 Constructs: Truth, Lies, and Humanity

Nathan Hansen
Virginia Commonwealth University

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CONSTRUCTS: TRUTH, LIES AND HUMANNITY

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

By

NATHANIEL BARRY HANSEN-HILLIARD
BFA, Texas Tech University, 2008
MFA, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2010

Director: WILLIAM HAMMERSLEY
ASSOCIATE PROFFESSOR, CRAFT/MATERIAL STUDIES, SCHOOL OF THE ARTS

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
May, 2010
Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge several people who have helped me achieve my version of success, as an individual, and as an artist. First, thanks to my grandparents, Mary and Hilton Hilliard both have been a constant source of encouragement. Thanks to my best friend Will Mack, who among many things waited during the hours I raced, and drove my wasted body home. I would like to thank the Clarkes who have kept me well fed both literally and emotionally. Also thanks to my committee William Hammersley, Susan Iverson, and Jack Wax who have helped me refine my motivations for making. Finally, thanks to my family, friends and faculty whom have supported during my time at VCU.
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Abstract

CONSTRUCTS: TRUTH, LIES, and HUMANITY

By Nathaniel Barry Hansen-Hilliard, 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, 2010.

Major Director: William Hammersley
Associate Professor, Craft/ Material Studies Department, School of the Arts

This thesis is a discussion of my ideas, struggles and outcomes experienced during the making of my two bodies of work, Devices and Relics. These two bodies of work explore fleeting moments, the intrinsic values of labor and imagination with reference to sedentary living and labor in contemporary American society.
Introduction

Since 2002 I have been dedicated to both endurance athleticism and the production of art objects for my personal fulfillment. During this period I have been actively involved in both cultures, often requiring many sacrifices in other areas of my life. It was the balance I found that brought to light many themes and questions that drive my day to day life and studio practice. When working, riding my bike, running, or engaged in any repetitive physical activity I gain a unique awareness of myself physically and mentally. In the moments where I hear my feet pounding on the pavement or see shavings of wood parting from their whole, I unintentionally meander through my conscious and sub conscious. Like a prospector sifting for clarity instead of gold, physical engagement washes away the clutter in my mind, allowing a brief but unobstructed glimpse of clarity. The answers to questions which hours before were beyond me, become obvious. These periods of meditation hold a ritualistic importance when seeking clarity within my daily life. My mind at times has been so dependent on this ritual sifting that I have on occasion trained without respect for my body’s limitations, resulting in two stress fractures, malnutrition, torn muscles, and damage to the nerves in my left foot. The moderate pain I feel from sore joints and muscles as result of training act as a reminder for the distance I have traveled. It is literally a
reminder of mileage completed, but also as a metaphorical toll I am compelled to pay each day as testament to a promise I made myself as a child, vowing to live life well. Paradoxically, as my training accumulates it reflects the clarity I find mentally, which heightens the appreciation I feel for fleeting moments and ubiquitous but vital objects and production processes which manifest a comfortable standard of living within contemporary American society.

As a child I developed an intention to live my life well, blithely unaware of the indefinable, highly individualized, and ever changing aspects of the goal I had set myself, yet compelled to do so. Prior to triathlon and making as personal outlets I had camping, weightlifting, and a high school job with long hours of sun and manual labor, which I loved. It is in my nature to be curious but to lack organization. As result, in my own way of researching, I seek out anything related to the nature of humans including but not limited to extreme endurance sports, literature both fiction and non-fiction, science related to mind/body, philosophy and objectifying my ideas. This process of thought, research, realization and repetition has resulted in discoveries and ideas that are the foundation of my conceptual motivation for art making and the beginnings for the two bodies of work, Devices and Relics.
Devices

I hear the shot gun blast, the clock starts. Instinctively, like a stampede of cattle we run. In an instant I am in the water. All sound stops. I turn to breath and hear the splashing of many people. I am a fish, in a tight knit school. I slide between bodies, feeling only kicking feet and groping hands. It's terrifying, stopping is not possible. As I exit the water I rise to my feet, plunged into a world of sound and air. I run, dizzied by this abrupt change from water to land, locate my bike, and ride. I ride with purpose and intent, wholly focused. All my energy is spent with reference to the clock. I push and pull my legs round, and begin to move without conscious thought. I become machine built of flesh, a laborer fed on will.

Participation in triathlon events acted as a catalyst for the creation of Devices. I have inexplicably fused together the dynamic of triathlon, my personal life, my process of making and my conceptual motivations for expression. Triathlon race routes are geographically circular, competitors often begin and end in the same location after having traveled for hours. These events are completed individually, and without breaks. I bring these qualities of triathlon to the systems that the Devices function upon.

As an undergraduate, I was building objects because of the pleasure the process brought me. The physical demands of woodworking and casting offered me the feeling of mental clarity I find in training. My first device, Machine (Fig. 1), asks for endless and
cyclical labor from its user providing the meditative experience I search for. While working as a woodshop assistant, I began to view the machines as tireless laborers, individual participants within a larger process. I identified with the machines as I understood myself while working. I labored with little care for personal purpose or eventual outcome, similar to Sisyphus endlessly but contently rolling the boulder up the hill.

Building on my ideas I created a stationary bike generator and later produced a video called *Generator*, depicting myself as rider. While sitting in darkness I slowly revved up the power the bulb received using the pedals on the bike, eventually aerobically climaxing and returning to a stop, leaving myself and the bike in darkness. I learned two lessons, one being a need to provide a primary (the feeling of actually doing something) or secondary experience (seeing something being done) for my audience. The audience’s orientation with the device is vital to comprehend the burden of the physical energy exerted. When these devices are experienced in person, videos seem pale by comparison. The second lesson is the direct transfer of power through the piece, which in a way, is a deeper investigation of lesson
one. In *Generator* I employ electricity as a system of power transfer that is understood through the nervous and explosive light cast by the bulb that I was powering, an indicator of my effort.

The systems I am building started to resemble the philosophic ideas I was investigating. My research was beginning to help frame the discussion I wanted to have and as a result the object entered a contemplative metaphorical pairing of life and labor. I wanted to test how increased scale would change the users and viewers responses and created *...Turn, Turn, Turn...* (Fig. 2). Referencing Sisyphus’s metaphorical boulder, I designed a closed system built of large burdensome parts. I found that by increasing the scale of my objects they became a stage for human interaction. The shift in scale spoke to the burden I aimed to create. Unforeseen was the added conceptual issue that was created from the rope walking up and down the spools while they were being turned. This technical problem forced the user to turn clock wise then counter clockwise keeping the rope centered on the spool. This added a reciprocal motion to the action of the user, changing the experience in a subtle but pleasant way. It heightened the absurd nature the piece, by requiring the user to noticeably ravel and unravel their own work. When using the device myself, the reciprocal motion allowed me to work, then stop, and work again reflectively.

Figure 2. *...Turn, Turn, Turn...* (Aerial)
Each system I built became increasingly specific in the type of labor I needed the user to perform. While the user’s labor is still not productive tangibly, the purpose for the labor was becoming ritualistic. I was not sure to what end my Devices were becoming ritualistic, but I knew this development was important to my ideas. The systems were evolving, adding a cleansing aspect that is stumbled upon though the users work. …Grind, Press, Grind, Press… is a stage consisting of a creation station (a press), a destruction station (a pencil sharpener like cutter), a soap cylinder, and a path linking each station (Fig. 3).

The stage is built for a single user, in this case myself, starting at the destruction station, grinding the soap cylinder down to shavings. The shavings are then carried to the creation station for pressing, returning them to their original form. I periodically ground and pressed soap in the weeks leading up the opening night of our candidacy show and labored in this process during the opening. While working, the soap would build up on my body and around the path between stations. It was an honest patina of build-up that told the story of my work even after I stopped. The elements of the stage, the soap and my labor in this system are an attempted discussion about life and labor. I am confused about the time we have
between birth and death. In my consideration of a seeming stark view of existence I
cannot help but wonder if the fact of death adds a reality check that is needed to
actually value moments that one day will end. So what then is the purpose? I do not
know. But I do enjoy the process of slowly working my way toward an inconceivable end.

Triathlons are a large aspect of my physical exploits, but I also greatly value rock climbing. The only multi-pitch climb (meaning one half length of rope vertically or one hundred feet per pitch) I have experienced was at White Horse Ledge in New Hampshire. This climb is five pitches or roughly five hundred fifty feet, which we would climb with traditional (TRAD) equipment. TRAD climbing utilizes little wedges and cams placed strategically in rock cracks creating anchors from which to hang. During the climb I expected to feel the exhilaration of being hundreds of feet up latched to the rock face with only my finger tips, ropes and little wedges. What I found was an unexpected relationship between myself, the ground, and the peak. The first fifty feet were nerve racking. I was painfully aware that if I fell there would be a lot of pain. I think part of my concern was that I could conceive the fifty feet to the ground. The further I made it up the face, the more my outlook shifted. Between one hundred fifty and four hundred fifty feet I spared little thought for the ground. I think my nerves relaxed because the distance between me and the ground was inconceivable. I felt a lot like an ant climbing a tree. The rock face is such a large scale in comparison to us, it was easy to imagine that we were not climbing at all, but actually lying, crawling horizontally across a bed of rock. I had no understanding of the top, and no fear for the
bottom. My mind and body were engrossed with the present moment. Eventually the end was in sight and in a weird way the intense emotions I had experienced at the bottom were back. Seeing the top of the cliff was like seeing the end of the world, I was immediately aware of gravity and the ground again.

When I reflect on this experience, I see myself climbing and remember the unexpected emotional transitions I went through between the bottom and top. When I think about my life, past and future, I often feel as if I am back on that cliff face. When I think back as far as I can I remember just flashes, images without context. They have become almost unfamiliar due to time and so many newer memories. Similarly the future holds so many possibilities and unknowns.

Considering this experience in relationship to my devices I thought how strange it would be to see a life’s duration, presented in a comprehensible scale. I wanted to rectify the short comings of my perception and build a machine that would allow me to see life from birth to death.

_Odometer_ is activated by the user’s use of a tempting handle (Fig. 4). I view my machines as literally complete without a user, but perhaps not completely whole conceptually. They are complete in the sense of construction, design, and potential for contemplation but are further deepened by the action of the user. The user provides a frame work for the machines potential and purpose. An odometer records the distance
traveled by your vehicle, an indicator of the prior use for the vehicle. *Odometer* measures the history of its use. The handle and arm are built in proportion to body mechanics. The natural construction of the human arm and the measurements of the machine arm promote the users turning of the crank at one revolution per second. This initial energy input is then directly transferred through many sets of pulleys ultimately, reducing the original speed to that which is undetectable by sight. The progression can be read through dials on *Odometer’s* display panel (Fig. 5). Using the graphic image of an inclined plane wrapped around each dial a user’s can see the effect of their input on this system that is counting down. Unknown to the user each dial records a different increment of time and this record is irreversible. Cumulatively containing the average life span of an American woman and man (Fig. 5 From right to left) each dial takes one second, one minute, one hour, one day, one week, one year, and eighty years or one life to complete one revolution. As this record of life/time builds, the exchange between the piece and user becomes more apparent. Each time a user turns the crank they forever change the dials adding to the cumulative life/time spent in this moment.
As both curator and conservation specialist, I am charged with the collection and restoration of an era when work was life. Remains of this fading reality are manual tools, survivors of their time. They suggest a story of purpose and connection, but speak a distant language. I attempt to decipher and describe this language through the fragment, reconstruction, and presentation.

My conceptual motivation in developing the *Relics* body of work was a by-product of building my *Devices*. Often when building the machines I have to create specialized tools with a very specific purpose. Due to their specificity once they are utilized they become obsolete. As a result, I find neglected parts lying around my studio like carcasses. They are fragments of my other exploits, a byproduct of the device-making process. Yet, I have trouble disposing of them. I regard them as the negative molds, of their positives; the final piece they helped create. I see them as the embodiments of their manual processes, and potential representations of a cultural period based on the physical labor in which I find clarity. This relationship I have with the leavings of my machines is apparent due to my separation from them. After the completion of a piece I set the obsolete parts somewhere convenient in my studio and I
move on. After my next piece has been completed, I go through a rediscovery period, sifting through my mess. I was excavating the history of my own work, but now the parts do not have a purpose except as reminders of the expended effort involved in completing my last piece. I am reminded of the way anthropologists excavate artifacts that may be donated or collected by museums where they are possibly conserved, and represented.

My first attempt at objectifying these ideas resulted in Fragment #934721 (Fig. 6). This is a tool is made for bending and holding wood, with the aid of glue, in a rigid form. Completely imaginary but fairly convincing in its form and construction language, it lacked the proper surface treatment to match up with what the viewers’ imagination might feel age looks like.

The next piece in the Relic body of work is Fragment #005436 (Fig. 7). I imagine the highly specific scenario where a lever clamp had been broken off from a larger contraption and then partially reconstructed by a conservator. The reconstructed areas provide a visual separation between old and new materials alluding to differing manufacturing processes and the passage of time. This fragment form was a bit more successful in that it seemed to foster many connections within viewer’s minds. In addition my finishes were becoming “real” appearing as age and use.
I primarily use wax, stains, acrylic pigment, along with an ebonizing aging chemical (a mixture of steel wool and vinegar) and lots of sanding, scraping, and burnished to create the illusion of age I need.

I find that, for a viewer to visually understand time, the patina has to appear hundreds of year old. In reality no exposed wooden structure would last fifty years a hundred tops, according to Alan Wiesman’s book *The World Without Us*. I found this way of thinking and working completely contrary to my learned construction and thought processes. In *Devices* I aimed for a visual language consisting of honesty and utilitarian directness, now I needed very little of this practice. These relics are illusions, my interpretations of manual tools. Initially I sought very little researched regarding to older tools and processes, but eventually visited the Mercer museum in Doylestown, PA. The Mercer museum holds the tools/shops of 19th century craftspeople. I felt I was tainted, having been informed by the reality of what tools from this period actually looked like. Yet, I was drawn to a bizarre little machine that turned out to be a meat grinder. It was extremely foreign to me and was one of the few tools I was curious enough about to find the placard in an effort to understand what it did. This was a bit of departure from
where I began. My intention was to describe the values of manual labor in an object, facilitated by my imagination. The meat grinder was “real” even if only in its essence. This was a problem. The meat grinder being seemingly real in effect was limiting in interest, the meat grinder was too complete. Its relatively undamaged structure suspended belief, minimizing the opportunity for the viewer to explore and invent possibilities for its past purpose. This problem with its completeness unveiled similar issues in the other two *Fragments*, which had similar proportions of reconstruction to fragment. It was necessary to maximize opportunities for the viewers’ exploration of the fragments and their partial reconstruction. I have achieved this by exploding the meat grinder into multiple pieces, *Fragment # 049626* and *Fragment #049625* (Fig. 8 and 9). Additionally, I stripped the meat grinder, as well as my previous pieces, of their definitive names providing only serial numbers and a portrait style drawing of the fragment itself. These changes remove most of the definitive information from my *Relic* pieces leaving the faux history embedded in the fragments themselves and their museological presentation as a base from which to investigate.

When I pondered the relationship of my two bodies of work *Relics* and *Devices*, I see both similarities and differences. In *Devices* I am investigating the clarity and fulfillment I find mentally through physical engagement. While my *Relics* body of work
is in part a continuation of my previous investigations. It is ultimately born out of contemplating physicality rather than actually participating in it. As an artist my fragments are fantastical objectifications of the intrinsic values I find through experiencing physical labor. The fragments are relic of a past time and are now merely history. As a conservator, I further employ my imagination in an attempt to understand this distant language and rebuild the fragments past, while using the visual language of contemporary fabrication processes. I display the reconstruction and the fragment as one, a mixture of two different times, manufacturing processes and value systems. Juxtaposing these two periods of history heighten the viewers awareness of each. This provides an opportunity to view the subtle differences, while provoking the imagination into fantasies about manual tools which are whole, not fragmented. Ultimately, enticing the viewer to wonder how these fragments could be engaged physically.

Figure 9. Fragment #049625
Conclusion

My perspective of daily life is viewed through a lens built in part by the values I find that triathlons hold. As if I am continually running a race I tend to live with consideration of the clock that is ever ticking away, counting down the time that I have left to be alive. All that I am is contained in a bubble traveling between two points on a single line. At one end my birth, and at the other my death. Though I do not have the ability to know the future, I make hopeful plans which I want to experience. At times my dreams seem so real I want them so completely that they are no longer just possibilities but become in my mind inevitabilities. Ironically, I have a similar but fleeting relationship with my memory. When I rediscover the forgotten folds of my mind, I see flashing images of my past that are almost as distant as the ones I invent.
I can no longer relate to my memories as the person I was then. I can only understand them as the person I have become. I feel as if the lens through which I view my past is altered by every experience I stumble upon. As a result, the further I look back the more indistinct and foreign my past feels. Perhaps I am a little insensitive, but I am always intrigued by the idea that most people are surprised when told they are going to die, as if they thought they never would. I both admire and grow weary of this response. The underlying implication of this unrealistic optimism is an indication of the human ability and need to believe in evermore unlikely ideas. In his lecture on *Ted.com*, Dan Gilbert, author of *Stumbling on Happiness*, describes the inner-workings and impact the prefrontal cortex has on humans describing potential experiences. Our frontal lobe is often boisterous in its perceived possible outcomes. This thought process is similar to a natural version of virtual reality where players are not players, they are people acting out aspirations with little respect to logical reality. Therein lays the problem. This portion of the brain gives humans the ability to preconceive circumstance. Using this we can imagine and override any logic, regardless of what is reasonable. This ability is both inherently valuable and potentially destructive to people individually, as a species, and the planet we live on.

I am weary of a society that has little time for manual interaction and the values found through inherently experiencing it. I am equally weary of a society unable to look forward and with a childlike innocence challenge the seemingly impossible obstacles around them, discovering new vistas of potential, conceived by imagination, and tapped by human will. Accepting my two halves, I find by embracing the cyclical nature of
manual labor I have a meditative experience during which my mind embraces my body’s physical nature. In Devices and Relics I explore how these manual experiences could affect contemporary American society with respect to sedentary living and the standards by which we live.
Influences

While building the *Devices* body of work I looked to Arthur Ganson as a fellow maker of machines. In his artist lecture he discusses his intentions for his machines gestural actions, describing them as depictions of certain human emotions. I was intrigued by the idea that a mechanical action could suggest more than utility. This idea helped me build mechanical systems that do more than merely operate, but work in such a manner that they become my ideas rather than representations of them.

My passion for reading has resulted in influence by these various authors and books including George Orwell’s *1984*, Michael Pollan’s *Omnivore’s Dilemma*, Amanda Ripley’s *The Unthinkable*, and Christopher McDougall’s *Born To Run*. All of these writers have been significant to the development of my ideas. The following excerpt from Matthew Crawford’s book *Shop Class as Soul Craft* is particularly relevant to the development and consideration of my *Relic* series.

“A washing machine, for example, surely exists to serve our needs, but in contending with one that is broken, you have to ask what *it* needs. At such a moment, technology is no longer a means by which
our mastery of the world is extended, but an affront to our usual self-absorption. Constantly seeking self-affirmation, the narcissist views everything as an extension of his will, and therefore has only a tenuous grasp on the world of objects as something independent. He is prone to magical thinking and delusions of omnipotence.”

- Mathew Crawford, P. 17
Bibliography


Appendix

Figure 10. Construct
Figure 11. Construct
Figure 12. Construct
Curriculum Vitae

Education

2010   M.F.A., Craft/Material Studies, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA
2008   B.F.A., Sculpture, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX

Professional Experience

2008-2010   Instructor of Record, Wood Department, Virginia Commonwealth University, School of the Arts, Richmond, VA

Awards/ Honors

2010   1st Place, Sleight of Hand II, Gallery 5, Richmond, VA
2009   Graduate Term Assistantship, Virginia Commonwealth University
2008   Half Ironman, Buffalo Springs 70.3, Buffalo Springs, TX
       Second Place Division Winner, Triamerica, Houston, TX
       36th Place Team, USA Triathlon Collegiate National Championship, Tuscaloosa, Alabama
2007   Half Ironman, The Iron star, Montgomery, TX
       Third Place Division Winner, Rec Sports Triathlon, Lubbock, TX
       First Place Division Winner, Tri Champ Series State Games, Leander, TX
       Qualified for National State Games of America, Colorado Springs, CO
2005   Deans List
2004   Texas Art Scholarship
Exhibitions

2010
Craft Texas 2010, Houston Center for Contemporary Craft, Houston, TX
Jurors: Gail M. Brown, Independent Curator of Contemporary Craft, Philadelphia, PA
Cindy Hickok, International Fiber Artist, Houston, TX
Paula Owen, President of Southwest School of Arts and Crafts, San Antonio, TX
MFA Thesis: Construct, Anderson Gallery, Richmond, VA
Sleight of Hand II, Gallery 5, Richmond, VA
Jurors: Anonymous

2009
The “C” Word, Metro Gallery, Richmond, VA

2008
Leap, FAB Gallery, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA

Life or Something Like It, Stray Dog Gallery, Lubbock, TX

2007
308, Stray Dog Gallery, Lubbock, TX
20th Annual Juried Student Exhibition, Landmark Arts Gallery, Juror: James Housefield, PhD, Adjunct Curator, Austin Museum of Art
5th Friday, Waters Space, Slaton, TX
Annex Studio Show, Stray Dog Gallery Annex, Lubbock, TX

Publications

2009
Jungle Noises, Animal Beat, Album Photos, cover and p. 3

2007

Organizations

2010
Furniture Society
Theta Xi Alumni Association

2009
Graduate Assistant Association, Secretary
Furniture Society
Theta Xi Alumni Association

2008
Tech Sculpture Network of Texas, President
Tech Triathlon Team, President
Theta Xi Fraternity, Texas Tech Chapter

2007
Tech Sculpture Network of Texas, President
Tech Triathlon Team, Founding President
2006  Theta Xi Fraternity, Texas Tech Chapter, Risk Management
      Tech Sculpture Network of Texas, Trip Coordinator
2005  Theta Xi Fraternity, Texas Tech Chapter, Risk Management
      Tech Sculpture Network of Texas, Trip Coordinator
2004  Theta Xi Fraternity, Texas Tech Chapter, Vice President
2003  Theta Xi Fraternity, Texas Tech Chapter, Founding Vice President

**Teaching**

Virginia Commonwealth University

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