

(T)HERE

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By:

Eli Taylor Blasko

Director: Tom Ashcraft
Distinguished Professor of Visual Arts,
MFA Program
School of Art and Design

Committee Members: Susan Alta Martin, Dr. Seth McCormick

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ABSTRACT

(T)HERE

Eli Taylor Blasko, M.F.A.

Western Carolina University (April 2022)

Director: Tom Ashcraft

(T)here is a body of work focused on the role that systems play in the formation of everyday experiences and encountered objects and works to highlight these systems by mimicking their visual languages and organizational behaviors. Objects are the residue of human institutions, cultural bodies, and their influence, and this authority often remains invisible through its design. By fusing object-making and aspects of relational artwork, the projects executed for *T(here)* unearth these structures by pointing to them in a direct manner that often requires participation, asking audiences to reconsider their role and the inherent value of these structures themselves.

INTRODUCTION

Building from a foundation in craft and fabrication, my practice has adopted new reciprocal modes of production leading up to and throughout my graduate studies. By continually working on various community-facing projects and public interventions, I have developed a cooperative language in my work that often appropriates the styles and techniques of cultural institutions and governing bodies. I use these borrowed visual languages to guide audience participation in artworks while drawing attention to the ways in which these entities structure the world outside of my projects. I now frequently discuss my artistic practice in terms of hybridity: the fusion of object making, relational art, and social practice, and this document serves as a blueprint for that reading. It discusses how I arrived there, some of the terminology that I use to conceptualize my practice in this way and concludes by highlighting these elements in several of the works presented for my thesis exhibition.

INVISIBILITY THAT SHAPES

The world is made up of invisible things, and these things have a way of shaping the world in much more tangible ways than the objects they produce. It's important to note that being invisible is not not being there. On the contrary, it equates the existence of things that simply aren't accessible by visual means. Invisibility implies presence in a way that circumvents what we typically associate with being here rather than there and allows us to examine the nature of things in a way that accounts for their past histories and the nebulous systems of which they are merely a small part. Building from ecophilosopher Timothy Morton's ideas about objects, I think of what we see in the world as the residue of numerous interactions over time between humans and systems—either our own or those out of our control (*Spacecraft* 33). This notion is largely what drives my work. I am a collector of these observations and, in conceptualizing them as nodes of much larger frameworks, am interested in how meddling with our awareness of them can reveal glimpses of the mechanisms behind them. I don't go out specifically looking for these observations and often, like an object's relation to the systems that formulate it, they are the result of many previous interactions or encounters.

I think it's logical to view my practice in this cumulative way; it is a methodology that has evolved incrementally as a result of the outcomes of certain projects. I once considered myself exclusively an object maker but, building off of experiences working with the public on various projects that I will discuss at length later, my practice has evolved into something more socially-responsive while still heavily incorporating the use of fabrication and design. Instead of creating artworks as symbolic representations, fabricated elements have become a way to guide my audience's experience of a relational or cooperative artwork rather than being exclusively the work themselves. The objects that I make often co-opt their visual language from the systems and institutions that I draw attention to, like mapping, cataloging, the park service, or museums

and other cultural institutions. By doing so, I simultaneously emphasize and distort their authority by recontextualizing them within the microcosm of a particular project.

TOWARD A RECIPROCAL PRACTICE

In 2016, I took on a role in Spartanburg, South Carolina as the Artist of Record for a community art project: *The Northside Artlets*, and concurrently formed a business focused on creating public artworks commercially, both of which forced me to work in a sort of hybrid space as artist, designer, mediator, and collaborator. (Figs.1 & 2) This was all rather new territory for me, and it required a loosening up of both the personal aesthetic that I had spent several years developing and my largely private methodology in which works were cultivated in the isolation of my studio away from an audience until I was good and ready to exhibit them. I was now frequently working out in public on artworks that garnered immediate feedback from passersby who rarely censored themselves and kept an open door policy at my studio that I had relocated to the Northside neighborhood for the *Artlets*. Local history and narratives were the conceptual bedrock of the *Artlets*, and anyone walking in the door knew a lot more about the neighborhood than me, so I was grateful to sit down and hear what they had to say, no matter what I was in the middle of.

I enjoyed the work that I produced with the community for the *Artlets*, as well as the public projects I was executing under the guise of my business. I started to reconcile this with the object-centric work that I had been making up until that point in my career only after the *Artlets* project was complete and the business was operating with regularity and a full project schedule. My personal practice had been drifting, veering away from solo building and leaning into a more socially-responsive and cooperative one. Directly influenced by the container of the *Artlets*, I had become interested in new ways of working with audiences to generate experiences that weren't exclusively visual or object-based, but included aspects of participation, cooperation, and the sharing of skills or narratives.

The *Artlets* had planted a seed and functioned like a two-year crash course in the execution of a social practice artwork ("Glossary | Hammer"). This experience taught me many

things about community artwork and myself that later would feed into my art practice. I had personally struggled with many aspects of the project but realized that these conflicts stemmed from the fact that I, who was the one actually operating within the Northside community and listening to the needs of its members, was not given much agency or control over the framework of the project. I came to discover that this container, designed by art administrators, lacked the adaptability necessary for the project to reach its full potential. The *Artlets* taught me that I am not a social practice artist in the most conventional sense of this term, but do embrace certain techniques commonly associated with it. It taught me which aspects of community-facing artworks I preferred to be in control of, what I could let go of without compromising the integrity of the artwork, and how to better develop my practice as a relational one with the potential to elicit a spectrum of meaning or generate novel experiences for wider audiences and individuals who don't share the same positionality as me.

The moment that these new perspectives regarding my practice seemed to come together was with a work called *Interlace: Time|Body* that I installed at the Spartanburg Art Museum in late 2017 (Figs. 3-5). The work consisted of four vignettes fabricated throughout the museum in a cyclical layout: a bedroom with an alarm clock, a bathroom with working plumbing, a grassy area with a concrete slab reminiscent of a grave marker, and a waiting room with a snow cradle (a theatrical device used to generate snowfall on stage) filled with shredded newspapers with their photos removed placed high above a couch and end table. Initiated by the alarm clock at 15-minute intervals, four actors continually cycled through each vignette during the run of the show, performing their own personal rituals in each.

The work was based on four performance pieces I had devised but never executed because I was stuck on the details of how the action within each should unfold. When I was invited by the museum to exhibit, I hadn't been making objects because of my public project load, and decided it was an apt occasion to execute these performative works. During the months leading up to the exhibition, as I was hashing out the conceptual nuances of the works, I

realized that I was much more interested in devising the container of the project: its spatial layout, props, and various environments, than performing the action myself. There were an infinite number of possible outcomes for each performance that were far more intriguing than any predetermined script I could write, and I decided that I shouldn't limit these possibilities to my own experience and conceptual choices, so I instead hired four actors to execute the works for me. By inviting these outside performers to participate, the work became an open-ended experiment more than an artwork with definitive boundaries and objectives. I prompted the actors with a baseline introduction about each vignette and provided them with a finite amount of set elements to work with but left the action, which would drive the work's content, largely up to them. We rotated through the vignettes twice the day of the opening, and I recused myself to operate the snow cradle and become an audience member as the exhibition opened.

Up until that point, I had never created an artwork in which an audience became so engrossed. Some viewers would follow specific actors throughout the museum, others sat on the floor intently watching new performers cycle through the same vignette (even as the actors just sat or slept), some entered the work in an attempt to interact and, as the waiting room took on an emotionally distraught atmosphere while fake snow accumulated over the couch and end table, some teared up alongside actors who were emoting grief from some unseen hardship. To me, the piece felt like having a sentence finished for you by someone else with a more eloquent vocabulary and, after having belabored the narrative details of each performance for months without ever really landing on something that was satisfactory, I found this transferal of conceptual intent and the success it granted the project invigorating.

Interlace became an ongoing conversation in which I had posed the initial question and designed the container with requisite props without taking complete control over the outcome of the work, a format that I find parallels how I design many of the projects presented in my thesis work. By physically removing my presence from the work, inviting actors to project their own ideas onto it, and not prescribing any particular method for it to be experienced, the piece

became relational, and allowed for many more possible outcomes among audience members than would have been possible had it been a solo performance (Bourriaud). The work moved past the purely symbolic representations of my earlier sculptures as they became more of a support structure, helping to fuse the physicality of others' actions with strategically placed props that took on symbolic potential, acting as aids to the content that was being actively generated by the performers.



Figure 1: Nest is one of four public spaces created with the community for The Northside Artlets project.



Figure 2: Brawley Street Artlet is one of four public spaces created with the community for The Northside Artlets project.



Figure 3: Installation image of Interlace: Time|Body at the Spartanburg Art Museum



Figure 4: Installation image of Interlace: Time|Body at the Spartanburg Art Museum



Figure 5: Installation image of Interlace: Time|Body at the Spartanburg Art Museum

(T)HERE

The reciprocal nature of my practice and how it relates to both cooperation and object making can be seen on a spectrum throughout the works exhibited for my MFA Thesis Exhibition: *(T)here*, and *An Air for Drifting* demonstrates varying levels of these ideas in a singular work (Fig. 6). *Air* is a piece executed in collaboration with Lex Turnbull in which we both have equal co-authorship over the work, and in this sense it is a traditionally collaborative artwork, but also illustrates a way of cooperating with materials and outside institutions as well. Lex's and my objective was to develop a work about movement that would give form, or perhaps more accurately assign boundaries, to the expansive idea of movement by encapsulating multiple interpretations of it within the artwork. After consideration of this concept, a meteorite and pair of tap shoes became the ideal vehicles for conveying information about movement on varying scales. The work is an intervention in the lives of materials, an exercise in collaboration with another artist, and an example of cooperative practice encompassing outside institutions and objects (Finkelpearl).

The experiment consisted of procuring a meteorite, which was then pulverized and cast into pewter taps affixed to Lex's shoes. Lex, who is a trained dancer, then performed while wearing the shoes, and this was edited into a four and a half minute video projected behind a curated display of the taps in the exhibition. The meteorite itself is not simply a symbol, but actually *is* physical matter that arrived here via an exceedingly long stellar trajectory. The shoes invoke movement on a more familiar human scale as objects that are used to traverse terrestrial distances. The meteorites were selected because of their origin in Morocco, rather than a North American location, and were intentionally purchased on the other side of the country in Tucson, AZ, so that, in addition to their extraterrestrial voyage, they had to travel between continents and then traverse a country. Because this cataloged provenance of the meteorite is central to the content of the work, *An Air for Drifting* can be seen as cooperative engagement with the

meteorite as material. The United States Postal Service, which was responsible for the final, continental leg of the space rock's journey, is also implicated in the work, as its role necessarily contributed to this content as well. Additional meteorites, once pieces of the same meteor before falling to Earth, are presented on a mirror in the vitrine along with the altered tap shoes, affording them the opportunity to convey their own message about the piece as a participant in their unadulterated material form. The mirror is significant for its use in both microscopes and telescopes, instruments used to look across distances that cannot be seen with the naked eye; however, this component remains symbolic as using the types and sizes of concave mirrors in these instruments was not practical within the work. The video is framed in such a way that only Lex's feet are visible, which gives a sense that the shoes themselves are actors all on their own, and this allows the work to become less about its human authors and more directly about the concepts of motion, sound, and distance presented in the work.

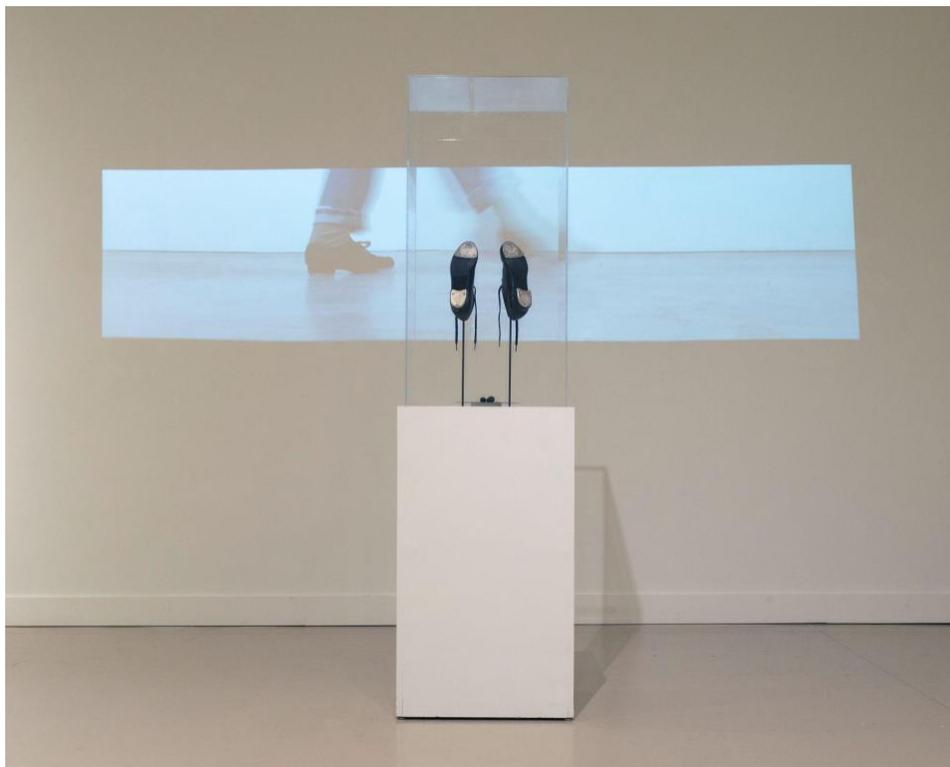


Figure 6: An Air for Drifting at the Western Carolina Fine Art Museum

The project *Desire* is the most openly interactive artwork presented in the exhibition and maintains an important link to fabricated objects that help guide participant interaction. (Figs. 7-9) It is an excellent example of what I describe as an ongoing reciprocal exchange relationship with an audience. *Desire* takes as its impetus the desire lines (or desire paths) located throughout the Western Carolina University campus. Desire lines are a concept in landscape architecture and urban planning first coined in the 1990s, referring to unplanned routes within an otherwise undisturbed geography or planned public space (“Desire line”). They are most commonly generated when repeated pedestrian traffic erodes visible lines into a landscape, and this is the case for WCU’s desire paths, which have been formed by the campus community’s ongoing use. The work was created by first cataloging and measuring the lengths of four desire lines throughout campus. Signs based on national park trailhead markers indicating accurate, fractional mileage and reading “Desire” were then fabricated and installed at each of the corresponding pathway’s entry points.

Desire is an intervention in public space that simply points to something preexisting, not made by me as the project’s author, but created by a community as a solution to meet a common need. This indicating action functions as an invitation for members of the campus community to reconsider the presence of desire paths as collectively created objects, potentially assign them meaning, and participate with the project by walking the paths or in other non-prescriptive ways. This action further designates each member of the audience as a potential co-author, and examines their role as the artists. If they had never traversed the pathways previously, they now have an open invitation to do so, and the ongoing nature of the work means they may join in at any time. The component of the work in the museum offers another, more guided way of participating in the work by presenting maps that can be used to geolocate the outdoor portions of the work and extended wall text provides a brief definition of desire lines.

I see this project as an optimistic gesture signifying the possibility of diverse groups working together incrementally to achieve goals, and hope that the project illustrates how this activity could be transposed into other social, economic or political dimensions. By not attempting to be didactic in any way, other than perhaps the accurate notation of trail lengths, the word “Desire” routed into the outdoor signage takes on a greater metaphoric potential and, assuming most of audience members are not familiar with the terminology, helps to encourage this transferal of meaning into other arenas. However, to once again frame my work as an ongoing experiment, I recognize *Desire* as a hypothesis that I am testing, and have simply set parameters with only the bare amount of input that’s needed to initiate the process. Even if the meaning I’ve assigned is not readily transferable from within the work to other sociological dimensions for many participants, the framework of labeling desire pathways in a given location is, and the social data collected from watching this version of the artwork play out can be used to pilot future iterations of the work.



Figure 7: Desire installed on the Western Carolina University campus



Figure 8: Desire installed on the Western Carolina University campus



Figure 9: Desire installed on the Western Carolina University campus

ARTWORKS AS NETWORKS: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Through a thorough consideration of the provenance of objects, the means of their creation, and a selective incorporation of the cooperative gestures of both social practice and relational artwork, my methodology has been expanding toward its current form since 2016. I do not characterize my current practice as being strictly within these boundaries, but rather opt to designate it in hybrid terms that encompass aspects of each. By using invisibility as both a lens through which to view my own practice and a subject that it explores, I further define the work as acting within unseen networks of the social and experiential that lie beyond the facade of purely visual experience. I consider myself to be working in a socially cooperative way with these structures, and regarding this element of my practice, I find that my works are better described as experiments, containers, or interventions occurring in both public and private venues. Audience feedback and the way its members choose to interact with my works actively drive my own interpretations of projects and the development of strategies for future experiments, both of which maintain an adaptability and remain open-ended. This reciprocal element makes my practice a continual network of exchange, creating an ongoing dialogue between my audience and I as we jointly navigate objects, environments, and situations while questioning the larger institutional and cultural networks of which they are residue.

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