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Auto Tune

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Virginia Commonwealth University

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Auto Tune

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

by

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Abstract

AUTO TUNE

by Dana Ollestad, MFA

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

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This thesis is an overview of the source material, methodologies, artistic influences, and conceptual decisions that inform my artwork and characterize my art practice. Utilizing participation (audience, community, viewer), I engineer experiences and encounters for the general public. Whether through directed physical interaction or implicit reaction, I create open-ended situations or environments that I may influence, but not fully control.

The democratic cede of authorial control, as well as the heightened risk and unpredictably in my work, instigates a more positive, non-hierarchical social model in which every viewer is an “author,” who produces content and communication signals, and has a voice and a presence in society.
Current and Emergent Trends, an Introduction

Utilizing participation, either by the installation audience, community members, or gallery viewers as an element of my work, I engineer experiences and encounters. Whether through directed physical interaction, or implicit reaction, I create open-ended situations or environments that I may influence, but not fully control.

My art must confront the growing disparity between true interpersonal connection and perceived connection in society. Consumer-driven technology is answering the demand for interpersonal connection, but with the market-friendly response of buy more gadgets! Purchase more services and unlimited data plans! The answer to an individual feeling disconnected and lonely is not to buy a communication device, or to sign up to a social network. While social networks and communication devices are useful structures to support relationships, the creation and strengthening of interpersonal relationships, the nurturing of empathy and cultural/social awareness is only achievable through personal contact with others. In my work, I facilitate such relationships by offering the viewers a shared experience.

The arts are the only means to provide people a shared experience that isn’t market-driven. Governments have failed, corporations have failed, and even humanitarian groups have suspicious and incongruous goals and methods. My work offers an alternative to market-driven and gallery represented art that concerns itself with the constant affirmation of the artist as author. Instead, my art acts as a catalyst for social renewal and the repair of interpersonal relationships. Interaction– both of the participant with the situation created, and the participant with other participants– creates connection, which grows into relationship, divulging interdependence. My work reveals that the individual viewer and the situation, as well as the participant and other participants are connected in that they affect and effect each other.

The current trend of participant-generated art is telling: the democratic cede of authorial control, as well as heightened risk and unpredictably of the loss of such control, instigates a more positive, non-hierarchical social model in which everyone is an “author”, a producer, and has a voice and a presence in society.
The rich heritage of viewer/audience participation in the arts, from 1920s Dada to 1960s Fluxus and Happenings, informs my work. As participant, the audience is empowered by the experience of physical and mental connection, to determine their own social or political reality and relationships. Evidenced by emergent myriad social networks, we all yearn for the restoration of the social bond through collective elaboration of meaning. In other words, we desire to be part of something larger than ourselves- we seek to belong to a shared understanding. As French philosopher Jacques Rancière states, “Art no longer wants to respond to the excess of commodities and signs but to a lack of connections.”¹ This is the foundation of my work. I create situations that invite group interaction, usually through a humorous or absurd action.

Let’s Do It

My interest in participation can be classified into two groups - physical interaction and social identity. I consider all elements of the artwork’s situation: location, time of day, community the artwork is in, the people passing by the installation space, and so forth. This methodical analysis, art as system, explores the numerous physical and conceptual aspects of how my work functions within a particular social context; I am investigating how my art acts as part of a system of interactions. These works are constructed to be more than a choreographed action by a group of people (Auto Tune, 2012) and a video recording (Boys, 2012). These pieces both include the viewer as a key element to the function of the piece. The viewer’s assumptions, presumptions, moral and personal identity-defining constructs are accessed through the work.

Physical Interaction

Activation, by which I mean the creation of an active subject– empowers the individual via the experience of physical or symbolic participation. As is the case with the Fluxus events and Happenings, the physical experience of my work engages people on a level that is physiologically unique. Since the 1950s, western society has been a consumer culture. Fluxus and Happenings

came about as a challenge to jar the general public from their complacency. Today, it is clear that
the world revolves around consumption; society is bombarded with government and corporate
persuasion, in some cases advertising, in others propaganda. The need to reveal to people that
they are capable of original, independent thought, not just reacting, is more pressing than ever.
With corporeal engagement with art, the physical and mental stimuli feed into each other and
break the circuit of learned receive/react behavioral loop. Essentially we, western/westernized
cultures– ever-growing through globalization and technology (consider the far-reaching
brand recognition of Nike and Disney) are being controlled through calculated government
and corporate manipulation. Through the viewer being an active physical participant in my
work, I hope to set off the spark that both interrupts the ubiquitous controlling structures and
emancipates the individual from these structures. Ideally, the viewers/participants will find
themselves able to determine their own political or social reality. In doing so, my work confronts
and engages the viewer/participant with visual and physical activity that is outside their normal
life and gives them cause to form opinions and definitions for themselves.
For *Auto Tune* I have gone into the community, looking for people who own “high-rider” cars. “High-riders” are usually four-door sedans, that have been lifted and fitted with larger wheels than their stock configuration. The owners of these cars usually have installed powerful, bass-heavy sound systems into the vehicles. These cars are the pride and joy of their owners, they are paraded around with sound systems booming, and meticulously cared for. For the performance/installation of *Auto Tune* I’ve asked a few of these drivers to utilize electromagnetic pick-ups, similar to those on an electric guitar, that are plugged into their car’s sound system. Hovering these pick-ups over different parts of their car will induce feedback from the system, in different pitches and vibrations. I’ve asked the drivers to sonically and physically explore their car with the pick-up for a 15 minute performance/installation.

The objects and actions of the performance/installation piece in and of themselves negate the value system of consumer culture. Playing in an orchestra of high-rider cars won’t advance your “street cred,” won’t raise the monetary value of one’s vehicle and won’t land the object of your obsession on the cover of any magazines. It will however reveal that this object is interesting in ways these drivers had never thought of, and they both– driver and car– are musical in ways
they never knew, and that they can exist and create outside of cultural defaults- in this case Hip Hop and Bass-Off cultures. My piece *Auto Tune* hijacks the language and signs of those cultures and uses them to allow the driver to decide for him/herself what is valuable, what is interesting, and thereby establish his/her own definition of self. Such an outcome is due in part to the experience of the work, and to the ways in which *Auto Tune* allows for the creation of individual and collective meaning. The participant is the driver, untrained in the musicality of playing his/her car, they explore their obsession in a manner and context that is unfamiliar and novel. Yet the transformation that occurs by bringing these cars and drivers to the gallery will cause the role of participant to extend to the viewer/interpreter as well, as they are also confronted by and engage with the novel and unfamiliar. *Auto Tune* not only recontextualizes the high-riders and drivers, but also turns that recontextualization upon the usual gallery-goer population. The more neutral installation location of outdoors allows for a reconciliation of the alienating and exotifying forces at play and grants access to both the drivers and gallery-goers.

*Social Identity*

The notion of “social identity” highlights the interplay in my work between society and art within the trajectory of cultural (scientific, social, political) progress. Art investigations react to and reflect cultural progress and perspectives. As Italian philosopher Umberto Eco states, “In every century, the way that artistic forms are structured reflects the way in which science or contemporary culture views reality.”2 Given this situation, the creation of interactive and participatory artworks, and the public’s reception of these works are evidence of the need that people have to be more closely connected to each other. Individuals strive to be more connected, yet technology and contemporary culture, even with the advances such as Facebook (social networking), mobile phones, and video chatting, have not been able to satisfy the need for interpersonal bonds that current contemporary art addresses. My work joins this discourse by emphasizing the need for a change in social identity— from isolated consumer to engaged

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relationship participant. I situate the work in the same discourse that is joined by the likes of Erwin Wurm, who uses gallery visitors who follow simple instructions to interact with objects he sets in the gallery to create *1 Minute Sculptures*, 1987-on going, and Oliver Herring who’s infinitely flexible *Task Party*, 2002-on going, piece involves groups of people interpreting, acting out, and generating instructions for each other.

My approach is not to simply indict technology, or to insist that just standing people physically next to each other will solve all of contemporary culture’s problems. Rather, I seek to point out that technology alone is isolating (even under the pretext of nurturing relationships), and that there must be a way to nudge people closer to each other. As Jean-Luc Nancy, French philosopher, states “Still, one cannot make the world with simple atoms... There has to be an inclination, or an inclining, from one towards the other, of one by the other, or from one to the other.” The “inclining” that Jean-Luc Nancy speaks of encapsulates the goal of my work. I facilitate the creation of societies, perhaps temporary, perhaps very small, but nevertheless a group of people who would have at least one thing in common- their participation in an artwork that I set in motion. This inclusion in a new social identity, ideally, will interrupt their everyday experience so that they will engage the world around them, including each other, from a novel

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perspective. I first observed this outcome in my piece *Electric Feel*, 2010 as people coaxed their friends into joining an electrical circuit with them and being shocked with current they generate together. *Electric Feel* is a stationary bicycle that routes electric current to its handlebars. The current is generated and regulated by the rider as he/she pedals. This was a key moment for my artistic development. I discovered that I can facilitate unifying, empowering, and shared experiences. Viewers who stood in *The Field*, 2011 listened to crickets together and this new social identity triggers the sharing of stories about other times they’ve heard crickets—perhaps sitting with their friends on a porch and watched summer storms roll across the horizon, or out fishing with their dad. My art is about this kind of connection. For *Auto Tune*, the high-rider drivers will be part of
a group of people who have played their cars like musical instruments. They’ll have this absurd experience, which will unite them as well as compel them to connect with others as they share the memory of their experience.

The gratification of a unifying experience is also evident in groups of people discussing TV shows watched, or concerts attended, but such events are based on consumption. The situations I facilitate are based on creation. These situations are not passive encounters, but active and creative—playing “music” in a car orchestra, pedaling to generate power through a group of people, trusting someone who’s putting you through an uncomfortable time like shivering on a beach.

The alienating and isolating effects of capitalism result in a crisis in community and collective responsibility. The resolution of this dilemma is the restoration of social bonds through the collective elaboration of meaning, which is itself generated through shared experience. A hurdle to this restoration is what Guy Debord refers to as “the spectacle”. The spectacle mediates social relationships between people through images; it is pacifying and divisive, uniting us only in our separation from one another. Given that the spectacle results in passivity and subjugation that in turn arrests thought and prevents determination of one’s reality, Debord advocates the construction of “situations” wherein the viewer is no longer an audience, but vivieur (one who lives). Debord’s work aimed to produce new social relationships and thus new social realities.

Keeping in mind that Jacques Racière questioned the theory that “Spectacle” equals passivity, and that “active” is not opposed to “passive” (which is ripe with presumptions of looking and knowing, watching and acting, appearance and reality), I position my work to engage the spectator who is active as interpreter. To consider the audience as interpreter is to adhere to the idea that we are all equally capable of inventing our own translations of the artwork/experience. My work doesn’t divide audiences into active participants and passive viewers. Instead, I invite viewers to appropriate and engage with my work for themselves. The most successful of my pieces are those that are engaged with in ways that I might never have dreamed possible—such as when people started

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high-fiving or kissing on the *Electric Feel*, or when people started swapping childhood stories while they were in *The Field*.

*Auto Tune* is more of a collaboration. The participant is performer, the viewers are an audience for the performers. This untrained “orchestra,” while finding a familiar ground in the car show exhibitionist space, is transplanted into a fine art context. This change of display space (from car show to art gallery) transforms the objects of fetish and obsession into objects of art. *Auto Tune* not only holds a mirror up to the obsessive fetishisation of the art world, but it also legitimizes and entrenches the car-object/driver obsessive relationship. The car show, complete with throbbing and caressing fetishism, by being brought into the gallery, is elevated into “high art.” In turn, “high art” is revealed to be nothing more than what is presented—swagger, attitude, grandiose masturbation.

Spectators are left to interpret what they’re seeing as either a choreographed publicity stunt, or as an earnest exploration of sound and form, or as an exploitation of car culture.

This ambiguity strikes at the core of the piece. When questioning one’s observation, one’s assumptions, and value system, interpreters/viewers are confronted by the way they interpret and view the world around them. They may realign, reconcile, or reaffirm their perspective. Nancy’s “inclination” is set into angle by the performance.
The counter-point to *Auto Tune* is the *Boys*, 2012 piece. As opposed to the *Auto Tune* live performance, *Boys* is a quiet, methodical, structured, and controlled work. Carefully arranged to seduce the interpreter into being a voyeur (ideally enjoying the view,) *Boys* quietly solicits the audience to look closely and questions the viewer’s morals. The images become “loaded” with meaning by whatever preconceived notions the viewers bring with them to their viewing experience. The physical separation of the two video installations causes the viewer to erect mental bridges. The repetition of form will trigger both the creation of these bridges and the mind’s natural desire to find patterns and recognizable repetitions. Seeking out meaning and significance in the differences between the videos presented, viewers are left to question their methods of perception, definition, and judgement.

This moment—when the action of judgement becomes self-aware; when an individual’s predispositions, assumptions, prejudices are laid bare— is the encounter I engineer. Looking at the world differently, giving people the freedom to make their own interpretations, and allowing the work to grow and change outside of my control all stems from the initial encounter I’ll establish. My approach here is informed by the avant-garde musician John Cage. “… who understood that for us to hear silence, it first needs to be bracketed out from the rest of the world that surrounds it.”

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Go Farther Together

The creation of artwork via a sense of togetherness is, for me, the most compelling aspect of Allan Kaprow’s *Happenings*, 1957. No longer was the art experience an isolated event. Groups of people were involved, participating, exploring the extremities of their bodies, their minds and their spirits. Participants in Kaprow’s works, experience a sense of community that is an important part of a human psyche and physiology. Kaprow created the *Happenings* in 1957, just over ten years after the end of WWII, in the midst of the Cold War and the Red Scare. At this time in American society, the middle class had turned inward, focusing on their families, their consumerism, and their economic stability. This focus led to the growth of a paternal government and the Red Scare generated a mob mentality witch hunt movement that labeled the unconventional “un-American.” Against this backdrop, Kaprow provided a vehicle for people to again become engaged, critical, and connected.

Likewise, the response to *The Field* that I’ve enjoyed the most has come as different people experiencing the piece begin to share stories of the memories that the work elicits - hot lazy summer evenings; spending time with friends in the backyard; watching summer storms roll in. This “gathering around the fire pit to tell stories” or the modern workday equivalent of gathering around the watercooler or coffee machine, brings people together and gives cause for each person to have a voice and to be listened to. This kind of participation/engagement, this *togetherness*, is one of the most successful elements of my work.
Whether it’s that the work is best engaged by more than one person at a time, or that the work engages through participation, forming a cooperative/collaborative bond between the work and the participants, and between the participants themselves is what actualizes the work.

For past projects, I chose to employ insects as a means to investigate the idea of depending on “another” to generate the work. Insects are fascinating—nearly alien in appearance in close proximity, at a further distance they become mundane, every day, and in some cases, pests; they served as accessible entry points for the viewer to consider the work. Flies’ movements generated wandering classical piano music; moths flying frantically towards a light generated frenetic free jazz sounds. Tying insect movements to computer-generated sounds felt extraneous, the technology was a layer that wasn’t necessary for the piece. I created *The Field* using crickets in hanging jars that when placed together created a field of natural sound that audience members could move through. This type of common experience tactic is present in many of my works—
the Sound of Light, 2010 (four hanging plexiglass panels which generate amplified sound through their movement), Pinwheels, 2011 (800 pinwheels made from paper from the space in which they’re installed) and Bells, 2011 (500 hanging bells, with strips of paper reclaimed from the space where they’re installed) pieces all included this type of investigation. These are pieces installed in public areas, to be stumbled upon or discovered and function as interruptions to the everyday; they are contact points that facilitate shared experience—togetherness.

An issue that has arisen in Auto Tune that has questioned the notion of togetherness is race. At the start of my project, I was interested in partnering with high-rider owners because I found the customizations made to the cars themselves interesting aesthetic choices. I also wanted to utilize the powerful sound systems that are usually installed in these vehicles. Engaging with high-rider culture seemed like it fit in well with my interest in hip-hop culture via remix culture. While my intent was never to specifically and exclusively engage with African-Americans, the high-rider owners
I’ve met have all been African-American. This has opened a large and problematic avenue of thought that warrants future investigation. The implications of presenting this work as a white artist utilizing black culture must be respected and considered. The people I’ve approached for Auto Tune have had the widest range of reactions from any community engagement piece I’ve done before. People usually react with positive interest in being involved, or simply decline to be a part of the artwork. I’m truly grateful that everyone I met in preparing for Auto Tune was gracious and civil. I did however also meet with race-driven suspicion and near hostility. Although I’m an idealist and hope that my work builds community and interpersonal relationships, in hindsight, it was ignorant of me to not prepare for these reactions. I was prepared to take on the roll of strange foreigner to car culture, but have in some cases been received as an invasive intruder to black culture. While growth does not occur through comfort, stressors and discomfort must be carefully managed. Interrupting and moving people out of their comfort zone is the method of activating and communicating the object of my work.

**Systems**

The “systems” perspective can be utilized to understand the structure of work that is actualized through participation. American writer Jack Burnham writes that, “In evaluating systems the artist is a perspectivist considering goals, boundaries, input, output, and related activity inside and outside the system.” Perspective is a crucial beginning point for creating systems.

Relational artists curate elements into a system, they erect or establish outward boundary markers, and then set systems into motion. It is at this moment, the moment that the snowball is pushed down from the top of the hill that the future of the system is most unknown. Up to this moment, the artist had an image of the relations and structures of the system in mind, and after the initial push, the motion and trajectory become more and more established. Here the nascent system is vulnerable to influences, abuses and, recontextualization- all of which will shift the trajectory of the system. These alterations are what interest me. I agree with the democratization

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of expression and creativity. Giving people a chance to join in something, add their voice, move it, or change it, and leave their mark on it. To be completely committed to this idea, I must allow my work to leave the path I set for it back at the top of the hill. I must be content to join into the system just as any one else.

Shifting my perspective to that of systems analysis and reading my historical context as a perspectivist, I’m able to dissect the objects that I do utilize, critique how elements function within the system, and examine how the system as a whole operates as an ecosystem of work. Referring to *Electric Feel* as an interactive sculpture misses the work’s main strengths, namely that it is a system. The object of the bike, the electrical current, the people, the space around the bike and the flow of foot-traffic, the dialogue generated by the viewers and riders are what make the piece- all of these elements should be considered, refined, and understood.

**Having Fun**

Playful and humorous work attracts me because I’ve grown tired of art taking itself too seriously. The regressive, cocking-a-snook attitude of using humor in art subverts the conventional/traditional posturing that accompanies art viewing. Humor changes the sacred to the scorned, shifts the revered to disregarded, and re-examines the relevant. The lightheartedness of Erwin Wurm and Keith Boadwee shows that playfulness in art is powerful, effective, and covertly offers aggressive ideas to the viewer. As Wurm puts it, “If you approach things with a sense of humor, people immediately assume you’re not to be taken seriously. But I think truths about society and human existence can be approached in different ways. You don’t always have to be deadly serious. Sarcasm and humor can help you see things in a lighter vein.”

Several of my works are built on the foundation of the absurd being received as humorous. Riders on *Electric Feel* generate enough electrical current to inflict pain on themselves. On the surface, not a funny situation at all. Using the everyday object of the bicycle as a pain-generating

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7 Wurm, Erwin. Pretty Cool People Interviews: Erwin Wurm. SubmarineChannel. 2007
device creating a masochistic activity and engineering a situation that encourages group involvement transforms an unfunny concept to a humorous experience. The ridiculousness and group dynamic of the situation is the access point to the work and fuels its ability to engage with the viewer/participant.

The same is true for the other works that utilize absurdity. In *Photogra-beef*, 2010 a camera is loaded with raw beef, the “film” is then cooked and eaten as a way to draw attention to the transformative ability of art, as well as its less logical aspects. *Blow Me*, 2011 is an absurd illustration and exploration of gender identity that shows two characters facing each other, blowing at pinwheels in the other’s pants. The same theme is addressed with *Boys*. Young males slowly react to an unseen stimulus, at times with pained expressions, at other times with quite sensual expressions. The ambiguity coupled with the seductiveness of the image (with glowing morning light radiating from their faces) is absurd as well. The viewers are free to make decisions about and create definitions for what they are seeing. In turn, they become aware of the judgement processes that allow them to assign meaning.
The disarming action of playfulness in art is more productive and effective than trying to linearly communicate with the viewer, or overpowering the audience through enormous size or shocking imagery. We live in a society over-saturated with images, like aggressive videos, coercing communication, or shock-and-attention-demanding communication tactics. Combined with the unyielding flood of information from the incredible proliferation of wireless devices and ubiquitous data services, the collective “bad news” of the world oppresses it’s population. Humor is turned to not only as an escape, but as a re-contextualizing of that information. Satire and parody have burgeoned in this time of information explosion, false connection and self-publication. Auto Tune, through the parody of the Bass Off car show, eschews the machismo of hip hop and car culture, and allows for a light-hearted entry to the viewer and participant to think critically about gender and social identity.

Humor in art communicates to the viewer that what they are seeing isn’t serious, allowing them to relax in that space, lowering their defensive walls, eschewing their expectations, all the while leaving the subconscious exposed to the ideas. “Humanity has advanced, when it has advanced, not because it has been sober, responsible, and cautious, but because it has been playful, rebellious, and immature,” states American author Tom Robbins. I agree— I think that humor and playfulness can disarm viewers, or catch us with our guard or prejudices down, and allow the message in the work to be understood more clearly. As English philosopher Simon Critchley notes, “Humor can provide information about oneself that one would rather not have. It reminds one that one is a person that one would rather not be.” In this way, humor not only allows access to the work, but also directs the viewer’s potential for critical thought, directed both outward from and inward to their self.

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Future Moves

With this foundation of absurd, group participation systems in place, I’m excited about the new pieces I will produce. The market-driven technological push has done well to strengthen cliques and boundaries between groups of people. Engaging directly with these boundaries is fertile ground for investigations into interpersonal relationships.

Technology has provided a backbone for far-reaching connection, perhaps there’s a way to utilize it that overcomes the shortcomings inherent to its structure. Other technologies I’d like to specifically utilize in work to come are randomized video, radio broadcast, and directional audio to illustrate the fluidity of relationships.

Harroll Fletcher and Miranda July’s project Learning to Love You More, (2009)– where they posted small assignments online, allowing anyone with access to the internet to complete the assignment and mail it to be part of the exhibition of responses – provides an interesting point of departure for this trajectory of work. I already have some pieces in progress that have this foundation. For example, I need you so much closer, 2012 - on going, is an ever-growing online user-generated database of techniques and processes that people who are distant geographically utilize to stay close emotionally.

In actualization, Auto Tune presented a couple of key issues that I’ll resolve before restaging the piece. One issue is the musicality of the piece. I’d like to engineer the piece to be more inclusive of car styles and take advantage of a broader range of sound systems that produce a wider breadth of tone. The other issue is that of blurring boundaries of systems. In the actualization of Auto Tune, the system of “car show”, or “bass off”, was successfully subverted into a novel unknown system- the Auto Tune art piece. This was only half of the entire piece though, with the other part of the piece, the system of the “gallery-goer” audience/viewer remained intact. The physical space of the amphitheater where the piece was installed integrated with the exhibitionist nature of the high-rider drivers, but reinforced the role of audience/viewer by allowing the audience to be comfortably and familiarly insulated from the performers, just as in other audience/performer situation. The performers were on the “stage”, and the audience
stayed on the “seats”. This pushed the piece to a place where it seemed the ideas of “the other”, exotification, and race segregation had not been considered. Future iterations of Auto Tune will be installed in places that don’t encourage this to happen. The role of the audience/viewer must be subverted to open them completely to the piece.

The relationships I’ve developed during working on the Auto Tune and Boys piece are so interesting and exciting, I’ve already begun to draft future work with those in mind. Established groups such as hot rod builders, bicycle clubs, and even filmmakers have all been welcoming and inclusive to me. The interpersonal relationships I located in these groups, in turn, allow access to a consideration of universal themes of community, togetherness, and social identity.