

Something is Missing

An Installation

by

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A thesis exhibition
presented to the University of Waterloo
in fulfillment of the
thesis requirement for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
in
Studio Art

University of Waterloo Art Gallery, May 1 to May 17 2014

Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 2014

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

Something is Missing is an installation that incorporates drawing, a security camera, audio, appropriated objects and built sculptural elements using common construction materials and clay. This work is rooted in notions of failure and empathy. Drawings of organs float as if desperate to inhabit imaginary bodies, a security camera that resembles an examining tool of a medical practitioner fails to fix or function and walls fall short of completing a room. This room as a whole becomes a metaphor for a stage without actors.

The thesis body of work that comprises *Something is Missing* is meant to serve as what I call a *dysfunctional affect machine* that opens cross-sensory possibilities and induces empathetic feelings in the viewer. The aim of this machine is to pose questions rather than suggest answers to the contemporary predicament of being bodies in a post human era. This work is also meant to summarize a sort of contemporary anxiety, which I feel I participate in both as an artist and citizen of the World.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank to my advisers Bruce Taylor, Cora Cluett and David Blatherwick as well as the rest of the Fine Arts Department and my fellow MFA graduate colleagues for their support, guidance and friendship. I would like to thank Sin-ying Ho, who was my mentor during my Shantz International Internship, for her enthusiasm and support.

Special thanks to Jane Tingley for her help with the development of my final thesis installation as well as to my editors Ester Jagica and Wing Yee Tong for their endless patience and valuable advice. And finally, thank you to my colleague Megan Green for her support and friendship.

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Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller *Opera for a Small Room-*

2005

Interior View;

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Introduction

“In this uncertain and beguiling space, between the two subjective poles of success and failure, where paradox rules, where transgressive activities can refuse dogma and surety, it is here, surely, that failure can be celebrated.” (le Feuvre, Failure, pg. 19)

In the age of the Internet - of rapid information sharing - I believe we have a tendency to fail to empathize with our surroundings in many significant ways. In the world of the virtual and a so-called everyday “real” reality, our intentions and the results of our actions are somehow intertwined between these two opposing realities. In this new environment, are we able to make any conscious decisions? How can we sift through meaning in a world ruled by an intense bombardment of images, semantic information and consequently, fully understand what is right or wrong?

Throughout my thesis work I engage in a dialogue that relates to ideas of play and failure; where failure itself is imbued with the potential to unravel a realm of new possibilities. *Something is Missing* constructs a mechanism where the elements within the installation repeatedly fail to play out their original functions. For example, walls are constructed but do not actually enclose a space, or a security cameras fail to bear witness and instead become movement sensors. Paradoxically, the installation enables us as viewers to empathize with its abstracted parts: to feel the intensity or danger from a bulk of chain from which a feather is suspended, to hear and feel the vibration and sound provoked by the movement of a small porcelain sculpture that is hung inside a cardboard box. In this sense, sound and vibration play out on a provisional stage that is meant to encourage tension within the viewer. It is hoped that this tension is manifest as a bodily response. (see image 1) I see tension within the body as a driving force that enables us to respond to our environment. For this reason I am interested in exploring this possibility as an artistic strategy within my work.

Description of work and choice of materials

Is *Something is Missing* a sculptural installation or is it about all kinds of other things than the actual objects present?



image#1

This installation is comprised of two main sculptural elements and is connected through a framed structure that is made of pressure treated wood beams. The first unit that the viewer encounters is made of a sculpture stand, a pressure treated wooden beam, a small cardboard maquette that resembles the inside of a shed and an analog television that is connected to two digital cameras (see image 3). A heavy industrial chain, hangs from the wood beam, and a feather is suspended from the chain.

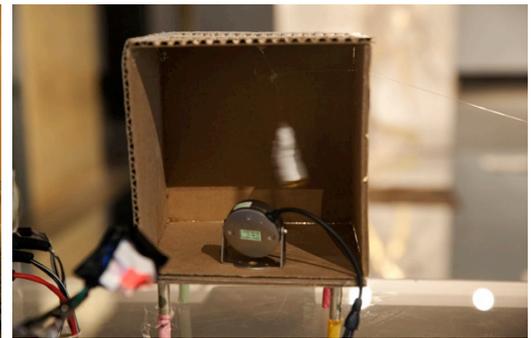
In the installation, the two digital cameras respond to the movement of objects in close proximity to them. The “unit” is focused on the movement of a porcelain miniature sculpture in a cardboard box. A body entering the room triggers, via an infrared sensor, movement of the small ceramic sculpture. The second camera focuses on the chain and feather that hangs from a pressure-treated wooden structure. A feather is connected to the chain with an almost invisible thread of glue (see image 2).



image#2



image#3



image#4

Even a slight breeze will set the feather in motion. This contrasts with the heavy bulk of the chain. Strangely, both the chain and feather are mostly subject to the inevitable force of gravity. The cameras that produce a repetitive, static noise register all movement in the cardboard box. This noise is emitting from the TV’s speaker.

The second section of the exhibition consists of drawings in ink, gold leaf, compressed charcoal and carving that are made directly on drywall panels that form part of installation. There are five walls that do not form a complete room - these freestanding walls are positioned a few feet away from the existing gallery walls. A chandelier hangs in the middle of this quasi stage-like space (see images 1 & 5). It is a found object that I have modified through attaching sculpted elements made from clay that reach out in a gesture toward the drawings on the walls. These clay

works reference internal organs, or tendons that seek to connect with and penetrate the drawings on the walls. They spread out in many different root-like configurations from the metal frame of the chandelier and cast shadows on the adjacent walls a few feet away.

The chandelier, like the feather, is suspended from the ceiling but instead of industrial chain-link, the work is connected with airplane wire. The same infrared sensor that triggers the movement from the small ceramic sculpture in the box also activates a motor. The rotation of the feather attached to the motor brushes against an airplane wire, causing the chandelier to move subtly and, in turn, cast a set of light patterns on the walls. This whole interactive environment is designed to simulate the dimensions of a personal space rather than a purely theatrical one.

The mixed-media drawings that are made directly on and into the surface of the drywall make reference to the ceramic sculptures within the installation. As I construct the drawings, I use small pieces of charcoal, ink and fabric dye (images 7 & 11) as well as forms of tracing to create organic looking images. When the drawing reaches a certain stage, I map out geometrical drawings directly on top of the bodily images using gold leaf that is then partially etched with the acid. This etching process softens the geometrical edges and, furthermore the new layer of compressed charcoal drawings on top of these shapes.



image#5



image#6



image#7

Another aspect of the installation includes, on the other side of the exhibition space, a life-size ceramic sculpture entitled *Boys Don't Lie* (Image 8). This work makes an overt reference to story of Pinocchio. In order to become human, Pinocchio is tested and fails many times to achieve his goal of becoming a boy. That is, human. If we look at this failure as an imbalance between desire and reality, Pinocchio's failure is absolute.

Does being human make him a better being? In my opinion, a real boy would not be able to withstand all of the ordeals that Pinocchio does in the story. Yet he endures all of this only to become human, which might in fact be a bigger disappointment in the end. To some extent, living in the world as humans we are doomed to fail and so we have a great empathy for the character of Pinocchio who bears all the visible signs of our internal strife.

This character is constructed in clay wrapped on a metal chain framework. This unusual marriage of materials is superimposed with a large, golden, toothy grimace. The sculpture itself is hung upside down from a thin airplane wire and dangles just above the gallery floor.

The process of firing clay around a chain is unpredictable and usually does not work the way that it would appear to be intended to. As a result, the inner beauty of the decayed ceramic sculpture had a resonance for me. It evokes empathy and conveys a sense of dark humor. I interpret the chains as being the skeleton of this future boy. The piece explores the awkwardness as well as the sacrifice that the character of Pinocchio makes throughout his journey to become a mortal - a human.



image #8

Process

My work is, to a greater degree, process based. The way I draw is directly influenced by the anatomy lessons I took as a medical student in Belgrade before relocating to Canada. I recall a feeling of disconnection from the corpses being dissected in the anatomy lab. I could not see them as living beings. I tried to imagine that the bodies were just meat in a butcher shop. This brought the presence of the body closer but still seemed removed. I found that I was unhappy with my results unless the mode of drawing was executed in a chaotic, broken, geometric and botched manner. Only then did the body's essence begin to reveal itself to me, while the likeness simultaneously disappeared. In this way, drawing became a process of discovery through which, in some performative manner, objects or bodies materialized from the fundamental nature of what was in front of me. For me, the act of drawing became an effective tool of communication and in this elementary way; the process of making an installation is an extension of my drawing process that is translated into a three-dimensional space.

The process starts in the studio by assembling seemingly disconnected drawings, sculptures and structural wooden hanging devices. Over time the "things" start to connect and speak to each other despite the inherently differing nature of these various materials (clay, gold leaf, appropriated objects, wood) (see images 9 & 10). Some accidental relationships are formed simply through my aesthetic choices or intuitive associations. The chain begins to look like a brain. Even the act of applying gold leaf on cracks in the clay objects are to be seen as performative semi-shamanic gestures of healing. Pure play in the studio led to the discovery that the camera responded to movement with an annoying, eerie sound. From this discovery, the cardboard box, originally intended to be only a scale model (see image 4), became a final piece, resembling a prop with

an examining stethoscope-like camera. In this way, the three dimensional development of the installation has followed a similar process to how I would describe the individual evolution of any of my drawings. It is essentially a process of accumulation, accident and layering – both physical and in terms of potential meanings.



image#9



image#10

Theoretical influences

My theoretical influences are mainly related to the philosophical concepts expressed in the writings of Deleuze and Guattari as well as Brian Massumi. Deleuze and Guattari's writing on rhizomes foreshadowed the organization of the Internet today: a format that proposes possibilities of communication that are opposite to the centralized distribution of information that dominated prior to the Internet. However, along with this decentralization a widespread misuse of the medium has had serious social ramifications. For the sake of illustration, one such misuse came to light through the American computer professional, Edward Snowden, when he went public about the acquisition of private information while working for organizations such as the CIA. The existence of tracking information flow through mobile devices by government agencies is endangering concepts of privacy and personal identity. As Snowden described; "privacy is what allows us to determine who we are and who we want to be" (Wall Street Journal, online, 2013). Initially these new media possibilities held a promise for a transparent, socially and politically aware society. Yet, in 2014, I would argue that the Internet fails miserably to deliver any drastic change - in the sense of political or personal freedom.

To bring this discussion into a personal context, as a refugee from former Yugoslavia I could argue that an abundance of information often leads, intentionally or unintentionally, to so many different interpretations of any given event that eventually it loses its context and results in individual alienation. My experience of displacement, and that of my family as well, resulted in the inability to return to claim our own property, cultural forms or the right to work. This situation was caused by political quarrels rooted in history and further complicated by media and outside political agendas. Living through a situation, the individual becomes dehumanized and alienated

from the former organic whole, which was a known culture and identity for us. This a personal analogy, but it relates to what I would describe as a Global phenomenon.

The information about a situation like this might be available and widely distributed through the Internet; however, the amount of information, interpretations, degrees of separation have become so elaborate that the original issue is buried in mound of competing views. Blame, if there is any, is impossible to direct. Everyone and no one are at fault. Since the information flow – represented by the Internet – has no centre, there is, likewise, no actual location for responsibility to be placed either. The end result is that any individual subject to a political situation is not only subject to a loss, but is really unlikely to receive much real empathy other than the most momentary sort caused by viral information trends. This phenomenon manifests itself in what I would call a silent sort of anxiety and alienation.

The point is that the Internet, as a rhizomatic and progressive way of sharing information, is failing to make a change. As a citizen I feel that something is missing but the missing part is much more than just the failing of the Internet. In my view, Global society has begun to function as a super-organism not run by individual state structure but rather from different power centers such as corporations whose interest are not largely culturally or even geographically centred.

My interpretation of Deleuze and Guattari's proposition is that the global political structures from the 1990s onward have operated as a centreless super-organism. This is the *body without organs* so often referred to in their texts. In this way, the hierarchy of power is hidden within the socio-cooperative super-organism; as opposed to the nation/state that at least had some level of visibility - it had organs.

All of this leads to a question about where ones political consciousness lies and whether it can actually exist at this point in time. Brian Massumi declares that being a body in the world

automatically assumes it has its own political consciousness. This consciousness is now stuck in a tangle somewhere between the virtual and the actual worlds in which we currently live. Massumi stresses that this new world is dominated by affect and that the use and abuse of affect has political ramifications.

Brian Massumi points to the necessity of broadening our understanding of the principle of affect, and to the reorganization and invention of new terminology related to it in order to avoid paradoxes related to semantics which affect has the tendency to produce. Reading Brian Massumi's essay, "The Autonomy of the Affect", I have become aware of the nature of affect and how it could act as a tool used to produce meaning contained within an artwork. I connect with this text as it is related to my own art practice, which explores unconscious tension within the body.

Conceptual underpinning of the work

“People ask, So What is this BWO? - But you are already on it, scurrying like a vermin, groping like a blind person, or running like a lunatic: desert traveler and nomad of the steppes. On it we sleep, live our waking lives, fight-fight and are fought--seek our place, experience untold happiness and fabulous defeats; on it we penetrate and are penetrated; on it we love.” (Deleuze and Guattari, pg. 150).M

As previously discussed, even if we cannot really see the hierarchical structure of the state, we can feel its enormous pressure on us as manifest in our own bodies. As a result of that pressure, our ability to empathize with the World around us is limited, and, by further extension, we live in a state of alienation from it.

In my work I draw from this alienated position as fragmented body parts fail to construct the body as an organism and function rather as the compost on which new life could grow. This infers a possibility of hope that resists the complete failure of the postmodern body that is currently read or understood as fragmented.

Another way of expressing this alienation is through anxiety. One form of this kind of anxiety manifests itself in a Goth tendency present both in youth culture and contemporary art. It must be stated that this is a rather arbitrary label and does not really refer to the Gothic in the art historical or literary sense. Gilda Williams in her introductory text *How deep is your Goth?* (for the collection of essays from the White Chapel series, *The Gothic*) analyzes a new presence of Goth culture in contemporary art. She argues that Goth as a repetitive, impulsive, supernatural, escapist, traumatic, regressive, juvenile notion that has crept into many art genres is a means of turning away from the canon of conceptual art (Williams, *The Gothic*, pg.18) and expressing contemporary angst.

Goth flirts with death, apocalypse and destruction and has been present in the post-9/11

period even though its roots were in the early 1990's; "when the bright, busy globalism of 1990s were wearing thin." (Saltz, *The Gothic*, pg. 48) In his discussion of Goth Jerry Saltz refers to the prosperity generated by globalization that translated into another form of despair on the downside of the economic scale.

A form of this spirit of Goth is present in my work as a silent scream. I have adopted an aesthetic of the absurd and the grotesque as a protest against the feeling of various forms of bodily alienation. It is a rebellious outcry, a mutiny without a cause. The form of disaffection that I relate to in the mentioned authors has been absorbed and translated into a visual aesthetic found throughout the work.

The works' relation to contemporary art practice and culture

“Worringer sees Gothic art as a hybrid of abstraction and empathy, an unstable and feverish amalgam of unreconciled opposites that resembles the “exalted pathos of youth” (Worringer 1912, 81) in its yearning for transcendental liberation.” (Bogue, pg. 149)

Just a couple of months after my arrival as a landed immigrant in Canada, I forgot my passport-sized photo in one of the side pockets of my trousers while doing laundry. After recovering the photo, I found that my portrait was distorted in a weird spiral shape, revealing in its unique expressions although it was still visibly a portrait of myself. I could not say what this newly distorted face was imbued with: if it was pain or some other intense feeling. The visual appearance of the washed and dried passport photo reminded me of images of heads in Francis Bacon's paintings. A few days later, while perusing David Sylvester interviews with Francis Bacon, it became obvious for me that many people experience similar sensations. Francis Bacon's vision of the body as a flash, pure force or sensation felt familiar to me. Although there are no direct visual references, I feel a direct affinity to Francis Bacon's work.

Francis Bacon paints meat as if it were only loosely connected to a body or a skeleton. (Deleuze, pg. 20) In his work, forces and intensities take the body apart though it is still visible as a contour suspended in what seems to be architecture of torture painted from multiple vantage points. In his painting, *Study of a Baboon* (image 12), organs seem to disintegrate inside a body and build

towards a threshold of intensity. The body is painted in a translucent manner, neither recognizably human nor animal. It is positioned in front of what appears to be a cage and is articulated with a series of dark, expressive brush strokes that suggest a field of grass.



image # 11



image # 12

In a more current context, there are two installation artists - David Altmejd and Adrian Villar Rojas - with whom I have an affinity and would like to discuss as representing my connection to artists at work today. Both produce large-scale mixed media installations and borrow from both Baroque and Goth aesthetics.

David Altmejd's particular aesthetic balances a sense of the grotesque with the delicate. In his sculptures he uses a number of different materials including plaster, crystals, mirrors and fur that seem to confound our sensibilities in new ways. (see images 13 &14)

Although his sculptures appear fragmented and botched, they describe a form of beauty through the meticulously worked details. Robert Storr sees that the tension comes as a result of the “cross fertilization” of two aesthetic elements of different origin (Storr, *The Gothic*, pg. 16). The first of these is the use of familiar materials: plaster, fake fur, and mirrors. The second element is the fragmented body. The point is that we, as viewers, are repulsed by the fragmented body and simultaneously lost in the beauty and use of materials. Their aesthetic fascination lies in this duality.



image # 13



image # 14

Adrian Villar Rojas’s work calls for a redefinition of culture through the act of burying history, both cultural and personal. His large clay installation at Venice Biennial 2011 titled *Now I Will Be with My Son, the Murder of Your Heritage* (see image 15) included a number of massive gray columns. On a first encounter with them in the Arsenale they came across as Miro’s sculptures from Pompidou sculpture garden gone wrong. On the second look these columns were each stylistically different from each other. On some of them the application of clay was expressive and the mark of the artist’s hand was visible, others were more slick and architectural with unusual choice of detailed everyday artifacts buried or sculpted on them. These everyday objects looked like collected debris of human civilization. Adrian Villar Rojas’s visual language reaches into an

imaginary world where cartoon characters, cellphones, organic life and motorbikes are incorporated without any visible hierarchy.



image # 15

I feel that both Adrian Villar Rojas and David Altmejd's artwork also deal with notions of the spectacle. Villar Rojas work could be easily seen as a high-end theme-park installation while Altmejd's work could be an upscale installation in a high-end design store window. To paraphrase David Altmejd, both he and window designers have similar challenges in finding modes to present their work to a public (OCADU, Lecture, 2013). These comparisons are not necessarily negative. They make their work accessible to the consumer culture savvy public while, at the same time, complicate it with a sublime, grotesque beauty does not allow an easy way out.

The idea of making my installation respond to the viewer's presence through the use of low tech sensors, a small TV monitor and couple of cameras came from an encounter with the installation, *Opera for a Small Room*, by Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller.

Opera for a Small Room is a closed multimedia installation whose outside appearance is minimalist, consisting of a simplified wooden box. The interior is full of memorabilia of an actual person's life, the life of (R. Dennehy): Record players, LP-s, speaker's lights and megaphones. (see images 16 & 17).



image # 16



image # 17

The poetics of the *Opera for a Small Room* was inspired by an early Fritz Lang movie *Testament of doctor Mumbusa*. One strategy in early German cinema was the use of a central character that goes through a melodramatic existential crisis wherein pure evil is fought with the power of free will, all of which is theatrically presented through high contrast lighting. These effects are layered further in Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller's piece with explosions of light, the independent robotic movements of turntables and a cacophony produced by interconnections of songs, voices and sounds coming from inside of the installation as well as a narrative voice that comes from the speaker positioned on the outside wall of the room. Both Cardiff's and Burn's imagined histories are enfolded in a randomness of the events and as such are perfect examples of post-modern narratives.

While there are certainly many more artists whose work has either inspired or influenced

my own practice, I feel the three practices described here summarize the most relevant ones in reference to this particular body of work.

Summary

“She argues that there is no excuse for our lack of sympathy because there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another. There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination.” (Walsh, pg. 8)

As a person and an artist in the world today, I sense an alienation and anxiety that is a result of an environment dominated by the bombardment of images and information coming largely from new media communications. This new situation is a web of social interactions and exchanges pervasive to such a degree that what we formerly associated with genuinely personal empathetic relations seem as out of reach as a distant memory. Yet I feel that there is no excuse for a lack of empathy other than a laziness of our imaginations.

This new context has resulted in what I characterize as a silent anxiety that is stored in our bodies. My role as an artist of this moment is to comment on this as well as resist it. For this reason I align myself with certain contemporary anti-aesthetic tendencies associated with Goth and the notion of angst that form a resistance and an alternative to what seems like a state of affairs teetering on the brink - both within the art world and beyond.

Something is Missing is my way of responding to these concerns - the exhibition is full of conflicting tendencies and as such; humor and angst, beauty and ugliness, silence and noise, are all players on the same stage.

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