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The Adventures of a Young Artist, and the Promise of the Digital Culture in Art

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The Adventures of a Young Artist, 
and the Promise of the Digital Culture in Art

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Bachelor of Fine Arts in Studio Art 
The University of Texas at Austin, 2003
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Virginia Commonwealth University, 2010

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Richmond, Virginia 
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# Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... v
Preface ................................................................................................................................................ 1

*To be of Use* .................................................................................................................................... 2

*Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* by Louis Althusser .................................................. 3
What This Means for “Us” .................................................................................................................. 4
My Time as a Musician ....................................................................................................................... 5
Our Digital Revolution ...................................................................................................................... 6
The Way this can Work for Visual Artists ......................................................................................... 7
The Film Industry’s Attempts to Squash DIY Progress in Movie-Making .......................................... 8
Matthew Barney ............................................................................................................................... 9
To Conclude This Section ................................................................................................................ 10
A Public Option ................................................................................................................................. 11
And Finally .......................................................................................................................................... 12
Influences ........................................................................................................................................... 13
Super Fan .......................................................................................................................................... 14
Finding Rapture in Secular Knowledge ........................................................................................... 15
Exactly Wrong .................................................................................................................................... 16
Datamoshing ...................................................................................................................................... 17
Artist’s Statement, 2009 ..................................................................................................................... 18
Post-Post Studio Practice ................................................................................................................ 19
Artist’s Statement, 2009, Paragraph 2 ............................................................................................. 20
...Paragraph 3 ................................................................................................................................. 21

*Tatts*: *Voyager I Interstellar Spacecraft/The Dawn of Man, 2009* ................................................... 22
Images Relating to *Tatts* and the Previous Page .......................................................................... 23
The Voyager I Interstellar Spacecraft ............................................................................................... 24
Art as Adventure ............................................................................................................................... 25
Specific Allusions to Richard Long and Vija Celmins ...................................................................... 26
Doubles ............................................................................................................................................... 27
A Few Examples of Doubles in *Doubled Vision* .......................................................................... 28
Drum, as seen in Quest of Sight: Part One,
and the Exhibition Doubled Vision ................................................................. 29
What I did with the Drum after I used it in my video ........................................ 30
Sculptures as Props .............................................................................................. 31
Color Inversions .................................................................................................... 33
Formal Connections ............................................................................................. 34
Art as Play: Paul McCarthy in Conversation with Alan Kaprow .......................... 35
Why there are no Women in my Videos (Yet) ....................................................... 36
Into the Future ...................................................................................................... 37
Conclusion ........................................................................................................... 38
Vita ......................................................................................................................... 39
Abstract

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By Jonathan D. Marshall, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2010.

Major Director: Hilary Wilder, Assistant Professor, Painting and Printmaking Dept.

An analysis and explanation of my reasons for working in video, painting and drawing, and sculpture, considering the technological developments of the past decade; the possibility to use the internet as a distribution tool for works of art, and to shift the decision-making balance of the art-world; the ways that this approach is a democratic format for output in the arts and within communities of artists; an explanation of my studio practice while a graduate student at Virginia Commonwealth University.
Preface

In 2002, while an undergraduate working on my BFA at The University of Texas, I read the book *Beyond Civilization* by Daniel Quinn. The book outlines why it is important for people to organize themselves into tribal communities. Quinn begins by discussing the ways we have gone wrong as a species, tracing the line from the Agricultural Revolution through the Industrial Revolution, and advocates a “New Tribal Revolution.” In Quinn’s vision, humans will sustain themselves by forming tribes within civilization (as opposed to the starry-eyed “back to nature” hippie communes of the 60s and 70s), where the motive is to work to provide for the members of the tribe, so they may make more of what the tribe makes. I recently read the book a second time, eight years since my first reading, a decade following its initial publication. In this short time, advances in readily available technology and a consensus view of the doomed path of our society make Quinn’s outline for a new way to live an exciting possibility just beyond the horizon. We all know that things need to change, but how, and in what way will this change occur? My thesis will explain how, as artists, we must address these issues. I will also explain my own reasons for creating work, and the ideas within the work that I have made up to this early point in my life as an artist.

I had just turned twenty-one when I first read Quinn’s book. I was right on the precipice between adolescence and adulthood. Upon agreeing with the keys points of Quinn’s thesis, I decided that I could best apply the message of the book to my own life by becoming an artist, for my life and for my living, and to make it a point to involve myself in communities of artists. As a boy, I was always making things, drawing, and telling stories. I was lucky enough to have a family that encouraged me to go to college, but I studied art as an undergraduate for lack of a better thing to hold my interest for four years. I read the book, and that was it. My decision was made.

I don’t believe that art in its content and message has political power. There is too much “preaching to the converted” for that to be the case. However the choice to become an artist is in and of itself a political act, as we do not build a pyramid for any Pharaoh. In the words of Kurt Vonnegut, “If you really want to upset your parents, go into the arts.” If you really want to upset the Pharaohs, become an artist. Ideally, as artists we build a pyramid of common interest for no Pharaoh, and aid and influence those around us and those who come after us, with the wisdom of those who came before us. And in the model of tribalism, we hope to make our work and sell our work so that we might make more work. The endeavor sustains itself on the fruits of its production. The motive is for sustenance, not profit.

*Beyond Civilization* was organized as a series of essays, each no longer than one page. My thesis will be organized in this manner, for several reasons. First of all, I see value in making my points concise and well organized, and it seems appropriate to follow the format since it was Quinn’s book that led me to this particular place. Second, I imagine that there will be a small (though distinguished) group that will ultimately read this document. It is with you, the reader, in mind that I have decided to follow this format. My approach is partially a challenge to myself to write economically, partially an organizing principal, and partially an act of humility before you, so my ideas are clear, concise, and of merit.

All the best, and thanks for reading,
Jonathan Marshall
May 13, 2010
Richmond, VA
My Mother gave me a copy of this poem when I turned twenty-seven. It’s taped to the last page of the sketchbook I’ve used while in Graduate School. I have also included a quote from the book Wind, Sand, and Stars, by Antoine de Saint Exupéry at the bottom of this page.

**To be of use**  
by Marge Piercy

The people I love the best  
jump into work head first  
without dallying in the shallows  
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.  
They seem to become natives of that element,  
the black sleek heads of seals  
bouncing like half submerged balls.

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,  
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,  
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,  
who do what has to be done, again and again.

I want to be with people who submerge  
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest  
and work in a row and pass the bags along,  
who stand in the line and haul in their places,  
who are not parlor generals and field deserters  
but move in a common rhythm  
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.

The work of the world is common as mud.  
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.  
But the thing worth doing well done  
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.  
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,  
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums  
but you know they were made to be used.  
The pitcher cries for water to carry  
and a person for work that is real.

"To be of use" by Marge Piercy © 1973, 1982.

To be a man is, precisely, to be responsible. It is to feel shame at the sight of what seems to be unmerited misery. It is to take pride in a victory won by one’s comrades. It is to feel, when setting one’s stone, that one is contributing to the building of the world.

-Antoine de Saint Exupéry, 1939
Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses by Louis Althusser,
Or, Yes, I Really am Going to Start with Marxism

We read a tiny bit of Marxism in Paul Ryan’s theory course in my first semester at VCU, and much to my surprise, the ideas of Louis Althusser in his Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses really spoke to me and highlighted many issues that I have noticed and pondered in the past decade. On my second reading of Beyond Civilization, I was surprised to find considerable Marxist sympathies in Quinn’s passages. I will not analyze Marxism, or even of Althusser’s writings in this thesis. However, certain portions of these two thinker’s related philosophies have shaped my thinking profoundly during my graduate studies.

Althusser reinterpreted the theory of Marxism, from the perspective of a structuralist, living in France during the 1960s and 70s, during the time of high French cultural theory. I’m going to explain the basics, according to Althusser, from his famous essay Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses. In subsequent essays I will discuss how I interpreted this, through my lens as an artist whose goal is to make a living from my work, and who wants to be a member of a supportive and challenging community of peers. Althusser’s ideas are very important for artists, musicians, film-makers, writers, and appreciators of all things cultural in this day and age.

-Every society has a Base, also called the Infrastructure, or Economic Base
-Superstructures are built up from the base.
-The Superstructure is made of two parts:
  1) Político-Legal (or, to Marx the SA, or State Apparatus. The whole shebang, the government, the courts, the army, basically any repressive force within the public domain.)*
  2) Ideological State Apparatuses, or ISA, which include Churches, Schools, the Media, and Culture, among other institutions.*

*These are really more like distinctions, as opposed to distinct parts. Essentially, one is public, and the other largely (though not exclusively) private.

Althusser’s interpretation of Marxism:

State Apparatus and Ideological State Apparatus

The Base (Us, buying and selling and making things)
What this means for “Us”

Here is a graph to describe our relationship specifically to the Cultural ISA, the one that is the most appropriate to this discussion:

![Graph showing the relationship between The Cultural ISA (aka, the record label, distribution company, film studio, gallery, museum, etc.) and The Connoisseur, Collector, Movie-goer, and so on.]

When was the last time you purchased a CD? When I was in high school I had after-school and summer jobs at various grocery stores so that I could buy records. I used to blow almost all of my paycheck at the record store. The last time I bought a record on CD was about three years ago. I still listen to music daily, and have more records in virtual space than I know what to do with. I am proud to say that my laptop contains 37.8 days of music, if each song were played end to end. I did not stop acquiring records, but rather, technology allowed me to have access to music through different channels. I miss album artwork, and the physical artifact of a great record, but I am sure that something will take its place. We are in the midst of many transitions.

As for the record labels, they are pretty much screwed, as we have all heard these past few years. Ultimately, they are becoming obsolete, or their role in the industry is in flux, more than likely for the better. Musicians in particular made pennies on each record for each sale, so even if your album sold a million copies, you still had to pay the label back for the time you spent cranking out solid-gold hits in a recording studio, a process that could take as long as a month and cost up to $20,000 a day. This was the purpose of the record label. If the record was a hit, fabulous! The debt to the label was paid, and the musician might make a killing on merchandise and touring, and maybe even make gas money for the tour bus from record sales through the label. If the record was not a hit, the musician was back to square one. The label either canceled their contract and support, or the musician’s debt was paid, the label got rich, and the artist suffered.

At some point a sea-change took place.
My Time as a Musician

Before I decided that I wanted to throw all of my time into my development as a visual artist, I played music with my best friends. We played in a band, went on tours, recorded albums, all with an insanely rigorous DIY approach. We did everything ourselves. Booking, recording, websites, design, everything.

I learned a lot from the seven years I spent with my friends making music and going on summer road-trips to play Chicago, DC, Houston, or even Spartanburg, South Carolina. One of the more interesting things about being in the band was witnessing the transformation in the music industry from CDs, big labels, and recording studios to laptops, recording programs, MySpace, and free online album releases. In 1997 we recorded our first cassette tape on an eight track that we rented from a local gear shop for about $80 a month. God, it sounded awful. I mean, really bad. And not just our playing either, or our songs (though they were bad too). It was really difficult to get something good out of the damn thing. We learned a lot, had a lot of fun, and had a tape to pass out to our friends.

In 1999 and 2000 we recorded in proper studios. They gave us good deals, like $200 a day, which was something they would do if you were a young band. I think that the engineers and owners of these places enjoyed our enthusiasm. Plus, sometimes we would bring them some pot. Either way, they didn’t seem to mind our company, and we all had a good time. In the end, we were moderately pleased with the results, but just could not afford to get something really good out of a studio for a reasonable price. In the past, there would have been no alternative. However, in 2001, we discovered CUBase and Logic Audio, recording programs that made the eight-track we had used look like a real clunker. With a rented mic we could really get things to sound pretty sweet. Our songs and our playing had improved sufficiently at this point as well.

Thus began our foray into a full DIY approach. We all had our strengths and weaknesses in this regard, so each member had a specific responsibility in the process. I was draftsman, designer, and cook. Hunter Cross and Tristan Rhodes were the techies (but could both do everything pretty well, especially Hunter), Aaron Castillo had a pick-up truck, Travis Austin had (has) a fabulous ear, and Dustin Withers brought the pot (very important at the time), and was the booking agent/manager. We all played and wrote songs together. It was lots of fun, looking back on it. At the time it was stressful, as we all had day jobs and were in school (high school, and then college).

The point is that with available technology and our ingenuity and know-how, we were able to make something on the cheap that didn’t sound like it was made on the cheap. Our musical model toward the end was Radiohead. In 2000, the album Kid A was released. I remember the day I went home and slid the CD, fresh from its packaging, still rich with that plastic smell, into my 3 disc changer, an Aiwa shelf model with a dual cassette deck. I leafed through the art slowly and methodically as I listened to the whole record from start to finish. It was a truly transcendent experience. I had never heard anything like it. It was a mind-blowing, earth-shattering thing to my peers and me.

In 2007, upon completing their contract with EMI, Radiohead released the album In Rainbows independently to the public. The album was made available as a digital download from the band’s website, for free or for a donation. When the most notable band in the world ditches their label and releases an album for free, because they can, knowing that they will still be able to do everything a band does, and still pay rent, you better believe that the labels take note, and have a collective aneurysm.
Our Digital Revolution

So, now musicians have figured it out. F*ck the label, record your music at home with your awesome laptop you just bought for $3500. NASA flew three guys to the moon with a graphing calculator, and now you can make lousy music with the most advanced personalized technological apparatus in human history. Soup it up with some programs that your nerdy friend bootlegged off the Internet, and if you can figure out how to use everything and write a song worth listening to, you’re off to the races. No more ISA to tie you up in a bunch of debts and obligations that are now unnecessary, because what they have to offer you is no longer useful. Plus, people like getting music for free instead of buying it.

Filmmakers are figuring it out as well. You can go to iTunes, Amazon, and Netflix, and watch movies that were never in the theatre (because having a film print made is prohibitively expensive at $15,000 for 90 minutes of film). People are watching movies online, and filmmakers are finding a way to get their work to a mass audience without the help of the Hollywood Studios. There are scores of sites where a filmmaker can upload his or her video masterpiece and get it to millions of people instantaneously. And Netflix is becoming famous for buying films directly from filmmakers for exclusive releases. Check out the movie Ink, 2009, for an example of how people are making it happen.

What is great about these two scenarios (music and film) is that the output of the artist travels in a straight line to the connoisseur, like this:

Sure, you might say that Netflix is just doing the same thing that the film studios do. In this case, that is not entirely true. The studios, historically, created content. Netflix and Amazon are not creating content, but rather acting as a middleman. They collect, house, and deliver content as opposed to producing it. There is a big difference.

It really works out better for everyone, except the pan-national media conglomerate, but nobody really liked them anyway. The music goes directly to the people; the money goes directly to the artists; everyone is happy for now. This is a model made possible by available technology that has proliferated and flourished in the past decade alone.

The other thing that the Marxists, Structuralists, and Althusserians would like about this scenario is that the message of culture is no longer under the thumb of the ISA. We are not currently oppressed to the degree that most Eastern Europeans were at the turn of the last century (during the flourishing of Marxism), but we can all agree that the less we are censored, the better. From the Marxist point of view this model works well, as the artist is no longer exploited to the extent that he or she was when under the umbrella—and thumb—of the record label.
The Way this can Work for Visual Artists

The ball is rolling for musicians, with the record label in its death throes. This might be debatable, but if nothing else, the label’s power is greatly reduced, and its role is definitely evolving. The film studios will be around for a while, because people still want to watch stuff blow up on a screen as big as a billboard. I know I do. But, it is undeniable that the art of moviemaking and the way that films get to their audience are also evolving.

It helps that musicians and filmmakers have figured out how to use the Internet to get their work to a wider audience. It makes me wonder why artists haven’t embraced the same way of doing things as the musicians and filmmakers have. Is it because we like the gallery and the museum too much? It doesn’t seem so. If the current system worked as well as we would like, I don’t think I would have read so many articles and heard so much talk analyzing the finer points of what is known as “institutional critique”. On the other hand, I have a modest gallery in Houston that represents my work. When the gallery sells a work, it allows me to be able to afford to make more work, and spend more time in my studio.

Galleries will always be necessary for this economic reason, and museums will always be the Arks that preserve our culture. What I am talking about is the most democratic way to get visual art to the entire public. I do not think that art should be specifically changed to fit into a more mass-acceptable model. However, we can take advantage of the Internet to help propose an alternative to the system of valuation maintained by collectors, dealers, and curators.

As visual artists, we are guilty of shunning certain aspects of the technological revolution. We have not figured out how to use the Internet effectively. Having a website is fine. I have one. Most of my friends do. It makes me happy when I want to look up an artist and I discover that they have a website. Facebooking your pals when you have an opening is not an effective use of the web. That said, I do like knowing who is doing what where.

Most of the web-art that I come across is an effective use of the web, but is often no more than a critique of the processes that construct the Internet, sort of like abstract-expressionist html. Try to find an artist who is making good work that can only be seen on the Internet, but work that is not about the Internet.

It would also help if more successful artists would set up websites. I notice reluctance on their part to put themselves into the cloud. Perhaps this has to do with an arrangement with a gallery, or maybe they are simply too busy, but until every artist has a website, and we get bored with drawing hyper-color circles and other flash doodles in the web browser with the mouse, we’re not going to get anywhere. But, I am certain that eventually we will get somewhere. It will probably take a decade. I am excited about witnessing this transformation, just like the one that I watched with my musician friends in the late 1990s and early 2000s.
The Film Industry’s Attempts to Squash DIY Progress in Movie-Making

As I said in my last essay, I too want to watch stuff blow up on a screen as big as a billboard. What’s more, now you can see it blow up in 3D! At first I was excited about this, and then I went to see Avatar and realized how pointless it was, an exercise in gilding the lily on a multi-million dollar scale. Since the effect was so lame, I began to consider why it had been done. Additionally, I noticed that subsequent blockbusters were coming out in 3D in 2010.

I had an aha! moment when I saw the first consumer-grade 3D TV, for home use. HD video looks great. What more could we want? Do we really need 3D TVs? After seeing how silly the 3D effect was in Avatar, I think not. We are just being sold more junk that we don’t need.

The cool thing about HD video I have discovered in the past year or two is that you can get a pretty regular video camera and shoot something that looks pretty spectacular. Other folks have caught on to this as well. There are a lot of very professional independent films that were made with relatively inexpensive cameras and edited on a basic laptop. These are democratic technologies. 3D is an exclusive technology, designed to keep the power at the top, as opposed to spreading it across the Base.

Avatar becomes a tool for propaganda in this scenario. One reason abstraction in painting developed was so that Fascist governments could not use art as a way to promote their political ideologies. Artists made painting about nothing but painting. Avatar becomes propaganda for a consumerist hoax perpetrated by the big film and consumer electronics industries.

The film studios are struggling. Folks don’t go to the movies like they used to, primarily because you can watch a movie at home and not have a significant decline in quality, with more comfort. DVDs are about to pass into obscurity. It will all be online in the future.

Faced with this reality, the film studios figured “what better a way to hold on to our share of the market than to create a technology for film production and exhibition that is so crazy expensive and complicated to deal with that none of these folks who are actually interested in stories, and making-do-the-best-you-can-with-what-you-got will ever be able to keep up.” I mean seriously, 3D doesn’t look that cool. Hopefully people will wise up soon, and we can be done with this bs.
The most considerable cultural bummer of my early and mid-twenties was that I couldn’t see a Matthew Barney movie anywhere. I was not living in a culture vacuum, but in Austin, Texas. Say what you want about his work. Some people thought it was interesting enough to give a young guy millions of dollars to make the most visually dazzling and oddly far-out films of the last decade, and to use hallowed ground (the Guggenheim Museum) for an art project. They even let him get Vaseline all over the place. Not that all this makes Barney’s films automatically good. I am not making value judgments or critiquing artistic approaches in this essay. I happen to like Matthew Barney, but what I am going to talk about is the way that he outputs his films, and why I disagree with this.

I don’t understand why someone would make a movie intended for the big screen, which is the most democratic creative medium known to man, and make it so that you can’t see the film anywhere. Barney and his gallery sold copies of the film as DVDs for millions of dollars each, so it was not economically or politically wise to make the films accessible to a mass audience. To protect the investment of the collectors, the film was not made readily available to the general public. Sure, it had a brief run at the little art house theatre near the UT campus, but these films should be seen a few times, maybe even dissected. An alternative could be to make a limited run of expensive full versions of the film on DVD. I am certain that plenty of people would spend more than $100 to own copies of the films. Additionally, collectors could act as producers for films, footing the bill for production, as opposed to a gallery putting up funds for production. There are lots of ways to do it, and I wonder if Barney relinquished some control to the benefit of his dealer, and the detriment of the art-aware public.

As a result of the way the film was released, Matthew Barney and Barbara Gladstone made the most democratic way people have ever made things since the invention of the printing press, into the most exclusive thing you could possibly imagine. Thus, they did a great disservice to young artists and scholars the world over, and kept the valuation process for works of art at the top.
To Conclude this Section...

It would be terrible if galleries and museums ceased to exist. To be clear, that is not what I am advocating. Likewise, I know that film studios and record labels will not disappear, but their impact in selecting what makes it to the ears and eyes of the public will continue to be diminished. I am sure that they will still serve a purpose. It is important that viable channels exist for artists to get their work directly to an audience without having to filter their production through a hierarchy of cultural institutions and corporations. Currently, the Internet is the best place to start. Content-delivery companies, like Netflix, Amazon, and itunes, which do not create and police content to the extent that record labels and media corporations do, might also become useful for visual artists trying to get videos, sound pieces, or even digital books to the public.

I am advocating a mixed approach to carving out a creative life and career. I plan on continuing my relationship with the gallery that shows my work in Houston, and I hope to create relationships with galleries in other cities as well. This structure allows me to do more of what I want to do, which is to make my work. In addition, I would like to make some work that is free for people to experience. I can do this by creating websites that exhibit video. The drawings, objects, and paintings can go to a gallery, and a video might be free to watch online or made available for purchase through the itunes store, Amazon, and so on. Or I can make DVDs and sell them online so that I might recoup the cost of producing the DVDs. I will always have the problem of needing to fund my work and my life. Unfortunately, I come from modest means. This reality does not change what I choose to make, but rather forces me to be strategic about the way that my output is placed and presented.

What this means (for visual artists) is that we might not rely solely on the validation of curators, art dealers, and collectors to support our studio habits and lifestyle. The new technologies I have described in this document (such as consumer-grade video cameras, HD video, PCs, software, and most importantly the web) make this creative reality possible for me. These are the solutions that I propose and that I will pursue, but clearly, they are not the only solutions out there.

Galleries and museums will always exist, and should always exist. However, it is important to realize that these institutions comprise a system that assesses, validates, and manufactures desire and value for art objects. If the system were tweaked, or added to, or further complicated in the ways I have just described, it would benefit the artists and the viewing public. It might also mean that the dialogue around art and the institution could evolve into something healthier and less navel-gazing (reading articles about “institutional critique” from within the walls of the academic institution is navel-gazing).
A Public Option

I want to explain the economics of the system that I just described and advocated for on the previous page. The best way to do so is to make an analogy to current events. Some politicians and pundits argued that health-care reform would be most effective if there was a public option, run by the government, which would compete with the private insurance system and which would help to drive down the cost of premiums and coverage. The idea illustrates my feelings about the art world, how artists make a living, and the way that art gets to the public.

As it stands currently, the institutions of the Art World (galleries, schools, museums, collectors, and publications) have almost all of the voting power in terms of what is seen, discussed, and appreciated by a wider audience. The decision-making power is at the top.

A similar scenario existed in the late 1990s in the music industry. Record labels decided what music was released on disc to a public audience. Then the Internet started to muddy the waters. Things were confusing for a few years. But today, we get most of our music online, whether we pay for it or not. There is no limit to the number of folks that can download a particular song (purchased or acquired otherwise). As a result, musicians no longer rely on the voting power of the record label, but rather on the voting power of the people, to get their music to as many listeners as possible. The decision-making power has shifted from the top to the bottom.

By approaching art-making in the way that I have described, (artists have a gallery, but also have other outlets to get their work to the public), the discussion around artists and their work will change. This way of functioning hinges upon the artist’s acting as a director and creating many types of work, not just as master painter, sculptor, photographer, and so on, but as someone who knows about making things and images and about bringing ideas into reality. The buzz built around a specific artist might rise due to the fact that more people online are seeing his or her work, as opposed to a rise through traditional channels (from gallery to museum and so on).

The solutions I have proposed might sound overly populist. It is not a good idea to have a mass audience responsible for the valuation of works of art. In other industries (such as film and music), adequate critical platforms exist to keep those films and records of importance to the craft and culture at the forefront of connoisseurship, and the academic discussion (especially in the case of film), despite the fact that the output of these industries exists online, specifically on Amazon, Netflix, and itunes. The situation in contemporary art is this: There is no longer a vibrant critical platform. The assessment of cultural value regarding works of art is being left to a small minority of art dealers, collectors and curators, who in some cases know less about art and theory than artists. If more art were online (specifically video, sound, digital books, writings, and other media-based work), it would not mean that an American-Idol style voting process of valuation would ensue. It would mean that a forum for discussion and appreciation of contemporary art would exist. When music went online, was it the death of music? No, if anything, independent popular music flourished. It’s up to artists to diversify our creative output, and start to steer the ship of criticism and value, to the service of art, culture, and one another. We will do this so that we are not trapped by making things that are already desired or valued. Instead, we will decide what is desirable and valuable, and we will decide what new things become desirable and valuable. Utilizing the web to deliver content to our audience is one way to do so.
And Finally...

I am going to move on to other topics, but before I do so, I’d like to briefly conclude the section of my thesis by relating to the current situation in art, culture, and technology, and where I would like to fit into this situation in the years to come.

I do not expect every artist to ascribe to this model. I am using my thesis as a way to figure out what aspects of my work might fit into the Art World’s institutional model, and what aspects of my work might be available to be delivered to an audience beyond the Art World. Online content delivery systems present exciting possibilities regarding the delivery of works of art. Art does not have to get dumber to achieve this. Contemporary culture might become smarter if more art were accessible through some of the channels that I mentioned. Additionally, artists might be able to create value and desire for challenging works of art if their presence online was less concerned with self-promotion (having a website that acts as a catalog), and more concerned with the construction of community and critical dialogue, and the delivery of works and ideas into that community. Think of the way that Youtube functions (or if you are after a more critical, higher quality forum, look to Vimeo): You post a video online. People view the video, and some sign in to comment on the video. This could be done in a smaller scale (and is done in a smaller scale on Vimeo) for works of art, particularly video and sound.

Ubu.com is a perfect example. Video works and sound pieces are available to be seen on the site for free, in their entirety, by pioneers such as Bas Jan Ader, Baldessari, Acconci and McCarthy. The list is hundreds of names long, and the site provides a platform by which students, scholars, and artists can view works so important to the development of critical opinions about contemporary culture. The first step is to get art online (particularly video, in this case, thought the site also houses sound works, experimental poetry, and critical writing). Ubu.com has done so, but the site is heavily curated and historical. Most of the work on the site is already canonized. The next step is to have a site where emerging artists can post videos, writings, and sound work online, within a critical community, where art writers and appreciators can comment on, write about, and view work to better understand and participate in a community that harnesses the powers of the web and online communities. We are one step away from this reality. The film community has Vimeo. Musicians have MySpace, scads of blogs, pitchforkmedia.com, among many other critical outlets, which steer the discourse of an incredibly vast community. Artists are one step away from their own online critical community that can tweak the balance of power in the Art World.

In the 1960 and 70s it was the proliferation of MFAs, spreading throughout institutions across the country, an increase in the funding of non-traditional art venues like the Chinati and Judd Foundations in Marfa, an influx of residencies and grants, and the rise of art publications like Art Forum that fostered the creation of an Art World larger than New York. The Internet has begun a similar revolution, but has become stagnant. It is my opinion that artists using multiple mediums, and with online presence, and in my case making videos, might be able to take advantage of new technological possibilities to push things a step farther. What does it mean to be an artist today, in a climate where the ease of accessibility to so many tools and output channels is such an exciting reality?

We have two options:
1) Continue the way things are. The decision-making power and evaluation of works of art happens not through criticality, but is distributed amongst dealers, curators, and collectors.
2) Harness the power of available technology to change the balance of power and value in the art world, and create new critical outlets for our generation.
Influences

At this point, I am going to segue into a discussion about my own work, since I have not yet directly addressed it. I'll start with a handful of specific influences. I am going to talk about specific artists, and I'll say what it is about that artist or work that influenced my thinking directly. Inversely, I'll also use other artists and works to describe things about my work.

But for now, I'll just make you a list. I'll stop when I get to the bottom of the page. I'll talk about some things on this list in the pages that follow. These influences will be sprinkled within an explanation of the work I have made for the past two years.

Andy Warhol
Joan Jonas
Tom Sachs
Vija Celmins
Alan Kaprow and Paul McCarthy conversation I heard
Kurt Vonnegut (already did that one)
Terry Gilliam
2001: A Space Odyssey
George Lucas and the good Star Wars films
Big Bend National Park
The Park Place Group (Dean Fleming), active in NY in the 1960s.
Matthew Barney (already did that one)
Ed Ruscha
My Peers (Sterling Allen, Seth Alverson, Keith Varadi, Nathan Green, Michael Kennedy Costa, Yi Sheng, Leah Beeferman, among many others)
My friend Sy
My parents
My wife, Haley
Animal Collective
Paul Noble
Outkast
Douglas Crimp The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism
Johnny Cash
Encyclopedia Pictura
There Will be Blood
Adrift (the story of a man stranded in a raft at sea for 76 days)
Endurance (The account of Shackleton’s Expedition to the South Pole)
Lost City of Z (a miserable trek through the Amazon jungle, and so much more)
David Byrne
Jack Goldstein
Robert Longo
Troy Brauntuch
James Turrell
Richard Long
NASA
Super Fan

I have included a diverse group of works and artists in my list of influences. I suppose it is because I approach my influences and surroundings not as academic artifacts, but as objects of admiration to a fan.

I pull from many sources. Occasionally I might have an original idea. Most of the time, I am just happy to be alive and to experience things others have made. John Baldessari once said that “art is mainly pointing.” I couldn’t agree more. I get excited about things I see, hear, or run into, and I want to point to that thing with my own work. For example, the odd Italian folk music that I used in my recent video, John Marshall/Jon Marshall, or the spaghetti strainer hat that Rick Moranis wears in Ghostbusters, or the LCW lounge chair designed by Charles and Ray Eames, and so on. I want to own some of these things, and make them in the way I would, or recontextualize them. Experiences of cultural artifacts, both high and low, should be free. You don’t need to spend a lot of money to know what is happening out there, especially with the Internet functioning in the way that it does. Matthew Barney gives very little to us with his work, aside from the photos and objects that we find in museums and the occasional film clip. The high points of his output are hidden from public view.

Part of being a fan and a creator simultaneously is appreciating the ideas, images, and objects that cross your path, then running them through your filter, then placing them in your internal blender, and then making something for everyone else to enjoy. I consider this a generous act, as well as an admiration of what precedes us.

The best part of being alive, of waking up every morning, is knowing that I am participating in this give-and-take, this back-and-forth of discovering new things, moving with the current of our culture, and adding my little piece to that current. It’s probably why I don’t feel the need for religion. I am already serving something beyond myself, and participating in a community that is so large that I cannot fathom its entirety.
Finding Rapture in Secular Knowledge

I started talking about religion, so now I am going address that because it’s a good way to talk about one of my major influences, Kurt Vonnegut. In his book *Timequake*, Vonnegut deftly moves between fiction and autobiography, and at one point tells of his own beliefs as the “Honorary President of the American Humanist Association”:

> Humanists try to behave decently and honorably without any expectation of rewards or punishments in an afterlife. The creator of the Universe has been to us unknowable so far. We serve as well as we can the highest abstraction of which we have some understanding, which is our community.

[...] Yesterday, Wednesday, July 3rd, 1996, I received a well written letter from a man who never asked to be born in the first place, and who has been a captive of our nonpareil correctional facilities, first as a juvenile offender and then as an adult offender, for many years. He is about to be released into a world where he has no friends or relatives. Free will is about to kick in again, after a hiatus of a good deal more than a decade. What should he do?

I, Honorary President of the American Humanist Association, wrote back today, “Join a church.” I said this because what such a grown-up waif needs more than anything is something like a family.

The German philosopher Frederich Wilhelm Nietzsche, who had syphilis, said that only a person of deep faith could afford the luxury of religious skepticism. Humanists, by and large educated, comfortably middle-class persons with rewarding lives like mine, find rapture enough in secular knowledge and hope.

This is pretty much how I feel about religion; absolutely necessary, but (with utmost respect) not for me. And what I meant to say with the last essay, about being a fan, is that I, like Vonnegut “find rapture enough in secular knowledge,” and in adding to that knowledge.

For me, this “secular knowledge” is the progress of art, and maintaining an opinion and stance within that secular knowledge. I find it extremely important to be part of a community of artists, which is what Kurt Vonnegut is essentially saying in the passage I quoted. We have “something like a family” if we participate in a community of peers, whose goal is to “help each other through this thing, whatever it is” (another Vonnegut quote). This is what I meant when I said that religion was not for me. My community of peers, and the hard work of making something valid to my time, and helping others to do the same is “the highest abstraction of which [I] have some understanding.”

A Christian friend of mine took an honest whack at converting me several years ago. It didn’t take, but I did attend his church many times before deciding that it was not for me. It was an undoubtedly beneficial experiment, but I felt like a spectator as opposed to a participant. One day I took him to the Fort Worth Modern Art Museum after telling him that I had been to his church, and now he needed to come to mine.
Exactly Wrong

Andy Warhol had a saying that has become very important to me in the past two years: “You have to get it exactly wrong.”

This is the best way to describe certain aspects of my visual aesthetic. I can really demonstrate this best by including some images from a video I made in 2009 while at VCU. The video is called *Quest of Sight: Part One*. This project required most of my attention for all of 2009, the one complete year, from start to finish, that I spent in graduate school at VCU.

I've attempted to tap into this “exactly wrong” aesthetic through the actions and decisions that I have made in my work over the past several years. Making a beard from a mop, or taking on the daunting task of creating a 30+ minute video with little to no knowledge of cinematography, animation, video and editing software, sound editing, and so on, exemplifies my approach. I do not utilize these techniques, programs, and strategies in the ways they were originally intended. Through my novice use of these tools, I hope that an original visual aesthetic rises to the surface, tied to invention in painting and creating images. I do not use after effects the way that a professional animator would. I use After Effects flatly, and without polish, to create an image that would be impossible to create without using the program in a way that reveals the image’s creation.
Datamoshing

Datamoshing is a processing technique which forces video to make mistakes, and results in an image that would be nearly impossible to arrive at in any other way. A typical second of video is divided into 29.97 frames that, when strung together, create the illusion of motion. About every 24 frames, or a little more often than every second, the video locks a frame (called a keyframe), which acts as a sort of digital road sign, so that the video does not get bogged down with tracking the motion of each and every pixel along the way for the duration of the whole video. It just has to keep track from keyframe to keyframe. Without keyframes, it’s like driving across the country with no road signs.

In the case of datamoshing, the keyframe rate is set very, very high when the video is exported from the editing program. Thus, the only keyframe occurs on the first frame of the video. This means that the video has to work a little harder to keep track of the motion of every pixel, resulting in a video more prone to errors, skips, and pixelation. Imagine two clips, A and B, and you have exported each clip with no keyframes. You put clip B after clip A, remove the keyframe at the beginning of B, and to make a long story short, things go totally crazy. The motion of the pixels at the end of clip B is applied to the motion of the pixels at the end of clip A.

Here is an example of a datamoshed video, from my thesis exhibition. The video is called John Marshall/Jon Marshall...

I became interested in this way of forcing video to destroy itself for several reasons. First of all, it taps into the hidden potential of the program and the PC, forcing each to make errors in ways that they would prefer not to, revealing a “ghost in the machine” of sorts. Second, it creates an image that would be impossible to achieve with traditional animation and image-making techniques. Third, it looks like a hallucination or ecstatic vision, which are ideas I’ve been exploring for the past few years (seeing things that are not there). And finally, I think it is exciting to get something that looks so amazingly eye-popping, so wrapped up within the digital aesthetic of the moment, with little to no control over the result. That’s pretty amazing when you think about it. You force the computer to do something it doesn’t want to, so that you can create something that looks incredible, which you have no control over. In my opinion, datamoshing is an example of getting something exactly wrong.
**Artist’s Statement, 2009**

Many of the influences that I listed earlier are addressed and alluded to in a statement that I wrote in school last year. I really spent some time honing this page, so I’d like to get a little more mileage out of it. And besides, it covers many important issues to the work that I have made and have yet to make.

**Jonathan Marshall**  
*Statement, September 2009*

Is it possible to use the studio as a capsule to explore the most distant reaches of the Universe? The answer is “no.” In knowing that the ultimate goal is unachievable, an artistic effort is concerned with the act of doing and seeking as opposed to the fulfillment of a prescribed goal.

Specific spaces protect our fragile bodies as we explore inhospitable landscapes. The wide-brim of a cowboy hat, chaps, leather boots, deep-sea diving suits, space suits, and cockpits are evidence of our survivalist instincts. These tools and spaces, tailored to specific landscapes, allow the observer to experience the sublime and to have a symbolic death, by going into a space where the individual can glimpse the intangible and return unscathed, reborn. This trope appears in storytelling as a journey into a cave, into the belly of one beast or other, a trek through a barren landscape, or a mind-bending adventure through space and time. Similarly, the studio is a space filled with the tools necessary to explore the Universe visually, where ideas gleaned from discussions, texts, wanderings on the Internet, and personal experiences coalesce to engender works that delve into the nature and understanding of reality. An artist experiences many self-inflicted deaths in the process. Old habits and inclinations must pass on so that one may reinvent oneself and progress to the next endeavor.

We are bound and simultaneously enabled by our physicality. Our bodies provide us with the means to create, while forcing us to face our limitations. Our existence is temporary, and our form is fragile. These obstacles force us to consider how large, how heavy, and how taxing an artistic endeavor should be. Nothing can subvert these limitations. However, it is important to push out to the edges of these boundaries—or to attempt to act as though they do not exist. The same can apply to the scope and scale of particular projects. Movie making is best when left to Hollywood, but the final result of a film made with limited means, knowledge, staff, and funding will possess interesting visual attributes, if nothing else. Imagine if the space program were operated from a suburban garage instead of at NASA. The outcomes of the above mentioned would vary greatly (blockbuster spectacle, a return on production investment via ticket sales, and successful missions to the moon, respectively, vs. cinematic images made interesting by their lack of professionalism, and highly dangerous spacecraft that solely accomplish an adherence to a rigorous garage aesthetic).

By utilizing the properties and contents of my studio, I am exploring the point where attempts at describing the intangible and physicality intersect, while looking outward in all directions from that point. By working in painting and drawing, video, and object-making, I am master of no single skill. I act as an amateur in all tasks. I hypothesize the results of my future efforts. The outcome of these experiments may be uncertain, but I will continue to act as though the ultimate goal is achievable, while expecting an outcome that will only reveal itself in its conclusion.
Post-Post Studio Practice

I'm going to go through the one-page statement that I just pasted into this document, paragraph by paragraph, elaborate on the key points, and connect what I wrote to several of the specific influences and ideas I listed on the first page of this section (see Influences).

Is it possible to use the studio as a capsule to explore the most distant reaches of the Universe? The answer is “no.” In knowing that the ultimate goal is unachievable, an artistic effort is concerned with the act of doing and seeking as opposed to the fulfillment of a prescribed goal.

In this introductory paragraph, I am making the case for a sort of post-post studio practice. I'm aware that this sounds ridiculous and pretentious, which is why I termed it a little differently in my statement. We are all aware of the ways, from the advent of conceptual art through the present, that artists have made it a point to decentralize the importance of the studio in creating work and manifesting ideas. I am not a conceptual artist, attempting to dematerialize the idea. It seems that my generation is not interested in working just with the idea, or at least, many of my peers in my immediate surroundings (whether at VCU, or in Texas) are not making heavily conceptual work that centers on the idea as opposed to the object. It's possible that this is due to the fact that the only Art World that we know focuses on the importance of the object over the idea. It seems unfair to blame this distinction on my generation. If my generation thinks that desirable objects are more valuable to art than airtight concepts, the understanding has passed to us from above. Again, this is a scenario that might benefit from a renegotiating of the structure that assesses value in the Art World.

That said, I am tied to this issue in two ways. First of all, I consider myself to be primarily a “maker” as opposed to a “thinker”. I believe that the thinking comes from the making, and that an object can be the centerpiece for intellectual discussion. Second, I think that as a maker, it is important to be aware of your relationship to the studio, and to the object-laden discourse of value in contemporary art. I am beginning to think of this by acting as though my studio serves a deeper purpose than just as a factory. I like to picture my studio as a space capsule, traveling through the universe, in which I am able to observe, and to pick up ideas and tools along the way, which become artifacts and approaches that I use in making my work. I am trying to base my philosophy in the studio around exploration and play, as opposed to solely production. I mean for my studio scenario to be tongue in cheek. Without humor, the reality of what we face as artists, the difficulty and futility of our lives and work, would be a heavy burden.
Specific spaces protect our fragile bodies as we explore inhospitable landscapes. The wide-brim of a cowboy hat, chaps, leather boots, deep-sea diving suits, space suits, and cockpits are evidence of our survivalist instincts. These tools and spaces, tailored to specific landscapes, allow the observer to experience the sublime and to have a symbolic death, by going into a space where the individual can glimpse the intangible and return unscathed, reborn. This trope appears in storytelling as a journey into a cave, into the belly of one beast or other, a trek through a barren landscape, or a mind-bending adventure through space and time. Similarly, the studio is a space filled with the tools necessary to explore the Universe visually, where ideas gleaned from discussions, texts, wanderings on the Internet, and personal experiences coalesce to engender works that delve into the nature and understanding of reality. An artist experiences many self-inflicted deaths in the process. Old habits and inclinations must pass on so that one may reinvent oneself and progress to the next endeavor.

This paragraph further explains what I discussed in depth on the previous page. This highlights my feelings about the post-post studio practice and such, without using that overtly pretentious phrase, post-post studio practice.

This portion of the statement also begins to set the tone in my statement (and mirror the tone in my work) of artist as societal shaman. This idea passes to me through popular culture and my affinity for science fiction and fantasy in films like Star Wars, the films of Terry Gilliam, several ideas gleaned from Joseph Beuys, and the humor in Bruce Nauman’s The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths. As I said, I think this is kind of a joke. How can the artist spiritually heal the world? I am guilty of claiming that art can make the world a better place to be (and occasionally does), but on the other hand, I feel that it is ridiculous to expect artists to help the world (but I know that they can and occasionally do). This gets to the feelings of futility that I try to make apparent in my work. I take on all of these ways of making art, all of these modes of creation and ideas, knowing that I will probably really mess things up royally. It’s with a dash of humor and humility that I go forward in all projects.

I think of the studio as a protective space, where our tools reside, and where we can synthesize ideas and experiences from our external environment while limiting external distractions. An artist experiences many self-inflicted deaths in the process. Old habits and inclinations must pass on so that one may reinvent oneself and progress to the next endeavor. There are many parallels, in both the real world and in mythology, to support this claim: Jonah and the whale, Joseph and the well, or birth, with exiting the womb. The true purpose of the space race was to bolster military superiority, but it was sold to the public as the embodiment of our desire for exploration of the most distant reaches of existence, and to push the outer limits of human ability. I’ll buy it. The motives might have been questionable, but Astronauts became the heroes of American mythology.

In the video Quest of Sight: Part One, which I made in 2009, two protagonists come across a sweat lodge made from a repurposed upside-down dome tent. Each character encounters the tent in their path, and enters it, where they have a shared metaphysical experience, which I created using a mix of live action video and animated backgrounds. This act of entering a protective space and experiencing the sublime and intangible while cheating death is analogous to the space race and to certain mythological tropes, as well as to the artist in his or her studio.
We are bound and simultaneously enabled by our physicality. Our bodies provide us with the means to create, while forcing us to face our limitations. Our existence is temporary, and our form is fragile. These obstacles force us to consider how large, how heavy, and how taxing an artistic endeavor should be. Nothing can subvert these limitations. However, it is important to push out to the edges of these boundaries—or to attempt to act as though they do not exist. The same can apply to the scope and scale of particular projects. Movie making is best when left to Hollywood, but the final result of a film made with limited means, knowledge, staff, and funding will possess interesting visual attributes, if nothing else. Imagine if the space program were operated from a suburban garage instead of at NASA. The outcomes of the above mentioned would vary greatly (blockbuster spectacle, a return on production investment via ticket sales, and successful missions to the moon, respectively, vs. cinematic images made interesting by their lack of professionalism, and highly dangerous spacecraft that solely accomplish an adherence to a rigorous garage aesthetic).

When I wrote this statement, I was going through some major problems with my body. At some point during 2007 or 2008, I injured my back. I’m not exactly sure how or when it happened, but by the late spring of 2009, the bulging disc between my L4 and L5 vertebrae was causing me such pain that I could only walk and stand with great difficulty. I managed to continue working, but I had lost my appetite to such an extent that I weighed in at 130 lbs (my normal weight is 145 lbs). I looked and felt terrible, and most of the time the pain was nauseating. I could sleep, but not without frequent interruptions to readjust my makeshift pillow setup. Imagine if you had several c-clamps pinching the muscle that runs along your spine, which means that standing up straight is pretty much impossible, plus having an ice pick permanently stabbed into your calf (This is called referred pain. The sciatic nerve, which was being compressed by the bulging disc, has its root in your lower back and runs down the leg to your big toe). It felt something like that, from May through October of 2009.

As I was unable to stand for long periods of time, I had to rethink the way that I made work. I made rules for myself. Nothing could weigh more than five to ten pounds. When my pain became fully disabling, I made small drawings that I could work on while lying on my stomach on a bench in my living room. This position was also particularly good for video editing and animation or for creating images in Photoshop.

At the end of May, I went to Texas to shoot video for Quest of Sight: Part One, a 30 minute D-I-Y style adventure epic made on a budget of $500. The funding was largely provided through a travel grant from VCU, which covered my travel expenses. Thanks to the modest grant and an HD camera I checked out from the school, I shot video at Big Bend National Park in West Texas and at South Padre Island National Seashore on the Texas Gulf Coast. I was unable to fully enjoy the process, but I got the shots that I needed, so it all worked out.

I came to realize through this process that our brains and our abilities provide us with infinite creative promise, but physical reality and our bodies present us with many limitations. Some have criticized me for my multi-discipline approach. The feeling is that I am confusing the relationship between sculpture and prop, or high budget filmmaking and D-I-Y video art projects. It might be better to master one aspect of art making as opposed to taking on all. I want to situate myself in the midst of problems, issues, and convoluted questions. I do this in the hope that I might push the limits of what I am able to achieve, in the hopes of a product and outcome that is as original as it is problematic. Working in this way also means that I can put the idea into the medium that it best represents, resulting in a final work that is most appropriate to the original concept. While the multi-discipline approach in art is currently the rule as opposed to the exception, it is important to define my rationale.
As a 28 year-old male, I was pretty much oblivious to my body. Experiencing chronic pain grounded me in my body and in the present in ways that I had never experienced. I began thinking about my relationship to my body and to my work. I was also thinking about permanence in regards to works of art (we last for maybe 80ish years if we’re lucky, a painting might last for 1000 yrs, but the uranium coated gold record on the Voyager Insterstellar Spacecraft will last for 4 billion years). I decided that in the last scene of Quest of Sight: Part One, a beach-dwelling shaman named Skelebones would tattoo Lenny, one of two main adventurers in the narrative (see the next page for images of the tattoos). I play Lenny, so I didn’t have to convince anyone else that it was a good idea to be tattooed for my art project. Above my right knee I am tattooed with a rudimentary icon of the Voyager I spacecraft, the only man-made object to leave the solar system, and above my left knee I am tattooed with a bone, a reference to 2001: A Space Odyssey.

There are several layers of meaning to this project. These tattoos will be with me forever. Luckily, they came out pretty good. My friend Sy Redding, who played Skelebones in the video, doesn’t really know how to draw, but he did a really nice job on the tattoos. While the tattoos are permanent, they will only exist briefly, as they are part of me, and I will only exist briefly. The Voyager I spacecraft is whizzing away from us, at many thousands of miles per hour. Right now, it is outside of our solar system in deep space, the most distant man-made object from us. Through our intelligence, ingenuity, and pioneering spirit, we have achieved something incredible. The Voyager is an ark of human culture, a cosmic “we were here,” which carries a gold record that has numerous sounds and images etched into its surface. Pictograms engraved into the gold record’s uranium-coated case show how to use an included cartridge and needle to make a record player, and how to calibrate a screen so that photographs on the record can be viewed. Illustrations depict where the craft came from (there is a map of the sun in relation to 14 neighboring stars on the record).

The Voyager is out there, far, far away. The bone that an ape in 2001: A Space Odyssey uses to smash an animal carcass and commit the first murder is a fictional scenario. Something like this might have happened, but more than likely, not in the way that the film proposes. The bone in 2001 is a cultural icon that comes from the era of the space race. The film fictionalizes an event in the distant past, while the Voyager is an actual man-made cultural icon from the era of the space race. The selection of the two icons for my tattoos was my attempt to juxtapose these two notions of man in space and time.

Let me get back to the ape. The ape uses the bone to kill an animal to feed its tribe, and later to commit a murder to protect its tribe (meant to signify the Dawn of Man, as the subtitle at the beginning of the film and scene suggests, hence, tools + animal with mind and opposable thumbs = man). This suggests the possibilities of our technology to improve our lives, while also revealing our destructive tendencies. This duality is what makes us human. Our ingenuity allows us to achieve the seemingly impossible, while our deviousness pushes us to the brink of mass-destruction. The space program is evidence of this duality. Part of the point was to prove to the Russians that we could drop nuclear bombs on them from above. The exploration of space simultaneously reveals humanity’s deepest, darkest tendencies, and our highest and most noble aspirations. That is why we watch 2001: A Space Odyssey and the Apollo moon landing with rapt attention.
Images Relating to *Tatts*... and the Previous Page:

*Tatts: Voyager I Interstellar Spacecraft/The Dawn of Man, 2009*

Details of each tattoo

The Voyager I Interstellar Spacecraft
Distance from the Sun as of 3/12/2010 (in miles): 10,491,000,000
Velocity Relative to Earth (Mi/hr): 42,287

EXPLANATION OF RECORDING COVER DIAGRAM

THE DIAGRAMS BELOW DEFINE THE VIDEO PORTION OF THE RECORDING

GENERAL APPEARANCE OF WAVE FORM OF VIDEO SIGNALS FOUND ON THE RECORDING

BINARY CODE TELLS TIME ON THE SCAN (0.8 sec)

SCAN TRIGGERING

VIDEO IMAGE FRAME SHOWING DIRECTION OF SCAN. BINARY CODE INDICATES TIME OF EACH SCAN SWEEP (32 VERTICAL LINES PER COMPUTER PICTURE).

IF PROPERLY DECODED, THE FIRST IMAGE WHICH WILL APPEAR IS A CIRCLE

Art as Adventure

What I have begun to describe with my statement, and with some of my influences, is my feeling that art-making is an adventure. I am a being on a journey of discovery, traveling through the universe at the speed of light. I will embark on this journey for my entire life, and leave some evidence, some product or proof of my expedition behind when I am no longer here. Similarly, the hero in mythology leaves society to embark on some great quest, and returns to society with new wisdom to share. Astronauts risk their skins to journey into outer space, and return to society with scientific insights and images of the planet as seen from above.

Many artists who have come before me embody this ideal. I was exposed to a particularly appropriate excerpt from *Song of Myself* by Walt Whitman, at the beginning of my graduate studies at VCU:

My ties and ballasts leave me, my elbows rest in sea-gaps,
I skirt sierras, my palms over continents,
I am afoot with my vision.

Richard Long has become increasingly important to my understanding of my own work. Long’s walks and conceptual drawings made by clearing or stacking stones into paths and by creating worn grass trails made from walking the same path repetitively where no path existed before, parallel my own art adventures. I am not going to these places to make a site-specific work. On the contrary, I head to the wilderness (sometimes the deserts of West Texas, sometimes the Ocean) to capture a breathtaking, barren landscape. The environment becomes a material that highlights the challenges of the figures (individuals or objects) that interact with that landscape. These land, space, and seascapes come directly to me through Vija Celmins, an artist whom I admire greatly in addition to Richard Long. I want to make a star painting, or a graphite drawing of waves, or a drawing of rocks. But I can’t do that. How can I do any of these things as well as she has? How can I turn this idea into my own idea? How can I add to what Vija Celmins has drawn? How do I make it my own, while filtering it through my experiences and interests?

When I came to graduate school, I had the realization that I would not be able to physically leave the studio in ways that I had before. I can’t hop in the car and head to Big Bend National Park. I needed to be present here, to be in classes and fulfill my other duties at school. I decided to make a sweat lodge, with the idea that I would learn how to meditate my way out of the studio inside of this sweat lodge. That never happened (I made the sweat lodge, but I never went through with learning how to meditate). While I believe in achieving transcendence through meditation, and that there is more to reality beyond common perception, I am very skeptical of New Age spirituality, which is an issue that one needs to address when making work that deals touches on transcendent experiences, thinking of the invisible, and hallucinatory experiences. It is with this perspective, this split opinion of the world around us, that I embark on my various adventures within the studio or outside the studio.
Specific Allusions to Richard Long and Vija Celmins:

Myself, and Travis Austin, at Big Bend National Park last May, on an art-making video-shooting adventure in the desert.


Video Still, Quest of Sight, 2009.

Ambiguous Landscape Land Art Proposal Drawing (Left)/Untitled (Right), 2009.
Doubles

The doubling and pairing of images, and the appearance of sculpture and images in my videos and in gallery installations have been key aspects of my work for several years. I can trace my earliest tendencies in this regard back to my time at UT as an undergraduate. This strategy is my way of manipulating an image, and asking the viewer to think visually to reveal a relationship between two objects or images. My hope is that the art exists in the spaces between images, objects, or videos, in their relationships to one another. In this space the viewer becomes a participant in the completion of the idea.

I practice doubling in these basic ways: 1) placing two works next to one another, 2) inverting the colors of an image, so that it can be seen in its original colors, and in its negative colors (think of a photographic negative), 3) turning something that is right-side-up up-side-down, such as the dome tent I used for my sweat lodge, 4) recycling an old object that has hung around the studio for too long into a new object, 5) revealing the hidden possibilities inside an object or in software (as in datamoshing, or circuit bending—more on that later), 6) verbal doubling, such as the similarity between my name and John Marshall’s, and finally 7) utilizing an object or image to be used in video or to be presented as an element of an exhibition or installation. This last distinction has caused me a significant amount of grief during my graduate studies. Much criticism has been directed at this aspect of my work, and to the fact that my sculptures appear in my installations and videos with in an installation simultaneously. My initial inclination was to shrug and say “What’s the big deal?” Upon repeated concerns from a variety of respected sources, I began to address and explore my relationship to this issue. I am pleased with the resolutions I have arrived at, and at the progression that this line of criticism has fostered in my work. However, the issue continues to be addressed in critiques and visits, and I acknowledge that I have not fully resolved it. I don’t intend to ever fully resolve it, but I do intend to continue to act as though it is possible to resolve, as opposed to abandoning this specific path in my work. It is a sticky problem into which I would rather thrust myself headlong.

I’m going to describe these relationships of pairing, doubling, and inverting in my work on the next few pages, which will clarify my thinking in this regard. Particular attention should be paid to the page that discusses the work Drum, because it exemplifies the prop/sculpture issue addressed above.
A Few Examples of Doubles in *Doubled Vision*

The exhibition *Doubled Vision*, at Art Palace Gallery in Houston, Texas, was a solo exhibition I had in January 2010, and was composed of a gallery installation of works directly or indirectly related to my video *Quest of Sight: Part One*.

This work below is called *Untitled*, and is made of several drawings, a collage, a photograph, and several objects, and an oval shaped color-field painting on the ground.

This drawing on paper is in the shape of the top of the odd looking sand-covered shelf that sticks out from the wall. It also references the color pattern in the oval painting at the bottom of this page.

The guy inside of the oval is a reference to some of the ideas in the statement that I included earlier in this paper (e.g., studio, space capsule, cave, etc. as protective space wherein hero glimpses sublime and cheats death). It’s also the same color as the oval on the ground, and is the negative shape. The other thing you should know is that all of the ovals are of the same proportional height and width, though they appear at different scales.

Sorry for the small image. The important thing to know is that you are looking at two identical rocks. The silver one I found at one of my shooting locations for *Quest of Sight*. I made a replica of it in plaster, painted them identically, and then covered the original with silver enamel. This is also a reference to Vija Celmins; specifically her rock pieces, in which she sculpts and paints rocks to be identical to rocks that she has found. Amazing!

All of these examples tie back to the centerpiece of the exhibition in the gallery, this painting, called *Nike, Adidas, Reebok*...

The oval shapes refer back to this painting, which is about 7 ft wide and 4 ft high. The oval cropped sequences in the video *Quest of Sight* also relate back to this painting, which was the first of the ovals in this body of work.

Video Stills from *Quest of Sight*, with oval cropping.
Drum, as seen in Quest of Sight: Part One, and the exhibition Doubled Vision

This piece is a perfect example of the doubling, reusing, and general confusion I am striving for. It’s called Drum, and I made it out of an Omnichord, pictured on the right. An Omnichord is a musical instrument, made by Suzuki in the early 1980s, that plays electronic chords. I removed the back of the omnichord, which exposed the circuit board, then I covered it with aluminum foil, made it look like a space probe, and rigged it so that it could be placed on top of a mic stand.

I took the back off, and when you get the thing to start playing drum beats, you can touch the points on the circuit board, and the instrument makes terrible crunching squealing sounds that it’s not meant to make. This is a thing that nerds do to toys and battery operated instruments from the 1970s and 80s, and is called circuit bending.

This is how you play and circuit bend the Drum (omnichord). It really sounds crazy when you touch the points, but you have to watch out because you can get zapped. I like the idea of circuit bending because it reveals the hidden sonic possibilities of an object, similar to datamoshing, which reveals the hidden possibilities of video software.

The image above is a still from a 3-screen video I made at the end of my first year at VCU, which was sort of a rough draft of Quest of Sight. It shows the doubling and inverting of images I’ve started to talk about, as well as the idea of an object appearing in two places simultaneously through this doubling. In this case, the drum appears at Big Bend National Park (left) where NASA tested its Mars Rover. On the right, the background is from a photograph that the Mars Rover took while on Mars.

Right: A still from Quest of Sight. I covered some of the back of the omnichord with rectangles of blue, yellow, pink, red, and green foam. I did this for two reasons: 1) it made it look cool as a sculpture, and 2) so that I could go in digitally and ‘key out’ each of those colors and place a different animated vignette in place of each color.

Above: A video still from Quest of Sight. Skelebones, a beach-dwelling shaman of the apocalypse, plays the Drum after Lenny has entered the Sweat-Lodge, which brings on a hallucinatory vision of Lenny’s possible voyage across a sea which unfolds into a journey through outerspace, reminiscent of 2001: A Space Odyssey (see video stills on previous page).

Left: An actual shaman. In Siberian Shamanism, the shaman beats a drum, and enters into the spirit-world, where he can battle the demons of a sick or otherwise disturbed individual.
What I did with the *Drum* after I used it in my video...

I came back to my studio after my video shooting adventures in West Texas, and along the Texas Coast and decided that the *Drum* was interesting enough to turn into a sculpture, but that it would be more interesting if it appeared different in the gallery, as a sculpture, than it appeared in the video.

This is the original Drum, as seen at the top of the last page. I had just used it for shoots in the desert and on the beach, so I decided to coat it in sand.

And this is a mirror-image double of the Drum that I made using paper, foam, paint, wood, and resin. I tried my best to get it to look as good as possible, but it still came out pretty dumb looking, as I had hoped.

So, why did I do this? I decided to make the replica (the one on the left in the above image) as a prop for the original (on the right). So, the real thing gets used in the video, then destroyed (the sand ruined it's functionality). Your understanding of the original object is obliterated, and comes to you through the video, which is limited greatly, as video is a weak representation of reality, and through the double, which is a limited stand in for the original.

Here is an installation shot of about half of the exhibition *Doubled Vision*, which I had in Houston, Texas at Art Palace Gallery, January 15-March 6, 2010. I didn’t take this photo. Not a fan of the whacko angle, but it does show most of the work in the show. The video played in a little room at the back of the gallery, to the left edge of the photo.
Sculptures as Props

When I put one of my sculptures into a video, I am not thinking of that sculpture as a prop. I am thinking of that sculpture as an object with multiple uses, meanings, and available contexts.

First of all, the definition of a prop should be clarified: A prop is a limited stand-in for an object that enriches the visual narrative of a video, film, play, lesson, and so on. Think of saloon fronts in spaghetti-westerns, which have no bar inside, or a model of the gastro-intestinal system for an anatomy class. These representations do not do the same thing as the original object: get cowboys drunk, and turn food into waste. Contrary to this conception of the object within a narrative, I'll use the Eames LCW lounge chair that I made as an example:

I had an old color-field painting that I made for my candidacy exhibition at the end of my first year at VCU. I was going to throw it away. I had wanted to make a chair for a while, but a good reason to had not yet presented itself. Then I figured, why not make a chair out of that painting? I was upset about having to throw away all this perfectly good wood. I took the back structure off the painting, and set to work on cutting it into the pieces necessary to make a simplified version of the Eames LCW. The surface was not so exciting, so I gave it a coat of chrome silver, to unify the parts and give it a goofball sci-fi patina.

So then I had this chair. I had been thinking of making a video about John Marshall (historical American statesman and jurist, Richmond native), and how comical it was that there was a hotel downtown named after him, and how similar my name is to his. I needed a chair for a scene in the video, so I figured, what the heck, I've got this one right here, so I might as well use it. Hey, and why not try to convince the people that work at the John Marshall House Museum in downtown Richmond to let me dress up my buddy Seth like John Marshall, and have him sit at Marshall’s writing desk where he can make a drawing of the Eames LCW that I made? Seemed like a pretty ridiculous idea to me, so I figured that I should proceed.

This example illustrates the way that I think through ideas, references, and problems in my work, and also illustrates the point that I had set out to make with this page. I don’t typically make objects to fulfill a narrative in a video. Rather, I make objects that then guide the narrative of a video. The video is in service of the objects, as opposed to the traditional narrative/prop relationship, where the object enriches the narrative.

In my opinion, it’s lazy to assume that objects are only allowed to have one purpose or meaning. Things should just sit there in the gallery, and their only purpose should be for us to use them as a centerpiece, a springboard for intellectual discussion? Are we not smart enough to do this and use a thing for something else as well? While the criticisms regarding this tendency to put sculptures into videos were valid, there was always a default argument at work; You put that thing (sculpture) in this thing (video), and that is what Matthew Barney does, and his work is lame for reason x (for the record, I am a fan of Barney’s work, just not the way he releases his films into exclusivity). I am aware of this issue, and plan on taking it on the chin for the time being, while continuing to explore its limits or ways around it. I’ll show a few pieces where this worked pretty well. I’ll also talk about several pieces that enabled me to arrive at a result I would not have arrived at otherwise.
Prop? Sculpture? Both? Neither?

This is the color-field painting that I cut up to make the chair. It was from my candidacy exhibition, April of 2009.

The original Eames LCW lounge chair, 1946. Often considered to be the most important design of the 20th century.

My goof-ball version of the Eames LCW, set on top of a painting after Barnett Newman’s Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue? The colors are inverted and seen here in their negative value (from left; yellow should be blue, aqua should be red, blue should be yellow).

This is a still from the video John Marshall/ Jon Marshall. You can see the chair in the foreground below the figure with the yellow jumpsuit.

These are two stills from the same video. Seth Alverson is dressed as John Marshall, in John Marshall’s actual Richmond home. In this scene, Marshall draws my version of the Eames LCW.
Color Inversions

This image on the right is the key to the inversions and formal connections in the body of work that I made for my thesis exhibition. If you stare at a color, your eye burns an image of that color onto the back of your retina, and that color appears in its negative. Think of a photographic negative, in which black becomes white, and vice versa.

Try it out for yourself! Stare at the two colored circles on the left for about 20 seconds, keeping your eye lazily focused in one spot. After 20 seconds, look to the two blank circles on the right, and the image will be revealed in its true color (red, yellow, blue).


This is another example of making something invisible visible in my work, revealing a hidden phenomenon, like datamoshing or circuit bending.

I extended this same color-inversion strategy to some of the other works in the show. The painting that the chair rests on is one example (from the previous group of images).

I painted the edge of the frames of the drawings that I made for the show as well. In the example on the left, I painted (from bottom up) red, blue, and yellow. On the opposite side of the frame, I painted the reverse of each color from top to bottom, aqua, yellow, then blue.

In the example on the right, I inverted the layout of the colors on the frame’s edge, so that the two framed works are the opposite of one another, and each has an internal opposite as well.
Formal Connections

Aside from the prop/sculpture argument, what I am describing with the last few pages when talking about doubling and using sculptures in videos are the formal connections within each body of work I have made in graduate school. I’d like to go back to the John Baldessari quote about art mainly being about pointing. Art points to things (references/calls attention to issues) in the external world, cultural or experiential, which basically tells folks in the future who look at your work “I was here and I liked/thought about this thing. Now you are here, and you can like/think about this thing I made, in addition to that other thing that I liked/thought about too. And, when I was alive, these are the things that we thought about and liked.”

I work in all kinds of media. I make drawings, paintings, videos, and sculptures. I don’t do any of these things very well, but I do them in the way that only I would do them, which I think is more important than mastery. I try to use formal connections, such as repeating specific colors, doubling things, or flipping them up-side-down to connect these disparate practices, so that what rises to the surface in my work is not the mastery of a specific craft, but rather the relationship between objects and images in (a) space.

I was photographing my thesis installation the other day. The gallery was open, and a kid, probably around 5, was looking at my work with his parents. He looked at the chair I had made, then the video, and it clicked for him. “Hey Dad, there’s that chair! And look, there are those backpacks! Ooh, cool Legos!”

Yes, I make references to modernism, weird Italian folk music, Legos as my first foray into geometric abstraction at the age of 5 or 6, along with other grown-up high-culture points of departure. The five-year-old doesn’t know anything about any of this crap, and neither does anyone outside of the dialogue within our little pocket of culture (the Art World). I believe in facilitating levels of entry and appreciation into works of art. The first level can be visual attraction, for those who are attracted to what is before them. The second level can be the connection between works within a single body of work (this is as far as the 5 year old made it, not bad, considering). The third level would probably deal with external connections (pointing) to things in culture, history, and specific works of art made by other artists. The third level is the first challenging level, and where things begin to get difficult. The fourth level might deal with what I am saying through the way I am working. This is where things get difficult, become more abstract, and move more into the realm of questions and concepts, as opposed to terms and definitions. What does this way of working, and the things I am pointing to with my work, say about the current situation in art and culture? What is the role of the artist in society? What is valuable to this culture? And so on. My goal is to facilitate such a line of thought.

The model I described is also, interestingly and most likely subconsciously, a description of the way that video games were designed during the 1980s and early 90s. The first level introduced the visual aesthetic and basic rules of the game, and subsequent levels became more and more challenging, one after the other.

Art can be accessible (on the lower levels) without pandering to the lowest common denominator, while keeping our culture exciting, forward-looking, and intellectually challenging and stimulating. Making things easy to get is James Cameron’s job. Luckily, in art, we have the option and the responsibility to do both, if we are smart about it.
Art as Play: Paul McCarthy in Conversation with Alan Kaprow

During Paul McCarthy’s retrospective at MOCA in Los Angeles (November 2000-January 2001), the museum arranged a conversation between McCarthy and Alan Kaprow. Their discussion was recorded, and you can listen to it as a podcast. I heard the podcast several years ago. The discussion between Kaprow and McCarthy might not apply directly to my thinking specifically, but hearing the conversation did inspire me to consider the ways that the idea of art as play applies to my practice.

During the discussion, Kaprow asks McCarthy about the relevance of play to his studio practice. He says (and I am paraphrasing): Play is a human phenomenon that has a relationship to learning. Paul McCarthy plays with himself in a value-free way, play as play.

This discussion of play got me thinking about my relationship to play within my work. I don’t play in the way that Kaprow says Paul McCarthy does. If McCarthy plays as an infant, I play as a ten-year-old boy. I dress up my friends, we go out to the wilderness, and we play make-believe.

During the talk, McCarthy disagreed with Kaprow, on the grounds that his work was not fun, and that play connotes fun. Kaprow then disagreed with McCarthy. Play is not fun necessarily, but rather an exploration, an augmentation of concepts or materials with the goal of invention and learning. To illustrate his point, Kaprow talks about the difference between games and play. In a game, the object is for one to win. In play, there is no such objective. The only objective is to freely arrive at a different result than one began with.

This is the way that I feel about play in regards to art. When I was a boy I would visit my cousins, who lived in rural Pennsylvania, during the winter. We would go out into the woods in the snow and make forts and igloos. It wasn’t always fun, as invariably we would freeze, or someone would get upset about getting a cold fist to the face or the perfectly ice crusted snowball to the back. However, there was always an element of invention and creativity at hand. We started with sticks, trees, and snow, and ended up with a fortress.

Going out to Big Bend National Park to make my video, which lies within the Chihuahuan desert that straddles Mexico and Texas across the Rio Grande, in summertime (temperatures regularly top 100 degrees) was not exactly fun. There was no shade to speak of. We were forced to be in the blazing sun from dawn to dusk. On top of that, I was in excruciating pain the whole time because of my back. It wasn’t fun, but it was play.
Why there are no Women in My Videos (Yet)

I feel really uncomfortable about this. Above all else, the last thing I want to be is a chauvinist, so I feel like I should dig into this difficult issue. For the record, I’m married, have been with the same woman for all of my adult life, and I was raised by a single mother. I’m definitely no expert in this regard, but I have lots more experience living with women than living with men. I’ve watched my wife and mother each live as empowered women, capable of anything. It’s why I have the utmost love and respect for each of them. The lack of women in my videos has nothing to do with masculine superiority, or any crap like that.

In a studio visit, several weeks ago, I was asked why there are no women in my videos. I’ve been asked this before. I’ve never had a good answer, but the person with whom I was talking helped walk me through it, and I arrived at an explanation, albeit a very basic and incomplete explanation.

My hunch is that, for now, it ties into my idea of work as play. I feel like a ten-year-old boy who knows how to make things and shoot videos. I can make-believe and turn the process of play into a tangible product that others can see. Just as I did when I was 10, I invite my friends to come over and play. The difference is that now I can drive a car out to the desert and work complicated computer software to the best of my abilities. As a boy, if it did not occur to me to invite girls along on my various adventures to the creek to go catch fish, climb big rocks, or build forts. I think that maybe I am thinking about my work in the same regard. It hasn’t occurred to me to invite one of my female friends to spend three days on a desolate, hot, sandy, shade-less beach in a remote corner of the Texas Gulf Coast. The stories I am telling with my videos and the ways that I am making them can be open to any and all interpretations. However, the act of making these projects fulfills a deep desire for me that I can trace back to my tendencies as a child to utilize my imagination.

This is the best explanation that I can come up with currently. It’s impossible to psychoanalyze yourself, so I am sure that someone else could have a theory or two regarding this issue. I am not painting a picture of a complete reality in my videos, but maybe a reality in a ten-year-old boy’s imagination. The main difference is that while when I was a boy and I would build a spaceship out of blankets in the living room, begging my mother to “play space” one more time, now I can back up my desire to play space with a video project with theory and history, and I am learning how to make it fun for someone to watch me play space.

I have ideas for videos in the future that have female friends in some of the roles (keeping my projects staffed by friends is really important to me). At this point, I can’t really decide whether or not to pursue these ideas. Is it more important to me to keep the reality of my videos limited by the imagination of a young boy, or should I allow my videos to grow and mature? As a person, I am almost 30, but as an “artist” (in the literal sense), I am about 10. My video projects are in their infancy. Once they come of age, they will probably be able to encompass a wider view of the world, and will be more sophisticated in their creation and content. I am not making an excuse for why there are no women in my videos right now; I’m trying to think through this as I write. I’m also trying to give myself room to grow. I don’t want to be the guy who makes weirdo, sort-of crappy sci-fi videos forever. Someday, I’d like to convince someone to give me a bunch of money so I can make a traditional, feature-length film. The D-I-Y aesthetic and approach will always be with me, I promise. I will remain faithful to my beginnings, but I also don’t want to wear out a good way of working. I need to continue to grow, and to take on more.
Into the Future...

I think it’s time to start wrapping things up. I have some specific ideas about what I want to do with my life as an artist, and this forum, at the end of my graduate studies, seems to be the most appropriate place to lay things out.

I owe my friend Travis Austin (who plays Johan Pilgrim in the video *Quest of Sight*—the cowboy character) a couple of music videos. He wrote and recorded the soundtrack for that video, so I agreed to make music videos for his album, which will be released in the fall of 2010. That’s my first project after grad school; two or three music videos for Travis.

I’m going to collaborate on a short film with my good friend Dan Boehl, a very talented writer, who came along with Travis and me to shoot video at Big Bend last summer. I want to do this so we can build up to a feature-length endeavor. I figure that if I can get a couple of music videos and a 30-minute short film out there, in addition to the videos I made in grad school, I can convince someone to throw some funds my way to make a feature length film. *Quest of Sight: Part One* ends with “to be continued.” My plan is to finish the narrative that begins in that video with a feature-length video. I’m not expecting Warner Brothers or anything. A little investment from a gallery, a small production company, or a benefactor or two, and I can scrape together enough funding to make something pretty cool, and still hold true to my D-I-Y aesthetic. I would just like to spread the burden of creation around a little more. I’d like to work with real actors and a real cameraman. I know nothing about explicating a narrative through the dialogue of several characters, so my friend Dan will be my go-to writer for these collaborations. Dan and I are planning on getting to work on writing and funding the short film in one year.

Other than the video art, music videos, and film ideas, I plan to continue working as an artist. As long as the gallery in Houston (Art Palace) is open, I’ll be having a show there every eighteen months to two years or so. I hope some other galleries will take interest in what I am doing as well, as I hope to be able to spend all of my time making work as opposed to having a day job. Once I figure all of this out, I’ll work, and decide where certain aspects of my output should go: These paintings and this video and this sculpture will go to the gallery; this video will be released for free online; this music video will be available for purchase through the iTunes store; this short/feature-length video will go to film festivals; and so on.

I am going to work as though this way of functioning is a reality. I am setting my mind and efforts to this future. I am terribly uncertain that this will work out, but this is my goal and my idea of a dream job (and existence). I have to know exactly where I want to go to get there.
Conclusion

I ended the last page with uncertainty. I am uncertain if I can pull it off, but no one is going to make it happen for me. I have fears, anxieties, and issues just like everyone else, but at least I am not afraid of work. And most of the time, I enjoy my job, and even though it’s not always fun, it’s always a challenge that requires creative solutions.

There is one thing I am completely certain of: More and more artists, of my generation particularly, are going to work with the model I described. Recent advancements in technology, in addition to online developments, have made this model of artistic function a reality. I know that it’s not for everybody. I still want there to be folks who are just making paintings, or just making sculptures. These individuals typically deal with the issues of a specific medium, progressing and preserving it, and make a certain dialogue fresh and new for every era. This keeps what came before us valid, and leaves objects behind that validate the concerns of our own time. So, no diss to folks who want to just be painters. I think that is totally great. It’s just not for me—it takes all kinds after all, right?

In my opinion, it’s important for us to fully take advantage of the tools available to us. The exciting opportunity that the current climate affords is that we can spread our ideas around more, make work using more techniques, and put each thing into the box that it best fits in. Plus, if we could figure out how to use the Internet a little more effectively, it would help to decentralize the institutions of the Art World, and perhaps even make our culture a little more democratic. Nowadays, anyone can make a pretty good sounding album, if you can write a song worth listening to. Anyone can make a good-looking video, as long as it’s worth watching. I see it as my job and challenge to work in this way. By not mastering a specific art-craft, I hope that what rises to the surface is an original aesthetic and approach to art making. I feel that I have little to add to painting, but I do feel that I have something to add to a new way to work and function as an artist. I’ve done my level best to use my thesis as an explanation for this approach.

The economic reality of this way of working, of outputting to multiple sources, as opposed to just a gallery or two, might make it easier for artists to make a living, which in turn makes it easier for artists to have a community with one another. We do not need more galleries (a horizontal spread), but rather, we need more artists that are directing their output into more zones (a vertical spread). More importantly than the economic concerns, it might mean that we, as artists, take more control over valuation regarding works of art and which works are important to our discourse and era. My solution (using available technology like HD video cameras laptops, and thinking of the Internet as an output and content delivery option) is one way to attempt this. I hope that other artists of my age share my concerns, and are proposing other alternatives. It will take many strategies to make a change.

It is important to be an artist for these reasons: 1) art keeps us from merely being wallets with brains attached to them, and 2) art allows us to make communities of individuals centered around common interests, and push those interests to their highest limit, which ideally keeps us from building pyramids for the Pharaohs.

Thanks very much for your time.
Vita

Jonathan David Marshall was born on January 15, 1981, in Morgantown, West Virginia, the son of two doctoral students working on their dissertations at West Virginia University. After a brief stint living in Florida, and his parent’s divorce, he and his Mother relocated to Austin, Texas, which he considers his hometown. Jonathan graduated from Stephen F. Austin High School in 1999, and received a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Studio Art in 2003 from the University of Texas at Austin.