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The focus of my work has been to address the problem of using the written word within the context of visual art. Particular interest has placed on the reuse of two-dimensional writing surfaces to construct three-dimensional sculptural forms.

The result of the related thesis work consists mainly of the two works *January 6th through February 2nd* and *Memory Collection*. These are included in the required exhibition in the Weatherspoon Art Museum. Images of these works are included as supplemental files.

OPEN-ENDED STORYTELLING AND THE WRITTEN WORD

by

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OPEN-ENDED STORYTELLING AND THE WRITTEN WORD

I aim to create objects that invite the viewer to accept writing not only as a vehicle for thoughts, ideas, and emotion but also as an integral part of an art object. This is done in a variety of ways. We are used to interpreting writing merely as a means of communication. We have traditionally treated the written word only as a means to an end. I believe that writing can be talismanic, that it can impart its specific meaning to matter in physical reality. Writing in its traditional form already exercises a powerful influence on human feelings or actions. When writing is attached to an object, that intangible and magical quality that writing has is transferred to the object itself. I also see writing as a portal that allows the ephemeral realm of imagination to be brought into the world. My goal with this paper is to explain my inspiration for working in this way, to show how my work is informed, to show how I have used writing in specific works, and to discuss the importance of discussion in relation to my artistic practice.

Writing is an important part of being human. It serves as a means to carry our thoughts into physical reality while also being the primary means of visual communication. This is the reasoning behind the use of text within my work. I hope to highlight the power that the written word imparts to expression, with pieces that incorporate both writing as an expressive act and the use of the word to bring meaning to objects. I also wish to encourage the viewer to see writing as a form of drawing that can be appreciated for its characteristics as an image. It is in this way that

writing has a dualistic nature. It is a visual representation of language, but it can also be viewed within a context of nonrepresentational image. There is a well established history of viewing text as a visual art form. This includes calligraphy from many cultures as well as more modern and contemporary artists who use text simultaneously as language and image. Artists of this type include Ann Hamilton, Christopher Wool, Barbara Kruger, and Jenny Holzer. Hamilton's work in particular has been of great influence on my own work. This is because I feel that she has successfully used language in a variety of interesting ways. In works such as *Tropos* Hamilton has been able to incorporate text into an actual space that encourages the viewer to experience language in a very tactile, sensual way. In *Tropos*, the viewer enters a space in which the floor is covered with hair. Within this space is an individual who sits at a desk, burning the words from the pages in a book. Simultaneously, a recording of someone who is uttering incomprehensible sounds can be heard in the room. I believe this piece sets up a situation in which the viewer becomes a participant in a sort of creation and destruction of language. The work brings a deeper understanding of language in an abstract way by developing a relationship among written text, spoken word, and our tactile understanding of a space.

As well as being influenced by contemporary artists, my work is also informed by my own personal experiences. I've always been influenced by the art of storytelling through stories told to me by my grandfather and my mother. However, I have tried to bring this oral tradition into a written form. I choose to tell the viewer stories within objects. These are not narratives in the traditional linear sense, but are open-ended and influenced by the object itself. These usually begin very much as journals because they

are so directly inspired by my own experience. By the time they are finished, they have been rearranged in a way so that the viewers must bring their own experiences to the object in order to fill in the gaps. In this way, the viewer completes the story and therein completes the object.

An example of a piece that I feel does this is an installation entitled *January 6th through February 2nd*. This work is made up of hundreds of small pieces of paper, each suspended from the ceiling by a single thread. The pieces of paper originated in Vermont over the duration of one month referenced in the title of the piece. Each of these pieces of paper has a message on it, written with an assortment of pens and pencils in my own handwriting. They are a collection of my thoughts and feelings. Each particular piece of paper is unique in content and material. The thoughts recorded for the most part reflect a sense of frustration over being displaced. These hanging bits of paper have been arranged to mimic the size and shape of the ceiling in my bedroom in Vermont. This is where I felt most displaced as well as being where the notes were written. My purpose behind this arrangement is to use the objects to recreate the space in which they were originally made. One reading of the work is that the notes are used to protect me from what is outside. This suggests that writing can also be a defense mechanism. Because the notes are positioned overhead, the installation imparts a feeling that the ideas themselves are floating above the viewer. This has obvious implications that ideas or thoughts are constantly hovering around their creator. Metaphorically, I am also suggesting that the ideas contained on the scraps of paper can be used to create another type of psychological or emotional space. However, much of this information is not

readily available to the viewer. Therefore, the piece must be allowed to reveal more of itself over time. At first, the viewer will perceive the work only in a very formal way. I hope this means that the viewers will not be overwhelmed with my interpretation of the work and will enable them to come to understand the piece in their own way. This refers back to the concept of open-ended storytelling that I feel is such an important aspect of my work.

Another work which displays this property is *Memory Collection*. This piece is a group of small hand-made envelopes constructed from copper mesh. Each envelope contains a small rectangular piece of paper that has an important personal memory written on it. The mesh is difficult to see through, meaning that the viewer must approach quite close to the work in order to make out what is written on the bits of paper. This piece has several layers of meaning for me. The concept is centered around the idea of protecting, saving, collecting, and displaying one's memories. This idea in itself is not at all uncommon. I don't know of anyone who hasn't at some point saved an object to serve as a reminder of a past experience. The photo album is perhaps the most well known example of a memory collection. Another inspiration is the way in which we save letters, particularly love letters. Much in the same way, my *Memory Collection* serves to display and store these captured moments. However, while a photograph stores information visually, my memories are stored through the act of writing. For me, the association between writing and personal experience seems very appropriate. It is appropriate because when we write we are hand crafting a personal object. It must also be considered that envelopes are symbols of communication between individuals. When

this is combined with the fact that the memories are hand written in script, the association with personal letters is complete. This sets up a situation in which the piece has several meanings. It is simultaneously a way to keep things private and protected while also suggesting that the envelopes and the memories contained in them are for sharing with others. These multiple layers of understanding that can be peeled away by the viewer encourage discussion of the work.

The communication that is brought about through the making of work is an important part of my practice. This involves the dialogue with others while the work is in progress as well as discussion of the finished product. I find that my work is greatly benefited by discussing the work with peers as it is being made. This allows for the work to grow and evolve over time rather than to simply illustrate a concept. Work that is created to suit a preconceived purpose usually falls short of its goal. A piece that develops through the artist constantly reevaluating the work has several dimensions of meaning. I also feel it is important to continue the dialogue once a piece is finished. This helps me to reflect on the work and generate new ideas for future work. The continued discussion also aids others in understanding the work in a way that they perhaps had not experienced before. This dialogue is part of the inspiration for using writing in my work. It serves as a reminder of the importance of communication.

There are many ways of approaching the creative process. For me, it is a chance to both explore methods of expression and to fulfill a basic need to communicate with others using visual means. I feel as though the use of writing within the context of visual art is an effective way of doing this. Writing already inherently serves as an effective

communicative tool. However, I feel that through expanding the original intention I can use the act of writing to impart even deeper levels of meaning. I do not mean to imply that this is an easy task. It is in fact quite the opposite. I find that working with writing is one of the most challenging undertakings I have ever experienced within my artistic practice. This is exactly why I have been able to continue to work with writing and why I feel that I will continue to do so in the future. My goal will remain to show that writing can not only be used as a vehicle, but as a functional part of an art object.

CATALOGUE

Hinson, Dustin W. *January 6th through February 2nd*. Sculpture. 2007.

Hinson, Dustin W. *Memory Collection*. Sculpture. 2007.