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Time as Material and Fragmentation of Self

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*This thesis is dedicated to all the people who have supported me
through this journey, in ways big and small.*

Time as Material and Fragmentation of Self

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts in Sculpture in the Department of Fine Arts of the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island

by
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Abstract

In the conventional division of disciplines, film/video/moving images and stationary sculpture are categorized as formal and conceptual opposites. In my work and in this thesis, I am arguing that moving images constitute a form of sculpture in the style of assemblage by the manipulation of time around them. Yes, the image is flat and stationary on its own: but the cut of time which it represents exists multi-dimensionally (spatially and temporally) to be combined in a collage-like manner. In my practice, moving images constitute a form of assemblage that manipulate time and space in ways normally attributed to sculpture.

This thesis employs multi-disciplinary approaches, incorporating insights from psychology, cultural studies, and media analysis. It begins by exploring the role of cultural symbols in identity construction and the influence of media and the moving image on identity misidentification and misplacement, before incorporating in part a series of examples from my own work in order to . It continues with a critical examination of cultural and social/societal dynamics, highlighting the impact of symbolism and language on identity formation. It concludes by investigating identity through deconstruction, disidentification and reconstruction

A central observation of the thesis is the fragmentation of the self in the era which we currently occupy, where individuals navigate a world saturated with symbols distributed through media. The liquid, ever-changing nature of nature and time. This is exemplified through case studies including the reality television shows *The Real World* and *Susunu! Denpa Shōnen*, two programs notable for their widespread popularity and early codifying of the genre, presenting narratives of individuals seeking fame and identity – positioned as constants – through media exposure.

Introduction: On Terms, *Maximodernism*, and the “Cold Child”

George Trow, in a 1980 New Yorker essay *Within the Context of No Context*, identifies the United States as a nation built on wonder, made complacent.¹ The term refers to a historyless present in which the past continually converges with the contemporary world to create a moment which is mediated, apparently having either no or a shifting precedent as a result. That is, the relationship that individuals maintain with history even as far as it can be agreed upon to have happened is unsteady, thus easily forgotten (accounting for Trow’s introduction of the term New History which is itself an oxymoron). A child brought up with no sense of themselves in relation to anything at all is a child that grows up *cold*², isolated from the warmth of history and estranged from the idea of childhood as innocent or wonderful in a world with a scale based on television.

In order to understand this thesis as one based around understanding sculpture within the contemporary era of “no-context”, it is necessary first to establish an understanding of sculpture as both a practice based in material, and time *as* material. *Within the Context of No Context* is not a piece about fine

¹ Trow, George W.S. “Within the Context of No Context.” *The New Yorker*, 9 Nov. 1980.

² Trow, George W.S. “Within the Context of No Context.” *The New Yorker*, 9 Nov. 1980. p. 73

art practice, but time. It reflects a world which we can now understand as an antecedent to our own, yet not unlike it. Trow describes the alienation which children encounter in the face of television narratives, the way that the television in its grand scale renders all people like children: small and disempowered at a new symbolic mode, and how everyone becomes like children in the face of broadcast media (or *television's*) global scale. The implications of the media's ability to convey messages and images within their own independently formed contexts and on a massive scale is something unparalleled in history.

This sense of powerlessness and alienation is something that might usually emerge as one grows older, but one which they are taught to relate with from an early age in their experience of tragedy on both a national and transnational scale.³ Emerging from this we have the cold child; a purely contemporary phenomenon, to whose attention span television conforms in its broadcast blocks and segments and is self-perpetuating and thus is continually reproduced. The cold child grows up chest-deep in the 24 hours news cycle, approaching, crashing, and receding endlessly. As a young person is bombarded constantly with images of tragedy – war, disasters both natural and manmade, violence and domestic conflict – and especially images for which they have no broader understanding, it's easy to become desensitized, bored even.

The present when encountered without history, is disorienting, ungrounded. A history that hasn't been agreed upon is no different.

This *thing* which turns children cold is accelerating, and doesn't show any signs of slowing – nor can it be stopped or reversed.

In my work these past two years, I am considering *time* and its spatial implications like scale and form within sculpture. Time is often represented through found-objects containing their own discrete histories or in the stacking up of images within videos. My understanding of sculpture is as an all-consuming thing, difficult to distinguish into discrete forms – like hitting a bullseye on a moving target. It's nearly impossible, then, to separate sculpture and video (“video” used interchangeably with moving image for the purposes of this thesis) – or separate video from any medium when sculpture is understood to include multi-dimensional works on board, installations, and in “frames” (monitors) as/on screens, but this difficulty leads one to the conclusion that sculpture and video are not distinct media. Understanding screens as containers for moving images, the housing of a screen as a frame or a box, allows one to recognize that stillness and motion are often coexistent within the sculptural realm and thus not indicative of two disparate mediums.

In the current era, traditional notions of three-dimensional representation are challenged by the proliferation of screens and projections, which opens the door to considering sculpture as multidimensional: anything that utilizes more dimensions than two. I see screens themselves as tools: things which hold images, something like frames, but more like windows through which we can observe other, speculative worlds. Accepting these media as ways of looking allows us to move past these named and prescribed ways of understanding art objects. This thesis pushes towards the understanding that sculpture and performance are frameworks for looking and understanding rather than prescriptive (prescriptive to mean, something which must achieve certain physical requirements or ends in its objecthood) practice, and what might be considered appropriate to be viewed as sculpture has expanded in the 21st century to include time-based media (moving-images), performance, and transient installations.

It seems that now it is easier to identify oneself with what one sees reflected on the screen than in the mirror. Television and film, social media websites and other forms of image-aggregation such as in the case of Pinterest, Instagram, and Tumblr, allow individuals to view pictures– stripped of their context –

³ Trow, George W.S. “Within the Context of No Context.” *The New Yorker*, 9 Nov. 1980. p. 67

and say something like: “*this is literally me.*” Images and symbols, the meanings of which can easily become confused, act as substitutes for an identity, and suddenly it is as if the only context we might exist in is the *context of no context itself*, within which nothing means anything more than what it already meant for the individual in the first place. Works of mine like *Two Story Home*, embrace symbols with specific meanings that are not really so specific, just memorable. Symbols like the sun sporting sunglasses, or the crescent moon as a face in profile, are featured because of their inexplicable ubiquity: their archetypal and thus untraceable nature.



Meaning in the 21st century, as influenced on one end by mass media and on the other by personal histories, becomes something so subjective, so transient, that it eludes definition or identification. In the words of Trow, within the “[unvarying] scale” of television “...the trivial is [...] raised up, the powerful is lowered.”⁴ This gives way to the emergence of the “cold child”, whose preferences carry outsized weight in the market and whose tastes and beliefs have been shaped by the relentless media ecosystem that surrounds them. This is why reality television – the most extreme form of self-parody, next to social media myth-making – is arguably the most relevant form of media of our time, especially in its ability to manipulate time like a material – *as a material*. It represents the self, watching the self, from an imaginary omnipotent viewpoint that allows us as human beings to feel more powerful than we have any right to. The characters that reality television creates by highlighting *Ultraviolet LED Ghost Hunting Lamp (da waves)* features a bird’s eye view, which alongside the four simultaneous channels on each screen references security apparatus: specifically the security apparatus I’d all of a sudden been noticing in several bodegas and corner stores around that time. These videos exist as two loops which play purposefully out of sync, never finding at which they comfortably converge.

My own work in time-based media and sculpture questions where time ends and space begins, placing itself between the viewer and the world as a screen or – perhaps more accurately – a veil, through which to view one’s own present.

Ultimately, the work itself thus far in my journey has been focused inward, with an interest primarily in understanding personal identity through the narratives and forms found in the media that’s shaped me. Because much of this media was released on a mass scale, though, I recognize that experiences I understand to be personal are also shared. I don’t doubt that this is a common experience amongst those born in the present era: my earliest memories involve online and broadcast media as major factors. What is “real” or actual and what isn’t becomes mixed up and thus indistinguishable as one considers themselves in relation to what they see on screens, or on pages as pictures, or in pages as text, which I find reflected in my experience of performance and the performance of the self. *Who is to say that a photograph of the sky is not actually the sky? Who is to say that a construction of a house, made from photographs of other, “real” houses, is not a “real” house?* In a world ruled by simulation – where children are encouraged to simulate through play-furniture, play-kitchens, play-babies, and play-homes – who is to say what is *really* real, and what is “fake”? This doubly so as the world plunges into an age of

⁴ Ibid.

rampant misinformation as spread through online forums and things like AI deep fakes. *Two Story Home* (fig. features a dollhouse-like setting in a collaged-together home built from historical images pulled from the archive and based in an ostensibly fictional (though historicized) narrative of Radical Reconstruction, yet the authenticity of the reality the piece depicts is not typically questioned. Suddenly it's so much harder to parse real from fake in waking life: a world of make-believe, where all things are as "real" as any other. At this juncture in time, though, perhaps the realness is not so clear.

As I attempt to locate the "real" self within stacks of magazines, books, essays, films, songs, and inside the autobiographies of others – all of which can be reduced to a form of make-believe through memory: I realize that there is no *real* self here. Everything that makes up the "self", in the postmodern, can be viewed as only a series of well-placed pixels, LED-lights, hundreds of dots, dashes, lines, that come together to form symbols – empty words, empty definitions formed by those empty words – costumes and outfits and wigs and behavioral ticks. If it can't be found on a screen, could it ever be found at all? This becomes at once liberating and supremely demoralizing: when one realizes that they are not actually *anything*, besides the markers they identify with. To quote Baudrillard, "We live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning."⁵

Maxi-modernism

Language holds not only immediate meaning but also meaning through its context. Relevance, appropriateness, timeliness, and so on all bear on the words we use and the words we find need to invent. Sometimes language can be simple, and sometimes it has to be complex. Art tends to lose something when described in purely academic language, while language as conveyed in poetry and spoken word work differently. At the same time, however, the importance of language in the transmission of the ideas that bedrock a work is undeniable.

In my reevaluation of the term "postmodern" I've come to recognize its inadequacies in describing the ever-changing contemporary condition. "Postmodernism" is commonly understood to have emerged as a philosophical term in Jean-Francois Lyotard's book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* in 1979, but it's now some 40 years later. Postmodernism or *the postmodern* refers to a philosophical notion that's skeptical of modernist hierarchy, but rejects it on the basis of its irrelevance in the face of an evolving cultural landscape. Meanwhile, however, it disregards modernism's shortcomings as a concept built on an inherently flawed and unsteady foundation based in a socio-temporal hierarchy which sees itself as superior. Postmodernism is skeptical of modernism because it sees contemporary culture as having evolved beyond it, *not* because it recognizes the concept of modernity flawed in itself. What's more, postmodernism offers no alternatives reflective of this new recognition, choosing instead to revel in itself.

Postmodernism, built on the idea of modernity, describes not the material realities of a time period but a psychic shift within society. Similar terms have emerged more recently—psuedomodernism, metamodernism, digimodernism, altermodernism, and so on—to describe the (or, rather, *a*) contemporary moment.⁶ However, all of these terms ultimately refer to similar collections of things which make up a single interpretation of the current era. That is, each refers to the parts which form the whole of our time

⁵ Baudrillard, Jean. (1994). *Simulacra and simulation*. The University of Michigan Press. p. 11

⁶ Vermeulen, See Timotheus Vermeulen, and Robin Van den Akker,. "Notes on Metamodernism," *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2010).

in different ways: the emergence of new modes for communication, new material realities, and new understandings of history.

These “new” terms are now more than a decade old. This is not to say that they have proven themselves inadequate over time: rather, the phenomena that they describe are ones associated with unstable technologies themselves rather than with the ways that individuals understand themselves and their ontological condition within the new contexts that these technologies create.

What term, then, can be used to address my aesthetic and subject? My works rely on the idea of multiplicity, the lack of a *one*, or a *the* in this current historical moment: the multiplicity of selves, multiplicities of approaches within discreet mediums, and also multiplicities of meaning. They are about the incessant reproduction of symbols and ideas. In the “popular” lexicon, I’ve yet to come across a term that captures this excess so I’ll suggest myself: *maximodernism*.

Maximodernism is a response to a postmodern era marked by a state of plenty, which perhaps understood itself as a state that would carry on forever, manifesting an uninhibited growth which results in overwhelm: a frantic, ecstatic freedom found in the explosion of symbols, form, and material. The embrace of things and desire for *more* is not exactly a desire for “plenty,” but rather a desire for just that: *excess*, for more than what’s needed. My work does not imitate or embellish this state of excess; it shows how it manifests at an individual scale.

PART 1: A Context Of Self

There is no one “self” anymore, but rather innumerable selves as reflected in media, with each self being projected through symbols until they become symbols themselves (see: musicians like Kurt Cobain or Elliot Smith, as symbols for disaffected youth). This phenomenon is not simply one that happens internally, but also externally as one projects their understanding on the wider world. Like only God has the power to do, with the introduction of the screen as a vector for holograms, we pass through ourselves in an attempt to “find ourselves in the beyond⁷,” instead finding other “selves” without locating the self in the present. The question is then: can we ever be found? And, if so, what is there to find? The level of fragmentation within subculture and its endless attempts to capture a past that never actually was, reveals us to ourselves as little more than animals that have attained some understanding of social relations along with the ability to distinguish one another by cultural, subcultural markers. The ever quickening page of time tears bodies apart: it is not only stretched by age, and growing, but torn by time. This is, of course, what happens when the hyperreal meets reality: things once quotidian are suddenly rendered absurd, even campy or mawkish. “People no longer look at each other,” Baudrillard wrote of the then current moment of 1981, “but there are institutes for that.”⁸ That is, to “look”, has become a thing mixed up in hierarchy: it is no longer good enough to simply see and be seen, rather the idea has been taken up into theory and academia to organize it as an activity worth engaging in.



Fig 2. Detail of “FIGHTING GIRL, FIGHT ON!”, Shori Sims

⁷ Simulacra and Simulation, Baudrillard. p,105

⁸ Simulacra and Simulation, Baudrillard. p,13

People no longer look at each other, either, because now we have Zoom for that. Screen resolution is the best it's ever been or will be, on the level of its representational power at least. Then we have that other problem, of having to look at ourselves all of the time and constantly notice flaws in our own moving faces.

This is further complicated when we consider the act of looking as an active state – the gazing and the gazing back. Perception is not just a thing that is happening in the moment of the action. Thanks to image reproduction, it can happen forever in perpetuity – beyond the gallery or the museum. Looking, considering, and perceiving creates many from one in the blink of an eye.

Performance for Living

When “life” (narrative) occurs in front of a camera, specifically for the view of that camera (as in the case of television and film, and in social media which functions like personal autobiography), it could almost be said that life never occurred at all. Looking at oneself is at this point basically a prerequisite for living, too, and definitely for art though it doesn't always have to be so literal as physically looking at a picture or video of one's own body, though in the instance of reviewing a performance for video, it usually is other bodies can stand in for one's own personal body.

“Acting” is not exactly the same as “being”, though since both occur in front of a camera oftentimes you might never know the difference. Before surveillance became what it is, which is a 24-hour, 365 degree thing extending even into virtual space⁹, people have to agree upon some things as simply “unknowable”. This is not to say that by observation things become known, but instead that when things are seen we can believe that we *do* know. The invention of the lens and the security-camera apparatus is what allowed us to rest easy in the fact of a consensus-based reality, in the understanding that seeing is both being and believing. This is one of the tricks that television and narrative play for some: that everything important is going to be documented somehow, outside of ourselves, for other people to engage with. (At the same time, though, it seems like a camera is never around when you need it, or want it to be.)

We find ourselves in the post-Internet (since 2009 or 10)¹⁰, post-media age, (post not meaning *after*, just after it was new and exciting) living lives that could be said to have never actually happened at all unless captured somehow: just memories, existing only to ourselves and in images if we're lucky enough to have gotten any. If I wanted to roll everything into another “post-___” turn of phrase, one could call it post-reality. Now that we are aware of ourselves and the things around us, mining so-called reality for the thing that is even further underneath *that* – what makes up societies, cultures, and microcultures: symbols. It's necessary to get beyond the idea of objective meaning, empirical evidence, because even things captured under the guise of representing truth are typically captured with a motive.

Acting Inaction

“Acting inaction” is something that was mentioned to me during a critique of a work I made in my first semester at RISD, and a term I remain enamored with in the way it combines two ends of a binary (doing and not-doing). In a later video which continued to play with this, *Two Story Home*, I performed as all three of the principal women in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. The piece depicted a moment of rest, but also a moment of rumination, repetition: not only stillness but *stuck-ness*. Sethe sits by the window and the (broken) clock, Denver curls up in bed, eyes closed, and *Beloved* mills back and forth outside. All of the women are like ghosts haunting their house, not just the literal ghost which stalks the property: ghosts

⁹ Desk, N. (2023, September 26). *NYU Professors Accuse Zoom of Censoring Political Speech*. Artforum.

¹⁰ Gene McHugh, Post Internet blog (2009-10), <http://122909a.com>

which are unable to do anything but continue acting out the same predetermined actions that they experienced in life.

Two Story Home is a work which contains within it references to many, discreet moments and memories. The sun and moon which appear – clip art – refer to my childhood in the way that images like these are found all over classrooms, throughout media, simply things that stick in the mind. The domestic space always refers to childhood for me, while also referring to impotence and grief: it's the place where things happen – moments of beauty and of violence – but also a place where things supposedly never happen.

Life, after all, is meant to happen outside.



When the work was installed in the first group exhibition I participated in at RISD, I enjoyed walking past its light as I passed the front window of the space at Sol Koffler gallery at night on my way to and from the studio: to see how the characters continued to exist even when unobserved, which evokes the classic “if a tree falls in the forest” question (ie. is it still a performance is it isn't being watched). Seeing the work continue to exist outside of the confines of the context in which it was originally created imbued with it with new life to me,

The idea of many selves, which all exist and act independently of one another, represents in my continued evaluation of the work the state of being known and celebrity: especially the niche micro-celebrity which has been created by the proliferation of screen-based media, social and not¹¹. Not long after this work was completed, the mesmerizing “NPC” trend got big on TikTok, in which creators acted out repetitive motions like realtime GIFs (the originator¹² of this trend Fedha Sinon screenname “PinkyDoll”) which worked directly with TikTok's interface that relies on short looping videos and an endless scrolling mechanism which allows these NPC livestreams to blend in with other, pre-recorded performances.

This idea of a moment which goes on forever has been important to me in my exploration of film and media as something that reflects our current times. Television, film, and their scale as things so large they contain all stories is all-consuming and allows us to live through narratives that are not our own, but so varied we can see our specific experiences reflected within them. That way, media for me enters the realm of sculpture and vice versa: referring not only to the formal qualities of both but in the way in which both maintain an impenetrable scale.

“Reality” Television

It is worth identifying two examples of late 1990s to early 2000s programming, reality-television in its infancy and heretofore most experimental form, to examine how performance finds its way into the lives of people who might not even know they're performing. Through an examination of *The Real World: New York* along with the filmed reality of *Susunu! Denpa Shōnen* we locate the allure of performing the self, within the context of one's own life, as an all-consuming performance of self, relying on the awareness of time's manipulation to be legible as such. Andy Warhol's *Sleep*, *The Real World*, and *Susunu Denpa Shōnen* are marvels of contemporary video practice. By splicing a number of shots together in a way that seems to depict a single unbroken scene, life itself (represented as a single narrative, lacking in context) is presented to the viewer in a way that encourages them not to ask questions and simply *absorb*. In this way, we are introduced to time-based media as a trick of the eye (or a series of tricks), which

¹¹ It could be argued that all media is social in the way that mass media is a group exercise in imagining. Especially when it comes to shows, films, books, music, and other forms of art distributed on a global scale: engaging with these things is a collective action.

¹² Kircher, Madison Malone

highlights things as occurring on a continuum of time and space, foregrounding time. By viewing this self-surveillance for film, stylized for consumption, it is easier to explain the allure of performing the self, within the context of one's own life, as an all-consuming form of sculpture-turned-performance-turned-video relying on the manipulation of time to be legible.

“Sleep”

Sleep (1963) is a five hour and 21-minute video of poet and performance artist John Giorno sleeping. The film appears to be a single, unbroken shot, but in reality it consists of several, minutes-long shots distributed across five film reels, pointing to the way that time can be manipulated on the level of material. In this way, we are introduced to time-based media as a trick of the eye (or a series of tricks), which identifies all things as occurring on a continuum of time and space: with the self left behind only as the thing which allows one to take in and filter the world.



Fig 4. Still image from “Sleep” (1963), courtesy of Internet Archive

Though *Sleep* doesn't exist in a form intended for broadcast, the way that it manipulates viewer perception through editing does mimic the unscripted television of today or, conversely, online videos. The idea of sleeping as an act worthy of attention was unthinkable when Warhol debuted his film in 1964, but it's one that's become common since then in the form of Big Brother's 24/7 livestreams of the contestant house offered to paid subscribers, or “sleep streams” offered by personalities on Twitch where streamers are open to receiving donations literally in their sleep. The allure of the film does not lie in the technique employed in its creation – there's nothing special or new about the way Warhol handles the camera or edits the film – but in the concept behind it: that this video of a man sleeping – doing literally *nothing* – could be considered art, and how that's expanded the field of the medium. The work is the

documentation of an inactive performance despite the performer not recognizing what he was doing as such: not in the way that he had no idea Warhol would be recording him but because in the state of unconsciousness, awareness is not possible. His performance was a performance of real life in maybe the most perfect expression of the Real on film to date, because it leans deeply into the unrepresentability of Real states both by the obfuscation of reality by “manipulating” time and the impossibility of representing the experience of sleep.

“The Real World: New York”

The television show, *The Real World: New York*, encourages us to think of time nonlinearly, with the lives of the housemates then being presented as consisting of a series of stops on a temporal road, ultimately, into the unknown. The stated goal of the show is to depict “real life” and human behavior, but it encounters the issue which leads many to turn away from reality television to begin with: that by introducing cameras and a set to document the show’s events, it ostensibly becomes an exercise in pretend: acting. Airing several years before I was born and yet still being one of the most formative pieces of media of my life in the impact that it had on culture, *The Real World: New York* picked up where Warhol left off, making much less of an effort to hide its tricks through editing than Warhol did, yet somehow still deeply invested in concealing its “fakeness” within the context of a pop-culture in which everything is already presumed to be *fake*. *The Real World* tries to head-off its most obvious criticisms at the pass, first with its title and then its tagline:

“This is the true story...of seven strangers...picked to live in a house... and have their lives taped...to find out what happens...when people stop being polite...and start getting real...*The Real World*.”¹³

The Real World earns the right to call itself that, to have its actual basis in reality even considered by television critics of the time, because within a consensus-based reality: somebody is going to have to reveal to the masses that – actually – seven complete strangers winding up in a SoHo loft with no stated purpose besides showcasing (in front of several cameras, all of which appeared to be within plain sight) “real life”, could possibly be staged. Somebody is going to have to remind the people that just because the executives at MTV have decided to agree upon the real-ness of their programming, doesn’t mean that it is actually *real*. Time again is used as a material here in the way that is known to be always passing, this passage backgrounding the actions of the participants. Ultimately, the most notable thing about *The Real World* is the way that it set the stage for the deluge of reality television shows that came later, codifying for the modern age this format.

“Susunu! Denpa Shōne”

The Japanese reality television show *Susunu! Denpa Shōnen*, airing beginning in January on the Nippon TV network in 1998 and ending in September 2002¹⁴, meanwhile, is a lot more sincere with its portrayal of humanity. This is partially due to the fact that the first and most notable contestant, Tomoaki Hamatsu, nicknamed and further referred to in this thesis as Nasubi, didn’t know the entire time that he was on TV. With the impression that he was simply participating in an experiment that showrunners were unsure would even go to air, he was given instructions to record himself with a handheld camera which he



1. “Show That Destroyed Someone’s Life.”

did diligently, never knowing that it would soon be beamed into the homes of millions of people tuning in for the program¹⁵.¹⁶

A revolutionarily cruel bit of entertainment, *Susunu!* showcases reality through reducing people to the most desperate versions of themselves. More like a game show at times (or a “prank show” in which the “prank” is drawn out through an entire season) it is another piece of media that turned me onto this idea of reality-television (which might otherwise be described as “performance-for-video”) as kinetic, time-based sculpture, and an exercise in a “no pain, no gain” motto of life, which ended up with more pain than gain. The show’s first season featured a young man, nicknamed Nasubi for the long eggplant-like shape of his face, a hopeful Japanese comedian, who was forced to live exclusively on sweepstakes winnings, naked, and isolated in an apartment for 15 months. Though Nasubi was not actually the comedian’s name, it basically became such after the show aired and became the most popular in Japanese television history¹⁷.

The months-long ordeal of Nasubi, and the constant action of *The Real World: New York* which later spun off into several seasons located everywhere from London to Atlanta, are both examples of performance and how performance and its mounting ubiquity fractures the self even in its demand that the self stand still (it cannot). At the same time, all of these works also take on an element of endurance. The shows turned their “contestants” into characters over time, though perhaps not the characters they wanted to be. In the worlds of reality television, a major factor deciding if a contestant is loved or reviled by fans is the audience’s perception of their character’s “authenticity” overtime: that is, their never changing for either the better or the worse. This supposed challenge of remaining exactly the same way, however, without the ability to grow or evolve in any natural way. In later interviews given by Nasubi after the events of the reality show that claimed 15 months of his life, he discusses how his experience on the show ultimately resulted mainly in him being offered shows that required him to be “goofy and naked”, keeping with the characterization which Japanese viewers had come to love and recognize as quintessentially Nasubi¹⁸. If Nasubi wanted to get what he was led to believe by showrunners that he would get out of his stint on television, he would have to be the “funny”, desperate, naked character that appeared on the TV screens of Japanese households for the rest of his working life. He entered into a character that he could not escape, and realized that he didn’t want to be. Ultimately, Nasubi the character is who became famous after *Susunu!*: not Tomoaki Hamatsu the comedian. For him and many who gain notoriety in a similar fashion: this is the price of “fame.”

PART 2: The Physicality of Time

Sculpture itself, defined simply as the practice of creating dimensional representations of forms both abstract and based in life from materials with which the materiality is of major interest, is complicated by the introduction of screens, projections, and therefore the flattened images held within these frames into contemporary artistic discourse. What “counts” as three-dimensional within a context in which anything can become three dimensional when the dimension of a screen is introduced, becomes everything: *any image, any object*. Introducing time as a material further opens the doors for sculpture to be complicated by introducing another element to dimensionality, allowing us to consider performance for video and moving-image work altogether as also sculptural.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Fig 5. Image of Nasubi, *Susunu! Denpa Shōnen* in Season 1, Episode 1

¹⁷ This American Life 529: *The Human Spectacle*

¹⁸ Ibid.

Time is like a patina, which works on existing things (ie. objects, images, videos, writing). This is exemplified even as I am writing this thesis, where I am considering and reconsidering my own work with the knowledge of *now*. When we think of time as material, we are able to match it with the transient, ever-changing nature of performance. In performance the artist's body is the "material" of interest, also existing within a multidimensional time-space continuum. The tangible objects, the documentation that come out of performance, documents the *time* involved in its creation.

A room when considered as an installation – a *set*, where the multiple objects inside and around it become a single object by their identification as parts of a whole – could be considered the most complete example of sculpture as one in which an individual might be able to disappear. Upon disappearing into the sculpture, the performing artist, too, becomes part of the piece. This highlights the all-encompassing nature of time-based media in the 21st century: expanding to include architecture, video, furniture, screen-based media, performance, and so on. When performed inside of, anywhere might become a sculpture, and a time-based sculpture at that (one second activated, and in another second *not*). An entire house, full of cameras, in the context of reality television: is a moving, changing, transient sculpture. In the later video-based work of Andy Warhol (a man who is commonly hailed as the father of new-media art as we know it today), we can see the possibilities of sculpture when its definition is loosened enough to allow time-based media to fall under its purview. The set of *Susunu! Denpa Shōnen* certainly became a sculpture when it was pulled apart from each side at the show's climax like a Christmas gift to reveal Nasubi, naked and terrified, to a crowd of his loyal fans cheering and congratulating him on a job well done.

The thing that many seem not to agree with about reality television, is that in the way that it captures a facsimile of real life, it captures everything that it needs to. Like *Susunu!*[...], and *The Real World*, and the films of Andy Warhol before that which played explicitly with time (*Sleep, Kiss, Empire, etc.*): "reality television" captures everything of reality that it needs to by capturing so very little. This is because, of course, it is impossible to put oneself fully in the shoes of another, and yet as a culture we crave to understand others through narrative. This craving does not account for the possibility of performance, people not performing as their real selves and instead performing as versions of themselves, set for different audiences. Even though it is impossible to really *know* anybody besides oneself, this does not stop people from attempting. The old adage "seeing is believing", is correct sometimes, but believing doesn't indicate knowing.

In the 21st century, surveillance seems to have become yet another form of attention that everyone can get in on. The introduction of consumer television, followed by the World Wide Web, introduced Americans and the world to the idea of *watching-from-home* as a form of recreation. In a late-capitalist existence, though, it seems that the idea of watching others compete tooth-and-nail for a finite amount of money – an amount of money that many would argue is in no way worth the prolonged suffering potentially brought on by allowing oneself and the reality of their life, to be filmed, cut together, and intentionally misrepresented at times for the prying eyes of others – is one that fascinates many.

Acting Inaction: Losing Time in "My Year of Rest and Relaxation" and "Beloved"

Otessa Moshfegh's 2018 runaway success, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*¹⁹, is a novel that could easily be said to have taken over my life embarking on my first year of graduate school. Before that, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* dominated my conscious mind.

The protagonist of the former novel, who remains unnamed throughout the text, thus allowing the reader to graft themselves all the more onto her, is a disillusioned 20-something living in New York City in the years immediately preceding 9/11 (perhaps *the* television event of the 21st century in its representation of the Real). She is obsessed with two things: sleeping and media – particularly Whoopie Goldberg (which is ironic given her often described lily-whiteness). The protagonist is unable to cope with an intolerable present in which she finds herself orphaned by her father's death from cancer and her mother's suicide, but also more generally in the world. Instead she opts to – with her only friend, Reva, who is ultimately well-meaning but clueless by her side and her negligent psychiatrist Dr. Tuttle – sleep with the aid of pharmaceuticals for an entire year. She seemingly (at least, within her own unreliable recollections) cannot relate within other people in a normal way, nor does she seem to experience happiness (a “cold child” for sure). She is never described as smiling, laughing, or showing much, if any, emotion. She can only take sleeping pills, watch television, and otherwise sleepwalk through her life in the hopes of coming out on the other side of the year a “different, better person.”

This works, if only because by the end of the novel she's passed out of her worldly concerns in order to recognize life in its infinite beauties. By the end of the final chapter of the book we are led to believe that Reva died in the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, or maybe not. The protagonist has a VHS tape, recorded during the attacks on the World Trade Center. On this tape is a video of a woman leaping from the towers, and she makes clear that when she watches it – she does not find comfort in it because she imagines that the leaping woman is Reva and it is a way of remembering her deceased friend, but because in moments of necessity she finds it to be an awe-striking expression of absolute freedom. This relationship to the video of that tragic moment is similar to a lot of work based in video with a conceptual framework that lies elsewhere, where the meaning is in the act of making and the “product” developed is the result of that action. This is how performance works for me, as that which is within the making of the object and the object is the result of the performance (that's how *STREET TRASH* came to be, originally documented in photographs).



Fig 6. Making of *STREET TRASH*, photographed by Gaocanyue Zhu

¹⁹ Moshfegh, Otessa. *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*. Penguin Press, 2018.

One thing that interested me about this novel was its criticism of the current era as one of impenetrable nothingness except for images and symbols, exemplified in the protagonist's media obsession and also the way she conceptualized herself in relation to things. Reva's freedom in dying – a freedom which the protagonist found only in her sleep – only as she entered the state of pure detachment from the waking world, interested me also in the way that it is a rest which the characters in *Beloved* are never described to have experienced²⁰. After all, even Beloved herself the eponymous ghost is just that – a ghost – unable to rest even in death. The attention paid to rest in one context while in another none could be found, led me to begin imagining the realities which characters might encounter when placed outside of the viewer's gaze. Specifically: is there a moment in *Beloved* in which the women in the house at 124 Bluestone Road are able to experience stillness? What about myself: for me, how does this come to be? I was thinking about these things a lot as I was working through my first semester, trying to figure out where in society it could be possible for a Black body in the United States to find rest, rather than relegation to labor of one kind or another.

This is where my work costumed as a white woman emerged, from my interest in knowing if taking on the symbols of a character could allow one to disappear into them. I describe the practice within the work as “racial drag”: not *whiteface*, which implies a relationship to blackface and thus an inherently mocking, insulting, violent mode of so-called “imitation” with a much broader historical context. The work is about whiteness as camouflage, artifice and the limits of identity: reflecting an archetype existing somewhere between the protagonist of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* in look and manner, and Scarlett O'Hara in dress.

I began creating work within and around the narrative of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*²¹, my goal being to identify my own subjectivity relationally with the book's three primary characters: Sethe, Denver, and the eponymous ghost. This work relies on imagining the undescribed moments in the novel of rest and inaction: moments which certainly must have happened in the years . This was because, for me personally it's natural to understand oneself more through existing characters when found lacking the language to describe themselves independently and without reference to an .

The image and the idea of the self, observing the self from some kind of Godlike birds-eye view, appears often in my work (and the work I find interesting), as a metaphor for dissociation in this uncertain age. One is encouraged to go back through their own archives and attempt to reconstruct experience from tangible reference and symbols. Within the references, the images, the sounds and the stories: characters and symbols became mixed up in their relationships to themselves. The elements that brought the videos into the realm of installation also gave them meaning as things which were most legible in relationship to the temporal moment and the space.

²⁰ Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2019.

²¹ Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2019.



Fig 7. Installation view of *Funeral for Jesus*, Shori Sims 2024

Time and Space as Material: “*PAIN (How A Star is Born)*” and *STREET TRASH*

My understanding of the importance of time and image as a form of material emerges as part of my interest in history and time, and in understanding personal histories and those experiences of time as it passes. The loop in a work of video is an attempt to deny death by creating a moment which lasts “forever.” The consideration of space is well-tread in art, however time and its representation has historically been less considered when figuring a piece of work²². Time is an individual thing, and the experience of it, is something that no longer seems to be reflected in the media unless that media is very specifically attempting to recreate the past. There is an obsession within art, maybe, or maybe just within me when it comes time for art to be made: to make something new, and different. As we get closer and closer to visual perfection on a representational level, we lose time. The images in my work, now, even attempting to recall a different sort of image, cannot be taken separately from the time period in which they were made. Anything made using ever-evolving technology, must be open to being judged as a product of its times.



Fig 8. Still image from *PAIN (How a Star Is Born)*

All works that openly utilize time as material submit themselves to this judgment. Works like “*PAIN (How A Star is Born)*” or *PAIN* for short – a 22 minute short film – and “*STREET TRASH*”, an ephemera board measuring 70 inches across, taking time as sections represented both through objects (a sword, a doll, a sculpture) and image-objects (photographs of me, people I’ve known). Both of the works referenced above manipulate time and image to serve as autobiographical explorations of experience like reality TV, taking on the structure of a dream with cuts and movements in time and space, but in alternate ways. *PAIN* does this in the form of a video, whereas *STREET TRASH* does it in physical form. The former of the two features images of myself taken from my laptop’s deep memory intercut with references to other formative media moments in a jumble of things on screen. Rather than representing historical,

²² Gombrich, E. H. “Moment and Movement in Art.” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, vol. 27, 1964, pp. 293.

linear time: it utilizes multiple points and references through media which encourage the viewer to compare their experiences of childhood objects and early adolescence with mine while still occupying the time frame of a typical episode of television without commercials (about 25 minutes).

“STREET TRASH ” represents time as a snapshot, typically moving but momentarily suspended. It exists as the residue of performance, documented in photographs and continually occurring in my studio and the world, broken up and divorced from temporal reality to stand as a physical object. It is an attempt to lay everything out bare and take it for the ‘mess’ it has been, also exemplifying the earlier discussion of material time as being able to exist as things, pictures, and videos. The piece is autobiographical in that it represents my ongoing performance of life, keeping a record of time in the way that I’ve kept adding to it and adding to it in various ways when it feels meaningful to do so. In my original presentation of the work, it was accompanied by a performance and the absurd horror film from which it received its name – *Street Trash* (1987), where a contaminated batch of liquor causes the unhoused alcoholic population of a Brooklyn slum to begin melting²³.



Fig 9. Still image from *Street Trash* (1987).

The melting parallels the way that experiences and references “melt” together in order to form a person: the small and childish body featured, which resembles in its material features sporting fabric skin, yarn hair and painted features (save for the fact that the doll I was gifted is not blond or white) and painted with tattoos matching my own to represent the artist’s body is pulled through the scene of the sculpture by an unseen force: inside a space of memory, raised and flattened planes of darkened colors. The melting parallels the way that experiences and references “melt” together in order to form a person: the doll featured, which resembles in their material features, sporting fabric skin, yarn hair and a painted face (save for the fact that the doll I was gifted is not blond or white) and painted with tattoos matching my own to represent the artist’s body is pulled through the scene of the sculpture by an unseen force: inside a

²³ “Street Trash.” *IMDb*, IMDb.com, 18 Sept. 1987, www.imdb.com/title/tt0094057/.

space of memory which is occasionally interrupted by faces, raised and flattened planes of darkened colors.

The blond mess of hair by which the doll is also being pulled is the wig from the performance as the listless white woman from *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*. The surrounding environment stands for time and space liminality, originating as the residue of the initial performance that began the work and building as the continuous performance inside the studio which led the work to grow.

The performance is the performance of self in the interior mental space of time and marked by reference in the form of drawings and ephemera pulled from my life.

This is a piece for which the terms maximodern applies best, in the continuous process of its making and unmaking, and piling up, marking the excess of symbols and signs which mark a single life.



Fig 10. Installation view of *Street Trash*, Shori Sims 2024

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

All of my research over the course of these two years, was meant to result in an episode of a speculative reality television series that I planned to call, *Denver's Dream*—edited from the inside in a way that presented personal experience to explain the inner subjective life. A question driving this project from the beginning was: Can one become famous by pretending to be famous for long enough? As I worked and attempted the idea of a reality television series, I began to see the flaws in the idea.

Flaw #1: It takes a crew to be “known.”

It's hard – perhaps impossible – to make reality television without the cover of a camera crew, or a production crew to cut the video, or a major production budget. My error in the beginning was the belief that life could be boiled down to the level of narrative, before realizing that life itself is *no narrative*. The time, budget, manpower and attention it typically takes to get life when captured through a video to fit a narrative format is one I hadn't begun to consider with the full clarity it deserved.

Flaw #2: It demands planning and time beyond what was available.

There wasn't enough research, there wasn't enough *planning*. If I was going to do this, then I should've started planning the structure of it long ago. I don't have all of the film I would've required because I wasn't adequately compiling it, I didn't have all of the video because it wasn't being planned in a way that made sense. How was I supposed to get shots of myself experiencing things when *I* was the one who had to be recording it? This is where my work diverged into *collections* of things – *ephemera boards* – which were more relevant to my experience of being and could be made with more immediacy. The objects have lives, hold things and can be manipulated in their temporal objecthood physically.

Flaw #3: It takes more emotional resources than I had

I do have *collections* of things in the form of objects that can be held, and the way I've come to experience life is as a *collection* of things, with things in this instance meaning what you can touch (like a photograph, or a playing card, or some such other ephemera), and resources in the form of digital assets, but there's a reason why the media systems which keep these sorts of things going are regularly described as “machines”. The energy was there for a while, and then it eventually plateaued. I was so distracted trying to have the experiences that I forgot to record them, and what the experiences resulted in – trauma and despair that ultimately resulted in growth and a path forwards – did such a number on me that I got tired of putting myself through it. Yet I couldn't stop, because that was the thing that I was supposed to do according to some insane voice inside my head which told me that the easiest thing would be to keep pushing and *pushing* until things miraculously worked out on the other side.

I easily forgot myself, which seems to be a thing that happens to people in media or who try to insert themselves into the media. It's hard to deal with these things. I changed my name in the university's system to Halie, my stage name, which seemed like a good idea at the time perhaps and made it much easier for me to *be the character*, but ultimately opened me up to more confusion when people were not aware of what I was doing, and questions I couldn't exactly answer without revealing the flaw in my thesis as I first conceived it arose. The work that I've produced over the course of this year is made with the knowledge I've gathered, but presented in a different way: with the boards.

This endeavor, more meaningful in the physical making for me than a reality television series, led me to another epiphany: the only thing better than reality television is reality – the representation of the moment as it actually happened or *is happening* – which comes out of documentation in the form of the artifacts I made.

Performance, ultimately, is a way to stay alive. Performance allows the subject to escape the flattening power of normative, dominant society and instead assert their own individuation. This goes especially for individuals who by either the racialization of their bodies or their queerness are already placed far outside of what normative society chooses to embrace. The thing is, though, that if you're always performing, you're never really alive. This goes to a quote from *Simulation and Simulacra* "if you're always [acting for some imaginary camera, you're not really living]." Because life is not exactly acting (debatably). Performance, "acting", feels stabilizing because it implies that there is a story to be told. The phrase "story of [my] life, implies that there is a storyline, or a narrative. If you grew up on television and the Internet as I did, it means that it's easier to understand your life as a narrative. But, if life is like a television show -- like *Lost*, or *General Hospital* or something -- it's worth it to collect everything, never let go, because it could be relevant later. If you've experienced a lot of trauma, then it feels important to never let things go, because it could be relevant later: things like pictures, videos, feelings, objects. etc.

However, for me, the active collecting of these things became a distraction from living which adds to the inherent trauma of living. Being in the same moment all of the time, like the loop, does not allow for growth, because the loop never changes. Ultimately there are beginnings and endings, but things do not ever stand still. The world continues moving, with or without the consent of those experiencing it, and there is no way around that even within art and language yet in order to effectively approach the real it must necessarily be represented. Sculpture and the language which we use to discuss it cannot stand still in the face of evolving technologies, and material considerations must evolve to meet changing times as well.

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