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FUNNEL VISION

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

by

DAVID GRAINGER,
Bachelor of Arts, Integrated Art, Pennsylvania State University, 1999
Master of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2008

Director: CARLTON NEWTON,
Professor, Sculpture + Extended Media

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia

May, 2008

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Abstract

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This paper will talk about the videos and sculptural installation in my thesis exhibition. Shooting videos outside of the studio developed into a project overarching any individual video or its particular signs. Thus, this paper will focus on the video project with examples that follow a timeline of development, rather than the actual 6 videos on display in the exhibit. The two-part sculpture “Deer in the Headlights” is created in the context of these videos, and coexists with them in a specific architectural space. This space, as well as the clichéd meaning of the deer’s gaze, have a relation to the title of the show.

SHOOTING VIDEOS



Video still from *Pot Top*

In the summer of 2007, as my wife and I eased into a summer routine of cooking meals, I kept noticing how a stainless steel lid would rock when we lifted it off of the pot and set it upside down on the countertop. It rocked back and forth for an exceedingly long time, in my imagination creating an enjoyable drama with a simple action. The rocking pot lid also made a sound that I found intriguing, a slowly decreasing rhythm. Looking back on it after the work I have done this year, I can locate that pleasure in the extended effect that comes from the smallest of gestures, a large amount of motion resulting from the minutest effort expended. Balanced on the countertop so that its weight is distributed evenly across two points, the rocking lid approaches perpetual motion, but it eventually slows and comes to a rest.

During the summer I considered recording the pot lid rocking. I returned to school and made such a video, entitled *Pot Top*. In the quickness of brainstorming ideas, I remembered my thoughts on the lid and quickly composed the video. The time it took to make this video, from initial impulse to final result, was 5 or 10 minutes. It relied on contemplations that delved back months. In most of my videos, there is a tuned relationship between the prolonged period to consider an idea and the immediate time to make it happen.

In *Pot Top*, tension builds as the viewer is perplexed by what it is that I am doing. First, I hang a cell phone plug from the wall and let it swing as a pendulum. Then, walking out of the background, I brush against a rocking chair, and it begins to sway. Finally, my fingers appear in the extreme foreground and gently press down on a pot lid, making it rock back and forth. In this last moment, the confusion about the composition is removed. Objects are moving in the picture, in the distance and the foreground, all engaged in a metronomic movement. As in a painting, the flat surface of a video screen presents an illusion of space. In both, the composition depends on attention to details in the foreground and the background.

Finding working in my house to be limiting, I began shooting videos in the public and marginal spaces of the city of Richmond, VA. Either by bike, car, or foot I would go out and explore relatively aimlessly. Walking has always helped me gain perspective, it seemed likely to do similar things for my artwork. I shot many short videos, and looked for quick moments that were indivisible and impenetrable. In a half-day of shooting

video, perhaps 30 seconds would be kept as the best representative of that day. In a sense, these chosen pieces would compress the work and time of the day into a brief instant.

These moments rely on a novelty of perspective to surprise. Looking for strange viewpoints in completely common situations, I would use inconsistencies that the video camera has with our natural visual experience. The glare of a light is captured differently by a camera lens than it is by our eyes. The lens of the camera creates a flattening of grounds that is impossible to experience with both eyes open. The process of shooting the videos for this project was in a sense an exploration of these very basic characteristics of the tools I was using.

The subject matter of these videos follows a logic born of necessity: in order to make recordings outdoors, one must stay within the public space, which consist of the following – roadsides, cars, architecture, parks, graveyards, etc. They are the stuff of the day-to-day, the shared experience of the populace. I generally worked in places that were emptier and less inviting in order to avoid interruptions, retaining the benefits of a studio.

I consider the work of Olaf Bruening to be share many of the attributes of these videos. Bruening's films *Home* and *Home 2* show whimsical idiosyncratic decisions that are flushed out in a real world situation. He goes to Peru and sings country/western songs with natives at a tourist destination, he forces a rubber ET mask on an Amish boy, he dreams a sequence where he and a girlfriend are marooned on an island, and begin to

grow facial hair together. These nonsensical situations are placed adjacent to each other in a long form film that relates them to the tangential nature of thought and imagination. By performing these ideas so completely in public, out of the studio, Bruening gives them an immediacy and purpose.

Bruening also plays simple tricks with the camera and time. In *Home 2* he enters a bathroom in an African tour boat, and exits another bathroom in a completely different locale in the next moment. He sways the camera away from himself in one minute, and when the camera returns one of the boat's staff members sits in his place. The playfulness of these events make them good. They contribute to the strength of the work, but do not constitute all of it. If they were taken too seriously or mulled over, they would fail. They work as points of connection to a larger space that the viewer is allowed to imagine. My videos have comparable strategies, shooting in the chaotic out-doors public space, and editing from reams of improvised material. We both also use humor and simple camera tricks to create a psychological space that the viewer is invited to inhabit.



Video still from *Ease on Down (Richmond)*

I perform in the videos to give them a focus on the gesture of an individual amid these raw spaces. In *Ease on Down (Richmond)* my figure dances down a wavy path amid a congested sprawl of highway, elevated train tracks, distant office buildings, and a huge flood wall bisecting the frame. In it the composition of the frame and the improvisational act are equally important. The roads make the image feel like an abstract painting of lines, defying gravity as they creep up to the upper corners of the screen. As in *Pot Top*, there is activity at different proximities, cars putter along in the extreme distance, and much closer at the same time.

Balance Blur is a video made towards the end of Fall, 2007. I had noticed how the video camera's autofocus loses track of what to focus on when the only object in the frame is near the margin of the screen. What results is a regularized pulsing of the image between focused and blurred. A person in that position gives the effect a psychological meaning - words like balance and focus take on new, introspective meanings. There are also spiritual connotations - the phasing in and out of corporeality invokes the transmutation of matter to energy or spirit. The clear sky in the background gives it a minimal look that appropriates a designed video art style, where the viewer only sees what is essential. If the video were panned back slightly more, the viewer would see that I am literally balancing on a guard rail with a 50-foot drop into the James River on the other side. A slight wind blowing at my back creates a dangerous situation.

In the beginning of the spring, fellow classmates and I spent 10 days in Caguas, Puerto Rico, preparing for the FourPlay exhibition at the AREA gallery. It made sense to

make videos on location - the process of travel and exploration is central to the work. Among the videos I exhibited there was a piece titled *Dervish*. It depicts an abandoned road that is being overgrown by lush vegetation. Bright light shines through the treetops to certain spots on the road. As I stand in the light, the camera's image blanks out the top half of my body. I began to spin, thinking again of sublimation. The spin is connected with power for superheroes like Wonder Woman, cartoon characters such as the Tasmanian Devil, or Aladin's Genie being released from its lamp. This piece doesn't refer to any of these particular characters, but recognizes the more general archetypal concept. Spinning in a whirlwind, losing control of a situation, elicits a different relationship to one's life. Maybe by acknowledging that one is powerless in some ways, a person can focus on the real strength that they can access.

Continuing with this idea I began recording myself spinning, with the camera held above me pointed down on a tripod. The camera's perspective held my figure as the stationary element, and the rest of the world below my feet as whirling madly. I found this an appropriate visual cue to issues of the self, and self-importance. After working with this idea in several locations, I altered its parameters in my studio. The result, *Tachometer*, adds the element of a second axis to the spin. I stretch over a chair with a Lazy Susan swivel bearing on the seat, spun by an off-camera assistant. Slowly I rotate the tripod and camera with a slight wrist movement. What results is similar to the pot top rocking, a great effect from the smallest of gestures.



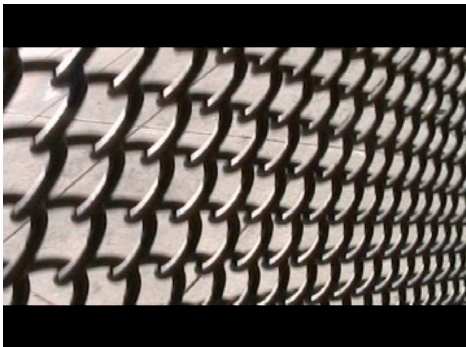
Video stills from *Dervish* (left), and *Tachometer* (right)

The circular movement makes no progressive achievement, it keeps itself busy remaining in stasis. The deer in the headlights, as well as the spinning-plate, and the juggling act are all immediate references to a state of pause. It is similar to what happens when we act shy in situations, or labor to find the right words. There is an unintelligibility in certain moments between people, where one loses track of what the other is actually saying, or gets lost in their own words as they speak. In these confusions, lackluster performances, miscommunications, spinning around and going nowhere is an appropriate metaphor.

Some of these videos do not feature any people taking ‘center stage.’ Instead of an imposed gesture, the images stand for themselves. *Pipe Drain* is one such video. On one level, it is an picture of a pipe releasing water from a construction site of a large building. On another, the black shadow looks like a cartoon animation, or perhaps oil gushing out instead of water. This is a very simple formal trick, a found illusion. If one

squints and does a little work to imagine, the image relinquishes its real-ness, the banal and completely everyday becomes fantastic.

In *Black Fence*, the video camera zooms around the fence, trying to capture something playful within the regular pattern of the fencing using the movement of the camera itself. Over the 6 minute video, quick shifts of perspective aim to produce a psychedelic sort of effect. Acceleration and deceleration, rotating and panning the camera explore the moving image of the fence in depth.



Video stills from *Black Fence* (left), and *Pipe Drain* (right)

Similarly, *Practice Net* is a play with patterns. A net inside of a batting cage presents the same pattern redundantly overtop of itself. Shaking the net from a point off camera, produced an effect where the two planes keep switching places.

With *Goose on Ice*, I explored a local park in January. A heavy goose is unable to walk across a thin layer of ice on a pond. The geese plowed, like an ice-breaking ship in the arctic, through the water in frustration. After observing this for a period, I began to

play with the tilt of the camera on the tripod. A simple shift of angle turns the goose struggling in its natural environment into Sisyphus, or a weary mountain climber.



Video Still from *Goose on Ice*

In all of these examples a simple manipulation of the camera or my body allows the work to happen. They happen quickly, and each is unique to the particular situation. These manipulations are immediately discernable as tricks. They lie in contrast to the more methodical, persistent project of the videos as large group. Seen in whole, this collection of tricks gathers new meaning.

FUNNEL VISION

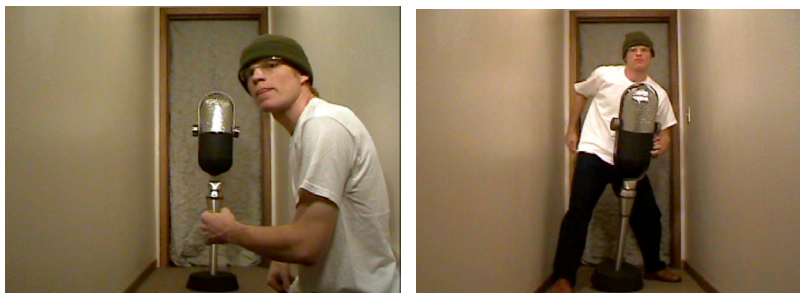


Installation of *Deer in Headlights* with 6 video monitors. Deer: foam, composite resin, steel, paint, fiberglass.

Bruce Nauman's *Performance Corridors* group show videos on monitors between two parallel walls. The walls form a narrow space where one person can fit. The act of walking into these corridors in a gallery heightens the individual sense of looking and being looked at. The tight architectural space underscores the emotional potential of a performance. When we sit in a theater, we conspire with the actors on the stage, ignoring all but what is in front of us. In a similar way, the corridor represents a fixed look or focus. Nauman places small monitors as well as video cameras into these corridors, so that the viewer sees herself from behind. Completing a loop of self-reflection, the installation provides a space for the visitor to consider their own examination process, a small secreted performance of looking.

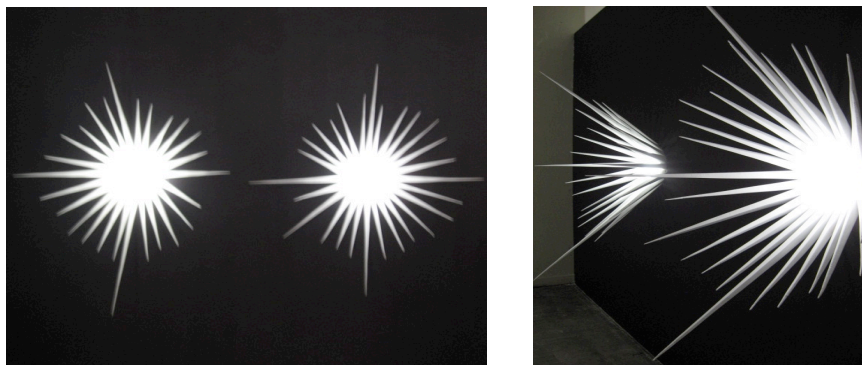
My installation investigates similar themes between video and architecture. The space it is installed in is narrow and long, like a corridor. The monitors placed in this space are looped moments of my own examinations (instead of live feeds of the viewer). The sculpture of the deer in the headlights twists the meaning of the videos; since the entire video exhibit is physically within the corridor of the deer's gaze, it is all implicated in a very literal way to the nature of that gaze. It also calls into question what our assumptions are about the transfixed nature of such a 'look,' whether it is passive or contemplative, focused or just lost. These questions, as well as to whom they refer (the artist or the viewer), are left open to interpretation.

In an older work entitled *Microphone Check*, I video recorded myself in a hallway with an oversized sculpture of a microphone. By placing myself in different proximities to the camera, I could make the sculpture look like it was being held in my hand as regular size. By moving myself I could reveal the true size of the sculpture in relation to my body. In a corridor, the *Deer in Headlights* exists in a similar way. From a distance, the deer looks closer to real size, but its relationship to the perspective of the room cues the viewer that something is off. This detail is a hook that draws one nearer, to see the actual size as huge.



Video stills from *Microphone Check*

The headlights' rays are represented with long white pointed forms, which are raked with actual rays from flood lamps. Like the videos, this sculpture has as a visual trick at its fulcrum: the immateriality of the light is coaxed into materiality with white paint and foam. The sculpture tends to increase the perceived brightness and size of the light source. In the installation, I was surprised to find it also plays another trick. Until one is close to it, the entire sculpture appears flat on the wall. Only in the final approach does the viewer understand what she is looking at. (Again the attention to proximities is important, whether it be in the flat illusion of painted/video space or the movement through real space).



Details of *Deer in Headlights*, (two views of headlights). Materials: foam, composite resin, wall, lighting.

When looking at headlights, one notices certain rays of light stretch longer from the source. If one squints, they can see orthogonal lines elongate that perhaps relate to the shape of our own closing lid. In videos or photographs these effects can reach beyond the borders of the image. In the headlight element of the sculpture, the cardinal point rays are longer than the rest. The symmetry abstracts the headlights to a pair of simplified mandalas, points of wonder or spiritual expression.

The title of the show, *Funnel Vision*, considers ideas of focus, comfort, and a narrow space (whether it be physical or psychological). For my thesis exhibit as well as *Microphone Check*, corridors or narrow spaces stand in for personal visions. The narrow long space elicits the concepts of light at the end of the tunnel, or staying on a path. Since things rarely change from conception to completion in my work, the tunnel seems an apt metaphor for my process. However, ‘tunnel vision’ usually has negative implications; it is an architectural situation that one is subjected to. I found a more apt description with the word ‘funnel,’ which can be a very vigorous action that one engages in. Funneling one’s own experiences and observations into a fully formed statement reflects more accurately how my work operates. I was interested in referring to, but also denying, the ‘tunnel vision’ syndrome. It is something that can haunt us, so it is there in spirit, if one were but to change a letter.



Video still from *Man in the Street*

Vita

David Brian Grainger was born on April 29, 1976 in Lumberton, North Carolina. He completed a Bachelor of Arts in Integrated Arts from Pennsylvania State University in 1999. He made art for 7 years while acting as an art handler and installer for a number of museums in New York City. After taking sculpture classes for a year at the University of Minnesota-Moorhead, David acquired his Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University in 2008.

Exhibitions

2008	<i>Funnel Vision (VCU Thesis Exhibit)</i> <i>sediment</i> <i>Gray Area Stake Out</i> <i>VCU/Pratt</i> <i>Fourplay</i>	Temporary Space Stamp Student Union Art Gallery Crane Studios Pratt Student Gallery ÁREA	Richmond, VA Baltimore, MD Philadelphia, PA Brooklyn, NY Caguas, Puerto Rico
2007	<i>Salon Selectives 2</i> <i>Scope Miami</i> <i>In Praise of Physical Labour</i> <i>Looking Forward to Seeing it:</i> <i>The Discipline of Anticipation</i> <i>Company Picnic</i> <i>Commonwealth Bricoleurs</i> <i>Us and Them</i>	ADA Gallery ADA Gallery, Woman Made Gallery The LAB Metro Gallery Off Grounds Gallery CCA Gallery, ÁREA	Richmond, VA Miami, FL Chicago, IL San Francisco, CA Richmond, VA Charlottesville, VA San Francisco, CA Caguas, Puerto Rico
2006	<i>Hecatombe</i> <i>Debate Team</i> <i>Winter Carnival</i> <i>It Was Now</i>	FAB Gallery, Fargo Theater Plains Art Musuem Annex	Richmond, VA Fargo, ND Fargo, ND
2005	<i>Now Playing</i>	Parasite Gallery	Beacon, NY
2003	<i>Local Artists</i> <i>Clock Tower Gallery Presents</i> <i>Outlaw Series</i>	La Vuelta Temporary space Various locations	Queens, NY Queens, NY Manhattan, NY

Published Work

Curious, VCU press, Spring 2008
Daily Constitutional, Winter Issue 5, 2007
Curious, VCU press, Spring 2007
500 Pitchers, Lark Press, 2005

Awards

VCU Travel Grants – Miami (2006), Venice (2007), Chicago (2007), Puerto Rico (2008)
VCU Graduate Teaching Assistantship 2006-2008
Ava Faltz-Miller Grant for Information Studies 1998 \$1000
Shreyer's Honors College, 1994-1999 Half Tuition Scholarship

Teaching Experience

Teaching Assistant to Stephen Vitello, *Media Survey*, VCU 2006
Teaching Assistant to Justin Lincoln, *Sculpture for Non-Majors*, VCU 2006
Art Teacher, Penn State Summer Study, Penn State 1998

Artist Assistant

Erwin Redl, 2002 - 2005

Jane Hammond 2005

Melissa Chaney 1998 – 2001

Gallery Installation

Queens Museum of Art, Queens, NY, 2002 - 2006

The Jewish Museum, NY, 2003 - 2005

International Center of Photography, NY, 2002 - 2006

Galerie Lelong, NY, 2004

Traditional Line Inc (including installations at the Brooklyn Museum, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art),
NY, 1999- 2005

Hudson River Museum, NY, 2002 - 2005

George Kargl Gallery, Armory Show, NY 2004

Activities

Curated "Acting Out: Videos by VCU Sculpture" ADA Gallery, Richmond, VA. 2006

Curated "*Quintin Rivera-Tora: Atmospherics*," 400 Cubic Feet Gallery, Moorhead, MN. 2005

Organized *Open Studios* at Crane Street Studios, Long Island City, NY. 2001- 2004

Released "*Shoot For the Moon*," collection of original songs. 2001

Theater coordinator for The Space in Queens, NY, an artist-run gallery. 2001

Released "*19 Accidental Hymns*," collection of original songs. 1999