Endless Exuberance

Coorain W. Devin

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ENDLESS EXUBERANCE

by

COORAIN DEVIN

Under the Direction of Jeremy Bolen, MFA

ABSTRACT

My thesis work, “Endless Exuberance,” presents Food Bank, an earthwork, alongside a proposed exhibition of performance props and photographic installation. Delusions of infinite abundance permeate the work, manically proclaiming the promise that everyone can have it all. Food Bank consists of 50 cast concrete turkeys working in tandem with 5 pawpaw trees to remediate stream bank erosion. This exhibition questions whether reconciliation is possible between a sustainable planet and humanity’s love for the industrially produced bounty. That which promises us the good life became the thing that will kill us all.

INDEX WORDS: Consumerism, Food, Camp aesthetics, Post-war America, Turkey
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by

COORAIN DEVIN

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

Master of Fine Arts

in the College of the Arts

Georgia State University

2020
ENDLESS EXUBERANCE

by

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May 2020
DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my mother, grandmother, and all the women in my family that have succeeded despite the odds.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you, Chase Gregory, for your incredible feedback. Thank you, Mom, Grandma Patt, and Bonnie for the sewing work we did together. Thank you, Rob, for making it possible for me to make this work. Thank you Nedda, for your smart edits. Thank you to my committee, faculty, and incredible cohort for all their support.
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1 INTRODUCTION

When I am unsure of my artistic abilities, I remind myself that I once played an artist on TV, even if only on public-access television. Performance has always been an important part of my life. While it took a long time for me to understand my sexuality, I intuitively understood that performance to be essential in assuring my safety and survival. Growing up in rural Maine, my epicene nature demanded a performance calculated to defuse conflict and help me avoid physical danger. This performance involved meticulously reading my audience and carefully altering my behavior to suit the situation in which I found myself.

An aversion to anything sexual helped me avoid confrontation. Even today I struggle with labeling my artwork “queer,” despite the aptness of the term, because viewers tend to interpret such work reductively as being about sexuality. I do not fully comprehend how I survived growing up in a town that had more churches than people (a running joke), especially with my obviously effeminate presentation. Most people around me perceived that my sexuality and gender expression deviated from the norm long before I had any inkling. What I did understand, however, was the power of putting on a show. Performance could protect me and return me home safely.

2 PERFORMANCE

Everything is a performance. If one acts a certain way, a predictable outcome occurs, whether one is conscious of this causal relationship or not. The world is produced through performance, which complicates the reality of anything we see: is this person/company/thing putting on a performance? Or are we witnessing genuine emotion? Or both? Whether the thing we’re seeing is a nugget of gold, a plate of food, or a president making a speech, reality is performance and performance is reality. In Trick Mirror, Tolentino writes, “A performer might
be fully taken in by his own performance--he [a job interviewee] might actually believe that his biggest flaw is “perfectionism” –or he might know that his act is a sham. But no matter what, he’s performing.”

Sometimes we know something is fake, but we accept it as real anyway. The “convincing-ness” of a performance is the only method we have to separate genuine from imitation. An audience is not necessary for the performance to exist. I think of myself, home alone, washing dishes after a meal. I would usually prefer to leave the mess for another time, but my sense of self-awareness prevents me from becoming a slob. When the kitchen is clean, I feel the same relief as an actor who’s just completed a difficult scene; with my domestic cleanse completed, I have maintained my self-image of a person who keeps an immaculate kitchen. Food scraps and pests do not spoil my space, physically or psychically; I am just not that kind of person. This phenomenon is described by Robert Ezra Parks in his book *Race and Culture*:

> It is probably no mere historical accident that the word ‘person,’ in its first meaning, is a mask. It is rather a recognition of the fact that everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, play a role… It is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves.²

We are disinclined to break character, and I am unlikely to give up my clean kitchen performance despite the time and effort required. The fact that we are role-playing calls into question our social reality. Erving Goffman writes,

> We find that the individual may attempt to induce the audience to judge him and the situation in a particular way, and he may seek this judgment as an ultimate end

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in itself, and yet he may not completely believe that he deserves the valuation of self which he asks for or that the impression of reality which he fosters is valid.\(^3\)

Whether consciously playacting or not, we are collectively manufacturing a social reality. Often “objective” reality is more difficult to accept than this manufactured version. In America, manufactured desire for products led to advertising campaigns that rebrand dystopia as utopia. Here’s an example: For many years, the Dupont Corporation poisoned consumers and residents of the Ohio River Valley through the production of its Teflon products. But in corporate public relations statements, Dupont claimed the products to be safe modern miracles. I would prefer to believe Dupont’s rosy version of reality rather than the facts, which reveal decades of corporate endangerment of American lives.\(^4\) Indeed, how else can I trust the new generation Teflon pan currently in my kitchen?

![Figure 1. Marina Abramovic, Rhythm 4, 1974, performance, det.: two images of artist naked before blower. Courtesy of University of California, San Diego. ARTStor Library.](image)


Although I have been interested in performance art for a long time, I have often worked against the field, or at least my perception of the field. I have only recently felt comfortable contextualizing my work within the medium. Unlike much of the performance art “canon,” my concerns are not closely tied to the body, but rather the concept of performance itself, especially within the context of a performed social reality. Much of the work of Marina Abramovic’s work, for example, directly relates to an experience of the body and features a nude performer, as the physical body’s strengths and limitations are displayed as artwork. The body is both medium and message. I am more interested in the performance itself. As RuPaul famously quipped, “We’re all born naked, and the rest is drag.” This idea of everyday drag is part of what interests me: I am interested in how performance intersects with mass media and produces the world around me. This performed reality has replaced our “true” reality.

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Another reason I have resisted categorizing my work as performance art has to do with my early exposure to the medium, specifically with the Mobius Group in Boston. I came of age in the city and the work of Marilyn Arsem and her colleagues defined Performance Art for me. One memory sums up my primary disagreement with this particular performance community: I once listened to a successful artist call for performance art to separate and delineate itself from theater and entertainment. Yet there is much for performance art and art, generally, to learn from theater and popular entertainment. I further disagreed with Mobius performers’ tendency to ignore or otherwise alienate the audience. I want an audience to engage with the content of my performance work, not to struggle with the delivery of said content. Because the Mobius Group performances rejected the conventions of theater, audience members frequently expressed anxiety over how they were supposed to act in the unfamiliar performance space. For me,
viewing these works was like attempting to read a novel, only to be frustrated because the typeface was illegible. Thinking through my objections to these early Mobius experiences helped me form ideas about how I wanted my performances to function. I see no shame in using the familiar and established rules of theater, especially when these allow me to communicate with the audience.

Later experiences with performance art helped me further refine my vision. K8 Hardy and Wyne Greenwood’s *New Report* did not seem like performance art when I first experienced it in 2012; it seemed more like the kind of video work I was trying to make at the time. Greenwood and Hardy critically engaged with the world around them, acting as newscasters on a fictional community cable network. Through this roleplaying, the artists assume the power and authority we associate with newscasters. What appeals to me particularly about the *New Report* series is the winking way in which Greenwood and Hardy act the part. Instead of fully embodying the anchorperson’s gravitas, they situate themselves on public access cable, thereby reflecting their own relative powerlessness. This camp roleplay reveals the artificiality of mainstream TV news programs.
Greenwood and Hardy posed questions about matters both important and mundane, always in a hilarious and political way. They covered everything from bra-burning to bathing to the value of art produced by women (examined through a report on paintings found in a dumpster). “They keep the news personal, which means informal, comical, and political.”6 This style of personal-political humor spoke to me. Humor led me into the work, but the questions asked in the work were smart and stayed with me. New Report addressed its audience in a straightforward manner that was easy to access as a viewer, making it a fresh departure from the more “traditional” performance art I’d experienced. Thinking through New Report solidified my ideas about what my performance art could be. It was like seeing everything come together for the first time.

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Coloring Coorain is my most important early body of work. In this video series broadcast on Cambridge Community Television (2014-2017) and later online, I performed the role of talk show host in this work. Coloring Coorain grew out of my interest in celebrity culture. I had previously made zines exploring celebrities as symbols and was interested in pushing this work further by adopting a celebrity persona. I found superstars deeply appealing, despite a strong suspicion that they merely acted as the beguiling skin over a corporate machine. I thought that if I experienced creating the enticement, I could better understand the celebrity system. With Coloring Coorain, I situated my performance in the familiar talk show format and adopted its parameters, eschewing the audience-alienating, obtuse approaches promulgated in 1970s and ‘80s experimental theater. I had found myself in performance.

Instead of constructing dazzling sets, the production was a collage created in my bedroom with a greenscreen and chroma key. I filmed objects like toy animals, jewelry, and coffee cups, creating new compositions in the videos. Glitter floated across the screen, sometimes obscuring my or my guests’ faces. Backgrounds of brightly colored, sparkling curtains swayed while hands rearranged refrigerator magnet letters. Fish swam by or I intermittently appeared in the background drinking a soda. I wore bright costumes that changed with an absurd frequency. Text rendered in 3D Photoshop animations jittered around the screen on purpose. Host and guests were interviewed separately, not in conversation, with both directly addressing the camera. Often if a cut was made mid-paragraph, the speaker’s image would move to a new screen location.

In these videos, no part of the image was stable; the entire project presented itself as a fever dream. I edited these video works so that each one called attention to its artificial, constructed nature. Although I wanted to focus on media critique, in the vein of New Report, and on deconstructing the conventions of broadcast media, I’m not sure I was successful in
communicating these ideas. As the TV show progressed, I became more interested in commodities than celebrity. (I now recognize celebrity culture as a key part of consumer culture.) As my interest in commodities grew, I decided to shift my focus from the celebrity to the consumer.

When I started graduate school, I intended to continue producing my television show; however, I became interested in pushing my performance work further than the format allowed. The fantastic backgrounds from *Coloring Coorain* began to exist as photographs, shifting into still life images. I continued to make videos of these still life setups, but focused more on the individual images, which allowed for faster experimentation. Many of these images still alluded to performance in some way, frequently including a hand gesturing somewhere in the frame.

Reflecting on these photographs, I’m stunned that I didn’t see the images as performance documents sooner. Outside the context of performance documentation, these images are visually

![Coorain wants YOU](image)

*Figure 4. Coorain, Coloring Coorain, Video Still. 2016.*
seductive, but ultimately not that interesting. My work and way of thinking, while informed by fine art photography, is much more indebted to Conceptual Art. This passage from *Light Years: Conceptual Art and the Photograph* helped shift my mindset.

In general, Conceptual artists have downplayed their ties to art photography, emphasizing instead the appeal of the medium as a vernacular form of automaticity and a source of readymades. They were not *photographers*; the fussy world of art photography, with its dreary technical obsessions and outmoded aesthetics, its pretentious aphorism and pedantic rules, was beside the point.\(^\text{7}\)

My primary interest in photography comes from its ties to commerce and our social reality. I am not interested in the image or the performance alone, but how a person performs an image and becomes an iconic media persona. I think of how readily American consumers give power to photographs and images projected on screens.

*Smile (Employee Study)* is a study for an as-yet unfinished performance for video. Deceptively simple, the artwork consists of the performance of smiling for 8-hours. Two of me sit side by side, smiling directly at the camera. I am dressed in everyday clothing and attempting to maintain my smile and welcoming gaze at the camera as faithfully as possible. While the study lasted just over 40 minutes, I am in the process of making an 8-hour version, as a reference to the 8-hour workday. Inspired, in part, by Arlie Russell Hochschild’s *The Managed Heart*, this piece deals with the strangest parts of the workplace. Hochschild’s 1983 text is the first to propose the concept of “emotional labor,” specifically in the context of the workplace,\(^\text{8}\) though the term is now used in a variety of contexts and relationships. Hochschild looked at Delta

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Airlines flight attendants, who were encouraged to think of the plane’s cabin as their own living room and the passengers as their personal guests. The company’s expectation was for attendants to smile through an entire flight, which could stretch to 14 hours or more for international flights. Although the performance customers anticipate from flight attendants is now more relaxed, we still expect customer service employees to smile. This performance study helped me understand performance as a key aspect of consumer-capitalism. This revelation pushed forward both my art making, and my research.

3 DOMESIC GODDESS

The domestic goddess is the apex of consumer-capitalism’s performative characters. She both consumes and demonstrates the proper consumption for others. Within my work, I reference other versions of the demonstrative consumer, such as the infomercial host, as well, but the domestic goddess is the concept that captivates me the most, in part because the character denies her own complicity in consumer culture. This archetype is

The woman who makes her living by making a very public, very desirable daily life for herself and her family. Domestic goddesses are not just chefs or cookbook writers who happen to be female; they must also perform domesticity. These women would have you believe that they cook for sensual pleasure and fulfillment, not for literal sustenance. They almost incidentally provide meals for their household and guests along the way, but that is also secondary. Tertiary — unmentioned, unmentionable — is the obvious fact that they are offering these idealized tableaux up for their readers’ consumption, too. By deftly controlling the narrative, via memoiristic writing or obsessive life-documentation or both, domestic goddesses do more than teach their fans new ways to roast chicken.
They use their charisma and skill to turn what has historically been a trap for women — the private, cloistered, boring kitchen — into a stage.  

I identify with this trapped woman; she is my mother, my grandmother, my mother-in-law, my great-grandmother. They are all incredible women who have made their own way in the world, despite carrying the burdens of domesticity in addition to their achievements performed outside the home. My great-grandmother, for example, started a successful diner/gas station business while taking care of three babies with almost no support from her husband. My great-grandfather took cash out of the till to buy a Cadillac, while my grandmother hand-pumped the diesel they sold.

I also identify with the demonstrative consumer archetype. That is, the woman who has turned the trap into her primary resource. This role shifts the consumer from being passive into being an active participant through performance. Although these personas often act in service to corporations and ultimately reinforce consumption/capitalism, they are also generative. Even as I identify consumption and capitalism as oppressive forces, I still find fulfillment in acting as a demonstrative consumer: I enjoy the acts of buying, creating, and showing what I have made with my purchases.

When I prepare an elaborate meal or make a quilt, I am both consuming and producing. This impulse to make strikes me as odd. The raw ingredients or fabric are invariably sourced from a large corporation and rearranged into a final product. I cannot help but wonder if I have really “made” anything. I think of tie dying kits: everything you need to dye your own shirt is in the box. Do you really have a choice other than where each color goes? As American consumers,

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do we have many options outside of kits or are we stuck with preselected options? Even as I ask these questions, I continue to participate, choosing from what feels like endless options: red or blue; conventional or organic; woodgrain or marble effect.

My work is an attempt to make good on some of the fantastic claims made by consumer-capitalism. Consumer culture and the American Dream promises us near-endless abundance, democratic availability of products, and infinitely novel choices within these products. But when I look around at the choices actually presented to me, they fall short of the dream. It seems I am provided a choice within proscribed genres, as any anti-consumerist movement gets assimilated as a new genre. Grunge goes from anti-fashion to fashion, just another kit you can buy. The visual language of commerce has completely subsumed all other visual language. Since Lyndon B. Johnson, American Presidents have primarily worn the clothing of a business man, rather than garb based in military or aristocratic contexts.  

This commercial visual language has intermingled with artistic production nearly completely, whether directly, as evidenced in Pop Art, or indirectly via anti-aesthetics meant to react against commerce. Our true choices have become limited, but we find endless variations in the fashions Coke bottles wear.

John Baldessari strikes me as one artist potentially carving out a space into between pure participation in capitalism in and critique of capitalism. “Representing the process of selection [in his various Choosing photograph series] allowed Baldessari to question artistic taste in new ways. By using vegetables, he humorously brought aesthetics down to the level of supermarket browsing, as Warhol had done with his soup cans.”

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Baldessari with three vegetables. Baldessari would point to one, and his choice was documented with a photograph. The selected vegetable would then proceed to the next round, while the other two were replaced by Baldessari’s other player. These works are more than just a critique of taste, although that is certainly present. Baldessari chooses the best vegetable, but by what standards? And what of the specimens that never even made it to the table, those that the other player never offered to Baldessari? The key element in this work involves the choices we see and the choices we do not see. Consumerism is as much about relinquishing our power of choice as it is exercising the right to make the choices we are allowed to make.
Figure 5. John Baldessari, *Choosing (A game for Two Players): Rhubarb*, 1972, photograph mounted on board, 7 panels each 14x11" Courtesy of University of California, Sand Diego. ARTStor Library.
My work *Soft as a Baby’s Bottom* shows pears in various states of decay resting on a piece of crinkled metallic foil. Commercial-style lighting shows every detail, but gently, with muted highlights. It is soft lighting on soft fruit. A few of the fruits have succumbed to decay, becoming piles of brown mush, but most of the pears are just heavily bruised. A cracked mirrored tray sits next to the pears. The mirror confuses space; it can be read as a window or a mirror. A bit of the pears’ juices has leaked onto the glass surface where the fruit leans against the mirror’s edge. One perfect pear is visible in the mirror’s glass; it is sitting atop a piece of 1970s floral-fruit motif upholstery fabric. The image is sharply focused except for the mirror’s reflection, which is just soft enough to indicate some depth. Every drop of putrid juice that has oozed from the pears is visible, as is every imperfection in the rotting skin. It is as if every object is the bad object.

*Figure 6. Coorain. Soft As A Baby’s Bottom, archival inkjet print, 60” x 40”, 2018.*
Although this series of still life photographs are visually alluring, they do little to communicate my deeper ideas about food and the complexities of our industrial food production system. It is an age-old problem with a 21st century twist: consumers do not know what is in their food. What feel like simple choices at the grocery store are in fact the results of choices made by others: do you want corn syrup in this form or that? While many American supermarkets now offer conventional or organic produce, this perceived variety masks the lack of real choice. These new options are a corporate response to consumers’ increased awareness of the environmental damage caused by agricultural production. But instead of creating real change and a transparent agricultural system, incremental changes, like a selection of organic items, appear.

In the 19th century, for example, unscrupulous millers routinely whitened their flour by adulterating it with everything from alum and chalk to pulverized bone: “For centuries both millers and bakers have been regarded with suspicion, often with good reason. It has always been hard to determine what exactly is in a bag of flour or a loaf of bread, and easy to pass off ingredients that are cheaper and less wholesome than wheat flour.”¹² In making this series of works, I found it difficult to contain this complex web of information in a single image. I began to expand the images beyond a printed image into installations that engaged with commercial and domestic displays.

It had become clear to me that the images could not stand alone. In a spring 2018 studio visit, Professor Joe Peragine aptly observed, “You don’t trust the image.” He was right. The image alone doesn’t work for me. It’s not complete; it’s like a single ingredient in a larger recipe. Representational photography is the medium consumerism is built upon. I have looked at too many photographs and bought too many products that looked good in those photographs, to trust

the pictures around me. Even so, photographic images beguile me over and over again. Photographs are exceptional at taking a tiny sliver of time, a fraction of a moment, and ask us to believe this image of this split second can stand in for all others. We fall for it easily because photography, like consumerism, excels at presenting reality out of context. Much like magic, consumerism and photography can, “create an arena within the viewer’s imagination for the magic to happen.”13 There are no limits to our imaginations, allowing for the most fantastic beliefs to become our realities.

In an attempt to find a stabilizing force, I began to consider systems of images. I look to the world around me and observe that a single photograph rarely changes the world. It does happen, but more often it is a barrage of images, in billboards, social media advertisements, printed mailers, and celebrity endorsements that coalesce around an idea to make it enticingly real. By combining my work into more fully realized worlds, such as publications, installations, with performance or through film, I am able to activate works and place them into meaningful contexts.

Haim Steinbach’s systems of display create and build a context for consumer objects, using each object like a word in a poem. “The way I arrange objects in one line is like the way that we arrange words in a sentence.”14 While more famous for his arrangements on plastic laminated shelves, I find the story-like, and aptly titled Backyard Story, to be his most compelling work. This sculpture is an industrial shelving unit with four grills, four plastic pumpkins, a full clothesline, and a pile of firewood. This artwork immediately recalls a weekend

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afternoon in early fall. But if we look carefully, any narrative we might read into the work is quickly frustrated. Although the wood relates to the fire in the grills, it is the wrong fuel for a charcoal grill. The smiling pumpkins seem to invite us in, but it is difficult to tell if they are a marketing ploy or plot in the titular “story.” Instead of placing the work in a domestic space, the industrial shelving suggests a commercial setting. This shelving, and placement of identical objects in rows, recalls warehouse stores that now supply America. Every American backyard story starts in the factory and warehouse.

As I grappled with my mistrust of images and our social reality, I started to turn to systems of display in an attempt to find something in my artwork I could trust. I learned about painted images in the Renaissance that were sometimes covered with curtains for protection, in the case of dangerous images, or as a means of controlling access and creating mystery, as in the case of religious imagery. I began adding curtains to my photographs, and with Egg Set Piece, found myself building installations for the images to live within.
In *Egg Set Piece*, a photograph of a table with five plates of deviled eggs is framed, within the image, by a set of curtains. In the installation, the curtains are repeated, blurring the line between our reality and the photograph. Further collapsing these realities, a real (three-dimensional) plate of deviled eggs sits just in the front of the photograph. Viewers are welcome
to eat the deviled eggs. In the photograph, a hand, wearing a chicken costume, gestures towards the eggs, but could just as easily be reaching towards the left curtain to pull it closed. In combining these elements, I hoped to create a push and pull between welcoming the viewer and obstructing their view. The presence of the performer is still felt through the photograph, but now the objects begin to act as performers as well. The curtains simultaneously hide much of the photograph and pull the fantasy world of the image into our own. The curtains, much like consumerism, are both tangibly real and part of an illusion. Both obfuscate and reveal to create a seamless narrative, whether or not the narrative bears any resemblance to reality.

Figure 9. Coorain, Easy as a Wipe, 2019, live performance at Satellite Art Show Miami, photograph by Quinn Dukes.
In my *Easy as a Wipe* performance, I assumed the dual personae of self-help guru and homemaker. During the performance, I demonstrate *ToVCQ*, and its various features, focusing on the ease of cleaning it and the protective nature of the vinyl. *ToVCQ* is a quilt I made and covered with a clear vinyl protective layer, much like the vinyl slipcovers that protected chintz couches in many post-war living rooms. Yellow, lavender, blue, and white artificial flowers ring the border of the quilt, pressed between the fabric and vinyl layers. During the performance, I used a bottle filled with blue liquid, “just a mix of washing powder and clean bottled water,” which I sprayed onto the quilt and into my mouth, occasionally taking a break to drink directly from the bottle and to replenish the spray bottle with powder and bottled water. I proposed that the quilt could be a space free from “pathogens, bacteria, lurking intruders and insects, viruses, and other undesirables” that attack the body, allowing, “for an empty space, much like deep space, where the body can heal and be at one with itself, much like a planetary being.”

4 PROPS

I view the prop as an essential object and theatrical tool. As my work is primarily about the effects of consumerism and performed reality, the relationship between the object and the consumer is vital to the work. I display and present objects through performance, just as consumer objects are often displayed and presented through commercials. Props are so integral to some of my works that a friend once asked me if I was doing prop comedy (the answer, to some extent, is yes). As Haim Steinbach used the readymade commodity in combination with sculpture, I use commodities, both ready and custom made, in combination with performance.

Is it possible to create work that functions both as prop and as artwork? In the work of Barbara Kasten, “Props are made from the same raw materials as their real-life counterparts, but

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15 Easy as a Wipe Performance at Satellite Art Show, Dec. 2019
they only need to be just believable enough to function in front of the lens of the camera or to be seen from a distance on stage."  The status of “prop” changes an art object. In presenting an artwork on stage, the question shifts from “What does it mean?” to “What does it do?” The prop object no longer presents the same claims to reality but asks the viewer to suspend belief and to accept the object’s performed reality.

The artist Guy De Cointet created abstract props and performances that explained the props. De Cointet was fascinated by language and how it functions. In his performances, he often used geometric objects to demonstrate his abstract language concepts.

He produces something more like walking tours through the decor of the set.

‘What I like is the texture of the characters interacting with the objects and shapes and feeling completely at ease with them…. The audience sees arrangements and piles of painted geometric forms. During the course of my plays these forms are talked about and their identities revealed.’

Cointet’s works require a performance; the forms are too abstract to be performative on their own. It is through demonstration that the objects take on meaning. I too am interested in creating works that sit in the space of the performative and the performance, with objects that are both prop and agent. These objects exist somewhere between set piece, sculpture, and puppet. They effectively move from performance to stand-alone object because they express formal concerns. As objects, the props are compelling; they resist classification. They are props and art objects, but they are not readymades.

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17 Connie Butler, “That's Guy De Cointet,” *Artforum International* 45, no. 10 (Summer, 2007), 145.
I constructed *Kitchen Glove Curtain* as a combination performance prop and set piece. The background is a sky-blue crushed velvet curtain with yellow polyester jersey gloves sewn onto it. The gloves are functional; performers can put their hands inside to activate the piece. The gloves reference rubber cleaning gloves a homemaker might use, and viewers often mistake them for the real thing. At the bottom of the curtain, four gloves filled with sand hold the curtain in place. Initially, the curtain was an interactive background for a sales pitch performance titled *But Wait, There’s More*, presented at Showerhaus Gallery in July 2019. For *But Wait, There’s More*, I dressed like an infomercial host in slacks and a collared red shirt. I parroted infomercial language but removed the titles of products, presenting an amalgamation of decontextualized slogans and enticing description of incredible (if generic) solutions: “It’s as easy as 1, 2, 3, and...

*Figure 10. Guy De Cointet Two Drawings Performance, 1978, performance, Source material in Franklin Furnace Archive, Inc., Brooklyn, NY. ARTStor Library.*
just like that, your home is safe from lurking intruders and dangerous spores on every surface! What’s more, this is guaranteed to impress those pesky in-laws. And your floors! They will gleam like never before!” *But Wait, There’s More* was done in 30-minute segments, to further mirror the infomercial format.

During the Showerhaus Gallery presentation of *But Wait, There’s More*, members of Mediums Dance Collective activated *Kitchen Glove Curtain*. Their hands responded to my language, as performative assistants. For example, the gloved hands made chopping motions when I described how the product slices through onions “so fast you won’t have time to cry.” Reviewing the performance documentation, I realized I was looking at two separate works. My infomercial host performance did not rely on the glove curtain prop and easily could stand alone, as could the activated curtain. In fact, *But Wait, There’s More* is more effective without any props, as the absence of any object makes clear the power of the sale pitch. Without any shiny product to hold our gaze, the sales pitch still captivates viewers. *Kitchen Glove Curtain* is a prop for a movement-based performance rather than a speech-based work. It is a discrete object that can stand alone as an artwork and work as a performance prop. This discovery felt like a breakthrough, even though it was simply the coalescence of several threads in my practice. This dual-purpose object was what every artwork I was making wanted to be, but couldn’t be yet because the form wasn’t quite there.
Mel Chin’s *In the Name of Place* is one example of how a prop can act as a discrete artwork. The collaborative project created artworks that appeared on the set of the soap opera *Melrose Place*. *In the Name of Place* opens up the world for the prop-art object, as the show acted as a catalyst exhibition. While these objects require a performance to be activated, that performance is not required to be art. These works ranged from actual artwork to everyday
objects like quilts or takeout containers. “Brief Appearances: Powder Puff Briefcase ... contains a large powder puff inside a briefcase, designed for a particularly vain male character, that was never opened on the show.”

Many of these items could only be perceived as art objects through their later exhibition, such as those featured in Uncommon Sense at the LA County Museum of Contemporary Art in 1997.

![Image](https://www.melchin.org/)

Figure 12. Mel Chin, In the Name of Place, 1995-97 and continuing in syndication, props inserted on the set of Melrose Place in collaboration with students, artists, critics, set decorator, producers. Accessed April 16, 2020 https://www.melchin.org/

5 HIDDEN ILLNESS/HIDDEN DANGER

In 2010, I was diagnosed with celiac disease. Celiac disease is a condition in which the body’s immune system attacks the lining of the small intestine in the presence of gluten. Gluten

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18 Miranda Lash, ed. Mel Chin: Rematch (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2014), 29
is a protein present in wheat, barley, and rye. In short, I found out I would never eat bread again. While the diagnosis pointed towards relief, the path toward healing was much longer and more difficult. Social gatherings became awkward at best; my condition seemed offensive to some people. While awareness around celiac disease has grown considerably in the past decade, I still occasionally find myself using the simpler, if incorrect, explanation of a wheat allergy.

I am glad that I no longer suffer from the worst effects of celiac disease and have learned how to create gluten-free versions of most of the foods I crave. Still, my forced diet can be frustrating. I love food and food culture, but I cannot risk my health to partake in the food served at public gatherings and other types of celebratory events. Often, I bring my own food to minimize risk, but it is a fine line between acting “normal,” enjoying life, and poisoning myself. As a result, I find myself in a paradise that I cannot access. Surrounded by the bounty of the American food system, I am lost in an ocean of deadly delights.

While I’d like to pretend that the difficulties related to my illness have subsided, living with an autoimmune disease is challenging. Although I’ve adapted to the dietary restrictions, I am still challenged by my sensitive stomach and immune system. I battle fatigue and clouding of the consciousness (“brain fog”) regularly. These ailments do not manifest visibly and are quite isolating. To make matters worse, symptoms can be triggered by stress. It often feels like my body and mind have ganged up on me, creating an internal and external threat that is invisible to the casual observer.

This position parallels the experience of the person who wants to partake in the American Dream. We are surrounded by vast and glorious commodities, but they are just out of reach, and
rife with dangers and traps such as incredible debt, lack of healthcare, or a system that prizes
profits over safety. America is like a dark version of Cockaigne, a medieval fantasy land where
the hardships of peasant life were upended, and food was so readily available, it literally begged
to be eaten.20 We can have it all, but only if we fit the mold and consume the factory supplied
commodities, and only if we do not accidently poison ourselves.

Figure 13. Coorain, Nabisco Premium Saltine Quilt, 2019-2020, archival inkjet print on
cotton sateen, cotton fabric, polyester batting, thread. 10.5’x11.5’

With these issues in mind, I began to create Nabisco Premium Saltine Quilt. I
photographed the tops and bottoms of a package of Nabisco Premium Saltines, enlarged the

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Books, 1994), 49.
crackers’ images to be almost a foot in each dimension, and printed the images onto cotton fabric. This blanket bridges between my own personal disease, and a larger array of topics. I made the quilt huge and overstuffed. Instead of a single sheet of batting, there are two, giving the crackers more corpulence than their edible counterparts. The quilting follows the crackers’ regular indentations. I imagine being able to wrap myself in saltines, a food that was given to me anytime I was sick in childhood and had been a treat when topped with butter. Saltines don’t exist for someone with celiac disease and I dearly miss the comfort they bring. With little known about the cause of celiac disease, it is hard not to wonder if these very crackers are to blame for my illness.

Even as this work is personal to my specific illness, I believe it speaks to a larger, now global condition. As COVID-19 continues to unfold, it seems clear that this pandemic, like most, has developed from, not in spite of, global industrialization and urbanization. Dense populations, and even denser feedlots, are fertile grounds for infectious disease. “From 1940 to 2000, infectious diseases tended to materialize most in densely packed areas, such as the northeastern United States, Western Europe, Japan, and southeastern Australia.”21 We seem to be driven by an insatiable hunger, for more grain, more meat, more fish, more products, more people everywhere. We have developed innumerable technologies that feed this hunger, but nothing that entirely satiates it. “The images that emerged from Wuhan in February—people donning P.P.E. [personal protective equipment] to leave their apartments, dogs in protective gear—speak to our new, paradoxical reality: the technologies that have made it possible for more and more of us to

inhabit the earth have also made the earth less hospitable to human life.”22 The very things we love are killing us.


I frequently think of the film Safe (1995), directed by Todd Haynes. The film follows Carol White, an unexceptional housewife played by Julianne Moore, as she experiences a decline in health due to “environmental illness.”23 Carol increasingly isolates herself, ostensibly from the chemicals she believes to be causing her illness, but also from society at large. Carol is clearly suffering from something, “But does this threat come from outside, from the external

22 Ibid.

23 “Commentary Track,” Safe, directed by Todd Haynes (1995; Los Angeles, CA: Criterion Collection, 2001), DVD.
environment, or does it come from within?”24 Visits to doctors and therapists seem to have no effect. She moves from her home to a New Age retreat designed to help people suffering from environmental illness and similar ailments. In scenes disturbingly realistic, clients are encouraged to take ownership of their illness. These scenes echo my own experience, as I have been asked to take responsibility for my own autoimmune affliction, as if I somehow brought this disorder upon myself. The film ends with Carol completely alone, in a ceramic room that is believed to be completely free from potential contact and contamination. She goes to extreme measures to alleviate her sickness, never fully understanding what is happening to her body.

While at a residency in Ireland, I was reminded of this “environmental illness” question, and whether it was something external or internal. I took a tour of a local farm, led by farmer-philosopher Patrick McCormack. The farm followed a mixture of permaculture principles and historic farming techniques and avoided chemical fertilizers and antibiotics. McCormack first brought us to a group of lambs, noting that these were the only sheep on the property that would approach us. These lambs had been bottle-fed, as they had been second or third born and rejected by their mothers. Because of the human intervention, these sheep could not rejoin the flock. Lacking the bond with their mothers, the lambs did not learn how to survive relatively unsupervised in the Irish countryside. What’s more, their immune systems were weaker and more likely required antibiotics. McCormack kept the lambs alive for their meat but noted that these sheep required more work from him than those that would live with him for many years. Once he intervened in the animals’ lives, they became dependent on his assistance.

While domesticated animals are all dependent on human assistance to a degree, McCormack’s orphaned flock of lambs raises a point that relates to my own life. Without

continued medical intervention, I would be dead (as would many of us). During the first two years of grad school, I suffered from a skin infection that could only be cured with increasingly intense antibiotics. Undoubtedly, another illness requiring antibiotics or some other intervention will arise in the near future. Am I therefore dependent on medications, not unlike one of McCormack’s lambs? Skin conditions might seem minor but can quickly lead me down a path toward immune deficiency like that seen in David Vetter, popularly known as “the bubble boy.” Vetter suffered from a hereditary disease that necessitated living in a sterile environment, a plastic germ-free bubble where he spent almost his entire life. Vetter is an extreme example of contemporary American life.

Beyond disinfecting our homes, we sterilize our food supply. Dairy products are pasteurized; leafy greens, fish, and meats are irradiated. Beyond just food, we sterilize our environments to a degree unthinkable even a few generations ago with bleaches, sprays and wipes of all kinds. In removing microbes from the environment around us, we are changing the way humans have lived for millennia. In his book *Cooked*, food activist Michael Pollan describes a revelation expressed by a group of microbiologists: “Indeed, even speaking of ‘us’ and ‘them’ may soon seem quaint; as a group of microbiologists recently wrote in *Microbiology and Molecular Biology Reviews*, we need to begin to thinking of health ‘as a collective property of the human-associated microbiota’--that is, as a function of the community, not the individual.”

In many ways, what Michael Pollan and these microbiologists are suggesting is anti-American. Our current mode of thought is that of the colonist or settler. We clear out whatever or whoever

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is living to make space for ourselves and our way of life. What we have yet to understand is how this operates on a microbial level.

Figure 15. Coorain, Step 4. Apply Antibiotics, 2020, archival inkjet print with artist’s frame (frame not pictured), 60” x 40”

Through my research, I have begun to see dangers in our food system that I never recognized. As I studied the histories of industrial agriculture, these dangers only become more present. I began to imagine a world where food was plentiful, but full of danger. This dystopia is not far from my current reality, but I began to imagine a world where foods required more and more preparation to be eaten safely. For Step 4. Apply Antibiotics, I photographed a ham I covered in antibiotic ointments in an attempt to disinfect the meat. The image does not include my presence, but with the aluminum foil covered work surface, it is easy to imagine the home cook with gloved hands standing just outside the frame. The title places the work in the context
of a cookbook or other demonstration. I made this image in January, long before I realized COVID-19 would soon threaten much of the world. Just as COVID-19 has created a world in which we must don protective equipment to interact with other people, I envision a world in which food preparation requires the same care and equipment. This world seems closer and closer to reality.

6 FOOD BANK

I have turned my own home into a roadside gallery to present *Food Bank*. This large-scale installation uses cast concrete turkeys and native fruit trees to mitigate stream bank erosion in my backyard. This domestic intervention attempts to solve an environmental problem with the very culture that created the problem. The concrete turkeys are a repetitive gesture that may be an imperfect solution to the erosion, but their multiplicity mirrors the logic of consumer capitalism. Consumerism seems to respond to any problem by telling us to buy more, want more. In addition to *Food Bank*, I propose an auxiliary bunker for the exhibition of additional objects and images, which follows my discussion the *Food Bank* installation.
When making my initial “life cast” of a raw turkey, I chose a Butterball turkey because the iconic brand is both the largest producer of turkey in the United States and host of the equally iconic Turkey-Talk Line, which dispenses Thanksgiving dinner advice to any caller. The turkey I purchased is undoubtedly a Broad Breasted White, the most common commercial turkey breed. Broad Breasted White turkeys have achieved market dominance due to their quick growth rate, reaching almost comical proportions; adult birds regularly weigh in around 38-40 pounds! The young turkey I purchased weighed 28 pounds and was likely slaughtered at 4 to 5 months of age.
My cast magnificently captured the detail of the bird’s skin, especially its sags and bumps. The indexicality of the cast is important to me as it represents an actual bird. This is not a stylized rendering of a turkey, but a nearly exact copy of an American delicacy. I am interested in the unmodified symbol of the bird, not altering it through the artists hand. The cast is of a stuffed raw turkey, ready for the oven, its most sculpturally perfect form. The muscles have yet to shrink and atrophy in the heat of the oven; its breasts are still perky and full of juice that will
be reborn as gravy. Its raw state is symbolically the bird’s most valuable (commodified) form as well. The flesh is at its most statuesque, yet it is unavailable, almost disgustingly so, in this uncooked state. This American symbol of patriotism, our native fowl, is both fertile and impotent. Preparing such a feast is a domestic triumph: it is no small feat to prepare such a large bird. In *Food Bank*, the turkey is a commodity, a problem, and a solution to a problem created by our thirst for endless commodities.

This very thirst is evident in the history of the turkey itself. In colonial America, wild turkeys were so prevalent that their domesticated brethren weren’t needed for their meat, but rather for pest control (they ate insects that feed on tobacco).27 As America industrialized, the turkeys’ wild habitat was increasingly felled to build American homes, factories, and products. When Chestnut Blight devasted the birds remaining food source in the early 1900’s, wild turkeys disappeared from most of their original range. By 1947, “Broad-Breasted” breeds were the standard commercial turkey throughout the United States. These birds had been bred for “docility, early maturity, maximum growth, and color of the carcass,”28 not for flavor. What’s more, these birds needed to be artificially inseminated to breed, which allowed for more control, ultimately leading to the Broad-Breasted White. A bland bird, this incarnation of the turkey fits perfectly into American consumerism, where “…the taste of the meat does not interfere with those consumer-added flavorings.”29 The turkey is now a canvass for our own desires, rather than a strongly flavored, gamey meat. Each bird is exactly the same, give or take a few pounds, ready to be dressed up with cranberry sauce or gravy, much like American suburban homes are exactly the same, some dressed up as “colonial” with others done in “ranch” style.

28 Ibid., 91.
29 Ibid., 94.
American-style suburbs created the erosion I am putting these turkeys to work solving. As a tool for stream bank remediation, the cast concrete turkeys cannot operate alone. They need the support of vegetation. For this project, I have selected pawpaw trees, *Asimina triloba*, another edible species native to North America. Much like the turkey is a large edible species, pawpaw is the largest native fruit in North America. Unlike the turkey, pawpaws have not entered the realm of the commodity. The fruit must ripen on the tree, and once ripe has a shelf life of just a few days, during which it is easily bruised. In short, it is unlikely to appear in a supermarket anytime soon as anything other than a flavor for ice cream or fruit leather. In *Food Bank*, it is the pawpaw trees that really do the work. While the rafter of turkeys hold the streambank in place in the short term, it is the trees that will in the long term preserve the landscape and produce the eponymous food.

*Food Bank* exists in two forms: the previously described, installed, land art form, and a proposed kit form. This two-part project strikes me as an important model for future works, following Robert Smithson and his concepts of *sites* and *non-sites*. In the case of *Food Bank*, the installation would act as a *site*, that is a specific location, and the kit form, *non-site*, which can function in any appropriate exhibition space. The kit form reminds me of the Sears catalog and the kit homes they sold in the early 20th century. These homes made the American Dream achievable for many of its buyers and created a new market for the Sears company. Although I have fully realized the installation form of *Food Bank*, I see a future in which my works are proposed or perhaps exist in the form of a kit only. The proposed kit form of *Food Bank* consists of: 1) three cast concrete turkeys, 2) a poster illustrating possible installations of *Food Bank*, 3) a short sales catalog promoting *Food Bank*, 4) an installation manual, and 5) an order form.

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Beyond using species native to North America, *Food Bank* uses concrete, a material central to contemporary American construction. Without concrete’s plastic nature, suburban American life could not exist. We could not build the roads and infrastructure our consumer culture needs. Levittown, the first mass produced suburb, has been an inspiration for *Food Bank*. This town is crammed with all the trappings of middle-class life, made cheaper through mass production—a comforting, affordable model community that could be easily repeated. It was, “a paradigmatic Cold War cultural landscape, simultaneously huddling place and open community, with neither extreme particularly far from the other.” 31 As the turkeys in *Food Bank* huddle on the ground, they hold and preserve the earth, just as Levittowners would huddle and protect their lands should the Cold War heat up. But given that the houses were small, often too small to hold much of a party indoors, these early suburbanites found community in their backyards and streets, the common areas that surrounded their huddling places. With fences forbidden, Levittown’s lawns flowed together creating, “land that looks common, but really it’s not—it’s just the assemblage of privately owned backyards.” 32 With curved roads that helped continued the illusion of a grand estate, Levittown promised the ease of the middle class to working class white Americans.

Alongside *Food Bank*, I propose a future exhibition inside a bunker of photographic installation and quilt-based sculptures. For a complete list of works and images, please see Appendix A. This bunker provides sustenance in visual form only, as foodstuffs have transformed into blankets or images that are tantalizing, yet inedible. Ideally these works would be installed in a windowless gallery, approximately the size of a single car garage with florescent

32 Ibid., 102
lighting. My largescale photographic images will be installed on the walls, with framing and curtains that echo the materials in the images themselves, as seen in *Egg Set Piece*. For example, *Step 4 Apply Antibiotics* would be frame in aluminum foil and petroleum jelly. A floor to ceiling stack of concrete turkeys is in the two back corners, with a line of turkeys connecting the stacks. This line of turkeys bows out from the wall, creating a small proscenium for performances. In front the proscenium is a seating area full of my *Kraft Singles American Cheese Quilts* is available for viewers to sit down and get cozy. Performances would be demonstrations of my other quilt-props, as well as domestic tasks that as they would be done in the bunker. See Appendix A for documentation of completed works to be included in the proposed exhibition.

7   CONCLUSION: THE SHOW MUST GO ON

Performance continues to create our social reality, even in the midst of a pandemic. While the nature of the performative gestures we make will necessarily change, the show must go on. Perhaps performances of welcoming will be replaced with performances of cleanliness, to ensure consumers feel comfortable in stores. Images and performance have become more powerful as human interaction becomes increasingly mediated by digital technology. It is now clearer than ever that our social reality is performed, therefore it is even more important for us to think critically about the performances we view, absorb, and produce.
REFERENCES


APPENDICES

Appendix A: The Bunker

Figure 18. Coorain, Meat Package Product Quilt, 2019-2020, archival inkjet print on cotton sateen, cotton and polyester fabrics, batting, vinyl, thread.
Figure 19. Coorain 93 Deviled Eggs, 2019, archival inkjet print, 50” x 40”
Figure 20. Coorain, *Kraft Singles American Cheese Quilt*, 2019-2020, Vinyl, polyester fabric, thread.
Figure 21. Coorain, *Tarred and Feathered Turkey*, 2020, cast concrete, feather boa, asphalt tar.
Figure 22. Coorain, Young Turkey (Broad Breasted White, Slaughtered at 4-5 Months), 2019, 60” x 40”.
Figure 23. Coorain, *Nabisco Premium Saltine Quilt*, 2019-2020, archival inkjet print on cotton sateen, cotton fabric, polyester batting, thread. 10.5’x11.5’
Figure 24. Coorain, *ToVCQ*, 2019, found quilt, vinyl, artificial flowers, thread.
Figure 25. Coorain, Step 4. Apply Antibiotics, 2020, archival inkjet print in artist’s frame (frame not pictured), 60” x 40”.
Appendix B: The Food Bank

Figure 26. Coorain Food Bank, 2020, cast concrete and pawpaw trees.
Figure 27. Coorain Food Bank, 2020, cast concrete and pawpaw trees.
Figure 28 Coorain Food Bank, detail, 2020, cast concrete and pawpaw trees.