

First Principles and Ordinances

Katherine Groesbeck

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Committee
Doug Jeck
Rachael Lincoln
Amie Mcneel
Jamie Walker

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University of Washington

Abstract

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Chair of Supervisory Committee:

Professor Doug Jeck

Three Dimensional Fourm

Garments/fabric are a central theme in my work. Their inherent intimacy and privacy conceals and signifies both the absence/loss and presence of the wearer.

In the studio, I investigate in a ritualistic and meditative manner that defines the work as it becomes imbedded with personal symbols and allegory. My objects and imagery gain their full meaning over the course of 'the making.'

I use honey, molasses, flour, oranges and onions because of their color, texture and ability to saturate all of our senses. Wax, clay slip and rust work in a similar way - morphing from liquid to solid enables them the power to coat, drip and embalm.

I immerse, coat, wash and scrub materials as a way of anointing the resulting objects; their presence is at once sacrosanct and tainted. The repetition and self mandated tasks that characterize my private, cathartic ritual are best described as an order of haptic ablution.

"I am for an art that imitates the human, that is comic if necessary, or violent, or whatever is necessary. I am for an art that takes its form from the lines of life, that twist and extends impossibly and accumulates and spits and drips and is sweet and stupid as life itself."

- Claus Oldenburg, 1961, Catalogue for the *Store*ⁱ

My work exists within these personal "lines of life"; I gather ideas, experiences and beliefs from my own history in order to amalgamate the index of the past and my present. I afflict created scenarios and objects through self mandated tasks of immersion, haptic ablution and repetition; creating coded objects that hold humility and sacredness.

Sense - ability and submergence

Pungent smell of onions burning my tear ducts, saccharine sticky of golden honey and the thickening density of molasses: my practice grounds itself in our senses. I use honey, molasses, flour, oranges and onions because of their color, texture and ability to saturate our consciousness. Wax, clay slip and rust work in a similar way - morphing from liquid to solid enables them the power to coat, drip and embalm. I hold my materials in high regard; they become embedded with the hallowed - both absorbing and emitting presence. The material *defines* my work, I do not just merely *use* material.

My first "art act" at the University of Washington was to pour a bottle of Pepto-Bismol over my head (fall 2013, fig.1). An almost comical act, it was both a desperate response to the new graduate school expectation to produce art and acting on an impulse to be immersed in liquid glossy pink. Immersing myself, and objects in color, texture and odor is central to my practice. In hindsight, the most significant part of the three-channel video projection, *Orange Neuroses* (winter 2013), was the submergence of myself in a bathtub of orange juice, with pulp (fig.2). I feel protected when coated and concealed. Jim Melchert's 1971 *Changes: A Performance with*

Drying Slip exemplified the connections between immersion, sculpture and real bodies. When people are covered in liquid turning to solid they become sculpture, with breath and flesh, anointed with an extra layer of skin - both cleansed and stained. My most potent experience of immersion was as a ten year old in a white jump suit wading into the chlorinated waters of baptism, dunked head to toe. If an elbow or even a strand of hair was not immersed, then the baptism had to be performed again - another prayer, another, almost violent, plunging to purify.

Ablution or washing hay with molasses and realizing I am not an alchemist

"Your start was like you were knee deep in molasses," my college coach tells me after an underwhelming 200-meter track race. I laughed, but my dreams were filled with endless swamps of molasses and frustrations of being stuck in the athletic doldrums. In my studio, I am now washing hay with molasses, pouring the thick liquid into my palms and aggressively working it into the hay. My hands take on a tarred and feathered quality. The word ablution is essential to my work: the washing of oneself with liquids - often used in a religious setting. Originally, the word was used for chemistry and alchemy, to mean purification through liquids. I work in my studio in a ritualistic and meditative way. I immerse, coat, wash and scrub, as a way of anointing the resulting objects and then, deeming them worthy, they are at once tainted and sacrosanct.

The title of my installation *The Laver*, references the laver in the Jewish Tabernacle, described in the old testamentⁱⁱ. Laver is derived from lave - meaning to bathe and in old Irish means basin. The laver in the Tabernacle was a large bronze basin filled with water and used for the priestly ablutions - washing of their hands and feet before they entered, and after they left, the Holy Place. The ablutions, like baptism, cleansed the priests - showing respect, service and reverence.

The Laver was placed beyond the altar, where sacrifices were performed and set before The Holy Place and the Holy of Holies - God was approached by way of blood (the sacrifice at the altar) and water (the Laver).

In *Task* (spring 2014), I stenciled a list on a wall with textured white paint: 52 onions, 20 lbs honey, 10lbs flour, 3 gallons milk, 8 yards felt. I scrubbed over the textured letters with whole onions and left behind the yellowed juice stain, onion flesh and a stinging smell (fig.3). Executed at a vigorous, almost manic pace, the act was cathartic, repetitive and compulsive. *Task* demanded my presence in the same way a competitive track race does; both body and mind are intensely focused, thus completely extant. Lucid experiences require longevity, repetition, endurance and a high level of rigor, met most often in my running and art making - both practices are inseparable and demand a focused madness to find solutions and clarity. The repetitions and self-mandated tasks that characterize my private, cathartic ritual are best described as an order of haptic ablution.

Scrubbing walls with onions was also present in my installation *Psalm for a Land Plot*. I blocked off half of a rectangular gallery with an eight-foot high wall that had three small floating steps. The viewer could, somewhat uncomfortably, climb up the steps to look over the wall. Because the top step reached a height of three feet: most people propped themselves up with their forearms on the top of the wall, letting their feet dangle above the top step, to look down on the other side (fig.4). The blocked off room was coated in textured paint and washed/scrubbed with raw onions, the floor was flour and burlap - showing foot prints from the ritual. Just one person at a time could climb the stairs. The viewer became intimately included - making the solitary

climb, putting faith in the walls integrity and curiosity about what lies on the other side. Without climbing the steps one was merely left in a sparse blank room, with the smell of onions and the shoe scuff marks on the wall - bearing testament of those gone before.

Repetition Repetition Repetition Repetition Repetition Repetition Repetition

Choreographer Pina Bauch explains "repetition is not repetition...the same action makes you feel something completely different by the end."ⁱⁱⁱ Repeating a word over and over creates new meaning and sound. Repeated action exaggerates the overshadowed, like the small hitch in a runners step that becomes a crippling limp by the end of a marathon. Obsessive Compulsive Disorder is where the excessive (obsessions) leads to repetitive behavior (compulsion) - the brain becomes stuck on one thought and/or action and cannot move forward. OCD is a nonsensical ritual and a self-mandated belief system that must be complied to, no matter how absurd the task because the consequence is believed to be horrendous. It is superstitious, religious and inescapable. The actions of OCD are futile, similar to scrubbing onions on a wall or washing hay with molasses.

Sewing is inherently repetitious and arduous. Repetitious sewing led me to abstraction. Fabric became landscape pulled by the tension of a thread. When my work shifts to abstraction it becomes exaggerated or deteriorated - emitting essential qualities and extinguishing others. Clothing can take on a looser abstracted metaphor of fabric, touch and mapping. In my piece *Inheritance [Obedience / Mutiny]* (spring 2015, fig.5/6) the burlap and paraffin boxes stacked on a porcelain slip coated rocking chair fold into one another because of the fragility of material and

weight. The boxes are an abstraction of clothing and the figure yet act as clothing actually would: to hold, protect and carry.

Poetry influences my work because of its power to describe the haptic, the abstract and the visceral within its often coded and metaphorical language. Poetry's structure can be sculptural in form - lines, stanzas and punctuation create a physical shape with words on paper. In *The Laver*, I finger-painted with molasses tall columns of Morse code in the shape of sewing pattern pieces on the wall; a coded language and map that emitted scent and constantly dripped (fig.7/8/9). Over the molasses I impressed waxed paper and then burnt it - the fire and smoke rose upwards while the molasses dripped downwards and pooled on the cement floor. The wall patterning related to the labeling system: a series of dots that differed from one bowl to the next.

Gary Hill's *Wall Piece* (2000) is a living poem, one that has rhythm, punctuation and structure. Hill articulates, "the anxiety surrounding the process of becoming, of passing from one plane to another, of waiting at the threshold for some critical moment of transformation."^{iv} He describes the "liminal", as being both places at once and nowhere at once, waiting at a threshold. Existing in the liminal is wearisome; like sitting on a fence post - the view is advantageous but uncomfortable. I create a personal system through my objects, imagery and repetitive futile actions in hopes of understanding being stuck between two places and nowhere at all. In my piece *Blank Verse* (winter 2014), two people, dressed in white, knelt across from each other and slammed burlap bags of flour onto the floor in front of them (fig.10). The flour seeped out of the bags, filling the air with white powder that accumulated on the figures. The sound was rhythmic,

but without consistency - like a conversation between two people or an archaic symphony, it waxed and waned. This repetitious ritual evolved as abstract, poetic and liminal.

Movable house, a body round thy body^v

The following sonnet is from Seamus Heaney collection, *Clearances*^{vi}.

The cool that came off the sheets just off the line
Made me think the damp must still be in them
But when I took my corners of the linen
And pulled against her, first straight down the hem
And then diagonally, then flapped and shook
The fabric like a sail in a cross-wind,
They made a dried-out undulating thwack.
So we'd stretch and fold and end up hand to hand
For a split second as if nothing had happened
For nothing had that had not always happened
Beforehand, day by day, just touch and go,
Coming close again by holding back
In moves where I was x and she was o
Inscribed in sheets she'd sewn from ripped-out flour sacks.

I first heard this sonnet read aloud in a high school English class and it now hangs on my studio wall. In the class, I was paired with another student and instructed to fold an imaginary sheet in front of the class - a bashful slow dance. The poem relates to my piece *Blank Verse* and speaks to the inherent intimacy and privacy ingrained in fabric. The artist Ann Hamilton writes best about the relationship:

We stroke a pet, reach to a draw a curtain and feel the fineness of the cotton, touch of the hand of another person. We sleep between sheets, stay warm inside silk underwear and wool coats; cloth is the constant tactile companion to our body, it is the hand that is always touching. Cloth covers nakedness - makes us social. Its surround us and is early architecture and its origins are animal: the fleece of sheep, the skin of bear, the spun thread of a silkworm^{vii}.

Clothing is preparatory and protective. Preparing the wearer for the specific: light silk running shorts, a suit and tie, a nun's habit or a bullet proof vest. They also protect us from outside forces,

a veneer for the naked body, holding, wrapping and buttressing us - much like architecture. In my three channel video projection, *Bas-Relief* (spring 2014, fig.11), three still figures stand still and erect like bas-reliefs, carved from the stony flesh of a building. Dressed in monastic/judicial gray felt robes, their bodies become armatures for drapery. Each one holds a different version of onions dripping in honey. They are visible only from the neck down is shown, their identity concealed - attention is on posture, gesture, garment and object.

Of particular interest to me, are honored or sacred religious clothing that is believed to function, in part, as moral protection. The dress of the Amish is protective from what is feared most - contamination from the outside world. The clothing reflects publicly their way of living. In comparison, the Mormon garment, sacred white clothing worn underneath pedestrian wear, is an invisible dress that facilitates participation with the public world. It symbolizes covenants and ordinances made in the temple and is believed to have the power to protect the wearer. The vestment of a priest is hierarchical and a material link between person and deity. What makes a garment sacrosanct? What deems a garment worthy? What is in-between the secular and the sacred? In part, an answer could be found in the humility of dressing and undressing everyday. In an act of volition, one reflects daily at some level, on commitments made, however routine and cursory it may be. But it could also be in the grandeur of a garment - one that publicly manifests itself. It can be in a costume worn only for one specific purpose and in the garments worn everyday.

Joseph Beuys's *Felt Suit* (1970), hangs as an empty shell, an implied self portrait. He used felt as a symbol for warmth, protection and his personal spiritual connotations. *Felt Suit* is of interest to

me because of the absence of its wearer. Most of my work has had clothing filled by the human body, with the face blocked or cropped out. Recently, I have been working with disembodied clothes that act as a surrogate, suggesting the presence of the wearer while also alluding to loss and absence. The dichotomy of presence and absence/loss is illustrated in a child's response to being asked to participate and walk over the landscape of used clothing strewn on the floor in Boltanski's *The Reserves - An Ongoing Clothes Installation*, the child declines saying "it would be like walking on people^{viii}."

In *Inheritance [Obedience / Mutiny]* the boxes are empty, similar to disembodied clothing; the boxes hold both presence and absence. The chair is uneasily balanced on a pile of washed, frayed and wrinkled burlap that levitates the chair from the ground. The pile of burlap echoes my experience of walking into a family member's room, one who is inordinately concerned with cleanliness. I was struck by his system of putting all of his belongings on pieces of paper and cardboard, so that they would not 'dirty' the carpet and simultaneously the carpet would not 'dirty' the possessions. The counterpart of the white piece in *Inheritance [Obedience / Mutiny]* is a large black wax bowl that sits across from the chair on a pile of clothing and burnt wood and wax compartments (fig.12). The bowl echoes the wax boxes, it has a black water ring on its interior, showing that it once held liquid. Containers, present in *The Laver* and *Inheritance [Obedience / Mutiny]*, have been introduced in my work because of their utility and ability to quantify. The blocked off room in *Psalm for a Land Plot* and empty clothing are containers as well - holding, protecting and elevating their contents.

My work is a container of my own experiences, holding the private and personal. I seek to coat,

wash, burn: persecuting the objects in my work they become imbued with faith and history. My work emulates life and drips with sweat. I am a doubter and I am a believer. I am held hostage by art, but I am drunkenly happy, in a state of delirious Stockholm syndrome. Art is the conduit I employ to investigate. Art and truth, indecipherably matted together, become both beauty and brutality; it is sweet and it is sour and it shows no mercy. It is meaty, messy and always unfinished.

ⁱ Stiles, Kristine, and Peter Selz. *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*.

ⁱⁱ Exodus 30: 18 KJV

ⁱⁱⁱ Kisselgoff, Anna. "Pina Bausch." *The New York Times*. N.p., 4 Oct. 1985. Web.

^{iv} Gary Hill: *Language Willing* exhibited at the Salt Lake Art Center Fall 2004

^v *Sartor Resartus*, ch. IX. P.39 (ed. 1871)

^{vi} Heaney, Seamus. *Clearances*. Amsterdam: Cornamona, 1986. Print.

^{vii} Part of the common S E N S E, an exhibition by Ann Hamilton, Henry Art Gallery, 2014/15

^{viii} Haye, Amy De La, and Elizabeth Wilson. *Defining Dress: Dress as Object, Meaning, and Identity*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1999. Print. P.135

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Fig.1
Pink Self Portrait
Fall 2013



Fig.2
Orange Neurosis
Film still, Winter 2013



Fig.3
Task
Spring 2014



Fig.4
Psalm for a Land Plot
Spring 2015



Fig.5
Inheritance [Obedience / Mutiny]
Spring 2015



Fig.6
Inheritance [Obedience / Mutiny]
Spring 2015



Fig.7 *The Laver*
Spring 2015



Fig.8
The Laver
Detail



Fig. 9
The Laver
Detail



Fig. 10
Blank Verse, Winter 2013



Fig.11
Bas-Relief, Spring 2014



Fig.12
Inheritance [Obedience / Mutiny]
Spring 2015

