The Trailer project

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Master of Fine Arts Thesis

"The Trailer Project"

Rochester Institute of Technology

Special thanks to Board Members: Jeff Weiss, Chairman, Cat Ashworth, and Judy Levy.

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Title of thesis: THE TRAILER PROJECT

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INTRODUCTION: PERSONAL HISTORY OF ART PROCESS

I have a long personal history of art making that has involved extensive experimentation with many different mediums. Over the years, my biggest challenge has been focusing on one medium long enough to develop a body of work. Regardless of the medium used, my work has always been rather intuitive and playful. My education in art was primarily of a “modernist” approach, with the proper aesthetics and materials paramount. I learned formal rules and techniques with each type of material.

My formal art education started at age thirteen with private oil painting lessons. Several years later, I became interested in clay and three dimensional form and switched my attention to ceramics. My work with clay developed a loose style derived from Japanese ceramics. My ceramics instructor at the University of Alaska, Anchorage, Alex Combs, advocated art as a process and had a very intuitive approach. This exposure to the power of process, and being true to materials, was pivotal in my early development as a ceramic artist. I became a competent ceramist over the years and obtained my degree in Ceramics with a Minor in Secondary Art Education.

After completing my Bachelor’s degree, I continued to take classes in advanced ceramics. One of the most significant events in my career occurred when I attended a lecture symposium titled “Time and Space.” This symposium was my first exposure to conceptually based art and featured the work of several avant garde artists from the Lower 48 states. One featured artist, Vito Acconci, had a profound impact on my art. I found his work to be compelling, intense,
humorous, and intriguing. What impressed me most was the absence of any objects associated with his art and the theatrical elements incorporated into his work.

Acconci’s body works inspired me to pursue a collaborative piece called “Claybodies.” My partner and I smeared clay on our bodies and performed first as if we were ceramic vessels, and second as if we were the manifestation of ceramics jargon. It was presented as a slide show with an audio tape accompaniment to a large group of clay artists and advanced students. Claybodies was well received and was the first time I utilized performance in my work.

The conceptual art seed had been planted, and the notion that there did not have to be a physical product opened my mind to a new approach. I chose to leave ceramics and began taking courses in photography. I worked on several collaborative pieces and produced works that were self-referential and ‘one of a kind.’ I utilized hand coloring to personalize the photographs. Each photograph became a narrative social commentary and satire that permeated both the subject and the titles.

Theatrical elements, such as those utilized by Acconci, continued to influence my work. Collage was an important element in many of the final images. I developed a new attitude towards ownership and control. My primary concern was no longer in owning every aspect of the work, but rather in collaboration where novel presentation could also be explored. For example I showed a series of photographs in a decorated photo paper box which became part of the piece.

I quickly realized that photography was the medium that could fulfill most of my creative needs. I decided to pursue art professionally and attend graduate school for fine art photography. I gave up a secure job to become a fine art photographer and rationalized that I could always
pursue advertising photography. I enjoyed the process of composing an image and the magic of not knowing how things would turn out. I also saw the field of non-silver and experimental photography as an open door for new combinations.

THE FIRST YEAR

When I arrived at the Rochester Institute of Technology, I expected to be surrounded by avant-garde artists like Vito Acconci. I soon realized, however, that this was not the case. This new, and very foreign, environment lacked the collaborative energy to produce works that I had experienced in Alaska. The size of the city and the architecture of the Institute created a feeling of depression and loneliness.

In spite of the depression and loneliness, I persisted in my experimentation with photography. I continued, doing photograms with multiple toning and hand coloring. Issues of "content" caused me to become disgruntled with this work, and "process" seemed to be a dirty word. I found it difficult to determine what this new work was about. During this time, I decided to do some large pieces that were reminiscent of the work of Robert Rauschenberg in the early 1960's. These pieces involved photographs, painting, and three dimensional objects. The work was not successful, I was not pleased with it because it did not represent progress. I wanted to do work that was new.

I was torn between my desire to pursue a career in something practical, like Advertising Photography, and continuing to experiment with photography as a medium for self-expression. I was encouraged to study the work of other artists to help find a direction for my thesis. I viewed myself as a visual person and was drawn to work with "soul". Work that incorporated a novel
use of materials was very compelling. I felt conflicted during my first year at R.I.T.. My education seemed heavily focused on art theory and I quickly realized that I needed know more theory to successfully complete my M.F.A..

    Studying the work of the popular Post Modern star artists, such as Jeff Koons, was enlightening. I enjoyed and appreciated his stainless steel castings of kitsch objects. I found his recontextualized vacuum cleaners amazing. The level of satire invoked by Koons’ work embodied, what I believe to be, the most interesting thing about Post Modernism. His apparent irreverence for old constructs of modernist fine art, and art as a commodity for the elite, appealed to my sense of humor. His work conveyed the attitude that cultural commentary and satire are more meaningful in art than the extrinsic value of the materials. Though I admired Koons’ work, I did not want to imitate him. Rather, I sought to draw inspiration from his audacious style.

    For the first time, I felt pressure to produce art that was contemporary and about something other than materials and techniques. In addition, I was forced to develop the ability to discuss my work competently with my instructors and peers while still remaining true to myself and my personal style. I realized that in order to be satisfied with my work, I needed to see myself as contemporary and progressive.

    Many of the objects I created during the first and second quarters did not meet my expectations. During this time I found it extremely difficult to narrow my focus and I became intrigued with the idea of combining all of my interests. The potential avenues for my creativity seemed exciting and limitless. I wanted to experience everything R.I.T. offered, yet there was pressure to solidify my approach into a cohesive final project.
I studied the work of many artists with whom I was previously not familiar, including the 1980's work of British artists Tony Cragg and Bill Woodrow. I found Wim DelVoy's work equally impressive. Novelty and the notion of taking common everyday items and giving them another dimension by transforming them into art was to become critical in my own work. In spite of my admiration for conceptual artists, I realized that I could not escape the desire to make physical objects. I admired work at both ends of the spectrum, from sculpture and conceptual art.

**Art/Life Connection**

Artist, Linda Montano gave an inspiring lecture at R.I.T. I was impressed with the scope of her work and how her art was enmeshed in every aspect of her life and her experience. She chose not to focus on one medium, but rather worked in the medium best suited to convey her message. While it is difficult to categorize her style, one could simply say that she is not a maker of objects. Montano’s work, like Acconci’s, was very ephemeral and conceptually based; however, Montano incorporated a strong feminist perspective. Her work helped me realize that photographs of conceptual work actually become objects which serve as symbols of that work. The photograph becomes the record of the work, then, in turn can become the art.

Another aspect of Montano’s work I found inspiring was a very unique performance element. Not only was the work live performance, but the way she presented it also became a performance. During the lecture she described and discussed a piece she devoted herself to for one year in which she tied herself to another male artist, thus rendering it impossible to accomplish anything without the cooperation of her partner. Montano’s work was very powerful.
Like Montano, I wanted my work to be relevant to what I was experiencing in life. I realized that the concept of self-referentiality I experimented with prior to coming to R.I.T. was in fact strong, and that most of what we think of as subjective life experiences are, in reality, somewhat universal. This notion remained with me and was important, ultimately, in the presentation of my thesis defense.

**Feminism/Decoration**

The notion of the female body as a substrate for decoration appealed to me. I completed a color photo series of decorated female nudes and experimented with decorated medical sculptures of the female reproductive system. As decorative objects had always appealed to me, it was no surprise that I was drawn to antiquities and the decorative arts. By exploring how a women's body is objectified in art, I became more aware of the history of women artists who utilized their bodies as commentary. I discovered a book titled *Ornamentalism* and was inspired by its content, which dealt with the synthesis between decoration and installation art. I realized that my personal aesthetic was aligned with decorative art, and I felt compelled to experiment further. This period of study and experimentation inspired me to examine connections between the construct of home, interior design, and feminist art.

**The Building Project**

At the end of my first year of graduate school, I did a piece for Judy Levy's "Off the Wall" class titled "The Building Project." Levy's course dealt with work intended to be site specific and not shown within the confines of a gallery. The combination of what I had learned in this course, as well as the process undertaken in "The Building Project" proved to be a pivotal experience for me.
For “The Building Project” I utilized an condemned building in downtown Rochester accessible only by the fire escape. I decorated it with inexpensive mis-mixed paint and furniture I found on the premises. My objective was to create a fictitious home for trespassers and homeless people. For the first time during my experience in graduate school I felt completely satisfied with the aesthetic and conceptual aspects of my work. This piece allowed me to deal with an entire space within a context that was site specific. It allowed me to work mixed-media utilizing painting, sculpture, installation, and photography. “The Building Project” was presented via slides and 4 X 5 chromes and was well received by my peers.

THE SECOND YEAR

Prior to my second year of graduate school, I purchased a 12 X 70 foot trailer in a trailer park to use for my thesis project. I chose the trailer because I was intrigued by the artistic possibilities of its linear living space and the blandness of its interior. I wanted to create an environment that was both unexpected and ornamental. I had been influenced greatly by the “Ornamentalist” movement of the 1980’s. Because interior design and faux finishes were of interest to me, I decided I would create my own specialized faux finishes within the trailer. I wanted the space to be surprizing and struggled with various themes, but had difficulty settling on one idea.

I remember being deeply affected by the culture shock I encountered when I first arrived in New York. Prior to R.I.T., I had lived my entire life in Anchorage, Alaska. Americana, kitsch, and the general glut of strange people and items found at flea markets throughout Rochester provided plenty of ideas and inspiration. I realized I wanted to incorporate some of
these materials from my new and alien life into my M.F.A. project. Many kitsch items bought at flea markets were repainted and displayed as “art” throughout the trailer. Though the installation was to be self-referential, combining important pivotal experiences in my life with my new found interest in kitsch, I did not want the life-references to be obvious, nor for the installation to be a singular idea. I wanted to leave room for broader interpretation. As well to combine the most pivotal experiences in my life with my new found interest in kitsch.

Art/Life Connection

At the start of graduate school, I experienced some difficult times in my personal life. For the first time, I knew what it was like to be alone and in a strange environment without family or friends. I had recently married, and issues about domesticity and being a wife affected the way I set up the piece. Issues about alienation and the gender differences were also subtly connected to the meaning I was trying to convey.

As a lifelong Alaskan, I lived always with the power of nature around me. A respect for nature is typical of Alaskans. Here, in the lower 48 states, I saw people ignoring nature and retreating instead to tiny artificial worlds of their own making. The trailer park is a perfect example.

I had conflicts about the best way to present my work. I struggled with how to best show my work. On one hand I thought it would be interesting to use the trailer simply as a stage set for photographs. But, that much would be missed by omitting the ambiance and physicality of the site itself. I felt it was a too site-specific and I preferred the advantages offered by presenting it as an installation. Though I decided to present the trailer as the “art object”, I believe photographs would have also been a valid presentation.
Specific Rooms

A purely verbal description is inadequate to communicate the kinesthetic experience of actually walking through the trailer where all of one’s senses interact with the work. Nevertheless, I have provided a room-by-room description, as well as slides of specific items in each room in Appendix A.

Upon entering my “Trailer Project,” the first room encountered was the “living room.” For me, this room symbolized the break down of the relationships between man and nature, and man and woman. A male mannequin in the living room symbolized “man” and a female mannequin symbolized “nature.” Snakes, symbolic both of nature and our fear of nature were part of the repeated pattern of the “fake mosaic” painted on all the walls in the living room. The snakes were red, implying both desire and danger.

The role of television in the break down of these relationships was also illustrated. A decorated television set was placed in the center of the room as though it were a religious alter. The set, also done in fake mosaic, had colored glass glued to the screen to obscure the picture. The male mannequin vicariously experienced the natural world through television and, no longer interacted with the world in a natural way.

Gender issues were also a part of the living room. The male mannequin wore horns on which twenty-two caliber bullet shells were glued. The mannequin sat on one side of the room holding black grapes for the female mannequin. He represented the seducer and the holder of rewards. The female mannequin sat on the other side with a painting of a grape arbor and black grapes hanging from her skirt. She represented the beauty of nature, but was neither the seducer nor the seduced.
After exiting the living room, one entered the “primary hall,” the hallway that went the length of the trailer. The hallway represented my reaction to the influx of colorful trolls of all sizes in our culture during the 1960s, and then again in the 1990s. The hallway was painted yellow with blue and red trolls stenciled all along the walls and ceiling. A fake fur covered vacuum cleaner with trolls attached and a matching vest could also be found in the hallway. The primary hallway colors and repeated patterns were reminiscent of the work done by Pop artists of the 1960s, and later by artists such as Wim Delvoy.

The “camouflage room” was located off the primary hall. This room represented my response to three things: the Desert Storm Gulf War, the paramilitary/militia movement in this country, and the nostalgic worship of various icons of American culture. It was a small closet-sized bedroom done in the motif of “Desert Storm” camouflage. A chair and an old stereo were covered in camouflage. A small set of deer antlers served as a gun rack for a decorative fake gun. The closet housed a decorative wall shrine to Marilyn Monroe done in Friendly Plastic, A Buddha in camouflage sat underneath. Fake guns were hidden under the Monroe shrine in two drawers collaged with pictures of guns.

Behind a curtain on the wall was a tapestry picturing John F. Kennedy. The tapestry was purchased from a local merchant who assured me that it was a valuable collector’s item. In an act of satirical whimsy, I embellished the tapestry with beads and sequins thus rendering the tapestry worthless, at least on the antique market. A video camera was positioned in the living room with a small black and white monitor in the camouflage room. This allowed one to survey the living room at all times. This surveillance system symbolized two things: one, the paranoia associated with the paramilitary/militia movement in this country, and two, the illusion
of security created by security systems. The background music for this room was a 45 RPM record of John Philip Sousa's "Star Spangled Banner," played at 33 RPM.

The last room was the "avocado bathroom," located at the end of the hall. This room had two themes: avocados and the victimization of women. I chose avocado for three reasons: first, it's color represented a bygone era of the 1960s, a time when kitsch items were very popular; second, it's shape was reminiscent of the female uterus; and third, it is an ingredient in many beauty products such as facial masks. Avocados were cast in clay and glued to the wall. Stills from a 16 mm film inspired by that room adorned the shower curtain. Sponged avocado shapes decorated the walls and created a jungle-like feeling.

Victimization was illustrated through a short segment of the film I produced titled "Avocado Green." The clip was projected through the shower curtain onto the toilet seat. In the film, avocados came out of the bathtub and tried to kill the owner of the trailer after she applied an avocado beauty mask to her face. She battled with the fruit and eventually forced them into a blender where they received their due, and the end of her victimization. The viewer was rewarded at the end of the installation with chips and guacamole dip.

**Thesis Defense**

The most rewarding aspect of the process of showing my thesis was my defense. Most of the attendees were friends and acquaintances from R.I.T. who were familiar with my work. Although I was disappointed in the small turn out, I believe it was a huge success. Rather than lecture on my thesis project, I chose to present a slide show with a video of me in costume. The costume represented my alter ego and the kind of person who might inhabit this trailer. During the presentation, I discussed my personal history as an artist and the progression of my work
from collaborative projects in Alaska to my final thesis project. This performance seemed to satisfy the audience’s desire to know more about the artist and the type of character who might occupy this space.

CONCLUSION

It was difficult to narrow my focus and come to terms with the meaning of “The Trailer Project”. I became frustrated with the level of detail and time required to complete many of the decorative objects included in the piece. There were many times when this project seemed insurmountable. To work in three dimensions with space, lighting, objects, and sound was undoubtedly my most ambitious undertaking. I learned a great deal from the progression of my work and struggled to finalize it.

This project was very complex and multidimensional. In addition to the pieces that were included in the final thesis, there were many more that I chose not to include. I did not deal with the issues that arose while living in my art relative to the piece as a performance. This, I believe, held great potential which would take several additional years to develop.

Living in the trailer was maddening. I felt as though I were being victimized by my own project. It became a constant obsession and there was no escape. In the future, I will continue to do installation work, but in environments that I do not live in or own. Through my thesis, I have grown to value more ephemeral work as well as developing the ability to walk away from my work and appreciate it as a progression toward something. Understanding the value of process was important to me. At this point in my development, my preference is to work with, and
photograph, objects in a defined space with the photographs becoming both the document and the artwork.
APPENDIX A

Slide Description Sheet

(Left to Right)

1) Detail of mannequin in the living room
2) Arrangement for camera in the living room
3) Arrangement for camera in the living room
4) Arrangement for camera in the living room
5) Detail of E.T.'s in the living room
6) Detail of wall piece in the living room
7) Performance for camera in the living room
8) Performance for camera in the living room
9) John F. Kennedy tapestry in the camouflage room
10) Detail of John F. Kennedy tapestry in the camouflage room
11) Detail of the gun rack in the camouflage room
12) Stereo in the camouflage room
13) Detail of the closet in the camouflage room
14) Detail of wall piece in the camouflage room
15) Detail of gun drawer in the camouflage room
16) Primary hall with vacuum and matching vacuuming vest