This piece puts me, the creator of the work, on the same level as the viewer. After telling the viewer that they are wasting their life by watching television, I am showing them that I too waste my life. This also allows the viewer to judge me from the shows that I have watched. This piece levels the field.

This list allowed me to see everything I have ever watched on Hulu. Many of the shows I have no recollection of watching. I was really just mindlessly watching and not gaining anything. Making this list has caused me to consider all of the things I could have done instead of watching things I obviously did not care about.
The third section of the triptych is “Get Paid” which consists of a letter that I wrote to Hulu asking for monetary reimbursement for the time I have wasted as well as asking that my account be banned, due to the addictive nature of Hulu and my poor self control. This piece reflects on our inability to accomplish something because of self control and also wanting to get paid for doing nothing. “Get Paid” includes a neon sign reading, GET PAID which attracts the viewer then presents a form letter, allowing the viewer to confront Hulu with me.
Conclusion

Upon viewing An American Self Reflection my hope is the viewer will leave and reflect on their life and actions. Regardless of where you are from I believe that viewers are able to relate to one or more sections of the installation that may cause some sort of self-reflection.

Through the completion of this project I have learned more about myself. Making these works of art has allowed me the realization of personal and societal short-comings. With this realization I have become a better person.

Exhibition Statement

For my exhibition statement I chose to give the viewer a very limited explanation. Allowing them to draw their own conclusions about the show.

An American Self Reflection is an installation consisting of six parts, each part raising questions about the American way of life. The main issues being talked about are stereotypes, class separation, legal litigation, consumerism and slothfulness all of which are prevalent in America. Every piece in the installation is surrounded by a fence. I have chosen to use the fence as a metaphor of the divisions these issues can create in our lives. My hope is that with this installation, the viewer will reflect on their own life.
Bibliography


