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Development, Research, Experimentation

As I look back on my time spent in the Louisiana State University School of Art, I reflect on the various works I have created. After analyzing my senior project, I observed a common thread that runs through my most memorable pieces. I have a fascination with the human body. I am interested in anatomy and structure, but the most captivating part of the body is its use as a vehicle for expression. The relationship I have created with my physical self through dance and yoga has had an incredible impact on my work. I have strong ties to exploration and discovery of the human body, my own in particular.

Another source of inspiration for new work has been material studies. When approaching each project, I enjoy the examination of material. If I do not begin a project with a concept in mind, often I will let the materials evoke a train of thought. Once I understand the formal qualities and typical use of materials, I attempt to stray far from that. I am interested in the less traditional way of treating pre-existing material. “Still Moving” began as a simple material study in September of 2013 and has found its way into the forefront of my thoughts ever since.

I laid the foundation for “Still Moving” by exploring the interior of a rectangular sack of elastane, a spandex like material. As I entered the space, I immediately felt compelled to move. My movements were spontaneous, but restricted by the bounds of the fabric. The resistant yet resilient nature of the fabric fascinated me the most. I set up a camera to snap photographs and take video recordings to see if the outside perspective was as intriguing as the internal experience. What I saw captivated me, so I began researching. I sought to explore gesture, movement, material, and space, and how their interactions could enhance our perceptions.

Countless hours were spent probing the Internet, ransacking the library, and discussing my ideas with peers and mentors. I read about other artists who use fabric as their primary medium. I examined performance artists, as their bodies are often integral to their work. Some of these artists included Erik Ravelo, Carrie Ohm, and Rebecca Patek. “Our bodies are sculptures formed by society’s expectations. I am a visual artist and my body is my medium,” said Heather Cassils, an artist who also utilizes the body as an expressive tool. I looked up dancers and dance companies who push the border on traditional performance space and subject matter, such as the Nikolais Dance Theatre, Mummenschanz Dance Troupe, and LAVA Dance Company. I checked out several books on Rudolf Laban’s movement analysis and his theories on the language of the body. Laban believed that movement is the deepest expression of our inner selves. After extensive reading, writing, and discussions, heaps of ideas filled my mind about the logistics and visual aspects of the project. What remained was conceptual investigation.

One captivating property of the fabric is the distorted relationship created between the viewer and the performer. The material is opaque so seeing one another is very difficult. As the performer, my physical attributes are somewhat visible, but my identity is concealed. This anonymity forces the audience to perceive the work with limited distraction and ponder the world inside the fabric casing.

Prior to selecting a site for my final performance, I experimented with location and various types of documentation. My previous explorations of this figure occurred in an environment of classmates and other art students, and I felt ready to take on the public sphere. With my assorted colored fabric in hand, I drove around the city and practiced performing in public for six-minute intervals. I used the practice footage to generate a

gesture database. The reactions of bystanders varied from place to place. The relationship between the spectator and myself was very important to me, so I wanted my final to take place at a location that would facilitate the building of this relationship. I have read a bit about Lygia Clark and the Neo-Concretists and the emphasis they placed on the interaction between object and viewer. They believed artwork to be subjective and expressive. The true beauty of the piece is when the viewer and work become one entity. "It is during this interaction that the spectator truly experiences what the art work means." For each individual, that meaning exists in its own way.

"Still Moving"

I created a proposal centered on these ideas for my final project and submitted to Prospect 3, a New Orleans based organization. As it turned out, they were in the midst of creating satellite art events in Baton Rouge and Hammond, and my proposal was accepted to both. The direction of my project started to shift in order to fit the Prospect 3+ event in Baton Rouge. Prospect 3 partnered with Elevator Projects and Baton Rouge Walls, other local arts organizations. After a few meetings, we determined logistics for my project. My performance took place at the opening reception of the Prospect 3+ festival weekend in Baton Rouge. The reception was held on Friday, November 14 from 6:00-9:00 PM downtown at the Chase Tower. I established a home in one of the elevators that brought guests to and from the parking garage, reception area, and art gallery. Most of the visitors I had were people attending the arts festivities, but because the Chase Tower is open to the public and contains hundreds of offices, I did ride with

several unsuspecting passengers.

By placing myself in the elevator, I challenged the expectations most passengers had for the space. Anyone who entered the elevator was forced to respond to my presence. The material I used was bright pink in correspondence to Prospect 3's color scheme. I put pink filters over five of the six lights in the elevator to make the lighting less harsh and the atmosphere a bit more intimate. One light remained white and brighter than the rest, and it functioned as a spotlight above me. This helped to focus the attention on me and it created interesting luster and shadow play with the fabric. I had a three-hour track of jazzy elevator music playing in the background. The sultry sound of the saxophone accompanied by the soothing piano with ambient noises such as rainfall, typewriter clicking, and wind blowing contributed to the cozy atmosphere. The music broke initial tension on the ride. I remained still when the elevator doors were open as to not frighten potential riders or make anyone feel that the elevator was off limits. Part of the reason the project was successful was the fact that no one knew what he or she was about to witness, until it was too late to escape.

Art From The Work's Perspective

Although there was much research and planning involved, I want to define my experience not necessarily from an academic standpoint, but from a place of the work's perspective. Rather than describing too much of what it was like seeing me, I want to portray what it was like being me. While I was performing I took note of the experiences I had in my own world, and my perception of what was happening in the world around

me. In order to retain so much information, I had to meditate to clear my mind before the performance began.

Upon inserting myself into the installation, I enjoyed the contradiction that occurred as I invited people into my space, yet they were still outsiders to my world. Inside the fabric, I felt very vulnerable. I was nude which immediately brought me to a raw place. All I could see was my skin and the color pink. At first, I was very aware of the activity on the elevator. Because my vision was compromised, my other senses were heightened. I could smell the scent of perfume, alcohol, pizza. The cold air that rushed in every time the doors opened in the garage sent chills up my spine. I could hear the repetitive “bing” of the elevator every single time the door opened and every single time we passed one of the twenty-one floors of the building. I heard the small talk of people waiting to catch an elevator. I heard the words they said to and about me. Since the passengers could not see my ears, they often treated it like I did not have any. Several people had no filter to their thoughts, while others kept their reactions to themselves. I logged memorable incidences as I performed:

1) My first passengers were an older couple who could not find their way to their car. They stopped at each level of the parking garage multiple times before deciding they found the right one. The woman began a conversation with me and continued it throughout their search. I responded in my head and somewhat through my body language, and it was as if she could hear. The conversation continued and I was fascinated.

2) Many people said “thank you” as they exited the elevator. I was unsure if it was just a polite gesture or if they were sincerely thanking me for what I was doing, or perhaps both.

3) “This woman must practice tai chi.” Although there is much more to the practice of tai chi, I do appreciate the incredible attention to detail and articulation of movement by those who practice. Their incredible focus and dedication is something I aspire to.

4) An older gentlemen boarded the elevator. He muttered to himself as we rode, up, and down, and up, and down, over and over again. Who knew how exhausting the ride from floor twenty-one to the lowest deck of the parking garage could be. I probably should have been disturbed by the fact that I was held hostage to this man for so long on the elevator, yet I was actually very intrigued by the situation. I continued moving, he continued watching.

5) “I passed up three elevator calls waiting for you to arrive.”

6) One woman was not interested in joining me and refused to get on. She told her friends she was scared, as she waited for the doors to close to catch the next elevator. Upon pushing the down arrow again, my doors reopened. This happened four times before she had the courage to accompany me. I am nude in an elevator and cannot see. We both feel vulnerable; you just do not know it.

7) "It is mesmerizing." A surprising number of people stayed on the elevator beyond their stop just to see more.

8) A large quantity of people took photographs and video clips, but the most memorable was a particular woman. She told me she was taking a video and began to move with me. It was oddly refreshing to have someone in such close contact with me, as the majority chose to keep their distance.

9) Most people kept their distance, but there were two exceptions. One interaction was very casual. As the woman made contact with me, I assumed she was more curious about the material than anything else. The other was a small child. The little boy could not refrain. It was adorable, but certainly uncomfortable. Everybody laughed and pictures were taken.

10) "Everything about it is so smooth and sensual." I was unsure if he was talking about the music or me, but it was most likely a combination.

11) "I wish this was here everyday. We need something to liven up the place."

Three hours did not seem like such an intimidating time frame until it was happening. I experienced a physical and emotional rollercoaster underneath the fabric. I felt isolated from the world around me, and while at first I found comfort and retreat, it was not long until I began to feel lonely and conflicted. My thoughts wandered from

place to place. I trusted strangers to take care of me. I forced myself to have incredible patience throughout the performance. I was truly thinking creatively about my body movement and expression to avoid repetition and monotony. I thought about my life and my future. Several times I was overcome by the sounds from within: my heavy breathing, the rub of the fabric, and my popping bones. During the times when I had a deep internal focus, I would catch words and phrases from the passengers. They echoed through my body, some commanding my attention, some simply passing by. A few times I got lost in this engulfing pink space. I kept comparing my experience to a baby in the womb, not that I think our experiences are truly alike, but just in the way that we exist and move in an indescribable isolation.

Physically, my body ached. I am taller than the unexpanded fabric so there was constant pressure pushing inward on my head and feet. I experienced exhaustion and fatigue and worst of all, a bit of motion sickness. I was sweaty and cold at the same time. My endurance was being tested, however there was something quite refreshing about my circumstance. For the entire three hours I focused on my body, my world, and my elevator. It was the most concentrated period of introspection I had in a long time. I did not hesitate to indulge in that introspection as I moved through the space. I took comfort in knowing that when my environment addressed me, I did not have to respond. I did not feel tense or awkward, as I had anticipated. I was able to establish temporary relationships with my visitors minus the anxiety or timidity that usually accompanies my exchange with strangers.

I learned so much during my experimentation with this fabric. It added a new dimension to my understanding of gesture, movement, material, and space. The fabric

functioned as a barrier between the performer and the audience while simultaneously forming a bridge to make a connection between the two. I oscillated between seclusion in my womb-like sack and immersion in a very public place, and I was made to contemplate the flux between all of these elements. Many combinations were oxymoronic.

“Still Moving” sparked tremendous advances for me as an artist, but I hope there were audience gains as well. The piece provided an alternate perspective on body language and expression. Observers unaccustomed to live art, especially so intimate and personal, may have left with a more open mind and a broader understanding of performance. I intended to redefine the ordinary and encourage viewers to indulge in their surroundings. By breaking up the mundane and challenging expectations, “Still Moving” gave the audience a temporary escape as well. If nothing else, it provided an interesting conversation topic.