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DIG

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DIG

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

by

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This paper is an outline to various creative pursuits in the Graduate school of arts at Virginia Commonwealth University in leading to my MFA Thesis Exhibition. I have been focused on the works of artists exploring audio/visual textures and overall conceptuality behind a Lo Fidelity sensibility. In my practice, I work through unconventional recording and editing techniques in an effort to define an individual sound within the music I make. With video, I have worked with software programs to manipulate and distort, altering the frame in an attempt to bend the very fabric of the medium. I also present a brief history of the Lo Fidelity aesthetic in music and film.
Introduction

Entering the graduate school, I was very concentrated on performing and producing through the computer. I had been liberated by the ease of use, both in terms of accessibility to software and digital interfaces as well as the functionality of tools, and was looking to push those technologies further in their form and ability. The one thing I hadn’t accounted for, however, was Richmond’s intense Hardcore and Punk rock scenes - which fill houses every weekend in the river city full of sweaty, leather clad, fist pumping 20 some-things with an absolute disregard for anything computer generated (made clear to me when I saw one punk upturn a beer bottle on a DJ's whole setup.) Having grown up in the region, the influence and unabashed aggression of these scenes was nothing new. However, the idea that I would eventually pull aesthetics and influences from these genres into my own work was something I hadn’t accounted for.

One of the basic tenants of a “punk music,” local and global, is a Do It Yourself approach to gigging, recording and marketing that generally is a result of an economic climate that necessitates this process. Groups and individuals pride themselves on the ability to produce work that is every bit as artistically and aesthetically driven as it is senseless, unmotivated and without foresight. When it costs too much to get your own studio space, musicians often strip down the set up by using a 4 track recorder and cheap microphones to capture what it is they

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pride themselves on the ability to produce work that is every bit as artistically and aesthetically driven as it is senseless, unmotivated and without foresight. When it costs too much to get your own studio space, musicians often strip down the set up by using a 4 track recorder and cheap microphones to capture what it is they are creating. Although our music interests vary quite greatly, the punk scene Richmond would lend its DIY ethics heavily to my own works on two separate folk albums I recorded during my time in the graduate school – 2010’s And This and 2011’s Sweethearts.

...And This & Sweethearts

On “And This,” my first album of folk songs, recorded over the summer of 2010, I was interested in creating a sort of folk music that was distinctly my own. My father is a great lover of Country and Americana music, so it came with little surprise when I, years later, began diving through his record collection, digging up treasures unheard. Influenced by pioneers of these situated American genres (Hank Williams, Townes Van Zandt & Gram Parson) I wanted to hold onto a traditionalism in structure and scope while drawing on techniques (heavy filtering,
vocal layering, reformatting and bouncing of finished products over and over between hardware and software – analogue and digital) employed by other lo fi artists, with an interest in unearthing moments of exploration within the medium and my own creative practice. For the lead in track “Honkeytonk I’ll Make You Mine,” I laid down initial guitar chords multiple times before layering numerous vocals tracks all slightly out of order to add a depth and variance of clarity within the production. When you listen to the song, you can hear the stacked dimensions of music as they attempt to interweave with one another. The actual construction of the melodic elements are meant to be flexible so that the track does not limit the timing and accentuations as they may come fluidly in live performance or on record.

For my follow up work over the Winter of 2011, I was exploring new territory myself being influenced heavily by Country Psych artist Gram Parson work with various musicians (Flying Burrito Brothers, The Byrds, Emmylou Harris.) I wanted to create a sound that was rooted in the Country zeitgeist and grounded by a real physical space. From these sessions came the record “Sweethearts” (a play off of The Byrds & Gram Parsons “Sweetheart of the Rodeo”) in which I decided to cut all song lengths as short as possible to emphasize only those specific moments in which something worthwhile or magical might come about. In my earlier efforts of songwriting, I allowed the system of songwriting to influence decisions regarding length far too often. Drawing influences from many of the lo fi artists mentioned throughout this paper, I was looking to produce song structures that contained a matter of fact brevity
about them and a concept that was more specific to their intentions as opposed to longer, bloated efforts that lacked a real grit and punch.

The things that specifically turned me on to contemporary Lo Fi artists such as R. Stevie Moore, Daniel Johnston & Ariel Pink, was the spontaneous feeling with which they created their music. The moment in which the seeds of inspiration were sewn, were galvanized from the ability to work in the now as opposed to the then. When you work in a professional studio, times are laid out and the schedule is maintained. When you work in a home studio, you can live your life with fluid motion and your work can ride right along the coast there with you so that when the axis of that creative moment arises, the ability to create on the spot exists. Allowing myself a comfortable creative space like this made the production of both of these records easier to organize and work through as all of
the work was done 1:1, with me as both artist and producer.

**Generation Digital**

I was born in the late 80’s and grew up firmly centered in the digital revolution. Film was never placed in my hands, tape machines didn’t exist in my childhood house and even records were an after thought as the compact disc was carving out its own niche in the late 80’s/early 90’s.

Along with a generation of digitally inclined peers, I took advantage of new technologies allowing consumers (we) an opportunity to produce on formats and with materials that have until very recently only been accessible by those with means, in this case, a great amount of money. Furthermore, the online community of peer torrenting had created a fluctuation, especially within the music community, of data and material available for free and with ease to a society and people who are absolutely consumed with the idea of consuming. With the proliferation of these technologies, a greater awareness of the technical abilities and flexibility of new mediums along with experimentation has grown within the artistic community at large and the consumer conscious at home. This comfortable zone in which to interact with these digital machines allows for access to an idea space firmly situated in the contemporary psyche – a new aesthetic with which to explore from.

Lo Fidelity, as a term, can link its lineage back to WFMU DJ William Berger, who in the mid 80’s produced a radio broadcast dedicated solely to music being created on broken or worn instruments and recorded through
inexpensive tape cassettes. The recent adaptation of the term as a genre shows a greater acceptance for the form as a musical sub genre and practice. The achievements of lo fi dentity can usually be attributed to a degradation in audio quality stemming from unconventional techniques wherein the authenticity of material is verified by its own methodology. Furthermore, with the continued rise of multi-tracking (a recording technique which emphasizes a slick and polished sound for radio) in studio centrals, Lo Fi has become a sort of musical counter-culture for producers and listeners looking for, again, a more authentic aesthetic in their music choice.

The loosening of traditional recording and performance techniques allows for an ephemeral and distinctively cerebral that is honest and true to the actual organic space and time. Also, the distortion caused by under recording and outdated editing systems throughout these albums lends itself an esoteric aesthetic that is completely specific to the group. These minor breakthroughs in the aesthetics of rock music would lead to an entire wave of bands (My Bloody Valentine, Sonic Youth, R Stevie Moore, Ariel Pink, Daniel Johnston, Galaxie 500, etc.) with more mainstream goals incorporating lo fi dentity aesthetics to achieve new motifs with their own defined specifications and structuralism.
"In the indie music world, where heroic failure and outsider status are cherished even more than commercial success, Daniel Johnston is a totem: the lo-fi genius from Texas who composes prolifically, commits everything to cassette tape, has spent time in mental institutions and writes all his songs about a girl named Laurie." (Laura Bourtun, The Guardian, 2006)

Daniel Johnston movement around the Indie Rock stratosphere has been mercurial and subtle to say the least (and until Jeff Feuerzeig’s seminal documentary on his work – all but forgotten). Yet his influence and simultaneous
investigation of alternative methods of playing and recording (often found on several instruments expressing different memes, thoughts and moods worked out on various consumer recording devices in his family’s home) can be witnessed within the direction of contemporaries in the lo fi movement (namely Americans Ariel Pink and R. Stevie Moore) who share Johnston’s embrace of using underperforming capture materials with flexible and robust strategies that actually end up defining the artist and bringing acclaim to their work.

On Johnston’s “Songs of Pain” recorded in 1980, you can hear the tape cassette recorder’s hissing wobbling in and out as Johnston’s lanky voice stretches thin. There is very little bass instrumentation and even less percussive elements and the entire record (like many of his to follow) sounds like folk songs buried in a time capsule from a maniacal past. There is an actual narrative here which is developed through the experimentation and the loosening of creative reigns, particularly in allowing the textural elements of a tape cassette become as
integral to the sounds as the instruments being recorded.

Figure 5: Lo Fi artist R. Stevie Moore

Textural Lo Fi

Interwoven between artistic communities, New York based – Lithuanian born Jonas Mekas filmmaker, would film the Velvet Underground, among countless other artists and common New Yorkers on his Super 8MM camera (at the time, a new home use camera designed for greater access to the medium.) In Mekas work there is present an unabashed realism in which Mekas
documents all the meaningless and meaningful experiences throughout his day-to-day experience. As we wind through the montage of days and months and years, the actual artifact in itself (super 8 film) shows it antiquated sensibilities as the real people’s lives play out on screen.

In 2000’s “As I Was Moving Ahead Occasionally I Saw Brief Moments of Beauty,” Mekas references his methodology of editing within the film, saying, “The first idea was to, keep them chronologic... but then I gave up, and I just began splicing them together by chance, the way that I found them on the shelf, because I didn’t where any piece of my life really belongs, so let it be, let it go, just by pure chance.” (Jonas Mekas, As I was moving Ahead Occasionally I Saw Brief Moments of Beauty.”) He goes on to mention how the space of that time within the film has an order of its own and that basically it should embody that same randomness or senselessness we encounter in our lives. It was with this very thought in hand that we too began to attempt to let go.
Specifically for the thesis project, “DIG,” I became interested visually in the opportunity of using a lower format video camera to capture all the images. At the same time, I had been working through sonic issues in creating a bass heavy speaker that could seamlessly move matter, in this case dirt. I had been thinking a lot about German Industrialist’ Einsturzende Neubauten & African drummers Konono #1, who both employ organic and elemental approaches to their sonic structures by using battered trash cans as percussion and grinding metal as melody. In their attempts to find new materials for sonic exploration, strides were made to further define where exactly we find ourselves in sound art today. How much more can we push the materials and tools already at our disposal (stringed instruments, voice)?
DIG

With the assistance of collaborator Brooks Finnie (VCU Cinema) we began to shoot everything we encountered through the lens of a Verizon LG mobile phone. Shifting the camera between hands we would switch between viewer and performer which allowed the performance to be bare and devoid of premeditated lines or set autocratic creative visions – a performance in which we were fluidly creating through our own everyday lives.

By using a cell phone, as opposed to a camcorder of film camera, we allowed ourselves room for error and play. Whatever we shot could become instantly disposable and there would be no repercussions. Instead of focusing on a central theme or script to the project, we were actively bypassing a structure
that would imitate fiction. In many ways, I was interested in a film that would show instead of tell, an audience the story, the plot. Here’s the plot, look at it, there is no surprise, I’m just going to keep living, that’s the story, the hook is in the bare realism, the minimal interference between the authentic subject and viewer.

The footage we got is at times unrecognizable - shadows and highly contrasted sets in which the back alleys of Jackson Ward become a nether world, a space of its own - the non-Richmond archetype. In that space, we laugh and play and sometimes fall down. A lot of the time, nothing is going on as we merrily take to the streets after dark. Constant ramblings swim underneath the footage and present a loosely based narrative structure.
Pre-visions

In a lot of ways the work is a progression from a sort of ambient video art I was creating the year prior. Even then I was interested in using different media sources combined with materials (plastic, woods, metals) to reshape or distort imagery. For “City Sight” in 2009, I created a 3-D projection that would hit different source textiles with provided depth to create a screen that would emphasize movement when viewing. Here I was less interested in the quality of image as I really delved into how other materials can change the visceral experience of a visual medium. The fidelity of image that I lost coupled with the raw materials that the video shown upon is at its very core an attempt to resolve resolution issues within a material and tactical projection.
For 2010’s video piece “Locomotive,” I used various software programs to distill the image into a running patter of alternating layers. What we begin to see is not what is originally seen and by re-recording the video from source material, to computer, off computer, to tape and then back again in through the computer, we get a degradation of the image that creates new peaks and valleys, dips and curves that stimulate a completely different motive and thought process than that of a train. By recording straight off the laptop, the screen within the screen falls in and out of motion, altering the viewer that what we see is perhaps not in fact what we think it is.
As I played more with the flexibility of the visual medium, I found myself becoming interested in the possibility of using a computer to further denigrate and destroy the images. Using the programming languages Max/MSP and Isadora Core, I began to pull apart the very fabric of video. During this time, I was also greatly intrigued by the sheer magnitude and aura of the Sun. I began aiming my consumer camera into the middle of the Sun and gazing tediously behind the viewfinder. When I imported the material into the computer I started to strip away the textures by applying mathematical calculations to color reference and vibrancy controls.
One thing I was interested in exploring in “Dig,” my thesis piece, was the versatility of what a film could be and how a filmmaker could show or participate in that process. In Krzysztof Kieślowski’s 1979 film Camera Buff (Amateur), an ordinary factory worker is given a film camera to shoot the daily proceedings around his workplace. At first he does as he is instructed, keeping the camera fixated on the daily ins and outs of the Polish factory. But as the film progresses, so does the man’s interest in creative limits he controls. He begins to turn the camera on birds in the sky and strangers walking in the streets below his apartment. It is in this film that we can see the transformation of a person through the democratization of art making, in which the consumer technologies have caught up enough (generationally) to put a new form of creation in the hands of a commoner.
We can also see this democratization play out quite frequently in the world of video art within the works of Sadie Benning, Guy Ben-Ner and Ryan Trecartin. Sadie Benning began making personal diaries in her teenage years and the dirt-cheap camera she used to make them with allows the viewer a feeling of mutual artistic adventure. Whereas with major cinema productions, which require a ton of money and people and time for planning, Benning would simply turn the camera on and shoot as she saw fit. This allowance of the moment to open up in front of her with great fluidity was an idea that also interested us very much in the process of shooting a cell phone film.
“Slippage between what is real and what is filmed occurs on many levels throughout Camera Buff. Even during the making of Filip’s first, most crude film, the chronicle of the company celebration, he finds that it is no simple matter to just capture the event…Filip begins to stage shots so that they capture the spirit, if not the actuality, of a scene. He shapes the world before his lens, leaving crumbs of bread on a window pane so that he can shoot pigeons on the ledge or directing employees to act naturally as they attend the celebration.” (Rahul Hamid, Sense of Cinema)

Interwoven between artistic communities, New York based – Lithuanian born Jonas Mekas filmmaker, would film the Velvet Underground, among countless other artists and common New Yorkers on his Super 8MM camera (at the time, a new home use camera designed for greater access to the medium.) In Mekas work there is present an unabashed realism in which Mekas documents all the meaningless and meaningful experiences throughout his day to day experience. As we wind through the montage of days and months and years, the actual artifact in itself (super 8 film) shows it antiquated sensibilities as the real people’s lives play out on screen.
“Benning was celebrated for the Pixelvision video works she began making when she was fifteen years old. Those diaristic collages of music, self-portraiture, and anecdote reworked the graphic vocabulary of first-generation video with a queer perspective.” (Orchard Co Op Exhibit Space, NYC)

This form or working is available to anyone with an interest and it is that same freedom that we looked to explore in our own film shot on cellular. The image is as direct and functional as the very words that come from her mouth, a stream of consciousness and with the camera rolling, no one yells for action or cut, the camera simply runs. This stripped down form of creating is indicative of the individualism that runs amok in the American zeitgeist - in that we are the dreamers of the dream and the very makers of that dream.

Guy Ben-Ner and Ryan Trecartin take cues from formal cinema tradition that Benning, by choice or not, dismisses. Trecartin is as hyper-kinetic as the society he lives in and the expression of this can be seen in his mixing of absurd and meticulously worded vernacular that is as highly charged as the pace and rhythm he cuts his films with.
“The garish low-budget look and feel of his work, and its near-anarchy, are often compared to early John Waters, to Paul McCarthy, to Mike Kelley and to drag auteurs like Jack Smith and Tom Rubnitz.” (Randy Kennedy, NY Times, 2009)

Weaving through gender, sexuality and consumerism, Trecartin’s work is not so much a personal diary as it is a narrative account of exaggerated lifestyles we find throughout the formalities of Capitalism. The visual aesthetic is that of a consumer camera, perhaps a mid tier HD product, which sacrifices quality for freedom and inventiveness. His editing style is that of a seven year old child riddled with ADHD, constantly manipulating the image and edit (through the cheesiest of final cut effects) until what we are seeing is a visceral montage including every word and thought one could think in a limited time span. His over use of editing effects also seems to be a critique perhaps on the traditional
aesthetics of cinema, in which composites, overlays, chroma-keys, multiple
screens, motion blurs, etc… are often seen as gimmicky or hokey. In fact, he
embraces that these tools are gimmicky and hokey as much as he embraces the
fact that his movies run a current with those themes as well.

Guy Ben Ner is an Israeli video artist, who uses common places as his
sets and his family as characters in his movie.

Figure 16: Unaltered still from *Moby Dick*, Guy Ben-Ner

In *Moby Dick*, a re-telling of the classic Herman Melville story, Ben-Ner
transforms his kitchen space into a port, a ship and a tropical forest and uses his
daughter in various different character roles throughout. In *Stealing Beauty*, Ben
Ner and family create a family drama in the national retail store IKEA. As the
simple family drama plays out, random shoppers pass by confused at what they
are witnessing, first noticing the casual and relaxed atmosphere of the family in the different fabricated rooms and then also becoming aware of the fact that a camera is standing present on the other side of the store. I am particularly interested in the definition of reality and narrative within Ben-Ner’s work. In the *Stealing Beauty* space, when passer by’s realize they may be in on an act, how does that shift their experience of a normal shopping day? What is going through the minds of these people when they come face to face with a play or story being produced in a space they are not anticipating?

**Lo Fi Media Space**

In my work, I became interested in grabbing the space of others whether or not they were aware of it. In a similar way that Vito Acconci so violently claimed a real physical space (the basement of a house), I was looking to capture a space situated within the contemporary movement - the media wave. Acconci’s work seems to be greatly interested in the space that exists around us and how we construct/mold that space depending on our understanding and interaction with it. In Seedbed, Acconci built a subtle wooden ramp in a gallery and scrambled around beneath it as his audience walked above into a seemingly empty gallery. As the viewers milled about, Acconci would be underneath the floor attempting to masturbate through the sonic coaxing of his audience. He was entering into their intimate space and exploring the often sterile environment present in the gallery setting. By manipulating the mood or atmosphere of the space with his sonic scrambling and ramblings, Acconci could transform a
perceived safe space into that of overbearing sexuality and violence.

Figure 17: *Seedbed*, Vito Acconci

I am interested in the media space that is present and how the internet is reforming our social interactions.

As such, we grabbed JPG’s off Facebook, shot from hidden vantage points and attempted to keep as low profile as possible when working to ensure the space in which our performers occupied was a “moment” of true interaction. In the project there are over 20 people who star in the ~25 minute film we shot on purely cell phone. Some know they are part of it but most are (or were) completely unaware of their presence within the narrative. Through this hidden camera we can attempt to remove the façade of acting or of parroting – and in there we can look for moments that accentuate a realism as artists we often try to reproduce.
Figure 18: Unaltered still from *Dig*

Though all these artists work is different in tone and scope than the previous, all are attempting to utilize the options they have to the best of their abilities. Embolden through economic realities and limitations, each artist works around aesthetic issues by embracing the visual possibilities of their own medium. I was inspired to follow in a creative path that valued content as a more important element than style but that in some ways could value style more than content too. A paradoxical enterprise in which I tried to let the work mold and bend along with me without restrictions of structuralism.
Conclusion

In my work, I am most interested in the flexibility of formats in the digital age. In the time I've spent at VCU, I have attempted to coax various themes and abstractions through this versatility in medium. The experimentation into fields of less certainty, where we can embrace the unevenness of expression is a logical rebuttal to the sanctuary of a full resolution, a complete digital revolution. It is the political response to a society that values quantity over quality far too often, which turns itself over every year, constantly upgrading, asking us as consumers to pay top dollar for the newest and greatest toy. My interest will continue to reside in the versatility of toys I already own.
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