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*ONLY THE LULL I LIKE, THE HUM OF YOUR VALVED VOICE.*

by

TREVOR REESE

Under the Direction of MICHAEL WSOL, MFA

ABSTRACT

The intent of this thesis is to clarify my artistic working process as well as the resulting thesis exhibition, *Only the lull I like, the hum of your valved voice*. I will provide explanations and descriptions of my exhibition (comprising a select placement of objects) as well as offer antecedents, informants, and the evolution of my art practice as a whole during my graduate studies. Specifically the work is discussed through the lenses of situational aesthetics, conceptual relationships, and perceptual absence to argue for the complicated semantics of the viewer within an ontology of object-hood and pre-established conditions.

INDEX WORDS: object ontology, situational aesthetics, relationships, binary, potential, absence, perception, Michael Asher, Thing Theory, Mono-ha, Leaves of Grass

*ONLY THE LULL I LIKE, THE HUM OF YOUR VALVED VOICE.*

by

TREVOR REESE

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2016

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2016

*ONLY THE LULL I LIKE, THE HUM OF YOUR VALVED VOICE.*

by

TREVOR REESE

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College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

May 2016

**DEDICATION**

To my wife and son

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

“I want to be more complex, more ambiguous, a communication without an answer.” - Jimmie Durham<sup>1</sup>

Before my entrance into graduate school I had the opportunity to fully immerse myself in some of the many trials of what is commonly referred to as ‘real life’ as well as fortunate enough (or depending on your viewpoint, unlucky enough) to take part in what is commonly referred to as the ‘art world.’ I point this out because it created within me a very different point of view when approaching my education. In part I understand that a studio practice (dedicated space, resources, dialog) is not a given, and also that I was already advancing towards a narrow focus within my work. With that said, I still have trouble, with any degree of exactitude, articulating exactly what it is I create, and that is precisely what excites and motivates me to continue.

During graduate school I constantly geared my group and individual critiques toward, what I considered each time, a focused body of work arranged within the myriad of constraints. This method of working and presenting was for me to gain the most knowledge from my peers and professors in my use of mostly ‘ready-made’ objects and their arrangements.

These previous bodies of work were almost target focused on ideas that have come to culmination within my thesis exhibition. A few of these ideas include object-based ontology, binary combinations, perceptual situations, and material relationships. My use of objects and their considered placement is integral to the experience and understanding of my artwork. Many of the works in my thesis exhibition—as indicated through the specific proximity of these

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<sup>1</sup> Jimmie Durham in interview with Mark Gisbourne, *Art Monthly* Feb. 1994. p11

objects—were developed around autonomous ideas, however, considering the installation as a whole, the objects still maintain some interconnected concepts.

Often I look to science to confirm unseen yet effective/affecting elements within life. I think when faced with these incomprehensible ideas and theories we turn to metaphors: “And yet, from the tiny to the vast, from the heavy to the light, how limited and relative are the terms we use! The rest is imagination, metaphors and similes. We are told by a scientist, for example, that the huge pressure achieved by the experimental laser fusion generator, HiPER, is ‘equivalent to ten aircraft carriers resting on your thumb!’”<sup>2</sup> And it is this reliance on metaphors and ways of understanding that create imagination and a different way of thinking yet offer little understanding of the forces around me. I similarly create and present my own metaphors in a personal effort to make sense of myself and all its relations.

For my thesis show I seek to produce conditions in which arrangements of objects alter a viewer’s perception of their own and the object’s position within existing conceptual and physical structures.

## 2 CONTEXT OVERVIEW

“What do objects experience? What is it like to be a thing?” – Ian Bogost<sup>3</sup>

The phenomenological sentiment of an object’s experience or the perspective of a thing speaks to the seemingly semi-absurd and tenuous task I work around in my studio practice:

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<sup>2</sup> Guy Brett. *Jimmie Durham: A Matter of Life and Death and Singing*. (Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 2012) p143

<sup>3</sup> Ian Bogost. *Alien Phenomenology, Or, What It's like to Be a Thing*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press) p10

building meaningful, complicated, and hopefully poetic relationships between objects—both pre-existing and constructed—through arrangements and installation-based presentations.

In discussion of these arrangements it is helpful to consider the idea that people use the same brain regions for remembering as they do for perceiving. For instance, the brainwaves of someone listening to music are nearly indistinguishable from the brainwaves of imagining music.<sup>4</sup> This is understood because of experiments with animals: scientists placed electrodes in the auditory system of a barn owl's brain. Playing a short musical melody for the owl to hear and then selectively removing certain notes from the melody caused the owl's neurons to fire at the same frequency as the missing notes. Thus effectively proving that the owl's brain eliminated the absences by filling in the gaps to complete the melody.<sup>5</sup>

This piece of information is incredibly important to my work. In essence the experiment indicates that our memories of something, in this case the owl's memory of the musical score, are the same as our physical interaction with it. Therefore, my exhibition could elicit an exact response in a viewer's brain based on my display of particular objects.

In the following chapters I will discuss my use of objects, my method of selection as well as relationships between objects, viewers, and place.

## **2.1 Objects**

There are no standardized rules I follow in selecting physical materials for an exhibition, however I rely on subjective guidelines negotiated in real time. In a sense, some basic ways of 'seeing' influence my material selections, and this sensibility is focused and based on several evolving and shifting markers: perceived functionality, social/cultural connotations, relatable

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<sup>4</sup> Daniel J. Levitin. *This Is Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Human Obsession*. (New York: Plume) p43

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

potential, and the materials' ease of acquiring and replacing. Even though these guidelines are subjectively in flux for myself as the practitioner, it remains that my artistic control of the object(s) on display is critical in directing a viewer's attention. In this way, my practice of displaying and arranging physical objects becomes an elaborate way of 'pointing'; I employ and manipulate objects as vessels to communicate metaphors and hopefully complex, even barely discernible feelings.

### **2.1.1 Social/Cultural**

Conscious consideration is necessary to quantify and articulate my material choices, such as, 'When is it a *thing* or an *object* I display?' In his essay *Thing Theory*, scholar Bill Brown describes a *thing* in relation to our interaction. Brown states, "We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation."<sup>6</sup> With regards to my artistic practice, an *object* seems more tangible, and not quite as elusive as describing *things*. Understandably though, a viewer may be confronted with the 'thing-ness' of a seemingly functional and unaltered object in my placement of it in an exhibition space. For instance an unmodified bathtub is initially comprehended as such, its placement within the realm of an exhibition might simulate the object-to-thing transition Brown is describing. The viewer recognizes the form but questions the reasons for its use in the setting.

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<sup>6</sup> Bill Brown. *Thing Theory*. (University of Chicago Press) p4

Scholar Michael Yonan describes objects as having a two-part logic to them. The first being material, for instance in reference to a wooden bowl: “some of its final qualities are inherent to the original material, like wood’s grain, density, and hardness.” The second he describes as semantic; meanings of objects and their combinations are “culturally determined.”<sup>7</sup> Therefore objects I select are guided by their culturally and socially understood function as well as qualities inherent to this function. Again the example of the bathtub—in the exhibition it still embodies our social/cultural understanding of itself and its purpose. However, ultimately the viewer’s previous understandings—informed by personal histories, experiences and contexts—of the object coupled with its new relationship in an installation, display, or arrangement renders a new and alternate understanding.

So, in contrast, my occasional selection of what might be considered a thing is instead what I interpret or perceive its intended functions will retain when displayed. For instance, a drumset may be created from many parts or things (metal, plastic, bolts, etc.) but ultimately forms a singular understood object. Similarly, my previous use of a discarded section of plumbing pipes is seen not as a thing but an object retaining its cultural use for the aesthetics of promoting an idea of its function, i.e. movement of liquids within a house.

Often I check and re-evaluate the social constructs attached to an object through conversations with peers and professors, as well as via light research. There is a concentrated effort on my part to present the chosen objects by optimally exemplifying inherent meanings, qualifications, and functions. The reasons for this methodology are twofold; first, is a striving for an overall simplification of presenting the concepts within the work, and second, is the ability to reference an idea that is not easily rendered visual, such as a feeling or abstract thought.

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Yonan. *Toward a Fusion of Art History and Material Culture Studies (West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture* 18, no. 2, 2011) p244

Resulting from this methodology, and at its weakest, my objects may reference a mere cliché. Curator and writer Georg Schölhammer, in referring to the artist Jiri Kovanda stated, “I do believe that Kovanda works with symbols, but his use of symbols has a different goal. [...] The ordinary is briefly altered.”<sup>8</sup> Since the mid-1970’s in Prague, Kovanda’s ephemeral works are typically temporary sculptures and actions in public places. Similarly, it is my hope that my choice of objects and precise arrangements can also alter the ordinary, however brief, and this allows for new meanings to be derived.

### **2.1.2 *Unaltered/Sourcing***

Understandably, I’m interested in this social/cultural approach as a logical way to select materials since I use, for the most part, unaltered (by me) objects in my practice. In this way, I agree with the sentiments of Mono-ha, a style of art in Japan existing between 1968 and the early 1970s. Mono-ha translates to “school of things” and importantly relied on “relationships between material, process, and site” as well as their “lack of fabrication and tendency to merely present objects.”<sup>9</sup> I liken this sentiment to my practice, and thus my thesis exhibition in that I do not need to fabricate new objects as artworks but instead employ objects pre-existing in the world to my artistic advantage.

Sekine Nobuo, one of the original Mono-ha artists stated, “Once one admits the existence of a thing, humans twist and make ways to convert them to one’s own desires, and the foundation of a thing’s existence is lost. That is, we may no longer be able to “create,” but what we can do is to wipe the dust off the surface of things and let the world that it is a part of

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<sup>8</sup> Vít Havránek. *Jiří Kovanda: 2005-1976 Actions and Installations*. (Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 2006.) p112

<sup>9</sup> Mika Yoshitake. *Requiem for the Sun: The Art of Mono-ha*. (Los Angeles: Blum & Poe, 2012) p100



appear.”<sup>10</sup> (Though he specifies ‘things’ instead of ‘objects’ I would argue the idea is the same, one does not need to ‘create’ but instead make the seemingly forgotten (readily available) visible again.) So, this conversion of appearance—from possible lost existence to manifestation of reality—would then rely on our site of interaction.

I appreciate that perception’s subjectivity is altered based on location. For instance the exhibition space is a specialized area capable of altering this perception. Theorist Pavel B. Ivanov verifies the power of the exhibition space in his discussion of non-linear art. “When put into an aesthetically saturated environment, any thing can acquire aesthetic value and become a work of art without being actually produced as art.”<sup>11</sup>

(Note: This is not a novel idea: since the inaugural use of manufactured objects as artworks in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century through avant-garde practices now qualified through terminologies such as ready-mades, assemblages, combines, and beyond, I am operating with knowledge of these antecedents and choose to formulate my own terminologies and ultimately, my own subjective and argued position given this lineage.)

Objects surround us at all times throughout the day and they become overlooked. I feel there is a considerable amount of information imbued in preexisting objects such as store-bought and manufactured items. For instance, books, clarinets, safes, wine glasses, spray paint cans, a guitar, are physically unchanged from the source in which I located, identified, selected and purchased them for my intended use. After this process, it is their placement within a situation that becomes most important.

However I have also altered oranges, brooms, a moving crate, and pedestals that necessitated slight changes to their physical properties. For an earlier body of work, in which I

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid p99

<sup>11</sup> Pavel B. Ivanov. *Nonlinear Art*. (Taganrog, Russia, 2001) p67

directly engaged ideas of twins and partnerships, I bought two oranges shipped from different parts of the world. I then sliced each orange in half and switched their halves, to conjoin one half of each orange together as a new hybrid. I held the halves together with rubber bands and displayed the oranges on a bright blue plastic bag—the fruits' complementary color (Fig.1). The oranges were *mostly* in their original spherical form but through alteration, by cutting and switching the halves, I constructed the slight difference needed to create focus on a new idea.

I typically use materials that are somewhat easily sourced. I purchase from retail stores, catalogs, thrift stores or classified ads. This ease of acquisition is an important factor because it allows me to recreate each work relatively easily. The ubiquity of an object is often related to its social use and typically to the ease of acquisition. In effect my practice is a method of borrowing; I can usually return a product to its intended social construct after its exhibition.

This methodology acknowledges that the most important constructs I work within are the artist's intent and the exhibition site as a specialized space. Therefore an objects' movement is inherently tethered to these two constructs, and their return to their original function is proof that my working with 'non art objects' is deliberate. Continuing with two previous examples: the bathtub reenters the supply-stream of remodeling supplies, and the split oranges were simply eaten afterwards.

I am particularly interested in reducing my interactions and responsibilities in regards to storage and transportation. For instance, to re-create my piece *Polyphony Printers* from 2014 (Fig. 2) I can simply buy two of the same model of a printer/scanner at a retail store and purchase a clarinet at a local pawnshop. I recognize this method is not exclusive to me and the recent article *Impermanence and Entropy: Collaborative Efforts Installing Contemporary Art* details the complexities of museums' and artists' ever-changing relationships with specific regard to

navigating “artist-approved exhibition copies,” “manual maintenance,” and “technology-dependent artwork.”<sup>12</sup> In essence, I understand my work might change periodically depending on the availability of an object in the realm of retail. Different iterations may also occur due to my or an exhibition staff’s inability to obtain a certain product.

Personally this method avoids and alleviates shipping and storage costs for exhibition venues and myself. More importantly this working method also aids me in avoiding a sense of personal and social nostalgia with the materials. An overwhelming sense of nostalgia could unintentionally cause the viewer to concentrate and condense personal significance as related to some idealized past or to fabricate historical significance on the object. Without focus on the particular make/model of an object, the focus shifts instead to the idea behind its placement within the work.

### **2.1.3 *Functionality/Potential***

I believe it is possible that objects possess a secret life: not in the sense that an object is conscious and actually concealing something, but that an object is more than what we ontologically project onto it. Ian Bogost, a digital media theorist, writes on the experience of objects and things in that he defines an object-oriented ontology for existence by essentially arguing that all things are equal, not in value, but in existence. Bogost points out that philosopher Thomas Nagel proficiently argued that the experience of “being” anything—a bat was Nagel’s famous example—can never be fully validated or comprehended.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, because of this subjectivity, we can only imagine what it would be like for ‘us’ to understand the experience of something else, and science can only provide a description.

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<sup>12</sup> Basilio, Miriam, Sydney Briggs, and Roger Griffith. "Impermanence and Entropy: Collaborative Efforts Installing Contemporary Art." (*Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* 47, no. 1, 2008) p4-10

<sup>13</sup> Bogost p62

Scientists also have recently come close to confirming that ‘Spooky Action at a Distance’ may indeed exist. This theory posits that two seemingly disconnected elements, such as electrons, are entangled or connected over a vast distance. This hypothesis is related to a scientific property of subatomic elements: “matter does not take form until it is observed.”<sup>14</sup> In reporting for the New York Times, John Markoff explains, “According to quantum mechanics, particles do not take on formal properties until they are measured or observed in some way. Until then, they can exist simultaneously in two or more places. Once measured, however, they snap into a more classical reality, existing in only one place.”<sup>15</sup>

How might ‘Spooky Action at a Distance’ operate in my artistic practice? Thinking about this hypothetical, I operate with two modes of thought in regards to what I choose to display: first is the suggestion that it is indeed possible for people to influence, however nuanced, the properties of an object; second, objects have their own experience that is unrelatable to us and are actually able to influence *us* in our perception of *them*.

I also believe objects possess a condition of potentiality relatable to many of us. Examples of this object-based condition of potential are present in artist Richard Wentworth’s photographs. On the streets of London, Wentworth photographs idiosyncratic scenarios in which people use an item to perform a task not originally assigned to that object, i.e. a shoe propping up a window. Neuroscientist Mark Lythgoe describes the brain’s peculiar response when viewing such a scenario in Wentworth’s photographs; that is, the release of chemicals to solidify a potential future action. Our brains want to remember this example of quick ingenuity so it is replicable in the future, if necessary.<sup>16</sup> I hope to elicit a similar response and utilize the brain’s

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<sup>14</sup> John Markoff (*New York Times*, October 21, 2015)

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> Mark Lythgoe, “Primitive Smile” (Liverpool: Tate Gallery, 2005) p2

chemical implementation in viewers when approaching my exhibition as well as their interactions with objects afterward.

Critic and curator Richard William Hill also recognizes the brain's reaction to objects in certain situations when he states, in reference to the work of Jimmie Durham, "... the object impinges on our consciousness and potentially changes our understanding of the world when we encounter it."<sup>17</sup> Again, our connection to objects and influence may extend further than initially perceived.

## **2.2 Relationships**

"I realized that all values only exist in relationship to each other and that restriction to a single material is one-sided and small-minded." -Kurt Schwitters<sup>18</sup>

Within my thesis work and prior I have deliberately focused on shifting binary relationships between the exhibited objects. This focus occurs in two methods— first, viewers are invited to question the relationship between objects by way of their proximity to one another and/or visual similarities. Secondly the viewer's a priori context of two objects thereby creates a specific idea in the viewer's mind. This second points focuses on the relationship of viewer to object in effort to have the viewer imagine a third element.

### **2.2.1 Binary/Absence**

One way of describing the use of two objects to encourage an idea in the mind is the term

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<sup>17</sup> Hill, Richard William. "The Malice and Benevolence of Inanimate Objects: Jimmie Durham's Anti-Architecture." (Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 2012) p77

<sup>18</sup> Johnson, Mike. "Kurt Merz Schwitters: Aesthetics, Politics and the Negentropic Principle." (London: Rutledge, 2002.) p145

*triangulation*. The word seems appropriately applicable due to its use in a variety of subjects such as geometry, psychology, social science and politics. The main idea is that two known points are used to establish a new or existing point. A previous work of mine from 2007 titled *Triangle*<sup>19</sup> incorporating a stereo speaker and a tree stump of approximately similar size is particularly important in demonstrating the idea of triangulation. The idea was to find a discarded speaker (wood enclosure, not plastic) and a tree stump of approximately similar size. I set about locating the items on my usual walking routes. I thought that by placing the items on the floor, separated by a few feet, in an otherwise empty space, it positions the viewer as the third point. A relationship is established that upon contrasting the two items a mental picture may develop. I am not fully sure what that resulting image is or should be. Perhaps Getrude Stein said it best: “Sculpture is made with two instruments and some supports and pretty air.”<sup>20</sup>

I feel this desired outcome is not unlike the Kuleshov Effect in film. The Kuleshov effect—so named after the Russian director who developed it—is a montage technique designed to influence a viewer’s perception of a character’s intent or foreshadowing of plot. This insight is gained through the use of seemingly disparate shots shown sequentially. For instance, a view of a character looking off camera is followed directly with an object, perhaps a hat. The viewing audience will infer that the character is looking at the hat. I believe that placing two isolated objects relatively close will create a similar effect, thus placing an image, feeling or emotion within the viewer of my work. I consider the viewer’s thought to be the third component to my work, thereby completing it.

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<sup>19</sup> I have no documented photo of this work.

<sup>20</sup> Burton, Johanna. “Sculpture: Not-Not-Not (or, Pretty Air).” (Hirschorn Museum & Sculpture, 2006) p10

The use of triangulation in my work also depends on my use of absence as a material. A more recent work, *waiting (pizzicato)* from 2015 (Fig.3) exemplifies the idea. An unadorned gray wool blanket lies neatly folded on the floor. A violin bow is placed on the blanket leaving enough room for a violin. The cultural knowledge of a violin and bow relationship acts as a prompt for the viewer to imagine or question where the missing violin is. The title advances this idea of literal absence in its reference to Pizzicato—the technique of playing a violin without a bow.

Lastly is my method of placing two objects within limited proximity to encourage comparison for similarities or contrasts. For instance, a viewer should try to understand what qualities of a displayed object are being affirmed or denied. In a work utilizing two wine glasses, one glass balances an eight-foot cedar timber while the other glass perches at the top (Fig. 4). Ultimately the glasses are positioned similarly to wood but are performing very different roles, one of support, the other possibly falling from a great height. (Fig. 5) Therefore the focus is on the glass' ability to support weight as well as shatter. Similarly, a personal copy and a library copy of the book *A Brief History of Time* are stacked one on top of the other (Fig. 6). A viewer might infer the implied history of the books though they initially appear identical. The call number label on the library copy indicates the separate roles each book inhabits, one sitting on a shelf in a home, the other at a public institution checked out by different people.

### 2.2.2 *Situation/Location*

“Such a challenge to the art object’s individuation might sharpen the way in which viewers perceive an object in relation to its environment, allowing the object to function as connective tissue between viewer, situation, and the practices of everyday life.” - Kirsi Peltomäki<sup>21</sup>

A priori knowledge of the space where the exhibition takes place is available for viewers when encountering the work. For example, previous understanding is employed in my request that during my thesis exhibition an entrance door that typically remains locked is purposefully opened together with the regularly open door, thereby altering the movement within the space (Fig.7). Therefore only those familiar with the space on a usual basis would notice, creating an increased awareness within them when approaching the exhibition space.<sup>22</sup>

The location of the exhibition remains an integral part of the physical properties the viewer should recognize. This location is made evident through the visible displacement of chosen objects. On a basic level the exhibition space as a culturally recognized specialized place for thoughtful consideration is important. As well as the fact that this space occupies a room in a building, meaning architecture as a whole, becomes an element. The thesis exhibition in particular is located in a place within an institution, particularly one for the education of art practice. As much as the objects themselves are important is our confirmation of their and our own existence within structures and procedures related to architecture, the exhibition space, and the institution.

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<sup>21</sup> Kirsi Peltomäki. *Situation Aesthetics: The Work of Michael Asher*. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2010) p61

<sup>22</sup> Several visitors I spoke with during the exhibition noticed and commented on both doors being open and the altered pathway created.



My working method is historically similar to the work of Michael Asher in his practice of Situation Aesthetics, a term first coined by Victor Burgin in an article in *Studio International* in 1969. Situation Aesthetics argues, “the entire [exhibition] is constructed for the sole purpose of facilitating a particular kind of viewing experience rather than explicitly promoting the artist’s worldview, subject matter, formal order, or visual aesthetics.”<sup>23</sup> This methodology is an admittance of the mechanisms inherent to exhibition making as form, and presented as an opportunity to “redistribute the boundaries between visible and invisible aspects of a given institution.”<sup>24</sup> Overall, I consistently explore various ways in highlighting these ‘mechanisms’ where my exhibitions take place.

The considered influence of the supporting infrastructure of the gallery exhibition space relates to my own personal experience. I am motivated by my experience and knowledge working professionally in supporting roles within the visual arts ecosystem. I have been employed for many years in contemporary art galleries and spaces, moving, packing and installing art. In addition, I have operated my own art spaces in which I exhibit emerging artists’ work. The personal interaction and caretaking I have with others’ art has affected the outlook towards my own art practice.

Some, but not all, of my work requires literal care-taking by gallery attendants during its exhibition. I consider this interaction a definitive element of the work. I want to further the correlation that a gallery or institution has with my own art, so I include the maintenance as an integral part in viewing or experiencing the artwork. In a work from 2008 and exhibited in 2011, I had the exhibiting institution mount a shelf in a high window (Fig. 8). A potted plant sits on the shelf and is periodically watered by a gallery attendant utilizing a stored ladder (Fig. 9).

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid p22

<sup>24</sup> Ibid p13

The seemingly sterile, white box environment belies the fact there are several people managing the installation and promotion of the exhibitions. I consider these administering actions as not much different than turning on a projector, etc. I am not trying to question or critique the underlying system in an exhibition space but rather draw awareness to the unseen human elements tasked with Art's upkeep.

The systems or structure of procedures, related to architecture, institutions, exhibition spaces are designed to go unnoticed. The purpose of these developed procedures is to maintain outward visible aspects coherent to our understanding of them. The art handler's presence is needed to install the art, and to not call attention to its installation; as is electricity preserved within conduits to effectively distribute power; as are elements such as the controlled distribution of physical items and personnel who's function is to continue the smooth operation within an educational institution.

### 3 THESIS

In my thesis exhibition, I 'installed' or rather I will use the term "laid" the objects directly on the floor, foregoing a pedestal- or any other possible support-based display method. Laying objects directly on the floor is important for two reasons: first, this offers the objects an opportunity to simultaneously both self-declare/self-define and allow the viewer to consider it beyond its initial function. (As mentioned, this duality is already declared due to its placement within a space designated for contemplation, the exhibition gallery.) Second, I agree with Franz West's assertion that the white cube is an inverted pedestal.<sup>25</sup> So, while the object is laid upon the inverted pedestal, this lack of a standard (positive) pedestal resultantly offers a reference for the

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<sup>25</sup> Manuela Ammer. "The Pedestal Problem." *Frieze*, August 11, 2011.

misplaced, forgotten or unwanted. The object again stands out through this ‘pointing’ via display methodology: one’s peaked curiosity can quickly transfer into direct value judgments. Through this inversion and confusion of site and value-based constructs, I am motivated: the object placed on the floor of the exhibition space commands reverence for its location within an exhibition and yet at the same time loses significance due to its physical position near our feet. (If we want to further confuse the value judgment, I can alternatively offer that this foot-based site level places the artwork on the same physical level as the viewer, regardless of physical stature. So, it is ideal the object is rendered important but not *too* important; hopefully it maintains a middle ground to function as just ‘itself’, and, through this recognition of inherent objecthood, the viewer might also realize they too are part of the exhibition construct.)

My thesis exhibition, *Only the lull I like, the hum of your valved voice*, featured the following objects laid on the floor in the gallery space and arranged in pairs utilizing right angles: two sleeping bags (red and blue), two woodwind instruments (clarinet and flute) and two second-hand bathtubs (Fig. 10) (Fig. 11). On the left wall approximately 50 inches high and evenly spaced are four standard letter-sized sheets of printed-paper affixed flat to the wall. Each piece of paper has one printed story, each approximately 150 words (Fig.12).

Near the back left corner of the gallery, a modified wind chime hangs from the ceiling, and on the floor near the wind chime is a small white weather alert radio (Fig.13). Near the right rear corner of the gallery is a wood chair facing the front (entrance). Along the floor on the right side of the gallery are three objects spaced approximately fourteen inches apart: a used flat rectangular cardboard box with its lid closed, a talking clock broadcasting the hourly time, and a square cardboard box with its lid slightly open to expose a plastic human brain model (Fig.14).

Leaning on the right gallery wall, near one of the gallery entrances, is a non-operational glass office door.

### 3.1 Individual Works

The exhibition's title, *Only the lull I like, the hum of your valved voice*, is a line of poetry from Walt Whitman's celebrated *Song of Myself* originally published in 1855 as part of his seminal collection of poems *Leaves of Grass*. From reading his poetry I believe Whitman is exemplary in his acute awareness and sensitivity to the qualities of potential within us.

Whitman scholar Robert Hass states that *Song of Myself* "captures in a particular voice and at a particular moment something alive, generous, and hopeful in the developing culture of the United States [...]."<sup>26</sup> The thirteen hundred line poem centers on "imagination and nature, about the human relation to these powers [...]."<sup>27</sup> And importantly that "we have more in common than separates us, that that common thing is the nature that courses through us [...] and human imagination connects people to one another [...]."<sup>28</sup> Two lines prior to the selected line, Whitman's narrator implores the reader to lay near on the grass and "loose the stop from your throat," then states interest to hear "not words, not music or rhyme."<sup>29</sup>

These poetic interpretations to nature, sound, silence, and personal expression through reference to the physical principally informed the title of the exhibition. Whitman's word choice correlates human voice and breath with valves and stops; elements usually associated with controlling fluid in plumbing or air in wind instruments—both elements that are physically present in the exhibition. The combination of rather elegiac words (only, lull, hum) makes for a

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<sup>26</sup> Robert Hass. *Song of Myself, and Other Poems by Walt Whitman*. (Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2010) p3

<sup>27</sup> Ibid p5

<sup>28</sup> Ibid p6

<sup>29</sup> Ibid p10 (line 75)

very sensitive sentence expressing a true desire for something so intimate. This idea, that not words or talking but simply a person's presence—as evident by the soft sounds from a person's mouth—is soothing and similarly relating to air, liquid or music.

Most closely related to the exhibition title is the grouping of objects arranged centrally in the space, sleeping bags, woodwinds, and bathtubs (Fig.15). This group of paired objects illustrates my aforementioned topic of binary relationships. The sleeping bags retain vague traces of use; minor abrasions in the fabric or loose stitching reveal they are not new but maintained. As are the telltale signs of use also present on the clarinet and flute. The bathtubs, positioned up on their fronts, both show evidence of previous installation and years of use.

Reference to the human form and its qualities remains the common connection among the objects. Sleeping bags are most often understood as a transitory component for the body's requirement of rest and warmth. The two woodwind instruments, arranged parallel to echo the side-by-side sleeping bags, lack human breath necessary for sound and music (Fig.16). The bathtubs, also in a nearby pair, suggest the absence in regards to literal and vulnerable care taking of the body (Fig.17). Their upright position calls attention to the usually obscured view and importantly the functional component of the drainpipe as well the missing plumbing system (Fig.18). The bathtub drainpipes, cylindrical-shaped musical instruments, and reference to rest make a fitting connection to the exhibition title. Finally, each of the two objects indicates similarities and differences within each pair. Viewers are given these examples that two objects, representing human interactions, are not only indicative of a pair of people but also the subtle distinctions between them.

Mounted directly next to both gallery entrance doors, taped to the glass wall between, is a printed-paper with text that operates as a combined exhibition checklist and press release titled

*An Addendum* (Fig. 19). The work *An Addendum*, meant to be discovered upon exiting the exhibition, is a comment on the conventional ‘checklist’ that typically accompanies an exhibition listing facts such as the artist’s name, the titles of the works on display as well as the materials used. Another common exhibition support convention available to the public is the press release, which is a short page or paragraph written by staff or the artist presenting details or thoughts about the creation or process behind the artwork.

For my thesis show I combined these two supporting documents and present it as an actual addendum, on oversized printed-paper, and a distinct work within itself. The addendum, functioning similarly to its use in literature, includes written thoughts and examples pertaining to the exhibition. However, the writing is arranged on the page pertaining to the layout of the objects in the exhibition space. Quite purposely, the writing is not quickly read or scanned, as there is a great deal of text and some is oriented sideways (Fig. 20).

At first, a viewer may perceive this text to represent simple explanations of the works in the exhibition, but a thorough examination reveals that the addendum includes the following: working titles for artworks (as most objects in the exhibition did not have singular titles), thoughts and mental meanderings meant to add a more robust understanding to the complex relationships between objects, the myriad of social contexts, and formal decisions arrived at or explored in the exhibition. Some examples of paragraphs and phrases included a quote from the preface of Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, a simple schedule for the week, and a circular phrase that asks the question “Is the book on the table or is the table under the book?”

Near the far-right corner of the room is a simple wooden chair that, for the majority of the exhibition, is unoccupied (Fig. 21). However, a hired professional sits in the chair daily for thirty minutes (11-11:30am), their professional status unbeknownst to the viewer, who mostly

perceived these professionals as ‘ordinary’ people (Fig. 22). In researching and preparing this work, I sought examples of how a person’s profession interacts intimately with their personal life. The three chosen vocations were a voice instructor, a guitar teacher, and a piano tuner.

The two-word phrase ‘Architect’s Home’ is the original prompt for this work. This person is defined by their profession with the modifier ‘Architect’ while the noun ‘home’ signifies exactly which structure is being referenced or modified (the one the architect lives in). Will the architect design a house very differently knowing they will live in it?

I seek to demonstrate when the relationship between the professional skill-set and personal life becomes full circle. For instance, a piano tuner relies on pitch-perfect hearing to discern the subtle audible variations necessary in piano strings, but this person uses their ears when not executing the adjustment of a piano. So, the piano tuner hears normal elements within everyday life using what many people may consider specialized or advanced hearing abilities. In the exhibition, the piano tuner sat listening to the arbitrary sounds of daily interactions of the nearby lobby and elevators. The voice instructor guides a student through the manipulation of the voice through subtle refinements of the pronunciation of words, however, for the exhibition the voice instructor read words silently while sitting in the chair. Similarly, the guitar teacher listens to music on headphones instead of playing the guitar for the benefit of a student. The chair also serves as a physical reminder of a person sitting for rest, waiting, and working.

We all carry fragments of stories that we repeat to ourselves or tell others, though I am not sure the stories, or memories we construct, are re-evaluated very often. For this work, which was the “same story” four times as four *different* stories, I recalled a brief snippet of story that before had struck an emotional chord with me. I was unable to remember more than “a man builds a boat in a basement, when finished it is too large to be removed.” After considering the

possibility of the man and the boat it occurred to me that it probably was not true. I had no recollection of who told the story to me so I could not ask anyone. I decided I wanted more of the story so I hired freelance writers, through a writing outsourcing website, to expound upon the story's prompt by completing or rewriting the story for me. I chose four stories to reduce the specialness of only commissioning one or two, but enough to present an overall image of the fictional character's dilemma (Fig. 23).

The four stories, each a page in length, were printed and adhered to the wall approximately chest height (Fig. 24). I hoped the viewer, after reading the different stories, would gather together an overall story arc: each of the character's newly constructed boats all fail before ever reaching their intended purpose. Read collectively and by gathering overarching context clues of failure and romanticizing of labor, readers might question if this story is one singular story or several parts to one whole; an oral folk tale, or the imaginations of one writer versus several. The reader's possible confusion with four similarly fated stories by unattributed authors is the point. Perhaps we are inclined to believe what we want to believe. We are perhaps unable to forget our stories but also unable to retell without pretext of its possible fiction. It is this doubt and reconsideration that may alter a system of reading/hearing and believing.

Again Schölhammer, in reference to Kovanda's working method, "But what I find exciting about Kovanda is that he always presents a story, but at the same time leaves the story unfinished. He always begins by telling a story, but then the narrative gets lost, deconstructs itself, comes to an end before it's begun. He doesn't let the story take up any room, so it collapses. Those are very explosive strategies."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Havránek, p113



Additionally on view, a door leans upright against the wall near the open entrance doors to call attention to its evident displacement; it is not mounted for typical use (Fig. 25). I obtained the glass and metal door a few feet away in a short darkened hallway outside the exhibition space (Fig. 26). Importantly for the context of this exhibition and to reinforce situational procedures, this door was previously installed somewhere within the institution; upon its removal, the door acquired a piece of paper, a handwritten note, taped to its face. The note clearly states the door should not be moved according to a person named Michael and an accompanying five-digit number (Fig.27).

The information on the note can be decoded with two levels of access: first, as a very specific ‘insider’ access to those familiar with the name and number code used at Georgia State University. The second, and more generalized entry point, is on a superficial level by understanding it as a door that is deliberately taken out of context within a university system designed to facilitate administration’s use of physical objects. The door is displayed as a reference for the literal movement of objects in an institutional system. The name and number is direct notice that someone of importance, in this case Professor Michael White, the current Welch School of Art Director, has placed control on the location of the door. At the end of the exhibition, the door is to be returned to its aforementioned place nearby to await its next placement within the institution (Fig.28). (Professor White told me it would eventually be installed as the front office door.)

At the back of the space a modified wind chime hangs from the suspended secondary ceiling installed in the exhibition space (Fig. 29). This standard drop-down ceiling, comprised of square composite panels and lightweight supporting metal tracks, effectively obscures physical infrastructure attached to the primary ceiling. This infrastructure includes plumbing, conduit and

ventilation, the physical elements that distribute water, air and electricity throughout the building. The square tile at the location of the installed wind chime is moved completely to expose these elements.

Nearby, on the floor, a weather radio announces the surrounding local outdoor climate conditions such as temperature, wind speed and precipitation (Fig. 30). The constant announcement of weather conditions as well as the exposing of the pipes and ductwork is to encourage the viewer to realize there is no sense of *real* environmental weather within the exhibition space. Importantly, this network's purpose is to maintain the building's function as a place of human habitation by attempting to recreate natural elements, i.e. water access, controlled temperature, and illumination.

Artist Jimmie Durham, known for object-based and culturally referential sculptures, states “But I think the funniest part of the architecture of a city is the plumbing system: bringing fresh water in, flushing dirty water out, all over the city. I like systems anyway. Like you have a wooden box that is your house and somewhere far away there is an electrical generator— and you have wires going into your house and getting electricity all over. I like that look of a house. The water system in the house and in a city—water coming in, water going out—is something close to biology, something not exactly hidden but hidden in a sense that's there no reason to go on about it. Just let it be there and function”.<sup>31</sup>

The lack of significant unidirectional airflow, normal to interior rooms, results in a silent wind chime. These sensory components (aural, motion) draw attention to the fact that the viewer is not in a natural environment, but instead surrounded by a modern and industrial creation.

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<sup>31</sup> Jimmie Durham quoted in Rudi Laermans, “Two Conversations with Jimmie Durham,” in *A Prior* (Brussels, no.9, 2004) p174

## 4 CONCLUSION

I understand and find it encouraging that my work may seem difficult upon first glance. I believe that many subtle clues actually affect the viewer initially. But my hope is that the viewer continues to parse out details in effort to build a more substantial idea of the work. This self-initiating ‘investigation’ of the viewer is actually a proposed component within the work.

Critic Nancy Foote notes, when reviewing an installation by Michael Asher, her feelings of anticipation, frustration, and a “nagging desire to be assured of the adequacy of her interpretation.”<sup>32</sup> She ultimately determines that his work was also “about the process of making [the] connection” and that the “artwork was constructed to facilitate such reflection.”<sup>33</sup> In a sense, figuring out the work was also part of the work. In a similar regard viewers of my exhibition rely on cultural rules and knowledge of preexisting conditions to understand my alteration.

My thesis exhibition serves as demonstration of the varied techniques in the ontology of objects and our perception of them as well as ourselves within established structures. Relying on cultural and social understandings in regards to the objects I select, their particular arrangement, as well the exhibition location, I attempt to facilitate this perception. I often rely on an implied sense of absence and parts of a whole to engage with a viewer; thereby their thoughts complete the work. My thesis exhibition is in part an effort to create nuanced works and circumstances that allow viewers a potentially alternate viewpoint within a system of objects and structures.

And finally this quote, a beneficial example I feel, in regards to my work and in relation even to this thesis, from critic, curator and scholar Robert Storr:

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<sup>32</sup> Peltomäki, p48

<sup>33</sup> Ibid p49

“The primary means for “explaining” an artist’s work is to let it reveal itself. Showing *is* telling. Space is the medium in which ideas are visually phrased. Installation is both presentation and commentary, documentation and interpretation. Galleries are paragraphs, the walls and formal subdivisions of the floors are sentences, clusters of works are clues, and individual works, in varying degree, operate as nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and often as more than one of these functions according to their context. Ordinary people are sensitive to their surroundings and what is in them if you let them be. Based on that basic aptitude they are or can become visually literate if you lead them into and through spaces filled with things in a manner that encourages them to heed the clues they are consciously or subliminally picking up, clues that the exhibition-maker has left for them.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Storr, Robert. “Show and Tell.” (Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative, Philadelphia Center for Arts and Heritage, 2006) p23

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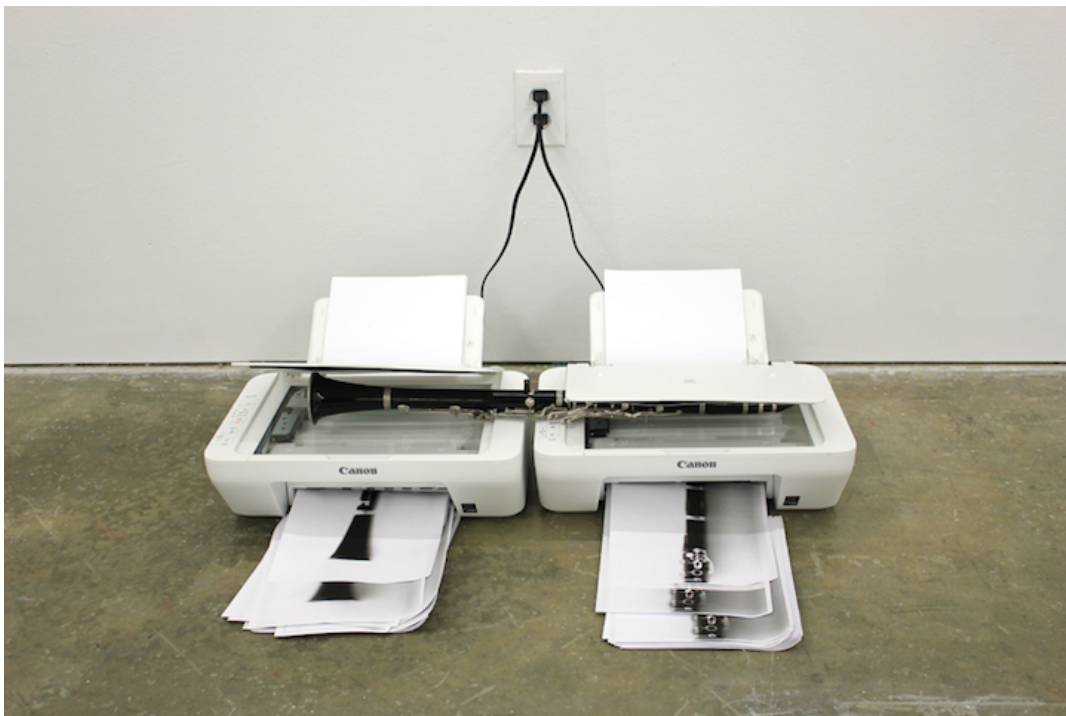
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**Figure 1** – oranges cut with halves switched, rubber bands, bag – 2014



**Figure 2** – *Polyphony Printers* – printer/scanner, clarinet - 2014





**Figure 3** – *waiting (pizzicato)* – bow, wool blanket – 2015

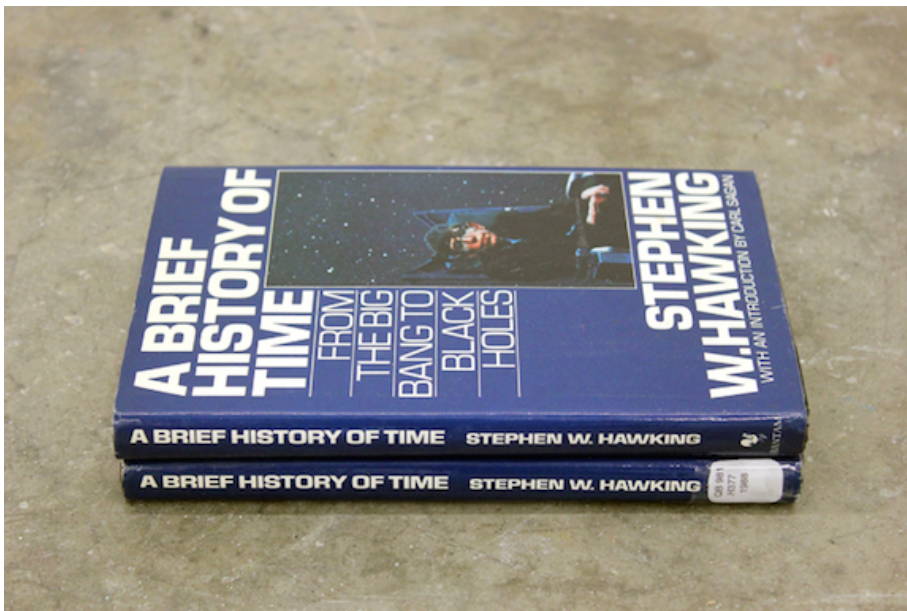


**Figure 4** – balancing wine glasses, cedar (detail) - 2014





**Figure 5** – balancing wine glasses, cedar - 2014



**Figure 6** – personal copy of book, library copy of book – 2014



**Figure 7** – thesis exhibition entrances



**Figure 8** – *Wake without Worry* – plant, shelf - 2008



**Figure 9** – *Wake without Worry* – plant, shelf, (ladder, watering can) – 2008





**Figure 10** – Installation view one



**Figure 11** – Installation view two



**Figure 12** – Installation view of four printed stories



**Figure 13** – windchime and weather radio





**Figure 14** – closed box, talking clock, box with brain model



**Figure 15** – sleeping bags, woodwinds, bathtubs





**Figure 16** – flute, clarinet



**Figure 17** – bathtubs (front view)



**Figure 18** – bathtubs (back view)





Figure 19 – An Addendum installation view

An Addendum\*

Or: a checklist with words that correspond to an exhibition that appears eerily similar to the exhibition that provides the text you are reading now. \*\*

Or: some possible thoughts on how to consider some objects in a room

Or: (that's probably enough)

\* it should be noted that the presentation of the addendum is also for consideration as, in itself, an element of the exhibition (but maybe that is already obvious to some)

\*\* possibly the exhibition does not exist until you view it, and when you look away and look back again it is not exactly the same thing. Sure, the objects and their placements within the space appear as before. But maybe other things have changed, such as the air, the sounds, or maybe within you. Maybe everytime you think of something it changes just a little bit.

\*\*\*this is not a claim against tables, they are incredibly useful and a lot of time is spent at tables throughout the day

\*\*\*\*this is not a claim against pedestals for everyone, just an attempt to explain why there are none in this exhibition

\*\*\*\*\*and now you are on the same level as the objects

language is really just a set of symbols, we agree that certain arrangements of lines and curves represent a letter, that that letter corresponds to a certain sound and in that certain combinations those letters or sounds translate into things like "cat"

the table or is the book on the table or is the book under the table

people were attempting to make these stacked boxes habitable. They hid the pipes, the ductwork, the wires. There is air coming and going, the lights are on and places thoughtfully designated for our functions. But it's still not the same as when there is no building. This is not against architecture, just a suggestion to notice it occasionally. An attempt has been made to facilitate this

something about 'the architect's home' sounds weirdly poetic. A person's profession interacting with their personal life. What would the bedmaker's bed feel like?  
People defined by their profession sitting there waiting patiently. You are welcome to notice here in this room on that chair.

- Piano Tuner  
- Voice Instructor  
- Guitar Teacher  
Mon - Fri  
11:00-11:30am

Petr had just completed a study in which he kept track of people's brain waves while they listened to music and while they imagined music. He used EEG, placing sensors that measure electrical activity emanating from the brain across the surface of the scalp. Both Petr and I were surprised to see that it was nearly impossible to tell from the data whether people were listening to or imagining music. The pattern of brain activity was virtually indistinguishable. This suggested that people use the same brain regions for remembering as they do for perceiving.

aren't there scraps of stories floating around in your head? Yeah. You're not even sure where they came from or who told you. Sure. But they are part of you, maybe even something you pass along to someone else. Yes, definitely. But when you really think about these stories, try to pin them down, you have to admit that they don't make much sense. True. It made sense when you first heard the story but now you're not so sure why it mattered.  
4 short stories by hired writers.

identity of indiscernibles is an ontological principle that states that there cannot be separate objects or entities that have all their properties in common. So, two things cannot be the same thing.

less like an object and more like the weather

Exhibitions get forgotten, films go up in smoke, novels fade in memory, essays slip away. But in the end (close to the end) one realizes that all these layers, these heaps of information, pile up somewhere in our brains or souls and come to shape our view of the world, which probably has some long compound name in German.

displacement as material

(this talking clock is for the visually impaired)

is it odd to wonder what this exhibition would feel like or taste like?

...the object impinges on our consciousness and potentially changes our understanding of the world when we encounter it.

there are actions, tasks, duties fundamental to the operation of this institution, it is happening all around

why are these objects not on a table (someone may ask). But why should they sit there when instead the floor is available, calmly waiting, patient and very stable. (It seems to be doing a great job holding us up and the building around us.) And what type of table would be appropriate. A table is a platform on some type of support, commonly legs (we can agree on this I hope.) But just consider all the types of tables and various materials. One table might remind you of someone special, or remind you of just how cheap a company can make a table; so many variables. And it is this reason that it was decided to not employ any standard tables in this exhibition.\*\*\* Some might suggest the possible solution is the use of a pedestal (a standard of display typical to exhibition installations - a rectangular box painted white to correspond with the white painted walls.) But there is something to a statement by the late Franz West when he observed that the white cube (the exhibition space) is an inverted pedestal.\*\*\*\* So, for this exhibition it was decided to not be redundant redundant, the objects on the floor are really on an inverted pedestal, the room.\*\*\*\*\*

According to physics, just watching an event or object effects or changes what occurs to that event or object all the way down to and particularly at the smallest smallest smallest smallest ever-so-small degree.

This is what you shall do: Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to everyone that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown, or to any man or number of men — go freely with powerful uneducated persons, and with the young, and with mothers of families — re-examine all you have been told in school or church or in an book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul; and your very flesh shall be a great poem, and have the richest fluency, not only in its words, but in the silent lines of its lip and face, and between the lashes of your eyes, and in every motion and joint of your body.

some of these words were written at other times by different people - sadly it has not been properly noted for the purposes of this exhibition

Figure 20 – An Addendum – text on paper – 2016



**Figure 21** – chair installation view



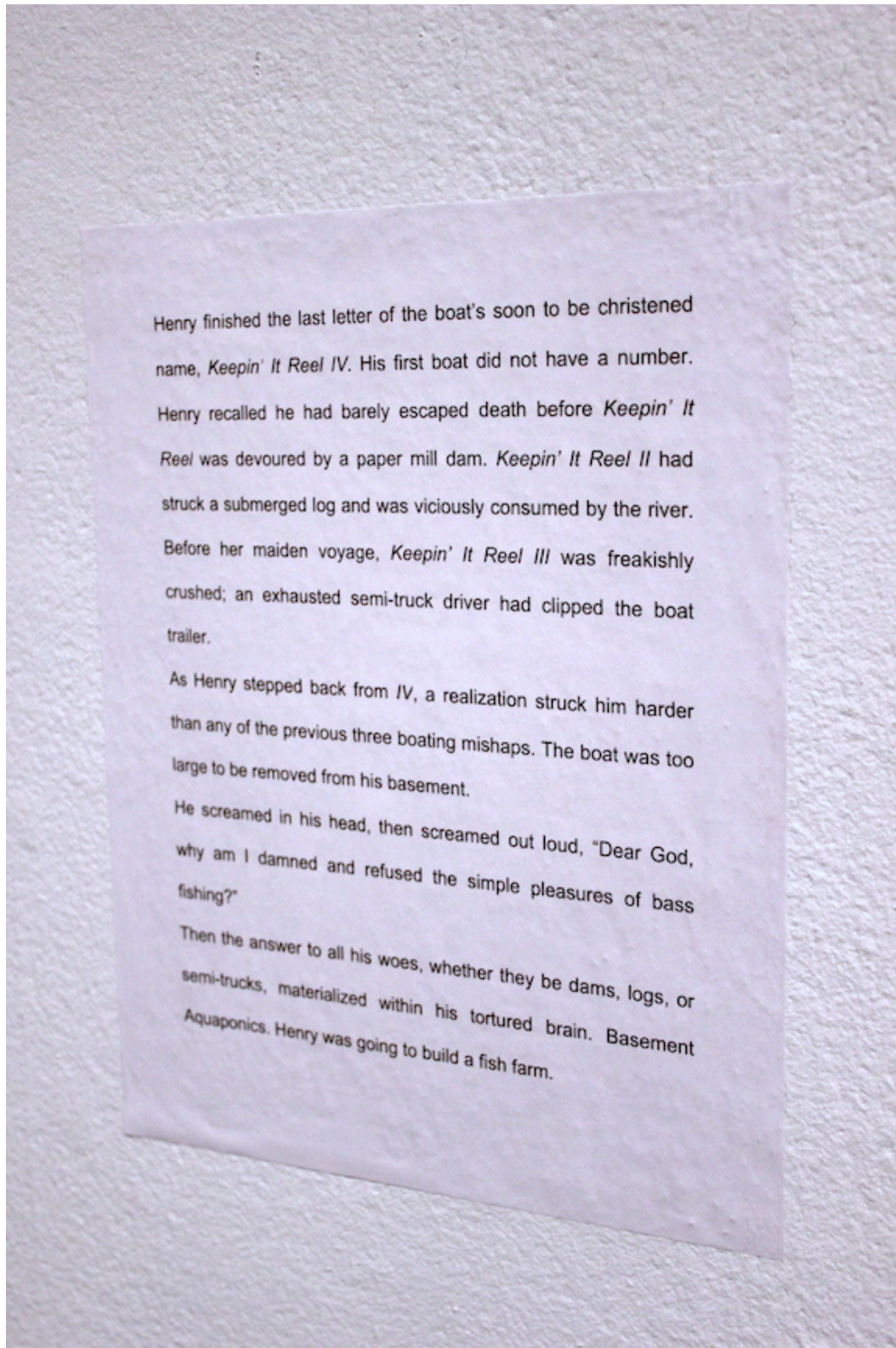


**Figure 22** – Voice Instructor

Jake had been down all summer. He couldn't shake the feeling that something bad was about to happen. They hadn't heard from his brother, who was stationed in Kuwait, for weeks. He should have been home by now, they were supposed to build their boat together, the one that they would be taking for their annual fishing trip. All the supplies were sitting there waiting. His dad had been on him about getting it out of the basement and starting work on it, but he just couldn't bring himself to do it. As he sat there on the floor he picked up the plans, maybe he would surprise Tyler instead. He worked hard the next few weeks, sanding, scraping, pounding, trying to lose himself in work instead of worrying. As Jake completed the final touches he sat back and admired the boat. Not bad, he thought, Tyler will be proud. He climbed in and sat there wondering where his brother was. All of a sudden he felt a hand on his shoulder, "mind if I join you?" Tyler asked. Jake couldn't have been more excited to see him. Tyler climbed in and faced his brother, "you did a good job little bro. You know something though, this is always where we are going to use it." Jake looked at him and then at the stairs and they both started laughing.

**Figure 23** – one of four stories





**Figure 24** – a story installed on wall



**Figure 25** – leaning office door





**Figure 26** – view of hallway outside exhibition space

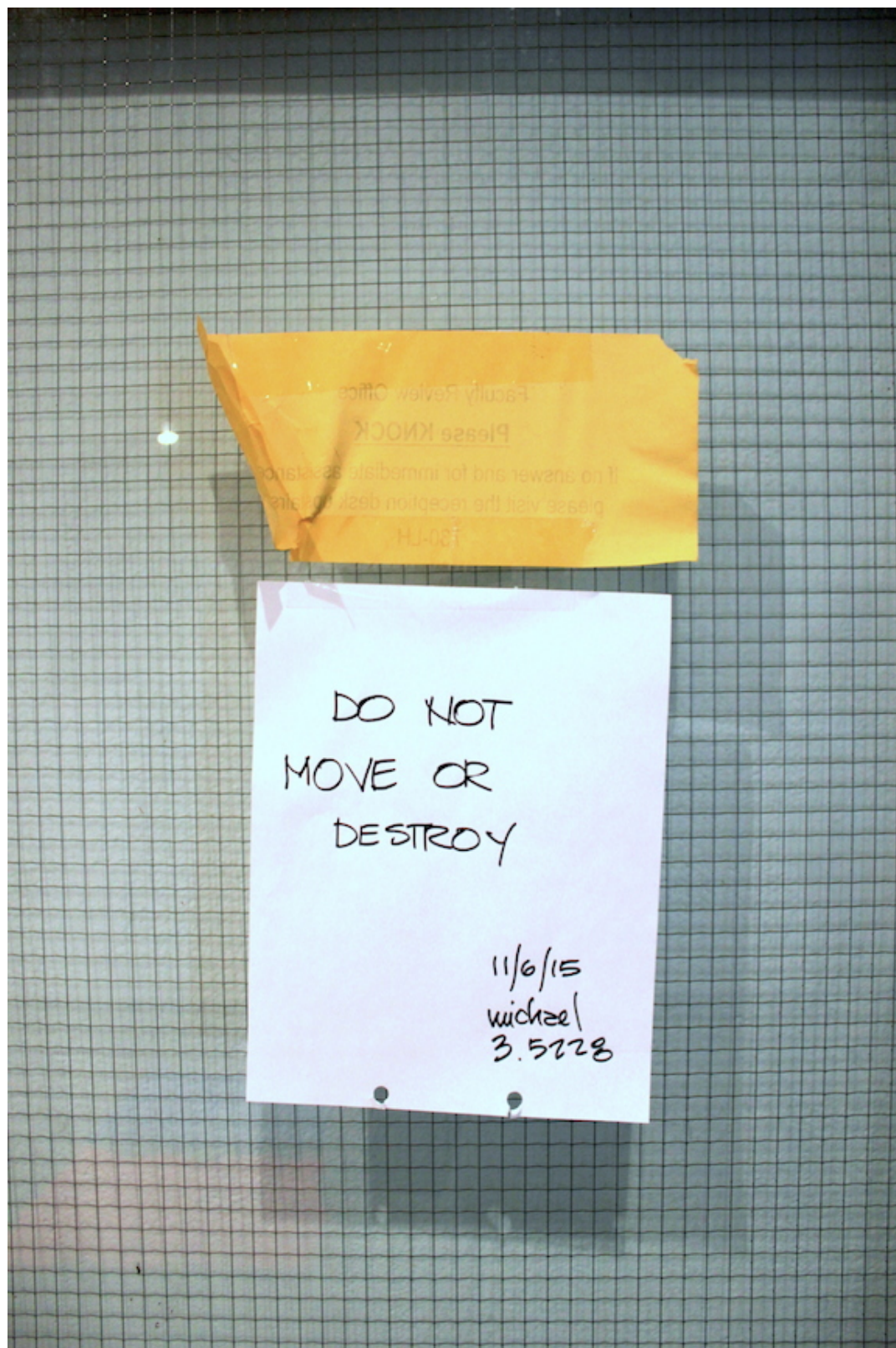


Figure 27 – attached paper on door





**Figure 28** – location of door before and after exhibition



**Figure 29** – windchime installation





Figure 30 – weather radio