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School of the Arts  
Virginia Commonwealth University

This is to certify that the thesis prepared by Ryan Mulligan entitled DEFENDING DEFENSE has been approved by his or her committee as satisfactory completion of the thesis or dissertation requirement for the degree of Masters of Fine Arts.

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May 12, 2005

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DEFENDING DEFENSE: CIRCULAR ARGUMENTS ABOUT ARTMAKING

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

by

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## Abstract

### DEFENDING DEFENSE: CIRCULAR ARGUMENTS ABOUT ARTMAKING

By Ryan Mulligan, MFA

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

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2005

Major Director: Peter Baldes  
Professor of Painting, Painting and Printmaking Department

This paper is a critical look at video and performance arts intrinsic relationship to culture. Investigations of storytelling, personal mythology, fear, and image saturation. Think-pieces on the nature of art in an entertainment society. Juggling a brief overview of various works and their relation to over arching themes of game theory, dark humor, and fascination with media. An in depth look at the process of the thesis show, “Defense is the Best Defense.” Multiple takes on the thesis exhibit counterbalance the need for contemporary art to include description. This paper is a detailed look at the process of Ryan Mulligan’s artwork and methods of materials.

Ryan Mulligan's work takes the form of performance lectures, video, and installations. Here the intuitive is dismissed and a demystifying approach to describing production and theory bridges a gap in contemporary literature on art making. Anecdotal stories on process, desires, thrusts, and methods illuminate an any-means-necessary artistic approach.

## Chapter 1 Defense is the Best Defense

For some time now I have been obsessed with the notion of defending oneself. Perhaps from the fact that a thesis exists only after it is defended before a committee. Or perhaps, more realistically it stems from a desire to find work that is not a ‘Waiting for Godot,’ experience but more of a ‘Prepping for Godot.’ The reality of fear and defense is so prevalent in our society that the slightest mention of it can activate an artwork. This newly kinetic form now acts more as mirror/blackboard than simply mirror. A mirror with notes scribbled upon denotes a plan or history. A plan takes the artwork into a larger time frame and allows our intent to fill the gaps of the work. We believe the *work* is making us laugh, but perhaps it is our nervousness manifest in the work.

### 1.1 Disaster Norms

I remember the adage ‘it takes a village to raise the boy,’ from a Hollywood movie about families going through divorce. There is nothing wrong with learning good quotes from movies, or spicing up language through pop culture. If Las Vegas has taught us anything it is that capitalism, spectacle, and defense are here to stay. September 12<sup>th</sup>, I have been told though can’t authenticate, was the highest grossing day for Las Vegas casinos. Perhaps the overarching fear aided that twisted economy momentarily enough to keep it safe during the period of planes being grounded throughout the US. In times of fear and great turmoil Hollywood relies on the Genre Films. Films designed to maintain

the status quo. During the thirties the Screwball Comedies showed class distinction being demolished by young impetuous couples falling in love, and always getting married.

In the 1980's horror films allowed our fear of the unknown red scare to find a form in the *Chainsaw Massacre*, and *The Living Dead*. These past years along with the 'remember our hero's' biography flicks, Hollywood has spun out some great heart stopping thrillers. Movies that remind us of struggle and survival against all odds.

Disaster movies show cross sections of America standing up to some insurmountable force. In *The Day After Tomorrow* an *every-man* father must keep his promise to his son and rescue him from an end of days style ice age caused by Global Warming. Of course the son is stuck in New York City, and America in reality had, at the time of movie's release, not signed the Kyoto Treaty.

The heroes in disaster films are usually average people with some skills but no real specialization. Truck drivers, mechanics, ex-sports stars turned gamblers, sales clerks, all make great heroes provided they have initiative and minimal street smarts. Americans don't want experts telling them how to fix the problem. In Science Fiction Disasters it is normally the scientists who started the problem. In *The Birds* it was an outsider who brought the havoc with her. We want normal people winning. We want all races shown working together. All spectrums of people teamed up as a direct reflection of the dream of the great melting pot.

## **1.2 Art Cowboy**

Let us presuppose all discourse, images, history, stories, and outside sources relating to or describing the Alamo and the events of the Spanish American War are valid.

Then it can be looked at as fact without relation to myth, hearsay, glorification, or romanticizing. The events happened, the place is real along with the cast of people, and actions were made that forced many to die and a struggle over Texas to exist for a long period of time. The reality of this history therefore must be like grammar: rules and structures determining their own function. The ripples stop at reality and do not continue into a cultural mythology.

Like a science experiment truth is established, findings recorded, guesses and implications are null and void. Yet this is not “The Alamo.” “The Alamo” exists in ripples upon ripples with stories, images, films, and texts evolving into a Popular Culture Myth with many, many implications and ideas communicated. A myth is a communication from a society to its members: the social norms and ideations determined by the history and institutions are delineated through physical storytelling. So what exactly is communicated through this myth: what implications and cultural norms are stressed and instilled? One can see premises of glory, determination against all odds, steadfast resolve, divine intervention for the side of good, American resolve, and protestant work ethic all apparent.

Since this story revolves around a battle there exists two myths, one for each side of combat. In the American myth the great Davy Crockett stands against insurmountable aggressors. The Cowboy with jaded past allowed to be reborn through sacrifice and heroism. On the Mexican side a great cooperation of men overcame the incomparable Davy Crockett and his men. A Marxist everyman army took the capitalist aggressor from their God given land. Their struggle relies on overcoming the myth of Crockett, whereas

Crockett exemplifies the American myth of manifest destiny, pioneer spirit, and singular exceptional nature into an almost godlike form. Both myths require each other to be told and to expound their ideology.

The idealism of Cowboy, and more accurately, “Alamo” mythology is the inevitable acceptance of the lone gun into society. The cowboy rides off into the sunset after a gunfight to avoid the probable gratitude and acceptance of the town. In Crockett’s myth he must die a Christ-like sacrifice to be accepted in society. Society no longer needs the physical Crockett since the ‘story Crockett’ is much more important for it can be retold, reformed, and re-imagined to continue its own game. The physical world and time of David Crockett pass and birth the legend, mythology, and validate progress of society through self-sacrifice.

In the twentieth century Jackson Pollock danced with dripping paint on sticks above canvases making paint paint, and surface surface. “A Pollock” is one of those paintings: the physical object contains within its structure the myth of an event that reformed the history of art. The man died but the idea and myth evolves constantly redefining a cultural ideology. Pollock was not accepted in society in the same way that Crockett could never become like everyone else. The status as an outsider and martyr principle of these myths is what keep them alive. Considered as the first Real-American-Art-Hero Jackson Pollock, the man, does not matter in the least it is his work and ripples of mythology that are important. “A Pollock” is “The Alamo.” A collective memory formed through retelling and mystification. People visit “A Pollock” with the same reverence as bones of St. Peter. Critics talk about the work in terms of sacrifice, defiance, heroism,

dedication, and godlike gestures. The societal myth of Modernism and later Postmodernism are like Genre Films reasserting the status quo. They are sermons of hell fire and brimstone designed specifically to remind young artists that with progress sacrifices must be made. No one in society should accept what you are doing if you are a real “Art Cowboy.” You must solve the community’s problems and then ride out in the wilderness.

So what is the infinite game in “A Pollock?” One *finite* game ended with “A Warhol.” Another ended when “A Pollock” became a poster and bathroom curtain pattern. But the infinite game is in the stories and mythologies of crazed Jackson Pollock dancing with drips. He will always be dancing when one sees “A Pollock” and therefore will continually reassert that true artistic vision and genius are possible. If an infinite game plays with the rules then Jackson Pollock expanded the field to let all *finite* games revolving around art exist simultaneously, and perpetually.

### 1.3 Defensive Theatre

Artists don’t wonder, “What is it good for?” They aren’t driven to “create art,” or to “help people,” or to “make money.” They are driven to lessen the burden of the unbearable disparity between their conscious and unconscious minds, and so to achieve peace. (David Mamet, *Three Uses of the Knife*)

David Mamet believes art is that which presses past the rational into the bizarre (50). If that is the case then the thesis show is a confrontation of the possible bizarre within the dialogue of rational American Politics. Political speech as a theatre expertly battles the unattainable through terms like Freedom, War on Poverty, Growing for Tomorrow, and Defense. This last theatrical device solves, and heightens the need for,

‘second act problems’ through mystifying and clouding the objective in terminology.

Defense needs no intended counter. Defense is an activator because it utilizes people’s natural ability to fill in the plot. With what Hitchcock termed The *MacGuffin*, the viewer enters the room already possessing fears of the unknown, fears of inadequacy and co-dependence on a support system in which their defensive trust is passed (President, Military, God, Mother, Architect, Entertainment). And as Hitchcock taught us the more vague a *MacGuffin* (desire, thrust) the more the viewer can develop the plot internally.

In *Defense is the Best Defense*, I align myself more with artist/mythmaker Joseph Beuys than with Duchamp and Warhol’s appropriated cool, calm irony. Yes the show delves into appropriation to highlight our already existent dialogue of contemporary art slowly catching up to entertainments speed and hype. But more importantly it bridges personal and universal fears of the unknown and societies wish to take matters into their own hands. It is another installment of my personal mythology clouding in a mix of Hollywood induced terms and devices. Which fear is from my real life and which exists due to something witnessed and absorbed in television? Does that honestly matter anymore?

I am talking about art in terms of drama due to my absorption of David Mamet, of Games, or Theories. Like a journey in a foreign country terms are re-learned and languages morph based on context. I do not believe that art must be discussed in only art terms, nor that it must find new languages to simplify explanations. Vito Acconci’s language stems from text analysis, yet artists understand his major thrusts, motives, and questions. It is writing/drawing making through these languages that excited me, or

already existing languages used in a surprising way that seemed applicable. It seems absurd to attempt to separate my multiple influential interests. My work is a byproduct of trying to understand the world in which I live and therefore must utilize those parts of the world.

#### **1.4 Defensive Process**

Once a journey is designed, equipped, and put in process, a new factor enters and takes over. A trip, a safari, an exploration, is an entity, different from all other journeys. It has personality, temperament, individuality, and uniqueness. A journey is a person in itself; no two are alike. And all plans, safeguards, policing, and coercion are fruitless. We find after years of struggle that we do not take a trip; a trip takes us . . . In this a journey is like marriage. The certain way to be wrong is to think you control it. (Steinbeck)

Students viewing *Defense is the Best Defense* prior to the opening entered the gallery space launching into suggestions and critical opportunities to improve the work. Which begs the question, “Why do they feel one day before an opening that there is a chance to revamp, rework, and rethink the show?” Perhaps a great asset of my working method is that I am open to drastic changes. Everything I have made in the past two years could have been totally re-altered (most were) the night before they were shown. The last minute second guess is a wonderful tool called desperation. In a state of desperation the mind is tricked into a cooperation of subconscious and rational thought. Desperation was in the bathtub when “Eureka” was shouted. My show improved ten fold the day before it opened because I was open to anything. A boxing coach must repeat strategy and planning at every round, because once punches start flying desperation takes over. I leave myself open to drastic changes: to influences ready to be filtered and absorbed.

People don't look at art to see beautiful pictures. They look at art to see the moment when someone turned off their rational brain and came to an unexpected and totally improbable solution thereby making the viewer envious. When I hear, "Oh I wish I could draw well," I interpret that to mean, "I wish I could feel a creative moment once in a while."

For some time now, the dramatic tendency to mentally restructure my "life story" has led to countless discoveries of a universal need for theatre. Theatre in the broadest definition reinterprets the world to centralize actions around us: grandiose and necessary actions to learn life lessons and personalize the impersonal world around. In *Defense*, the dramatic event is making art when real issues should be discussed. The self-induced desire to take a stand for something, to change things/ help people is being critiqued. I know art cannot save anyone, help anyone, or fix the world. Therein lies its power; the miniscule playground of battle in art must have no real consequences to remain art. A director paid twenty million to shoot the next Spiderman movie must entertain whereas an artist shooting the empire state building for eight hours is allowed to permeate the subconscious self through daydreaming about the temporality of light on glass, and reach the argument, "What does looking teach us?" It is the leisure-activated design of art, free from the problems of the world that let us examine the world. But to do so I must trick myself. I must take those steps into absurd connections to find a path of investigations that will allow genuinely universal truths to implode. The paradox is that it deals with things of the world but must be unbridled by the world.

## Chapter 2 WORKING PROCESS

For two years I have misunderstood my studio practice as separate from my daily interactions. I felt that by not making I was not working and therefore failing. I was far too critical of my need to rethink and digest ideas to make informed work. Too often I played down the side projects as being tests, experiments, and coping strategies. Now I feel they are my major focus.

### 2.1 Half of the time the screen is black

The physical byproduct of my practice appears in bursts much like my large investigations happen mainly in small uncontrollable flourishes. After a performance, one week will usually go by before I begin again into a process that resembles anything one would call a studio practice. During that week of seemingly non-work I feel so hyper aware of stimulus that to define, section, choose, or organize the excitement around me would mean I was missing out on a huge absorption opportunity. After a performance I see a month to two months of work in the context of grander questions. It is a time of connections becoming apparent without my force. I pay attention as best I can during those moments. The reality of deadlines, timeframes, and obligations seem to rest on the back burner. Slowly, usually five to six days later the feeling is gone and I start writing again. I start doodling the same questions at the heading of pages. What am I making? Who is my audience? What is the story? Where are you going to take them? Are you

going to take them or lead them? What do you need to see in the world? And these lead to research of some obscure sparkle from the previous week. It is in no way mystical. I just remember one thing that did not seem important and now seems vital. How do you make a work about your father without mentioning him? How do you make a work about Cheese? What if monkeys could use power tools? How do you get ten marching bands to walk through each other?

Or perhaps I work in bursts because I am satiated. The video, the drawing, the conversation centered my questions into acceptable forms and I don't feel the tugging desire to make anything else. Whatever the reason, half of the time I am absorbing the world, filtering, recompressing and gathering energy to release.

When the strip of movie film passes the light of the projector a small metal holder stops the frame in front of the camera. After that frame has been illuminated the holder jerks the filmstrip through and holds a small section of black: the in between frame filler. If our eyes were fast enough we would see picture, black, picture, black, picture, black for an hour and a half. But we miss those blackouts; we assume the slightly different photographs are linked together to form a series of motion. Our mind fills in the gaps of the film by our eyes holding on to the residual image of the last frame until the next frame is illuminated.

If I could answer every question about my work I would stop making it. A movie that wraps up all the loose ends is entertainment only and is not art. A space without room for questions or viewer entrances and exits does not interest me. I hope a work or work as a verb will never end. I desire to keep the game continuous. To keep investigating and to

keep finding that dangerous exciting moment of discovery are what drive my practice. I design conflicts that are unsolvable because those are the spaces where learning about art happens. Sometimes I get lost in fashionable work, coolness, theory and design. But by reinvestigating my process and resources with each new project the opportunity for discovery grows exponentially.

## 2.2 Painting Games

No one can play a game alone. One cannot be human by oneself. There is no selfhood where there is no community. We do not relate to others as the persons we are; we are who we are in relating to others. (James Carse, 37)

I needed to paint to look like I was asking those questions. Most days I painted what looked like a tortured artists mind. Sometimes the working actually led to discoveries. My notion of art making relied on two things, making something for other artists to see my complicated mind and making something that would entertain enough to be sold. The journey into wanting to make art without such focus on product/audience relationship was the best work I made.

## 2.3 Magician's Academy

The tools of art have too long been confined to the studio. (Robert Smithson)

It would be easy and efficient to spend my days in the studio shutting off the world around and focusing on problems that only relate to my decisions. But what would that be? Why would I spend two years asking questions that I only heard? To have answers that only I could understand? In this way graduate studies become some sort of Magic School. Your magician teacher locks you in a room and say, "Now, pull a rabbit out of your hat." After three weeks you step out and to their amazement have a rabbit in your

arms. “Great,” they say, “now try a duck!” Two weeks later you produce three burned animals, a new breed of fungus and a baby duck. No one says, how did you figure out how to make a fungus, or ask what happened to those three burned animals, they just say that is an amazing duck and congratulations you are now a magician. So you leave school being able to pull a duck and a rabbit out of your hat and have no idea why or what it means.

Someone starts crying in front of you at a bus stop and the only reaction you have is to do a magic trick. You haven’t figured out how to relate to the person and they get scared when animals start popping out of your hat. You didn’t have the ability to introduce your trick, or tell them why you were going to pull that rabbit out. They call the cops and you run home in fear.

After piles of dead rabbits surround your house and you don’t have a job to pay someone to clean out the carcasses you realized that maybe someone should have come into your studio to ask you why do you want to pull rabbits out of a sewn piece of cloth worn on a gentleman’s head. Maybe you should have not relied on figuring out how to pull the rabbit out so much, and wondered to what end? Why does anyone want to be given a rabbit? What does a rabbit do for someone in the twenty first century who can’t clean it, cook it, feed it, or make a shawl out of it? Maybe there was something bigger that you needed to find that couldn’t possible fit in that silly hat?

## **2.4 Chemistry Set**

Never give a chemistry set to someone who wants to make a batch of cookies. Eventually with enough practice they will make cookies. Cookies from repetitive actions and processes with the aid of pages and pages of instructions. Their notes and diagrams of

formulas will be precise and without error. They will have compiled the data on a computer system that churns out a secret cookie recipe that can be reproduced by every child across the suburbs that got that chemistry set for Christmas.

Toll House was a bed and breakfast on the eastern seaboard that brought in women coming in to meet their husbands as they returned from World War I. One night, so the legend goes, an angry, exhausted kitchen staff member decided not to melt the chunks of chocolate for the chocolate cookies and cakes. Instead she threw the bits of dark chocolate in to the mixers in distraught. The cake was horrible according to witnesses, but the cookies were amazing. Toll House morsels, and chocolate chip cookies were invented by an angry staff member who didn't want to follow a recipe, didn't care about the results, and who probably felt pretty happy with her intent of destroying these ecstatic wives' evening.

I don't cook from recipes; I don't make art from recipes. Some of my best decisions come when I have a deadline, or a show approaching too quickly. When I don't have time to think about melting the chocolate the results are always more interesting. Weather they will be successful or not, I have no idea, but I do know that they will be interesting.

## **2.5 Three Dead Bodies Lying on the Ground**

Your work is to discover your work  
And then with all your heart  
To give yourself to it.  
(Dhammapada)

Five years ago I wrote a play and directed three actors to perform it for Theatre 2 in Harrisonburg, Virginia. The title, “Three Dead Bodies Lying on the Ground,” came from an observation my mother made about what her children looked like while watching TV. As an art student approaching theatre without any knowledge of theatre production, design, theory, or history, I took what I knew. I devoured texts about Fluxus and the Dada movement. At the time, it appeared to me that the movements were most interested in recycling texts. My Indie rock friends were all into recycling physical waste and I never agreed with their devotion to the world and found recycling words as a much more intriguing idea. No one was doing it, to my knowledge. Ignorance was bliss in this case and I sat in my bedroom with two radios on, a television-playing channel 12 news and fifteen books circling my typewriter. Hands at the keys I would glance at pages, copy lines of history, fiction, film noir, and weather reports. I wasn’t writing anything, only gathering lines. After 20 pages of one enormous paragraph with words incomplete and completely misspelled I realized that the greatest achievement of this process was my typing speed. Twenty pages in an hour and a half are no small feat. I presented the play to faculty members including a four-page document about the collage mentality of contemporary life and numerous insults about why theatre needs to be more like ‘real’ life. My play was rejected until I had a faculty sponsor who would stand behind my ability to materialize the project.

Stuart Downs, gallery director of James Madison University, heard about this sophomore writing his own play that looked like a garbled mess of concrete poetry and agreed to sponsor me. In my mind he wanted to see the project happen and watch my

amazing play. In reality he loved the idea of a recycled text and wanted to read what happened when you didn't filter influences and just wrote what you saw and heard. He was never in the audience, and never showed me his collection of performance art videos until the next summer. He explained his hopes for me as an artist to find my voice without influences of history, a folk artist making work that would be just like work going on in New York without even knowing it.

Writers tell me that you can hear what people read in the words they make. I think you can actually find the sources they copied without their knowledge. Writing bibliographies has always been difficult for me not because of the format, or because I don't want to acknowledge the sources where words are taken from, but I feel that it is necessary to make a bibliography that includes every influential text, conversation, project, artwork and media that got you to where you are. Yes the village raises the child and the village should be in the works cited list.

The artworks, and books for that matter, that influence me come from a flank. They don't attack the reader with a forward motion of convincing them what is right. They usually state their purpose as something entirely different than what comes out through careful investigation. Work that sidesteps does better than work that marches.

My father stapled the first drawing I have ever made inside a small tan book about my life from 1981 –1999. The drawing is a pencil rendering of *The Snorks*, a Saturday morning cartoon about underwater critters. I wasn't drawing anything from my emotional center, or making something new. The drawing is an attempt to show my father what these

underwater people look like. Isn't this drawing the same thing as writing a play/performance piece from countless sources? Isn't this the same thing as watching Spalding Gray and writing a lecture about how to be a good storyteller? If so than Warhol was right when he said, "You make one work of art your whole life and the rest of the time you try to fix it."

## Chapter 3 PERFORMANCE NOTES

Performance practice involves developing a personal set of parameters to gage involvement with the world. A performance artist will eventually need to make a decision of the work will be entirely personal, private, and self-exploratory, or if the work will attempt to filter the world through personal actions and words. In the past two years my performance work has not only informed my videos, philosophy on art, and critical knowledge, but it has helped to shape my understanding of the world around. It has opened up an experimental viewfinder that allows for a more serious set of rules with which to play.

### 3.1 I'm Looking at You

What is at stake here is the 'fourth look' . . . that is to say, any articulation of images and looks which brings into play the position and activity of the viewer also destabilizes that position and puts it at risk . . . When the scopic drive is brought into focus, the viewer also runs the risk of becoming the object of the look.  
(Paul Willemen, 52)

I know I'm looking at you looking at me, looking at you, thinking I'm watching you wonder if I'm looking at you watching me. I know all this when I face the camera. I spend hours trying to forget it before the filming begins but it keeps popping up. When showing my videos at screening I saw them look at the physical me watching the video of me watch them. When they knew that the video me remembered that this was going to be shown to an audience they lost interest. They saw the realization in video Ryan's eyes and decided the knowing joke wasn't funny anymore. Someone called it "Ryan Mug-again."

Mug-again was self-conscious and that showed on the face. He knows when he is being funny or too serious. People hate Mug-again. But I find something wonderful in him. He is not trying to hide a reality he knows will soon happen. He is not trying to act any certain way; he is just reacting to an honest feeling. Perhaps it breaks the illusion or the theatrical artifice, but at least it is attempting to be more real. If performance art is about owning the self then shouldn't solo video art be about that as well? Shouldn't it at some point show you the back curtain and point out the man behind it? It isn't needed every time, once or twice is enough to remind people of the artifice. Sometimes the frailty of the actions or structure would completely be overshadowed by the new space developed by the returned gaze. It is in this simultaneous simulacra and reality that Mug-again lives. He stares out the screen destroying the proposed reality of the always robotic 'other eye.' And develops the new "I" that is not about an image of a person or about a person who once was in front of the camera but the metaphysical "I" of simultaneous watching and re-watching of itself, the audience, and the reactions of both. The audience for a split second becomes the "I" and then returns to audience. "I" know your looking at me now.

### **3.2 Live Discoveries**

I stand before people as if knowing something they all need. My palms are shacking and my voice bunched up ready to explode. I realize they are my peers and as such this is for us both. They have something to offer me. Sometimes teachers from the past creep into my voice and the room is thrown back to remind me of things I don't want to say. By now they are all staring at me. They aren't looking at an image, or a representation, they are just staring at me move and talk to them. I keep thinking walk out

the problem, don't swear too much, keep to the task, and forget their faces and just talk like you want to. If you could make anything right now would it be this performance? Normally I answer by the time it is over. I get caught up in the whirlwind and the spinning of stories. I remember saying somewhere towards the end, "Where am I?" No one answers and we move on to the next topic. When it is literal they laugh, when I mess up they laugh. We formed a contract. I am here to entertain third, educate and eliminate second, and to show them respect first. That was the agreement we both signed when the performance started. The reason people keep coming to them is because of that respect. I won't hold them longer than necessary. I won't shove them into a corner feeling guilty, or make them wish performance art never existed. I may be the only performance piece they ever see and as such I have to leave them in good speaking terms. I know the history and the aura of performance. I have seen the videos and been to enough to know the usual ideology.

I have seen performance artists who started as musicians, actors, playwrights, sculptors, painters, crafts people, and I know how all these backgrounds affect their work. After spending a month viewing every available video listed under performance in the library I realized what I want to make, and what I don't ever want to see again. I tried the Paul McCarthy thing, thought I could be Spalding Gray, attempted to figure out Joseph Beuys, laughed at Burden and Rist, took notes on Judy Chicago. I listened and watched these historic works and came to the conclusion that performance is about owning what you do. Owning it into its extreme. I realized I responded to the portions where honesty and directness were genuine. The moments when voice and space seemed to need each

other were haunting. Performance isn't theatre, though it can use its tools, it isn't dance, poetry, lecturing, or sculpting. Performance is being aware of the artifice while reacting to the intentions of the proposed work. In its design there is no fourth wall. It took me a long time to realize that no one wants to see an overblown, over zealous public speaker. They just wanted to hear what I had to say provided the contract was met.

### 3.3 Halftime Board-game

Investigations began through research of game theory and Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*. After numerous structures and presentational address formats were considered the halftime speeches of football coaches exemplified the formal and psychological issues most literally. The stress of continuing a losing game, the humility of playing a game not worth continuing related directly with my personal impressions of making art in a world destined to ignore art. The spectacle of news, sports, war, and television overpowered my private struggle of keeping an alternative gallery functioning.

Secondary research involved re-watching and studying *Hoosiers*, *Blue Chips*, and *Full Metal Jacket*. The aggressive posturing of the characters intermingled with their total love of those they coached made for interesting performances. It reminded me of wanting to hug the public for entering Orange Door Gallery and simultaneously slap them for not purchasing local art. Several scripts were written and rehearsed revolving around attempting to motivate artists to continue working. This direct of a reference seemed insulting to the possibilities of a small performance. By this time the notion of 'game' rested only on the format being a reference to sports. The idea was set aside to work on a different project.

Talking into my camera in an early video piece I started rambling about the need for better reality television shows. I never edited the short video into a finished piece, but later in the week I started a list of improved reality shows that took preexisting games and made them into shows with real people. One of those was called “Live Clues” which was a live action version of the Milton Bradley game of Clue. I tried this idea on my fellow students and strangers and every one of them agreed it would be very popular, but how would someone win if everyone around them were dead? That made me develop a loose set of rules and actually research the board game of clue. It was a natural progression to think that in the show there would need to be instruction for these contestants on how to murder people, enough to motivate them to blackmail and attack normal humans which led to the development of a ‘murder motivational speaker’ which I found much more interesting than pitching a new reality show to NBC. So the show idea was dropped and the lecture performance was pulled back off the shelf and dusted off into the final performance. That is probably the moment when I began to appreciate my process, understand what I was working towards, and could make just enough for people to catch a glimpse of it. Some days I feel like I make video and performance so people have to make an effort to see the work: the gathering of influences and ideas manifest in real time.

### **3.4 Eating My Childhood**

After the performance *Soup Lecture*, sitting with audience members, one student stated that they got to eat my childhood. Later in Chicago I restated this line at the end of my second performance of *Soup Lecture*. This time after the exhibition a gallery owner who lived in the city stated “thank you for letting us eat your history.” When I approached

the gallery owner later in the week my press release on the show contained both remarks. Now no one ate my childhood, or my history. They ate soup while hearing anecdotal family stories most of which have been shaped and formed to give the impression of being off the cuff remarks.

If we approach these events historically we see a single line: a chain reaction. If we step further back we see ripples intersecting other ripples that intersect other ripples each with their own strengths and destinations. We see a building of a new mythology through the simple act of cooking and talking with fellow human beings. The heightened experience of absorbing details of the mythology relies on theatrical conventions. I stand before you in low light, you focus on the performance and leave time, and the outside world for the ones I reconstruct, your experiences during the performance are orchestrated and paced to make you feel privy to deep secrets of my life.

But there are many more performances happening as a direct reaction and synthesis of this simple construct. The stories told to people outside of the audience become performances, and theatrical dialogues to recount the emotions, events, and reactions of the first performance. This recount is a new performance. Any “re” activity is a new performance. The remembering is a new performance. The re-describing to others is a new performance. The re-contextualizing of this whole episode (from performance of *Soup Lecture I* to this paper) is a new performance that has involved great numbers of episodes and smaller dialogues all to arrive at a belief that any “re” activity is art making. That art making is the work, not the physical singular object/time period but a larger rhizomatic system defined here as Art.

### 3.5 Not Performing

A person can consist of performing (adhering to the terms of) a particular element (a rule, a space, a previous performance, another person.) The performer can balance between tactics – selecting an immediate action from his available repertoire – and strategy – choosing where he wishes to be at a future.

The performance can be set up as a learning process. When the performer makes a move, the consequences of his behavior can control his next move. The use of feedback can steady and bring into unison one stage of the performance, after which can come change as new material is imported and adapted to.

The performer can work as a producer; the performance pattern can be linear – a series of additions of material and energy. Or he can work as a consumer; the pattern can be radial – lines of material and energy converging on him for his use. *Adaptive lines of action* -- Vito Acconci

Many times people, friends, or other artists will ask me to perform some public task that seems to be humorous. They want me to touch a stranger on the arm, stand next to someone and start humming, make a joke, tell a story, or simply to make a fool of myself. Because I am a performance artist they feel that this is an appropriate behavior. He does performances so he must like performing for people. Quite the opposite. I hate performing for people unless I have decided to perform. Asking me to do some senseless action would be to ask a painter to make a drawing of a duck in front of them right there on the spot! It is rude and presumptive. I make performances to have a journey through writing, researching, notation, rehearsal, retelling, and finally performing. I find some glimmer of understanding in that way of working. I will be a clown in a performance only when I have decided that it would be best for the piece.

In a performance titled *Menu Lecture* I ordered Chinese take out for the audience toward the end of the performance. Many people laughed while I talked on the phone to a

hard of hearing, partial English speaking woman about egg rolls and prices. I was petrified. Since childhood I have had an extreme fear of calling a food order in. It is a phobia that I felt could be cured in front of a live audience. If I did not tell them that I was scared to do this than perhaps it would just happen and I would be fine. The rule I established for myself made me balance in a complex space of real fear from the audiences understanding of the whole performance, a phobia of take out ordering, and consequences of the possibility of this performance to cure my fear. That dangerous ground allowed me to call and complete the order. It was a physical adaptation to a real stimulus. The audience saw ordering take out as a beautiful ritual filled with moments of humor, intimacy, and changes in voice only attainable through a difficult phone conversation. The artwork for me was an internal appreciation of an objective form to learn more about myself. I still have difficulty sometimes ordering Chinese food on the phone but I know that it can be done. I have seen it happen. I have the memory of my accomplishment etched in with the memory of clapping strangers appreciating me getting them food and growing before them.

## Chapter 4 Walking in Circles

Almost everyday I walk to a studio that I might not work in. Something tells me to keep going, keep working, and keep being in the studio. For two years I have not had the pleasure of a car to carry me to school on rainy or snowy days. It is only after the year is over that I appreciate all the discoveries I have made while walking.

### 4.1 Walking as Spying

“Above the Crisper”

I would like to make mayonnaise  
 From scratch, and hide  
 A bit of mustard in it, not enough to taste.  
 It'll be my fridge spy,  
 Reporting on the ham sandwich scandal.  
 The brands are too biased.

If you don't have anything to say start walking, a conversation will begin a block away. Once outside you can comment on the weather, “Boy, I thought it would be darker out here.” Which isn't about the weather but will get you there soon. I've only seen two woodpeckers in my life, and both were spotted walking.

Going for a walk was once termed ambulating. Even the word is designed to allow space to look about. When a friend spots you on the street and asks what you are doing you can reply, “Going for a walk.” Not groceries, a movie, a flower, or a goal, just a walk. The indeterminable thing is the present objective. The verb becomes noun and in that shift allows for new experiences. A walk acts as an “art” or to put it another way walk (noun word) is the same as art (verb).

It is about re-seeing the world. Tricking yourself into believing that you are the spy hunting for leaks in the system. The stepping motion is so known that the mind will wonder around corners and build narratives out of disparate details.

While walking, I have written many poems: some walking in circles in my house, some on the way to school. The walking alters my rhythm of speech and changes the poems forms. I try to jot them down with scraps from my pockets but most of them I have forgotten or lost.

#### **4.2 Walking by writing**

“Golf is the best way to ruin a perfectly good walk in the forest” – Winston Churchill

In fifth grade my English teacher taught us how to make diagrams to structure our papers. In graduate school I have relied on these as both an art making practice and to aid my other work. My video pieces sometimes start from a free association in a flowchart web, my lectures almost always begin by tacking pages of text to the wall and building a flow from disjointed pieces of information. They allow for a freedom of thought that a structured single lined writing lacks. Sitting by my desk is one such flowchart for this section of the paper.

While my father was in the UVA hospital my architect brother walked me through Jefferson’s Gardens that surround the ‘quad.’ He informed me that Jefferson thought gardens should be designed to walk out mental problems. The pacing of turns and intersections should allow the walker to change mental direction and physical direction simultaneously. Students were supposed to follow their professors’ footsteps through the gardens physically noticing the change in arguments by the change of motion. I don’t

believe that my writings allow for a noticeable change in arguments but they do require a greater deal of time to fill in the gaps. Much like walking down a street differs from driving down a street the flowchart allows details to rest more comfortably beside each other. The connections happen by our choosing verses the presentational view of a windshield.

### **4.3 Pacing**

Things started to change in December when one afternoon I realized that pacing around my studio was more important than making any object. The supremacy of experience beat the supremacy of thing. Later I went home to walk in a circle on my front porch for three hours. I asked a lot of hard questions, and answered them in a call and response minister/congregation style. I have sense done this exercise numerous times when focus seems impossible. It is a self-absorbed dance much like traditional studio practice. It takes the place of a journal that never gets re-read.

My studio has been called many things. Joe Fife said it was a good place to take a nap, when it was clean. For a month I called it the “War Room” after a quote from Dr. Strangelove. “Gentleman, you can’t fight here. This is the War Room.” It has been a weigh station of junk, a sleeping quarter, a partial home, an email station, a floor to spread papers on, a quiet place to scream in, and a window to look out of. I have made many videos in the room, though not many needed to be made in there. I have shown many shorts to visiting artists who first looked at the things hanging on the walls as if those objects would give them the answers. I didn’t want to make images because that signifies some religious experience in my mind. I couldn’t make a painting because that was

walking away from the problem. Most days I keep the door open, hoping someone will give me an excuse to leave. I go there almost daily, clean it out every three weeks, pile papers on the floor around the parameter, and loose important things in the piles. As this semester approached I quickly decided to leave the studio as much as possible. I started researching in the library, reading in quiet corners. I started writing at home Tuesdays and Thursdays to avoid people with computer questions. Fridays were quiet enough to get logistical tasks done, like ask for references, pay bills, turn in papers, and visit with faculty.

I am working walking to school. I start asking questions after my second cup of coffee in my home. I write out ideas during lunch while absorbing conversations in restaurants or outside. The majority of my work has been talking. I converse all day. I believe it has been good art, those talks with students and strangers about the world of ideas floating around my head. I act nervous perpetually when approached by someone who seems confident about his or her work. It is a simple theatre game designed to get students off balance enough to bypass the rational mind. I hope by our conversations end they are asking themselves some hard questions. Richard Roth said that perhaps my job at school was to shake things up. Get people excited and get the wondering. I feel this was my best accomplishment in graduate school.

## Chapter 5 Thoughts in the Box

My journals have kept me going through the process of making the thesis show. Many of these writings I have edited and reformed into complete ideas. They are think-pieces about process, working, making, and the state of art. They are circular arguments that more accurately fit with my process of flowchart drawings. The title for this section comes from one of my first drawings made in the studio. Up near the top of the page of twenty two by thirty I wrote, “Need more edu-ma-cated thoughts in the box.” Under that, circled in puffy clouds, I wrote, “Get out while you can.” These writings are being reworked for a new performance lecture that I plan to take on the road to universities.

### 5.1 Explaining Chicago

As of the time of this writing this is the thirty-first version of Chicago I have told. I have over twenty of them recorded in detail, and have vague memories of the other stories about Chicago I have talked about when people asked, “How was Chicago?”

Explaining a city is building the city for the listener. Every detail determines untold ideas such as road size, traffic patterns, smells, and local color. What the storyteller chooses to give determines the design and inhabitants of the city. My mother’s version of Chicago is cleaner and safer than the one I told my drawing class.

Being a tourist is the closest universal activity I know to Performance Art. It requires motivation and set goals. There is a result that usually differs greatly from the intention. No rules are known, no customs predetermined. The spaces are all-new and

force the tourist to become acute. Senses are awake, and the emotions constantly swished about by sights and smells. Who you are changes with each person encountered. To a young child on the train I am, and will always be, a college teacher. To a businessman I was an actor, to a ticket taker I was a tourist, and to a man sitting in the lunch counter I will be an avid reader and lecturer. To an artist I am Ryan Mulligan the performance guy. To the lady who runs the Bella Rose I am a big tipper from the south. I owned each of these portions of my body and maintained a hyper aware sense that I was a guest to this city, who would go on and rebuild it for others.

## **5.2 Calvinball**

A game developed to continue play indefinitely. Its sole purpose is to make play ceaseless. Small finite rules and games inside the overarching principle of infinite play allow for day to day responsibilities to have no effect on the larger more important task of always playing calvinball. The rules are reworked, rewritten, restated, redesigned so that players (Calvin and Hobbs) will never be allowed to win. The game relies on preconceived notions of sport interpolated through an acceptance of any new idea as a positive challenge to the game. But neither is attempting to win. They are playing seriously and with extreme dedication, but their goal is not points or beating the other player, their goal is to always exist as a player. To transfer the outcome from win/lose in a specific time frame to playing as living.

## **5.3 Illustration of Rocks**

Getting out of bed tonight I realized that somewhere along the line my memory started failing. I remember the smell of my first apartment but not the door or the reason I

put a TV in the bathroom. I remember climbing through the window of my second apartment after locking the keys inside but can't remember how I got to the second story window. I have a vague sense of my birthday party where two people gave me the same action figure, but can't remember either of their names.

Is it the time that kills the memory, or is it the lack of stories and details surrounding the event that cloud these memories. Three years ago my therapist, whose name I can't remember as well, said that to remember people you must build context for them. Perhaps with retelling these events their trivial mythology becomes concrete enough to aid my wondering mind. What I mean to say is that without some definitive details the history of incidents becomes so muddled that it can never be focused again. Warhol said we make one perfect painting our whole lives and spend the rest of the time trying to reproduce it.

I find comfort in associations, one picture singled out leading to story after story. A practice that started after watching some Joe Peschi movie lead me to collecting rocks to keep memories. I have a rock from my brother's proposal at thanksgiving to his wife. I have a rock from waiting in a parking lot to pick up my girlfriend after her meditation retreat. The rocks act as selective memory filled objects that keep enough clarity in the physical world for the stories to evolve slower. Every story evolves but most evolve into a disappearance. But this is far too limited. The actual story told (stories only exist if thought and told) reforms as ripples of affect that exist long after the story is forgotten.

## 5.4 Problem Solving

There are at least two kinds of games. One could be called finite, the other infinite. A finite game is played for the purpose of winning, an infinite game for the purpose of continuing the play. (Carse 3)

When applying for real world jobs (receptionist, waiter, research assistant) I usually say my art has taught me extensive problem solving skills. Dealing with galleries, non-profit organizations, installing, public relations, scheduling, graphic design, working with skilled technicians, filing forms, and research. But what about the physical art work? All the day-to-day dealings with the necessary requirements to make a show happen have taught me plenty, but the work has solved only self-inflicted problems. Making art is less about problem solving and more about problem making. Example: I need to be able to hang a six hundred pound piece of concrete from a non load-bearing ceiling. What if anything can this art problem be applied? Theoretically if you work out the problem you solved something and achieved something, but it wouldn't have been a problem if you didn't make the decision to build the art in the first place. This counterintuitive making of useless things is one reason an artistic practice is so important. We are not doing brain surgery and yet day after day we study, relearn, develop, write, discuss, and make things that our peers call great accomplishments.

## 5.5 Theatre of Viewing a Work

I take the knife to cut the bread to have the strength to go to work,  
 I take the knife to shave my face so my woman will kiss me at night,  
 And if I catch her with another man I'll use that knife to cut out her heart.  
 (Lead Belly)

The art is a three-act play that happens when anyone views a work. We approach it with our entire baggage ready to see what we know. In act two a problem arises when our preconceived notions are challenged or we do not “like” what we see. Or perhaps we do like what we see but the information will still, if the work is art and not merely decoration, will force us to an impasse. In act three we will either believe this is art and our focus will be widened or we choose to not accept what is presented thereby continuing act two indefinitely until such time as we revisit the work through another experience in the world.

All great works of art force this play out of viewers. Lead Belly understood this theatre when he wrote the lyrics to the song above. He aggressively allowed the listener to fill an object with vital importance. My videos allow for that departure during “intermission,” and as such are not an attempt to change, develop, or teach people. They are more like drawings than paintings. A drawing presents a proposition in terms people usually understand. People know paper, pencil, simple colors, and the distance from hand to eye to page. A painting (in my experience) makes a statement instead of a proposition, in terms hidden in art history and mystified by the process. It is not an attempt to reinvent the wheel. I am not attempting work for PBS or music videos. I am making propositions about my relationship to the world through a now universal form. It is nothing new, just applicable to my wishes. I have always been interested in building bridges to allow access, I feel confident that a major “art” I am doing is recycling common arguments and debates through my simple lens. We are desperate to see the play come to fruition, and I feel it can if the audience is not told that they can never understand the work.

Keep it simple stupid should come up in contemporary artists minds once in a while, though it is necessary to remember that the work is made only for yourself no matter how much you respect the audience. It is a wonderful tug of war with which to be dealing. A great territory for discoveries.

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APPENDIX



*Defense is the Best Defense: Training (Video Still)*



*Defense is the Best Defense: Waiting* (Digital Photo 4x6)



*Defense is the Best Defense: Speeches (Video Still)*



*Defense is the Best Defense: Speeches (Video Still)*



*Defense is the Best Defense* (Installation Shot)



*Defensive Tour* Performance: Inns Of Virginia Richmond (Video Still)

VITA

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