

PRIMARY OBJECTS

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By

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ABSTRACT

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We construct our environments and experiences through a continuous acquisition and collection of objects. However these objects make their way into our lives, we adapt in relation to them. There are objects and environments that we interact with more often than others, because they serve functions integral to our lives. My thesis focuses on an examination of the relationships we form and experiences we have with and in relation to these objects and environments.

INTRODUCTION

I believe the relationships we form through objects and environments follow the same patterns of any other human relationship. In this work I am investigating the way we perceive, experience and critique these relationships. I am creating an interactive installation that simulates different aspects in the development of our relationship with consumer objects as well as the environments and experiences that relate to them. My goal is to create an interactive simulation that provides the participant a space to examine the emotional and affective basis of the various relationships we form with each other and the impact they have on our perceptions.

When creating entirely fabricated experiences or simulations within a controlled environment, the amusement and child-like wonder normally attached to video games or theme parks like Disneyland come to mind. These can function to provide a sense of complete escapism, a period of release, or a momentary denial of the real. This view of the simulation can be found in Baudrillard's description of Disneyland as a "frozen, childlike world," within which the values of America are "embalmed and pacified" (Baudrillard 12). Central to Baudrillard's perspective on simulation is a fear that the connection to an original will be lost through mass reproduction, leading to a "hipper reality" where we are no longer aware of the inauthenticity of the duplicated representational portions of the reality we inhabit. Baudrillard describes this as "a world of simulation, of the hallucination of truth, of the blackmail of the real, of the murder of every

symbolic form and of its hysterical, historical retrospection” (Baudrillard 8). In my installation, I have attempted to turn this notion on its head by creating a simulation that allows the participants to examine their world from unique perspectives outside the reach of their naturally accessible perception.

Baudrillard’s views were developed within a historic frame where consumption-based mediums like television and radio were pervasive, only allowing for a mono-directional dissemination of information and ideas to be transmitted to the viewer. From the current perspective, where means of media production, reproduction and multidirectional broadcast are readily available to individuals that possess a creative drive or vision and the desire to communicate, Baudrillard’s critique can no longer account for the complexities of our contemporary culture’s relationship to the simulated.

A movement that took place in the late 1990’s, termed “Relational Aesthetics” by Nicolas Bourriaud, represents an attempt to move away from this approach to simulation. One of Bourriaud’s critics, Claire Bishop, captured the general sense of “relational” artists’ reactions to changes in communications technology and their culture, stating, “relational art is seen as a direct response to the shift from a goods to a service-based economy. It is also seen as a response to the virtual relationships of the Internet and globalization, which on the one hand have prompted a desire for more physical and face-to-face interaction between people, while on the other have inspired artists to adopt a do-it-yourself (DIY) approach and model their own ‘possible universes’.” (Bishop 54). Though the artists being described by Bishop in this critique build on

Baudrillard's cynical approach rather than completely separating themselves from it, a valuable understanding of this shift can be taken from the artists' work. One artist of interest connected to Relational Aesthetics is Andrea Zittel. In her work *A-Z Wagon Stations* (2005), Zittel designed capsules that simulate living spaces that can be personalized by the end user. These pieces come off as tongue-in-cheek and somewhat cynical showcases of the way we form our identities around the products in our lives. Though Zittel's work remains conceptually constrained by her adherence to Baudrillard's critique of "inauthentic" consumer culture, her focus on how we relate to objects and her use of traditional industrial design in creating her simulated spaces provides a bridge to my own work.

The way simulation is implemented in my work is through the creation of interactive experiences that illustrate possible methods of seeing and understanding as opposed to simply mimicking what already exists. What I attempted to do in my thesis work is to use simulation as a tool to critically examine our real experiences and relationships from an augmented perspective by allowing the viewer to manipulate sounds and imagery taken from areas of the installation re-contextualized within a digital interface. This interface reverses or inverts the concept of simulation as an insular escape from the real and uses it as a critical tool of reflection. This marks the divergence of my work from Zittel's. Zittel's work creates products that simply point out our culture's reliance on corporate branding for the development of personal identities. In my work, the objects are only a piece of a larger experience, acting as tools to aid in the direct

observation or analysis of a more nuanced, open-ended and personal reality. This work provides participants with the opportunity to manipulate images and sound within a simulated environment over which the participant is given complete control, allowing for a digitally augmented exploration of human experience.

Though not strictly an interactive or digitally-based artist, Pierre Huyghe is an example of the move away from cynical analyses of simulated experience, which are replaced in his work by the staging of what has been referred to as “spectacles.” In works like *Chantier Barbès Rochechouart* (1994) which consists of a billboard depicting construction workers displayed next to the actual construction workers on a job site, Huyghe creates an image or simulation of the real that allows that community to look back at itself. The image on the billboard is not romanticized: it looks as if it were a candid snapshot of the everyday. In an article discussing this work, art historian Vered Maimon says that Huyghe addresses “representation as a site for ‘real’ social encounters—which is to say, as a mechanism that is integral to the constitution of social forms of subjectivity” (Maimon 23). This seems to suggest that the simulation or representation of “the real” is a functional requirement for an entity to subjectively look at itself. In a more recent work titled *Streamside Day Follies* (2003) Huyghe takes this idea further by fabricating a celebration or spectacle that included a parade, speeches and other events for the opening of a new housing development. This celebration was acted out and filmed within the actual community. Maimon says that Huyghe provided the community with “not just a day for celebration, but the possibility to

face itself” (Maimon 28). This again suggests that self-representation can enable a community to recognize itself on a critical level, allowing for growth through reflection. Huyghe’s fabrication and simulation of this celebration created the possibility for the community to develop a new understanding of itself through a complete fiction. Such an implementation of simulation, providing individuals with the opportunity to look back at themselves, is at the core of my ambitions for this installation.

Another aspect of *Streamside Day Follies* that is of interest for this work is the method Huyghe used to display the film in three-dimensional space. Using projection screens that slide along tracks, Huyghe created a self-assembling structure described by David Joselit in his essay “Citizen Cursor” as an “architectural parade” that forms an impromptu “pavilion” within the gallery space, requiring the viewers to congregate within this simulated, tent-like structure to view the film (Joselit 164). What my installation shares with Huyghe’s is the creation of an environment within the gallery that involves a turning inward. The film of the community’s outdoor celebration, projected onto the inside of a mechanically constructed and deconstructed pavilion within the white walls of a gallery, invites the audience to look in on itself and on the environment it “communes” within. This inversion of experience in the presentation of *Streamside Day Follies* is given a different and somewhat more specific focus in my design for the physical structures of my thesis installation. The intent for this installation is to invite the viewer to rethink their perspective and place relative to the work and the space it is located within.

ATTACHMENT, OBJECTS & ENVIRONMENTS

Primary Objects uses the simulated environment to provide the viewer with a space to examine relationships, experiences and environments inflected by technology and consumer culture. In a consumer-focused culture, such relationships rarely receive critical examination. The origin of my interest in our relationships with objects and the environments they create is an emotionally driven one. I have been able to link this to two different aspects of my childhood: the nostalgia I have for the (admittedly mostly imagined) aspects of the industrial community my grandparents lived in, and the intense attachment my father formed with seemingly mundane, trivial objects. My grandparents lived in a small steel town just west of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Their home was down the street from the steel mill where my grandfather worked. Though I wasn't alive when these plants were operating, I grew up surrounded by their rusting structures, picturing my grandfather in uniform, walking to the mill with his lunch pail. This gave rise to nostalgia for a culture that was built around industrial production and provided its workforce with a middle-class, consumer lifestyle, a culture that possessed some connection and relationship to the making of the objects they consumed.

The reality of my relationship to objects is much more complex than what this romantic and mostly imagined past can explain. I also have a strong desire to form an emotional connection to objects. My father was a carpenter with a strong emotional attachment to the things he created, keeping and mending

things that should have long been disposed of. For my father, these objects became subconscious stand-ins or surrogates that allowed him to hold onto old relationships or periods of his life that were in the distant past. Though I was aware of the irrational nature of my father's disposition, I too developed a need to form a true emotional bond with an object before I would allow it into my life. This requirement is now applied to the things I create as well as the products I purchase.

OBJECTS

The products that were made for this installation are invested with a dual existence. They act as a touchstone of the viewer's real lives and also as vessels or companions. The products are meant to bond with the viewer through familiarity and use, with those associations and experiences carried from one area of the installation to the next. Because of this, their psychological function begins to conflict with the expected utility of the product. The object relinquishes its potential as a product of consumer use and becomes an object of dual functionality. This contradiction is underlined by introducing the viewer to these objects in a setting that references a retail space but provides no opportunity for the viewer to purchase or acquire the objects. Paola Antonelli touches on this topic in her essay "Talk To Me" for the 2011 MOMA exhibition of the same name. Antonelli discusses the point where traditional design begins to leave its "functionalist territory to venture into an ambiguous universe where its essence is confused and a crisis of identity arises". She goes on to say that "the ability to inhabit different environments and frames of mind at the same time have become central to our cultural development" (Antonelli 16). It is within this mindset that the objects created for my installation were developed.

It is important that the products be familiar to the viewer/participants so connections can be easily made to the products in their own lives. This requirement led to the creation of a reading lamp, video game console, and an audio system (fig. 1). These are a mixture of basic utility and luxury products and

serve to reflect the user's identity or tastes through the audio they listen to, the books they read, or the games that they play. These products in turn have a tendency to become very personal and coveted objects. The video game within the product line was used to introduce the viewer to the idea of open play and interaction within the space. It is controlled by three-buttons and is displayed along with illustrated instructions, pushing the viewer to interact (fig. 2). The game mechanics consists of the player moving a glass jar left and right to collect falling pixelated worms as the jar flies through different locales. The symbol of a worm jar is used throughout the installation as a reference to childhood play and the nostalgia for a basic playful investigation of our environment.

In order for a simulation that uses consumer products as a central set piece to be created, a believable or at least consistently crafted line of products had to be developed. Craft is important not only for the sake of the consistency of the participant's experience of the work, but also so that the objects evoke experiences the viewer has with real-world product lines and brands in their actual lives. Consistency was achieved by selecting three basic materials: unfinished wood, red clay and black wire. The construction of each product is based upon a single template: a short wooden box with a square clay lid that has a notch cut out of the bottom left corner. The square with the notch cut out of one corner also acts as a sort of brand identity for use in the advertising materials and other elements deployed throughout the space.

ENVIRONMENTS

Primary Objects is made up of five individual environments that supply the viewer with simulated experiences as well as the tools to analyze them. The areas are visually separated from each other using spotlights that also emphasize the products within each area. Different audio is played within each space in order to reference the space's real-world counterpart: store, living room, etc. The installation is designed to appear as if it were a series of experiences floating in a synaptic dreamlike space, requiring the viewer to cross through shadowy voids to investigate each area, and giving the viewer space for sensory pause. As was noted earlier in my examination of Pierre Huyghe's work *Streamside Day Follies*, these spaces were created to provide the viewer with an experience or space that continuously looks in on itself through thematic as well as structural mechanisms.

Another point of reference for the physical structure of the installation is a work by Bruce Nauman titled *Live-Taped Video Corridor* (1970). This work places the viewer's activity within the space central to his or her experience of the piece. In *Live-Taped Video Corridor* the viewer walks down a single corridor looking at a video feed of himself from behind, walking away. The central focus of this piece is the feedback loop of the viewer's presence within the space. Similarly the subject matter within the environments I have created is reliant on the viewer's presence, though it is not achieved through the use of surveillance or closed-circuit video. Instead it relies on the experiences viewers have within the space

as well as the memories and associations they begin to attach to the more familiar aspects of the simulation. As one area of the installation begins to reference another, the viewer can then begin to examine his or her own experience and associations with the space through this inverted perspective, in a sense creating a labyrinth of association and reflection.

The first area in *Primary Objects* provides the viewer's introduction to the space. The focus of this area is image-based representations or "advertisements" of the larger experience (fig. 2). These consist of the postcard advertising the show, signage on the exterior of the space, and pamphlets describing the products, providing the viewer with a simple language-set to reference throughout the installation.

The next area is the first stage of direct interaction between the products and the viewer. This takes place in a simulated show room or store and consists of a single table with the products on top accompanied by information cards describing their individual functions (fig. 3). The sounds within this space are made up of murmured conversations in the background, disembodied sounds of unfamiliar voices merging into the white noise, simultaneously reverberating and muffled as by the segmented architectures found within shopping centers.

The third area is the simulated living space. It attempts to represent time spent understanding how objects can be integrated into our lives and how these forms of integration compare to our initial expectations for the object. The area is made up of a simple desk and chair populated by the same products located in the retail area, now made available for interaction and use by the viewer (fig. 4).

The products are set up in a way that invites the viewer to spend time, to sit down, play, read, and interact. The audio within this area is a collage of sounds that would be heard within a small home. Unlike the muffled background sound of the shopping center, familiar activities and appliances can be heard; human activity is close, singular and recognizable.

As the viewer makes their way through the smaller areas, they circle a large central area constructed to provide an inverted, abstract experience of the installation as a whole (fig. 5). This space was created to promote critical reflection upon the relationships and environments that are formed through our experiences with the objects in our lives. It consists of a large curved screen that displays images, elements and themes from the other areas of the installation. There is a control mechanism in the form of a turntable with a large glowing glass jar on top (referencing the playful interaction and investigation introduced by the video game), through which the viewer / participant can manipulate which areas appear on the screen, simultaneously overlaying and sifting through the audio from each stage. This is where the participant will engage with an inverted perspective of the simulated space and their experiences within it: peripheral placement or advertising, a storefront, a living room, all woven together within a synaptic-like structure.

Looking in on these media-rich, sensually domineering areas from a hidden corner of the installation is a softly lit bench with no soundtrack and no content linking it to the rest of the areas other than the simple aesthetic consistency and common material, unfinished wood (fig. 6). This bench was

intended to offer a final space of decompression, to create another level of detachment and examination from within the simulated environment. The incorporation of this bench after all other areas have been explored and exhausted provides the viewer with another opportunity to re-examine the installation.

CONCLUSION

In this installation, I have attempted to provide an experience that is challenging and somewhat disconcerting by removing the expected function of commerce and acquisition from the products and simulated scenarios within the work, yet still maintaining a level of familiarity that will encourage participants to critically reflect upon their experience. By producing an interface intended for observation and reflection, and placing it alongside the simulation of familiar objects, spaces, and sounds, I am attempting to nudge the audience into forming connections between the simulation and their own lives. The final structure of the installation provides an architectural foundation to the work, a physical structure for what could have easily become an inaccessible cloud of abstraction and theory. This work serves as an investigation of the use of interactive simulation and immersive design as a means to examine and develop a better understanding of ourselves in relation to the objects we acquire and create and the environments we live within.

FIGURES

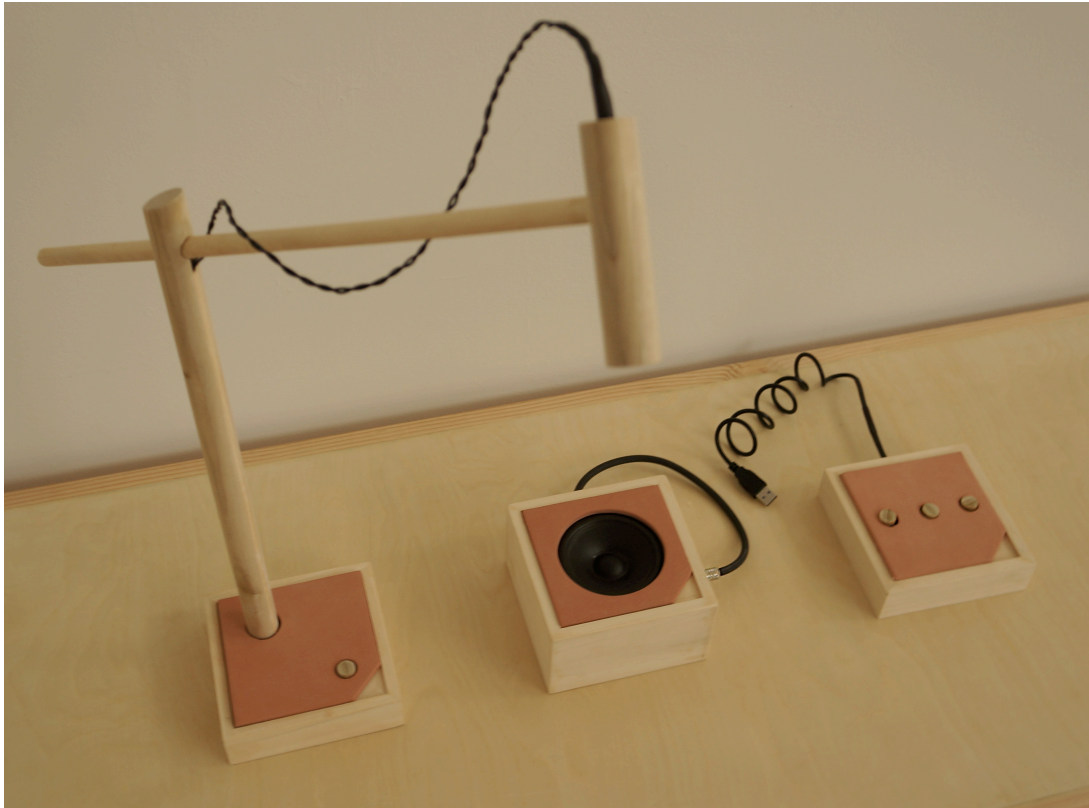


Fig. 1. Primary Objects: Product Line. John Seefeldt, 2013.

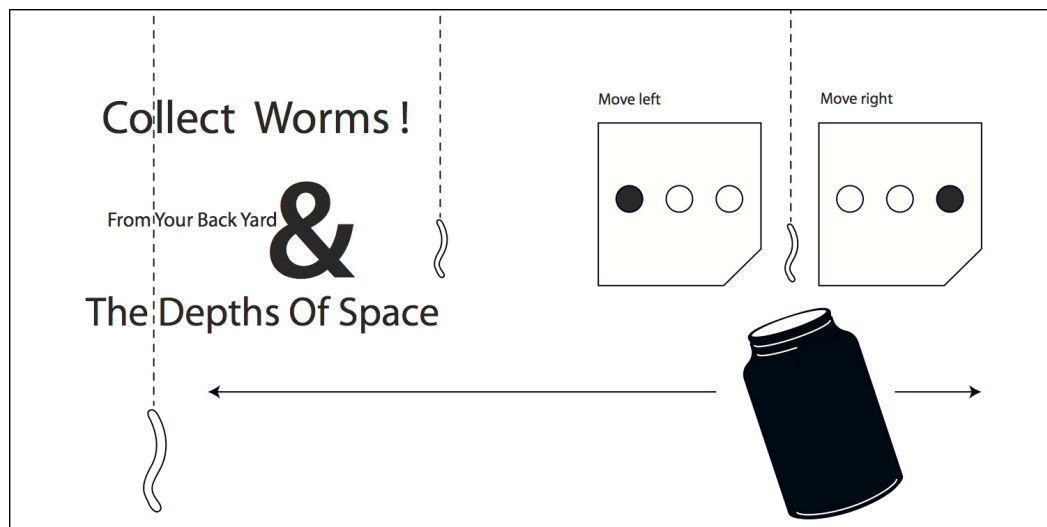


Fig. 2. Primary Objects: Advertising sample. John Seefeldt, 2013.



Fig. 3. Primary Objects: Retail Space. John Seefeldt, 2013.



Fig. 4. Primary Objects: Living room space. John Seefeldt, 2013.

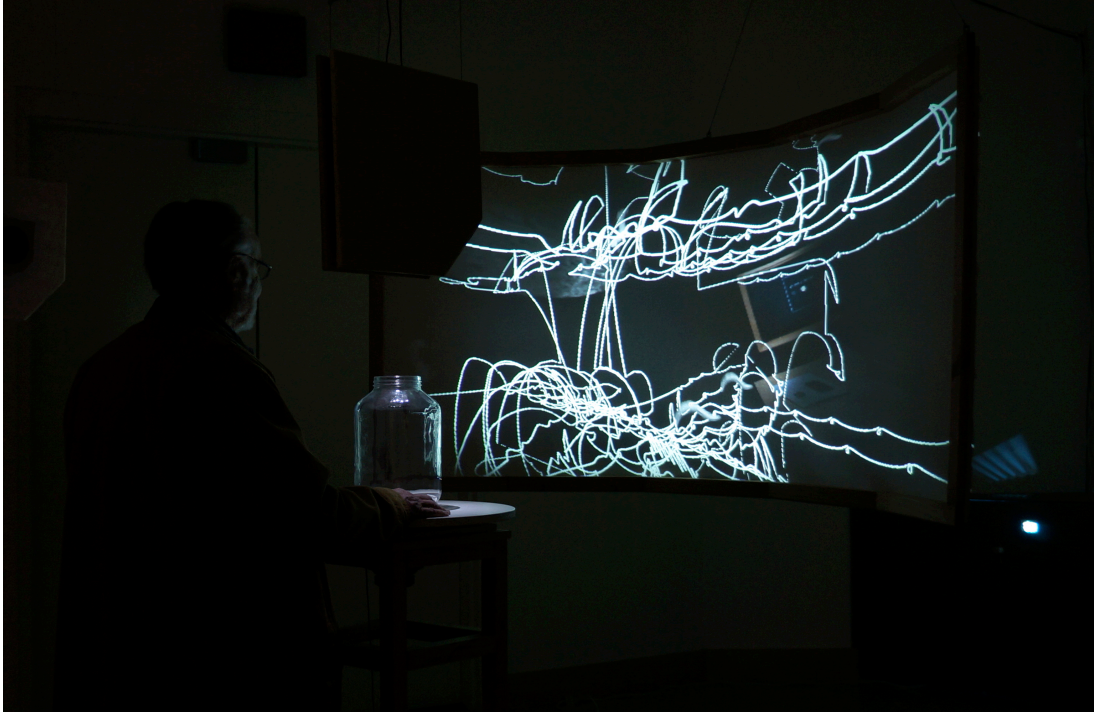


Fig. 5. Primary Objects: Worm Jar. John Seefeldt, 2013.



Fig. 6. Primary Objects. Bench; John Seefeldt, 2013.

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