A Sequence of Gaps

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A S E Q U E N C E O F G A P S

A Sequence of Gaps

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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Licenciatura en Diseño y Producción Audiovisual, ESPOL. 2008
Tecnología en Diseño Gráfico y Publicitario, ESPOL. 2003

Director: Elizabeth King
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Virginia Commonwealth University
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Abstract

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By Oscar Santillan, MFA.

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

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2011.

Major Director: Elizabeth King, Professor, Sculpture + Extended Media

This thesis unfolds some theories and reflections on specific works I developed during my MFA. It is a map of the past and present of my art practice, and speculates about its future.
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Warm and endless thanks to

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Autopsychography, 1931

The poet is a faker. He
Fakes it so completely,
He even fakes he’s suffering
The pain he’s really feeling.

And those of us who read his writing
Fully feel while reading
Not that pain of his that’s double,
But one completely fictional.

So on its tracks it goes round and round,
To entertain the reason,
That wound-up little train
We call the heart of man.

Fernando Pessoa

Translated by Edwin Honig
Artist Statement

A few years ago I renounced my political beliefs. By getting rid of the ideological superstitions and fraudulent morals of social utopias, I awoke to phenomenological thinking. In fact, I am not a citizen anymore; I am a wanderer who sneaks into the gaps of perception, history, and culture itself.

If there is something I am willing to create, it will be a device able to fill the gap in between clocks and calendars. If there is a rebellion I am willing to join, it is the one where the crowd whispers their demands. If there is a problem I am trying to solve, it is how to turn history into an empty skin with no past.

Manipulating materials through a meticulous process is at the core of my practice. This becomes evident in A Knife To Defeat The Night’s Breeze, as through a cremation process, the body of a coyote is turned into ashes and then rendered as a small knife. Or, in The Permanent Blink where I stitched together every blink by James Dean from all of his films to create a single video. Stripping the material’s embedded history is necessary to fit it into an unexpected body so that it can become a new flesh.

Therefore, I am not interested in erasure, but in mutation: how to transform marble into air, and air into flesh.

I aim for a way to cast mood instead of building up meaning. Mood must suspend interpretation by inflaming the spectator’s sensibility.
Introduction: A Sequence of Gaps

The ideas to be unwrapped in this text are the result of my own wonderings and wanderings. As a consequence, they do not behave in a linear or logical manner. Sometimes they will hug you, and other times they will try to spank your charms.

I have organized them in two groups of colluding ideas, *Theories* and *Works*.

The first section develops different sets of reflections and tales on artmaking and its broadest context, the world itself. The second deliberates specific works, while connecting them to other cultural references.

The chapter *Conclusions* offers a visit to my experience at VCU and a quick perspective of the future of my practice.

I hope this text explains some of the intimacies of my processes while opening up a friendly invitation for the reader to explore them.
THEORIES
1. A Tale on Transfiguration

This fiction narrative was created to convey a theory that I keep trying to prove in my praxis: that transfiguration is indeed possible.

I. Mussolini’s Colors

In 1940 – it has been said that the exact date was March 2, 1940– the Direzione Generale per la Cinema, made up of heads of Mussolini’s regime, started its collaboration with the CONRA, the political police. To the public, the official mission of the Direzione was to champion fascist films as well as clean up and retouch scripts of their film industry. Their undercover aim was something a little bigger however: they were to exalt Italian cinema to the world’s rapture by dethroning Hollywood.

Dr. Alessandro Costa was the scientist leading the team that dealt with what seemed an insurmountable obstacle to their goal: Color. Upon The Wizard of Oz’s premiere, just one year before, color film became an instant condition for commercial success. Since creating their own color film technology would take years, and war against the US felt so imminent, Mr. Costa came up with a different method: he would extract the colors from American reels and inject them into black and white Italian films.

After several months and spending millions, on the evening of March 11, 1942, they finally succeeded at isolating and extracting color from an American film. (In a rare short interview for Cahiers du Cinema, Mr. Costa claimed they actually used The Wizard of Oz for the experiment.) The team watched as the color slipped away from the movie source, making it a pale and fuzzy projection, completely useless. There were three colors, each carefully poured into its own mold in an attempt to keep the strains separate and as pure as possible. As the team of scientists cheered, their army was being defeated on the Russian front.

The following day, the team came upon a tragic realization: overconfidence in their own process. The molds had not been properly tested and so overnight the colors had eroded the walls; running away, never to be found. With no budget to redo the experiment, and having been furiously accused of professional irresponsibility by the officials, the team was dissolved and the
members barely saved themselves from execution. In fact, about a week after the accident, the CONRA unveiled the existence of the team to the public, exposing them as traitors to the nationalist cause. They were forbidden to talk to the press and their existence sank into obscurity.

The consequences were terrible for everyone but particularly to Mr. Costa, who would never go back to his scientific station, even after the war and the regime were over. After his death, his daughter—a leftist flutist exiled in the US—published her father’s memoirs, hoping for recognition of his legacy. Impossible: the few Italians who remembered the incident and lamented the outcome of the war were hurt. The academy abroad reduced him to an irresponsible fascist collaborator, and dismissed his achievement as an irrelevant one. Despite all of Miss Costa’s efforts—including an emotional preface describing the years of suffering her family endured—the first and only edition of the book (gracefully entitled ‘Shattered Suns and Sons’) hardly sold and was rarely quoted afterward.

One of the few people interested in the scientist’s life has been the writer Orlando Moretti. According to his accounts, after Mr. Costa was expelled, he spent most of his time at home, training his dog to whistle. In this version, the scientist had successfully trained the dog to blow, and it eventually produced some chords. Supposedly, Mr. Costa kept this a secret, fearing the academy would make fun of him. He also loved his pet too much to expose it to any possible media attention. His daughter has disclaimed the story as a mean-spirited joke, and has explained that the dog didn’t even bark that much.

II.

The previous short story tells about a procedure that is central to my practice. Firstly, something which is known to all of us, if closely inspected, can be dismantled to the stage in which—it almost like moving backwards in time, it becomes raw material. Secondly, this raw material can become a new body with no memory of its previous life. At that point it has transfigured from one body to another.

That is precisely the maneuver that Dr. Costa undertakes. He removes the colors from an exist-
Image 1.

A Knife To Defeat The Night’s Breeze
Ashes of a coyote on acrylic sheets
2009-2011
ing source\textsuperscript{1}, turns them back into molds\textsuperscript{2}, and then aims to reshape them into a new movie.

In the same way, in works such as *A Knife to Defeat the Night’s Breeze*, the procedure I follow is exactly the same. The actual body of a coyote is cremated turning into ashes and then reshaped as a little knife.

If in its religious sense, the transfigured being keeps its consciousness from the beginning to the end of the process, my works do the opposite, they unload the nature of the original source, in the same way that Mr. Costa tries.

If Jesus’ transfiguration is the reaffirmation of who he is and his mission, in my work the transfigured matter negates what it was and barely bears any information of its past life. So, it does not deconstruct the original body to re-read it but erases its memory through the mutation process.

That erasing is an erasing of meaning.

\section*{III.}

However, there is another similarity between Mr. Costa’s method and mine, the process has to be concealed. The secretive environment in which he and his collaborators work aims to make visible to the public only the final product, which is the peak of the big iceberg of the process.

In his case, concealment of the process is part of his secret mission, in my case it is more of a teasing for speculation and curiosity. That invisible part of the work is replaced by the power of imagination on the viewer’s shore. The process of my work is less of building up and more of a concealed journey.

What has been revealed during the journey is shown to the viewer, but the journey itself is only conveyed as a story, never as an actual image. Although, in order to increase the spreading of rumor, some documentation would be shown in an informal manner to a witness, whose consciousness and words would carry the information of the process.

\footnote{1}{In fact those colors were a finished and well-known cultural product.}
\footnote{2}{By fictional means of course this is the equivalent to the state of raw material.}
2. **Reality and The Real**

I.

At age 27 I decided to drop the agenda of leftist politics, once ideology began to feel like nothing but false consciousness.

If human beings are the contradiction of themselves, a multitude is merely the sum of those contradictions. The only way to consolidate this messy mass into a coherent body of shared values is to impose a provisional ideology upon it.

Social revolution seemed less like a liberating idea than it did a postcard of 20th century theatricals. I became an agnostic of social reform beliefs.

My resentment of leftist ideology was intensified by the influence it came to have over my art practice.

I discovered that I was betraying myself, my own ways of doing things, my own personal fantasies. I was making a kind of art that was ideologically motivated, narrowing the possibilities of life itself by framing it as such. If at age 8 I used to spend my afternoons designing cities for ants and building them in mud, at age 26 I was making art about deconstructing history. The role of the artist, I thought at that time, was to undress the mechanisms in which mainstream social discourses were built.

In my video *Dieta (Diet)*, 2005, for example, two mulato hands insistently try ‘feeding’ real bananas to images of western painting ‘masterpieces’ from art books. The bananas are crashed and pushed on the mouths of the characters in each painting. Because of the video’s ambiguous playfulness—the absurd interweaving of the sexual and the political—it was not merely illustrative. But its statement was clear to me: I tried to comment on art history in post-colonialist terms. *Diet* reflected on the access and relationship of artists from the peripheries of the world to Western Art History.

Therefore, my work functioned as a mirror of reality. As I attempted to deconstruct reality in a pedagogical manner, taking apart to re-arrange and re-name, my process was simply reflection
Image 2.

Diet
Video
3'33"
2005
on a defined social phenomena.

However, those ant cities were more humane and interesting to me than the big nouns of political discourse. The ant cities had a simple, humane quality grounded in an inner sense of curiosity that is common to more human beings. That curiosity displays itself in the realm of open possibilities, not within the frame of discourse.

Since 2007, my practice started moving from images that behave as mirrors to images that behave as curious crystals, and from reality to the real.

II. Mirrors and Crystals

While a mirror gives a consistent image of the outside world, one in which everything is coherently recognized even if flipped, the crystal is a sort of fictional mirror. The crystal fragmentizes the image reflected into it, fictionalizing as opposed to documenting actuality.

Therefore, as a thing happens in the world, the mirror reflects it in identical coordinates. That does not happen if you look at things through a crystal. Under a poetic license, Gilles Deleuze has described it in wonderful words, “The crystal-image was not time, but we see time in the crystal. We see in the crystal the perpetual foundation of time, non-chronological time”.³

Mirror images are those that I produced in my work up to 2007, while crystal images have been carefully unveiled in my current work since then. These crystal images do not reflect or deconstruct the world, instead they turn the world into an uncertain world. If for example, we take a work like The Cannibals⁴, through a mysterious artifice the shot image turns into a blurry one. An unstable and strange world takes over reality, revealing a new one in which language is pushed to its own limits.

Language is a beloved comrade of mirror images, the same words and phrases used to explain the outside world can be used to describe those kind of images, but in the crystal its logic gets broken into dislocated fragments.

³ Gilles Deleuze, Cinema 2: Time-Image, 1985, pg. 79
⁴ More detailed ideas on this work are later developed in the chapter Works.
III. Reality and The Real

Milan Kundera has said that “A novel examines not reality but existence. And existence is the realm of human possibilities, everything that man can become”\(^5\).

If at certain point my practice was restricted by the limits of reality, my aim now is to operate in the wider territory of what Kundera called existence, and I have labeled as the real. Thereby, the real is the distortion and multiplication of reality into possibilities. In the real, crystal-images replace those mirror-images that inhabit reality.

Reality, at this point it is clear to me, is associated with a state of deception. The real, which lives within the multiple fictions of the crystal, reveals “the realm of human possibilities” as an open scenario for truth. Heidegger has affirmed that “The establishing of Truth in the work (of art) is the bringing forth of a being such as never was before and never will come again”\(^6\).

I speculate that that moment, the moment of truth is not a brief amount of time, but as Deleuze suggested, it is the endless foundation of time.

\(^{5}\) Milan Kundera, The Art of the Novel, 1986. Pg. 43. It should be plausible to consider this statement in the context of art itself, not only in the territory of literature.  
\(^{6}\) Martin Heidegger, The Origin of the Work of Art. In Basic Writings, pg. 196
3. **Imagemaker**

As images are classified into mirrors and crystals, human are classified based on their skin. This is not an ethnographic distinction, but a metaphysical one.

Suppose that humans are either monsters, phantoms, or Christians; where the two firsts are mutants while Christians are “true” humans.

*Monsters* are noble beasts. Zizek has declared, “I’m not human, I’m a monster (...). I rather prefer myself as somebody who -not to offend others, pretends to play he is human”\(^7\). Monsters’ awareness of the limits of truth and beauty teaches them to wear a disguise of human skin, as this grants them social acceptance and license to hurt people. The human skin that the monster wears is a model for honesty and decency in non-Christian terms.

Monsters are stoic, as it is a stoic act to wear that human skin all the time. I admire them.

*Phantoms* are fiction-makers. Their model is that of Prometheus, Satan, or the way in which coyotes were depicted in some native-American tales. They are not only tricksters who can switch from one skin to another but also -beyond the excitement of the lack of consistency of their provisional identities- they have rendered a mission for themselves.

That mission can be only materialized through fictional means. Gods cannot tolerate them, since the privilege of traveling from the realm of fiction to that of reality is supposed to be exclusively divine. I consider myself a phantom.

*Christians\(^8\)* have no skin, they are sheer flesh; and under their flesh they are naked. Christian bodies still have clear boundaries. I tried to be a Christian for a few years and did not succeed.

They champion reality and its moral tool: honesty.

What they do not understand is that honesty is not about being coherent but about the rhetorical operation in which supposedly *who am I*, and *what do I do* blend into a charming creature that —let’s say, deserves financial support from state and private institutions.

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\(^7\) [Youtube video](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l-gK-CzCHug)

\(^8\) The term here is used beyond its religious sense.
All ideologies that try to avoid our confrontation with the chaos of the world are Christians.

*  

After developing these ideas about the world in which I operate as an artist (reality and the real), the kind of images that I want to produce (crystals instead of mirrors), and the kind of human being that I am, I feel ready to invite the reader to inspect ideas in the context of some of my works.
WORKS
1. **Juana Inés de la Cruz**

I. The character and the event

Seventeenth century maverick nun Juana Inés de la Cruz⁹ is a central character in Latin American poetry. Before being admitted as a protégée into the court, she even considered the idea of disguising herself as a man in order to attend the university and thus the opportunity to continue her studies. In her *Letter to Sister Filotea* she advocated for women’s right to education.

Well known for her formidable intelligence and beauty¹⁰ she rejected many proposals of marriage and became a catholic nun at the age of twenty. At the convent she laid out a fruitful setting for her intellectual activities.

But eventually, the pressure of the catholic hierarchy caused her to give up on her original pursuits, choosing instead to disappear into silence for two years until her death. As Mexican poet Octavio Paz wrote in respect to that episode “Loneliness is a test but also a trap for the afflicted: we have no choice but to leap over it or give up. Sor Juana’s isolation was more and more menacing: outside, she was encircled by prelates whose power was as great as their severity; within the convent, by fanatic nuns of weak and limited talents. Her saintly confessor had abandoned her to an uneasy conscience that questioned itself incessantly and turned upon itself. She had lost her patrons and was in the hands of her critics; someday, if she persisted in her ways, she would have to confront them, no longer as critics but as accusers and judges. The idea terrified her. Then it became her ally, and she saw in her present suffering the natural result of her past life: she had used religion as a screen in order to devote herself to worldly, frequently sinful, passions and desires. What had poetry been to her? A ghost that insatiably fed her sensual dreams and her intellectual fantasies, a chimera carved from her vanity and lust, her love of the world and of herself.”¹¹

Then, my interest in Sor Juana is not that of approaching a hero, it is founded in the empathy

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⁹ Her full name was Juana Inés de Asbaje y Ramírez de Santillana.

¹⁰ While looking at her 1666 portrait it was inevitable to feel certain resemblance to Frida Kahlo.

Image 3.

Juana Ines de la Cruz
Several Beings with Long Hair
2010-2011
for her paradoxical way of unveiling through concealment, in the latent and mundane truth that
she interweaves with the spirit. In the same way, in the installation I have titled Juana Ines de la
Cruz, the flesh is hidden inside the gallery wall. It could be defined as a stage that operates on
the edge between the visible and the invisible. That edge that the work explores is a mutant in
between the flesh and the spirit: a sensual ghost.

Five participants with long hair -female as well as male participants, are situated inside the gal-
lery wall. There are five holes placed in a vertical manner. By removing the caps on each hole,
the participants push their hair through the openings, and the hair is the only part of their bodies
visible to the viewer. After several minutes they pull back their hair and return the caps to the
wall. The event happens in random intervals throughout the duration of the exhibition.

The participants are asked to stay in the non-space of the wall for as long as they want and are
given no restrictions. It means that sometimes there could be less than five persons inside the
wall. Since there is no script, sometimes they are in complete silence and some other times they
hold a conversation among themselves, laugh, and even randomly talk to a viewer. This sort of
cascade or body of hair behaves in a spectrum that goes from deep silence to a phantasmagori-
cal celebration.

Emily Sydnor, one of the participants, has described her experience in an email to me:

_ I did it yesterday around four fifteen. At first there was no one in the gallery, but finally some
people wandered in and started looking at my hair and got freaked out. They couldn’t figure out
if it was moving or not. (I guess they saw my hair move slightly when I shifted my weight) So
I heard them come up to me, giggling, “Is it real?” “That’s not a real person, oh my god” They
touched my hair just as I was adjusting it, and I guess they saw my hand and they freaked out,
and apologized for touching my hair profusely. It was funny to picture them apologizing to the
wall. I just stayed quiet.

_ Juana Ines de la Cruz rises the uncanny in the viewer by inserting the doubt around the origin of
the hair coming out from the wall, “doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or
conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate”.12

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12 Sigmund Freud, _The Uncanny_, in _An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works_, Volume XVII, 1917-1919. Pg.226.
Translated by James Strachey
The flesh is concealed and the hair becomes a body. Hair itself is a paradox: it is a death part of the living, but the living part of a corpse. The work then awakens the fact that “Many people experience the feeling (of the uncanny) in the highest degree in the relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts.”

II. A reference to Seedbed

An important reference for Juana Ines de la Cruz is Vito Acconci’s Seedbed. The deeper connection is the concealed presence of the living in the gallery space, though there are other connections that will be more evident as I develop some ideas on Acconci’s performance.

Concealment and sexuality interweave, setting up basic rules of decorum. It is through concealment of the latent desire that we are allowed to display our sexuality in social life. If we would have the honor of meeting the president of the nation it will be very unlikely to think of him taking a shit and sweating while we shake his hand.

The gallery space obeys those norms though its set of rules is more relaxed and permissive, not because of any sort of inner rebelliousness but because of the ritual means that has been socially assigned to the arts. The ritualistic as well as the carnivalesque need the relaxation of everyday norms in order to allow the cathartic realm to exist, preventing the normalcy of everydayness from extinction or chaos.

Since the 60’s artists started going in and out of the boundaries of the institutional artworld, making sense of the utopia of modern art-life by exploring the intimate in social situations. Many of Acconci’s performances operate not in the territory of personal fantasies but in the gap in between individuals by projecting himself into the gap.

Seedbed -one of his early performances from 1971- is not a pornographic performance, neither for the viewer nor the artist. It is not because of the physical isolation of Acconci beneath the ramp -since it is not a matter of separated bodies, but because the viewer’s and the artist’s sight are impeded to find each other. As Zizek has explained, the tragedy of pornography is that

13 Idem, pg. 241
through the unveiling of the sexual encounter the latent desire, the motor of sexuality, is emptied and thrown away, not approached\textsuperscript{14}. \textit{Seedbed} cannot be defined for its sexual exposure but for the fantasized encounter of the sight of the object and the subject. \textit{Seedbed} is more of a religious meditation trying to reach the imagined body above than the plain repetition of a sexual action. Saint John of the Cross envisages the encounter with God as a dark night. The soul cannot see the divine presence as the consequence of God’s closeness. Our eyes cannot see him because of how strong and close is his light. You cannot approach the real through gazing. The sight is only useful to approach the door, but the room is in complete darkness.

The promise of art is not to offer successful images and shapes supposedly loaded with precious meaning, but a deep dive into the ridiculous tragedy of existing in the dark stage that God so carefully built for us.

Acconci’s masturbation is an act of faith to reach the viewer through the mental space of fantasies. However, maybe the viewer is not being imagined as God for Saint John, but as another soul lost in the dark wet night, on another level floor in the dark room. The dark room then is a dark building.

In the same way, it is in that dark non-space of the gallery walls in which \textit{Juana Ines de la Cruz} occurs. Then, the flesh of the participants is spiritualized by the darkness, and revealed through their hair.

2. The Cannibals

I. On Horses

Horses have been imagined as elongations of human bodies: statements of desire and frustration (the unguided conscience of the lost object). In films such as *Reflections in a Golden Eye* and *Giant* horses are shown as manifest flesh where humans place their latent frustrations. Major Penderton, in the first film, and Luz, in the second, both brutally injure a horse owned by one they hate in order to unleash their emotional demands. Yet the wounds arouse our pity for the cowardly aggressor. Since the true wish in both cases is to murder – a wife or a sister-in-law – we are confronted with an old and persistent idea: if something is unbearable to us and unacceptable for our society – like the necessity of homicide – we are allowed to divert it onto nature: atonement through animal sacrifice remains of paramount importance to our imagery. Those wounds are a reminder of our constant lack of self-control: trembling maps. But crimes of passion are always a mistake, and the reason is quite simple: they restore no power to the murderer.

In another film, *The Misfits*, old cowboy Gay Langland, his friend Guido, and a feckless stranger, Perce, go to a barren field to capture wild horses. Roslyn – a woman in a romantic relationship with Gay – also takes part in the trip. The night before the chase, she learns that the fate of the horses is not to be ridden, but to become meat. She is the only one who sees the fatuity of men’s actions. Roslyn is still young. She looks naked; you can see her generous tits bouncing into her blouse, her blonde hair lightly petting her neck, her blessing voice like blessed sex. The men, expecting to find a herd of horses, find just six, a family. They are the father, the mother, the little child, the three adolescents. One by one each is lassoed and put down. Except for the colt that stands next to his mother as she lies tied up on the ground. Capturing the horses feeds Gay’s male fantasy of freedom and power, but it turns him into a monster in Roslyn eyes.

Later that night, the younger cowboy Perce helps Roslyn to free the horses. But in an attempt to reassert his authority, Gay, the old cowboy, immediately looks to capture back the alpha horse by himself: his redemption is capturing his own image reflected in the horse. And he does so. He regains his humanity just as he frees the defeated horse.
Image 4.

The Cannibals
Video loop
2011
In collaboration with Signe Schmidt
How different is the case of Folco, the lonely kid in *White Mane*. The wild horse becomes his deep friend, not his mirror, but his equal. Together they run away from ranchers who try to capture the horse, and the chase ends at the beach on the edge of the ocean. Cornered, Folco rides with his friend into the sea. They disappear in the abyss of death. As his body becomes heavier, Folco understands that the world is just another place.

II. The Cannibals

*The Cannibals* belongs to the same spirit as that of *White Mane*. In the actual world the rider and the horse share a deep friendship, and on the video itself, since it is shown in first person, the viewer becomes a phantasmagorical rider. If Folco commits suicide, here an anonymous ghost takes his place.

The phantasmagorical image was created by using a hose that connects the rider’s mouth on one end to a camera on her head on the other end, transferring the breath to the camera lens. It is the part of the process that is concealed to the viewer as it is very recurrent in other of my works.

The breath is there in behalf of her body. As it spreads over the lens, the landscape and the horse become a fuzzy and dreamy image. However, the “dream” is perturbed not only for the instability of forms that have no clear edges, but specially for a particular episode in which the horse is gently pushed to approach a non-identified object which scares him. It is placed next to a lake’s shore, while the sun reflection on the water turns somewhat overwhelming.

Breath is a non-material proof of a living presence; it is the vanishing of flesh, its transfiguration into spirit. In *The Cannibals* I tried to capture that spirit in a moving image.

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15 The rider and coauthor, is my beloved friend, artist Signe Schmidt. Her horse is named *Not Good Union Star*. 
3. T.H.Y

I. The Method

From February 9 to March 23, 2011, artists Oscar Santillan and Ander Mikalson conspired to introduce fiction into each other’s everyday lives. They each gave the other the contact information of five close friends and family members who agreed to act as mediators. In this way each artist gained access to the private life of the other as they used the mediators to execute scripted actions, called events. The work was an attempt to insert romanticism into daily life and to fictionalize chance in the world.

II. Testimonies

ANDER

The project began when Oscar and I heard from a classmate that we were both working on the same piece. The piece was about telepathy.

We decided that this incredible coincidence was more interesting than the piece we were working on, and we wanted to create a situation that would allow this kind of telepathic communication to continue. We created a device for communicating with each other without ever having direct contact, a sort of game wherein we manipulated each other’s daily lives. We called it T.H.Y, after the last three letters of the word “telepathy,” for its religious, biblical connotations and because it means “your.”

As an artist who had only ever made work for a vague, undefined group of people—the audience, the viewer—I was stimulated by the challenge, the freedom, the generosity of making a work for only one specific person. I did not know Oscar well, having talked to him only a handful of times, so I began by learning everything I could about him. From his best friend Ricardo, in Ecuador, I learned his likes and dislikes, and let this information affect my daily decisions. When I wanted to read, I read Borges (Oscar’s most beloved author), when I rented a movie it was “Unknown Pleasures” (one of his favorite films), when I went to the grocery store I bought pineapple (a special food in the town he comes from), when I listened to music it was “Aceituna
Sin Hueso” (a song with personal importance to him). I thought about him constantly; I even dreamed about him. It was like being in love, or like being a stalker. I was used to thinking incessantly about my work and used to thinking incessantly about a person, but never before had the two converged. It was powerful and consuming.

Throughout the six weeks I experienced bouts of intense paranoia, but mostly the experience was characterized by a milder feeling of self importance. I felt I was being witnessed, paid attention to. I believed there was a plan to the way events unfolded, that every small interaction or experience was planned by some outside power to happen just that way, just for me. It was akin to what it must feel like to believe in God.

OSCAR

On the first day my friend Ryan –one of the agents– walked into my studio and suddenly asked me for my daily schedule. It was so suspicious that I refused to let him know about it; instead I asked him back why did he want to know? He stammered out something and left. At that time I started understanding that T.H.Y was a little more ambiguous than I thought. I mean, it felt that possibly I had successfully blocked or avoided Ander’s first attempt to intervene in my life, instead of feeling that I was up to automatically embrace it.

Even knowing that we had agreed to not use this mutual door for mean spirited jokes, the excitement was blended with some sort of slight schizophrenia, in the sense that after that first experience with Ryan’s question I started wondering, when people asked or offered me things, if they were kind of remote-controlled by someone on the other end.

A few days later she replaced the missing tire of my bike. That tire had been stolen at the beginning of the year and since it was winter (I don't ride when the weather is too cold for my Ecuadorian skin) I didn’t put a new one back. One morning around 9AM I walked in the Sculpture studio area and there it was, my bike had two perfect wheels.

It was such a nice gesture, however at the same time it made me wonder if it was some sort of appetizer for something a little more rough or intense to happen afterwards. I guess it was.

On a certain night I arrived at home very late, exhausted from working at the studio. Walked into the bathroom and my toothbrush was missing. I tried to find it all over the place, I even went
through the bathroom trash. For a second I ignored the old toothbrush left on the washstand since my mind was set up to search for a purple toothbrush. I called my roommates to ask them about it. Actually, finding this old toothbrush maybe taking the place of mine made me more upset.

Everybody claimed not knowing anything about it. I went to bed with my (dirty) mouth dirty. At a certain point I lost track of her presence. Maybe I was not always able to notice it. That is when I started enjoying more and more stumbling on her interventions. As I became more relaxed and less aware of the mechanism, discovering a page from my book glued to the ceiling, or finding my computer desktop image changed to a photo of me as a kid, became reminders not of the mechanism itself but of my own presence in the world.

III. Documentation

Documenting T.H.Y was the greatest challenge. We created—and in turn rejected—two videos, dozens of photographs, two text pieces, a sound piece and a performance. We looked to Sophie Calle and Brock Enright, whose work also blends seamlessly with everyday life, and who document their work with photographs, objects and video. We looked to artists like Sadie Benning and Howardena Pindell, as well as to contemporary reality TV/YouTube confessional culture and tried making testimonial video. We looked to Vito Acconci and Fluxus performance artists who documented their performances with concise, minimally descriptive, plainly typewritten texts. Every photograph, video and object we made was distracting. It became the work rather than a documentation of the work; it had much unnecessary information while missing that which was essential. Though attracted to the unadorned clarity of text documents like Acconci’s, we found that this option is now a convention signifying nothing so much as 60’s and 70’s performance art. Needing to invent a new vehicle for conveying our experience, we turned back to the form of the project itself: ephemeral, fictional and woven directly into daily life.

The experience of T.H.Y is documented in performances. Two actors, one male and one female, are hired to tell the story. They come to class in our stead, presenting the experience with a diagram and monologues. They appear at our openings, mixing with the gallery goers,
striking up conversations and spreading the story. The audience does not know they are experiencing an art work, just as Oscar and I did not know if our daily interactions with others were incidental or carefully planned. The conversations the actors have with the viewers blend seamlessly into the other social interactions happening all around them. The actors' performance is documented in photographs and in video. In the end, all that exists of the art action is a documentation of documentation. What remains of the work is a rumor.

IV. Conclusion

There are two stages that I am still evaluating and reflecting upon. The method itself applied into life, and its later existence as documentation.

The interventions, as they are recalled in the testimonies, became a real way to expand our art practice into the territory of life. The world instead of the artworld turned into the scenario in which art is practiced and experienced.

We consider this T.H.Y episode as the first of maybe many to come, since we both are planning to play it with other people. Maybe in the near future it will be played by people that Ander and Oscar do not even know.

The other aspect, the documentation, is still in construction and the rumor is still spreading out. However, the limits of that rumor are being tested. For now it remains complicated to measure its effectiveness. A little more time is to pass by before we acknowledge the documentation can survive in that way.
IV. Guessing Lists

ANDER

*I think Oscar*

Shifted the gears on my bicycle

Asked people to pay me compliments

Asked a friend to give me a sandwich; inside it there was a drawing of a sandwich

Broke into my studio, removed a piece of yellow drywall tape from the desk and placed it down the hall, so I might notice he had been there

Had Ryan send me a cryptic text message that said ‘I see you Jake Sully’

Told Andy to look at me funny in class

Put air in my bike tires

Broke into my apartment and lowered the blinds

Positioned in the hallway with her back to me a woman with my friend Loie’s hair, dressed in Loie’s clothes, so that I mistakenly touched her before realizing she was a stranger

Followed me to the library and removed every book I was looking for

Had Loie give me a basket of blueberries

Told Ryan to say ‘he knows, he knows everything’

Asked Iris to call me every day for a week, but always at a time when he knew I couldn’t answer

Broke into my apartment and squeezed all the toothpaste into the cup holder

Made a cherry blossom appear in the basket of my bicycle, thought it was parked twenty feet from the nearest tree

Rearranged the leaves on my doorstep
OSCAR

I think Ander

Asked several people to offer me pineapple, offering it to me with the word “piña”

Replaced the wheel that my bike was missing

Stole my toothbrush

Had Catherine tell me she dreamt I won a great prize and had Alexandra tell me she dreamt of me doing expert swan dives

Asked a friend of hers to offer me a ride, and once in his car insist on giving me a CD of music he thought I would like; once at home I played it—it was a two second recording of someone saying “running and searching”

Slid a half-eaten piece of coffee cake under my door

Tried to find out about my schedule through my friend Ryan

Sent me a text message in Spanish from an unknown number that said someone was thinking of me

Put a small piece of paper in my bag with a drawing of a nose coming out of a wacky shoe

Arranged calls from an old lady (at least, she sounded like an old lady) who wished me a happy new year every time

Tore out the first page of a book I had just bought; I found it a week later glued to the ceiling in the bathroom

Changed the desktop picture on my laptop to a photo of myself when I was 7 years old

Made caldo de bola, my favorite Ecuadorian dish, and left a bowl of it in my studio
CONCLUSIONS: PAST AND FUTURE
I. My Experience at VCU

Among many important lessons I learned here there are two that I want to mention:

- Between thinking and making there is a gap

The VCU Sculpture Department has been framed for many years by the outside as a maker’s program. I do not really understand what other people mean by that, but can offer my own perspective on the issue from first-hand experience.

If the complexity of the program would be somehow defined in a few words, I will be tempted to say that it is not about making but about the distance between thinking and making, that gap.

When I started my MFA in 2009 my understanding of the role of chance and the unexpected in the process of making was very narrow. Even if I recognized that chance, for example, played a role in some of my more open ended works, the idea of execution covered that gap. It means, the distance between thinking and making was shortened by executing a plan in order to materialize it. It took me over a year to understand what my professors were saying to me.

I remember the somber faces of the artists in my committee so many times when they found how my works were mostly scripted and executed in such a tight way that my practice was almost moving nowhere outside of my own limits. Michael McKean asked me to allow the work to be more drunk, Kendall Buster asked me to plan less and make more, and Elizabeth King asked me to allow the work to be smarter than I am.

Finally I understood that they were pushing me to expand and explore the gap. I feel that by the end of this challenging experience, the ideas or fantasies that often generate my work are now just starting points rather than complete plans; and the process is now a playful stage where everything can be modified and redefined, it is a space for mutation.

- An expansion of possibilities

I met at VCU a wonderful and talented gang of friends and colleagues. That opened up opportunities for collaboration that helped me to redefine the limits of what I can do.
I want to mention two experiences in particular. The one I shared with Andrew Brehm in our first semester making a video titled *Copper*. After performing with Andrew, whose background in performance is consistent, I felt encouraged to participate in actions of my own. We finished that video in November 2009, and the next month I created my first performance, *The Manifesto of Goodness*.

The second is *T.H.Y* with Ander Mikalson, a VCU Painting MFA student. That project has been widely covered in this thesis and has become a new starting point for me; it connects my practice with wider collaborations and the territory of life itself.

And maybe there is a third collaboration to be mentioned, one that happened subtly in the daily interaction with the wonderful minds and spirits around. Maybe I learned to be a better human being.

**II. Verbs for the Future**

Here is a map of the future of my practice as a list of verbs:

Doing  
Raiding  
Caressing  
Rubbing  
Dragging  
Preventing  
Stopping  
Reversing  
Unforming
Unearthing
Breaking
Gluing
Looping
Borrowing
Unforgetting
Unknowing
Forgiving
Missing
Vanishing
Whispering
Unwishing
Wondering
Floating
Elongating
Casting
Sleeping
Asking
Interviewing
Drawing
Vita

Oscar Santillan came from the past and goes to the future, but would like to stay in an endless present. He was born in 1980 and will die in 2020.

He believes in truth, not honesty.