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The Science of Loneliness & the Anti-Spectacular Method

British documentary filmmaker Adam Curtis famously starts the narration of many of his projects with the line "This is a story about..." This is a story about how society came to be sick while projecting sickness on us; how our thoughts and movements became ordered and controlled; and how we can resist this condition by carving out quiet spaces for ourselves, both internal and external. My work seeks to carve out a space to be alone, within oneself, with the work. The imagery is meant to carry a tone of loneliness because being alone and being okay with being alone are greeted with suspicion within our modern society.

Perhaps this suspicion occurs because loneliness is the most active site of resistance to the Spectacle. In *Society of the Spectacle,* Guy Debord puts forth the idea that "urbanism" is really the "atomization" of the working class and is meant to keep us psychologically isolated from each other.[1] While the language of "the working class" may be becoming outdated, this idea that the city is meant to make us feel connected but actually keep us disconnected seems to have something to it. But we have to keep up the appearance of interconnectedness lest we be thought of as anti-social; hence Facebook, Twitter, etc. So seeking out those lonely spaces and moments is anti-spectacular. This is not to embrace the atomization Debord talks about, but

[1] Debord, Guy. *Society of the Spectacle.* Detroit: Black & Red, 1983. Pg 172.

rather to reject the faux social. It is to find a place where you can consume nothing but what is present and deal with the everyday on your own terms.

This body of work started out as an exploration of memory and nostalgia, both cultural/ societal and familial. The combining of straight photography and constructed imagery was ideally working together to set a certain mood and tone that help the viewer to construct narratives about memory and time where there is no set narrative. From the beginning, the tone was right; the absence of people other then when introduced from old family photos made the work feel empty and quiet to a certain degree.

But memory and nostalgia are tricky things. I started using old family photos in my work precisely because so many of them held little to no direct meaning to me. They are part of a familial memory that was never passed on to me, an interrupted narrative if you will. They are interesting as objects and are holders of a certain kind of curiosity, but they are not necessarily objects of memory. They have remained in the family, but their autobiographic and memorial functions have largely been lost. I find this rupture interesting and am fascinated by the secrets held in these images that should hold more meaning for me. I was driven to make art with them because they did not have many of the connotations they were supposed to. Collage felt like the natural approach as it lifted the people out of a context that was empty to me and literally placed them in a world that I had created. It was a way to interact with people I never had the chance to interact with. For the most part I was happy with the aesthetic of this work, but something was unsatisfactory. I think that I actually really liked the collage work, but felt like it was going far enough in terms of creating a sort of dreamlike atmosphere that I really wanted (dreams being where we are most alone). The images were too concrete.

All photos are instantly of the past and therefore instantly historical, of course. There is too much to be read in an old photo, it gives away too much for what I was doing. Jean Baudrillard noticed that "today one has the impression that history has retreated."[2] We are not at the end of history because things are great and can get no better, but rather we are at the end of history because our sense of progress has by and large been lost. Making art looking backwards seemed to be contributing to the problem then. Old photos give one something to dwell on. So where are we now as opposed to where have we been?

Guy Debord's famously argued that "the spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images."[3] That is to say when we talk about the spectacle we are not talking about how we are bombarded with a landslide of pointless imagery meant to distract us from real concerns, but rather we are talking about what this visually inundation means to our culture and how we relate to each other. Art critic Nicolas Bourriaud takes Debord's idea and says that here is "the most burning issue to do with art today: is it still possible to generate relationships with the world"?[4] The obvious fear is that we no longer enjoy genuine relationships, not with each other and not with the world that we are told has become so interconnected.

The art world took this idea and ran with it; first trying to create art as spectacle with the theory that art now had to be loud to be heard over the din of advertising and mass media, but then turning to a project of reconnecting us to each other through the creation of dialogue or participatory art art. We find ourselves now at a point where the two have merged into what we

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[2] Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation.* Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994. Pg 43.

[3] Debord, 4.

[4] Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Relational Aesthetics.* Paris: Les Presses du Réel, 2002. Pg 9.

might call relational spectacle. We have definitely seen art return to large attention seeking

projects, but it seems like these projects usually have to be undertaken in the name of dialogue or

participatory conviviality to not be met with suspicion (that the artist is serving their own ego).

Debord called the spectacle "the *main production* of present day society" and this seems truer

now then ever.[5]

I love a lot of the pretenses behind art's social turn, as it is so often called, but I also have

my suspicions of it. Not only that it is so often seemingly spectacular in nature (my work had/

has to be anti-spectacular), but it also seems to serve power in some ways. Art historian Claire

Bishop shares this concern when she argues that "social participation is viewed positively [by the

government] because it creates submissive citizens who respect authority."[6] It does feel like art

serves power today and my work is meant to sit well outside that trend even if participation is

invited in some form.

There is a discussion that occurs whenever critics talk about relation/conversational/

diological art and that is "how do we define what this is so we can better discuss it in aesthetic

and artistic terms?" This inevitably leads to expanding the definition of what form is. Form can

now be a conversation, a conversation piece, the creation of space to foster certain outcomes, etc.

And if form has changed then then the definition of the aesthetic experience has changed. Grant

Kester argues that we must now think of art as durational rather then immediate.[7] If now

everything can be considered form and we live in an era when it seems like originality is dead (or

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[5] Debord, 15.

[6] Bishop, Claire. *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship.* London & Brooklyn:
Verso, 2012. Pg, 14.

[7] Kester, Grant. *Conversation Pieces: Community + Communication in Modern Art.* Berkeley, Los
Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2004. Pg 12.

at the very least very hard to achieve) and or very definition of aesthetic experience has shifted, how do we move forward?

Doesn't this combining of forms already create a dialogue both within and around a work? I believe it does and eliminates the need for all of the spectacle surrounding much of contemporary art. I was already combining imagery within works, so why not combine forms? And, furthermore, the last thing people need in the age of reality television and social media is more spectacle so it seems odd that art has returned there. Perhaps artists have somewhat lost the will to swim against social currents and challenge the social order, that is after all no way to get a gallery show. What we as artists need to be doing is creating space where it is o.k. to be contemplative, to be lonely, and to be within one's self, because alone time is fast becoming a disappearing commodity. Social philosopher Jacques Rancière believes "the image speaks to us precisely when it is silent, when it no longer transmits any message to us."[8] Can one create art that combines forms and creates a certain amount of dialogue, within itself and between it and the viewer, while being anti-spectacular and contemplative? And can it *seem* to be silent and without a message while in fact being quite deep and having a lot to say? That's what I wanted to find out.

Opportunities to be alone will disappear. That is a simple fact of urbanization, population growth, and the ever increasing aggressiveness of advertising. We are moving through the world as ghosts because as Debord points out "the spectator feels at home nowhere, because the spectacle is everywhere."[9] They more ghostly or dreamlike the representation of people, the more accurate, then. This has certainly shaped how I deal with images of people in my work

[8] Rancière, Jacques. *The Future of the Image.* London & New York: Verso, 2009. Pg 11.

[9] Debord, 30.

more recently. No one can escape that they will become nothing, but in spectacular society we are "strictly forbidden to grow old."[10] And, Claire Bishop points out, "in a world where everyone can air their views to everyone we are faced not with mass empowerment but with an endless stream of banal egos."[11] Is there not a real danger that art grounded in intersubjectivity only furthers the problem here? Feeds the ego of the spectator? To confront the ego with the inevitability of death and to reassure that loneliness is alright is to truly be transgressive. If transgression needs a limit to push against the limit here is our vanity, our arrogance.[12]

I turned to printmaking to help me deal with people in my imagery in a less obvious way. Screen printing in particular had the advantage of basically being a photographic process where one starts with some sort of base image and uses light to transfer that image onto an emulsion. And, the fact that that base image can easily be a photo was all the more interesting. It is also a mechanical process, which photography has frequently been referred to with negative connotation. The best way to get a photo to become a good screen is to turn it into a black and white bitmap - so right a way the photo becomes a series of dots instead of lines and loses a lot of visual information. And then the screen printed image itself looks roughly like the photo you started with, but it is clearly not a photo it is a collection of acrylic paint dots. This was the way to get the dreamlike figures I had always wanted. In these images, which are screen printed over manipulated photos, the sense of loneliness and of some sort of disconnect from the "real" seems to really be working. It feels like this process can be taken even further, though. I was zooming

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[10] Debord, 160.

[11] Bishop, Claire. "Participation and Spectacle: Where are we Now?." Thompson, Nato (ed.). *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art From 1991-2011*. New York: Creative Time Books, 2012. Pg 40.

[12] Rabinow, Paul and Rose, Nikolas (eds.). *The Essential* Foucault*: Selections from Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*. New York & London: The New Press, 2003. Pg 445.

into photos until they became pixelated and then still printed them out at the same size I would a straight photo, but I felt like all this processing might find itself being accused of being spectacular. So right now, I am working on screen printing onto photo paper with just the most minimal of photographic information on it, and this seems to really have potential. These images are quiet, they are minimal, and they are contemplative.

This work is turning towards something that is seemingly simplistic, but not simple, in the hope of restoring sanity to insane times by creating contemplation. Simplicity *is* the way to comment on the spectacle, for it is the purest expression of anti-spectacular methods. Contemplation can hopefully bring about anti-spectacular thinking and anti-spectacular thinking is the way to reclaim our potential. Combining forms creates a tension within the art, as does the stripping away of unnecessary information. This creates a dialogue both within the work and between the work and viewer willing to take a second to think about what is missing and why. And there doesn't have to be an answer, just a chance to take a deep breath and think and feel at home or to feel lonely, which can be okay. For embracing loneliness is one of the last revolutionary acts available to us. This isn't a call for misanthropy, just a reminder that detachment from the spectacle is an act of resistance. It is a reminder that is okay to seek out "alone time," but also points out that this cannot be achieved by watching television or playing on one's phone. It has to be sought out.

The use of the photographic image has been pared way back with the use of a lot of negative space (created by printing small relative to paper size) and some images have even been edited down to mere fragments of the original image. The subject matter is of lonely places where there are no other people few intrusions of the spectacle and, in fact, it has been noted

more then once that they have a kind of post-apocalyptic feel to them. But they are obviously of the here-and-now, or at least recent here-and-now. They are examples of the possibility of finding the anti-spectacle in everyday life. The use of smaller images and negative space invites the viewer to get closer, to in fact get very close, and tune out everything around them. The tone of the images invites meditation and introspection.

If, as Marcuse suggests, it is society that is sick and not individuals who feel detached from it, what then is our recourse?[13] The obvious tactic, it seems, to reshape how we experience the everyday. We must take what is given to us and subvert its meaning to our own ends, to live life on our own terms, and to carve out as much autonomous space as we can even if it only exists in the interior of our consciousness. The empty landscape can act as a metaphor for the emptiness of 21st century existence. But, embracing it and dealing with it and confronting it and being in it can also act as a site for liberation. Debord is right that our real relationships with each other have taken a serious hit in the age of mass media and the internet, but I feel like genuine human interaction can be reclaimed if we only learn how to use those tools well.

My work seeks to create that space. I feel like there is real potential in participation, but that it is more valuable if a viewer gets to have a one-on-one relationship with the art in a meaningful way. To this end, I have been playing with Felix Gonzalez-Torres' ideas of subverting the gallery space. People feel like they are having some sort of authentic cultural experience in the gallery, but really it is as mediated and controlled a space as a shopping mall. What Gonzalez-Torres did that was so revolutionary is site his work in a gallery, but invite people to not only touch the art but to take the art and sometimes to literally consume the art. All

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[13] *The Century of the Self. Part 2 - The Engineering of Consent.* Curtis, Adam (writer & director). BBC Four, 2002. http://thoughtmaybe.com/the-century-of-the-self/

of the "rules" on how to interact with art in this demarcated space go out the window. Bourriaud champions Gonzalez-Torres for foreshadowing the creation of space "based in inter-subjectivity" in his work.[14] This idea of the democratization of the gallery is very powerful.

This is where the birds come in. I started making these origami birds out of old family photos. The photos were cropped to squares and the prints were cut into quarters, so each photo became four birds. I liked this idea of a whole being split into other wholes. I started screen printing onto the images just to add another layer of both meaning and visual texture. They were about memory being cleaved but now also about something that could be considered and art object being taken apart and reformed. Working very much like collage does, I suppose. What gets me about the making of origami birds is not only that there is a legend that if you make enough you will have good luck (so the act of making is inherently hopeful), but that the final act of making one is to blow into it. Your breath becomes a part of the bird. It was obvious to me that they needed to be given away and spread far and wide then. There is also a durational aspect to the birds, obviously, if one takes the time to make one. I like that they fit into Kester's idea that we should think about the durational potential of art that way.

My goal now is to bring these birds into the gallery. They can be given away, which is a direct sort of sharing not only of a handcrafted thing but of a small part of myself. This is a genuine human interaction. There is also the potential to invite people to make their own birds. To get to create art themselves in the gallery rather then passively observe what I have made for them. The act of sitting down in the gallery and making a bird gives one a chance to be quiet in a space that can be busy, to interact with the gallery instead of passively move through it, and

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14 Bourriaud, 51.

provides a chance for an act of creativity in "creative" space that is usually quite mediated. And then, with the chance to either take one's own creation or trade it with another already in the space, well the possibilities for interaction or almost limitless.

There is real exchange and interaction between people, even if they never get the chance to see each other face to face. Perhaps a community is even formed, organically around this act of bird making and exchanging in the gallery. So much of the participatory art we see talks about forming community, but it is really a top down model where the project is a failure if the participants either don't appear or don't "do it right." The community is formed in a very rigid and orchestrated way. This model of participatory art is a bit fascistic. What I want to do is allow for something to happen, but not make the work's "success" dependent on its happening. This, to me, seems like the perfect tonic for the spectacular relationships we have through television or the internet. Kester points out that the great potential of dialogical aesthetics, and I strive for my work to fit into that category even if it is perhaps not quite there yet, is that the artist and the viewer become "co-participants in the transformation of both self and society."[15]

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[15] Kester, 79.

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