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Negotiating Documentary Space

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Negotiating Documentary Space

by

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Report

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Abstract

Negotiating Documentary Space

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This essay attempts to propose an art practice based on an ethical and aesthetic relation of author, subject, and viewer. This relationship is productive of results that are seen as critical to a precise, useful, and ethical representation of social problems.

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BEGINNINGS

I'm drawn to problems. I dislike unsatisfying work. I find it satisfying to look into work-related problems. I am happy to contribute in any small way to individuals contending dissatisfaction.

Perhaps my blue-collar upbringing explains my interest in this subject. My father, a maintenance man, was crippled based on his professional relation to machinery. Perhaps I unwittingly absorbed this trauma into my person. I studied Industrial Design, in part, based on the agency and safety I felt it gave to workers. However, I was to realize that the discipline, in reality, is less focused on problems of ethical dimensions then I had hoped. My work internships focused on gimmicks and marketing. I could not imagine working as my professors worked. I was dissatisfied with what I had seen, and ill equipped to deal with the impersonal corporate environment that loomed in the not-so-distant future. Still, I learned the value of problem solving, design methodology, collaboration, and modularity[1]. I was specifically interested in the idea that video could be used to observe and analyze work-related problems, and potentially perform a service for a worker in risk of harm. These factors led me to believe that documentary video had a utilitarian function that corresponded with my interests and training[2]. Moreover, as a long-term response to my blue-collar upbringing and my father's injury, I saw an opportunity to take my personal experience and establish this experience in the political

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[1] Industrial Design has its end-user. To the Designer, this person is (ideally) the limit and marker of practice. In order to design work gloves, a designer would analyze the way in which the worker works. Observation and discussion with the worker are critical to an understanding of problems and needs. In this way, the Industrial Designer negotiates between the person and the environment. I approach video making with this very idea.

[2] By utility, I mean that the video can function as a tool for the viewer. Foucault speaks of his books as "tools," and I take this meaning to rest upon an active reader. I wish to invoke a similar concept. See "Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972 – 1977." (Foucault 143)

sphere. I wanted to make work that was not instantly reified by the context of its production[3]. I saw a definite connection between my dissatisfaction with Industrial Design as a profession and the role of the designer as producer of commodities. I felt that a glimmer of spontaneity lay in documentary video, and that I wished to grasp at it.

> "…a documentary and its thesis is dictated by events as they unfold in the present and in front of the camera." (Bruzzi 103)

I saw openings in the documentary form for a gest that defied reification[4]. The domain of documentary video, specifically Direct Cinema, contains a toolset with limits overlapping those of Industrial Design. Direct Cinema involves negotiations between the video-maker, subject, and environment[5]. In fact, this relationship constitutes a problem in and of itself, a sort of puzzle that provides endless satisfaction. Moreover, by rooting itself in a subject matter, Direct Cinema puts a greater force on the viewer's relation to

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[3] There is something called the "surprise-delight" factor in Industrial Design parlance. This term describes the immediate response a user has when they first encounter a product. I see a distinct relation between the spontaneous gesture of a design-idea and the implementation of that gesture in product-form. This factor can be used as a measure to push back against the reification of a mass-produced product, and can have a similar effect when applied to digital video.

[4] "It is Brecht who created the notion of gest, making it the essence of theatre, irreducible to the plot or 'subject': for him, the gest could be social, although he recognizes that there are other kinds of gest. What we call gest in general is the link or knot of attitudes between themselves, their co-ordination with each other, in so far as they do not depend on a previous story, a pre-existing plot or an action-image. On the contrary, the gest is the development of attitudes themselves, and, as such, carries out a direct theatricaliztation of bodies, often very discreet, because it takes place independently of any role." (Deluze 192)

[5] These relationships are not necessarily recognized by the founders of Direct Cinema. The basic tenants of Direct Cinema can be summarized as follows: "The films of Drew, Leacock, Pennebaker, the Maysles brothers and Wiseman focused on the individual, the everyday, the contemporary; they attempted to keep authorial intervention to a minimum by adopting a more casual, observational style that had as its premise the desire to follow action rather than dictate it, to see and record what happened to evolve in front of the cameras." (Bruzzi 68) Nevertheless, the spontaneity of "following the action" lays the groundwork for elaborating upon these relationships.

the subject[6]. Finally, the observation-based methods of Direct Cinema can be applied to the problem-oriented and body-focused issues revolving around my personal interest in labor.

I made a number of videos over the course of three years that corresponded to my own desire for social justice, labor analysis, and body focus. These videos relied on a variety of strategies, but the constant factor was myself in conversation and negotiation with the subjects of each respective video. I was interested in the relation of the individual to a larger social context, much as I had been as an Industrial Designer. I was interested in how the individual might get "satisfaction" in speaking their mind to the camera[7]. I was interested in the potential of documentary video to take my personal ethical views into a political arena[8]. Finally, I was drawn to the spontaneity of the method and the opportunity it gave me to interact with strangers, to discuss their work and their problems.

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[6] "The filmmaker's retirement to the position of observer calls on the viewer to take a more active role in determining the significance of what is said and done." (Nichols 174)

[7] See "Exile," a video I made in 2007: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bP3dDTPOJzA

[8] See "Interrupt the Pipeline," a video I made in 2008 that was used a tool in an online peer-to-peer mentoring program: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QXsrsCk7HRo&feature=channel&list=UL

STRANGERS

Krzystof Wodiczko speaks of "No-Place," a site made mutually strange - where strangers can meet on equal terms[9]. The moment of the meeting of strangers is a central premise of Direct Cinema, a moment of many possibilities. Although their claims of scientific observation have long been disputed, the basic premise maintains its force:

> "…(the) starting point is the accidental meeting of so many direct cinema films – the chance encounter, the unexpected revelation, the ongoing dialogue with a set of events that are still in the process of unfolding." (Bruzzi 103)

This idea is both a contradiction and an effective device. Documentary film often assumes narratological continuity, which is also a device. Events are chopped, rearranged, and edited with utmost selectivity. All these fragments need a structure to convey continuity and immediacy – thereby promoting the idea of truthfulness. There are, therefore, ulterior motives hidden in a seemingly impartial form. The "stitching" together of documentary fragments in a purposeful way is created in Direct Cinema through the structure of the journey film[10] and through the driving notion of the meeting of strangers. However, the author remains strange to his subject, supposing that through this

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[9] "To survive, the immigrant must establish a utopia, a "no-place" that is located in the present time, not hidden behind the horizon of some idealized future." (Wodiczko 7)

[10] "The term 'journey,' applied to documentary, is either a very concrete term or a deeply nebulous one. In his chapter entitled 'Chrono-logic' Brian Winston argues that 'journey films solved actuality's big narrative problem – closure. How should films finish? Obviously, a journey film ends with the end of the journey' (Winston 1995: 104). Winston links journeys exclusively to time, observant that the journey through time has commonly been used as a means of creating logic ('chrono-logic') out of potentially shambolic or unrelated events; thus he categorizes city films such as *Berlin: Symphony of a City* and *Man with a Movie Camera*, as journeys because they construct a narrative around the passage of time, usually the passing of a single day. This 'became documentary's preferred way of capturing the urban experience' (Winston 1995: 104), a means of making potentially incoherent images and events cohere within the panoply of the 'city film.' (Bruzzi 100)

strangeness he might obtain some scientific legitimation. He is, however, both a fly on the wall and the elephant in the room. These fundamental problems for Direct Cinema were problems that I could not easily resolve. I was not satisfied with how this and other documentary modes represented my subject. How could I document, and then author the present moment in such a way that the structure was not some reified figure of speech, over-worn to the point of obscurity?

I found it necessary, therefore, to examine documentary video making from the perspective of video art. It is in this way that my exploration delves into the problems related to the visual and historical representation of a human subject, and attempts to negotiate a relationship between this subject, the subjectivizing context, and the subjectivizing authorship.

NEGOTIATIONS AND MONTAGE

"A liberated mankind would by no means be a totality (Jay 266)."

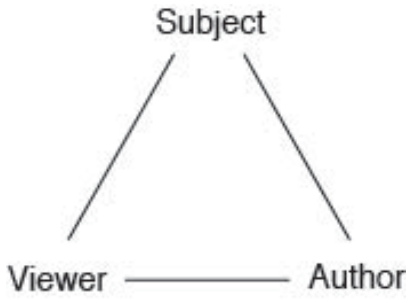
Therefore, if our end goal is liberation of one sort or another, any representation of a "class" or otherwise must include, "built within" as it were, representations of the negotiations which arrange and order the typology.

I would like to give an example of a failure in typological representation along the lines of which I am alluding. A day-labor site near my home was subjected to the journalism of a Spanish-language newspaper. The published photo not only scrambled the names of those represented, it inaccurately "labeled" each person, one of whom was not, as claimed, a "patron" looking for workers, but rather a friend who had pulled up in his truck for the sake of conversation. The site was used to "hang out," smoke weed, play soccer, or perhaps all three at once. Quite a few people seemed more interested in one of these three activities more so than in finding work, no doubt due to the work shortage, low pay, and relative danger of the available work.

The reporter was neither careless nor inaccurate. She had an objective and a preconceived subject. The misfortune arises from her totalizing task, which defined the nature of her representation beforehand. She was not liable to negotiate for her representations. I argue that it is in this way that even the best-meaning documentarian can be exploitative of his or her subject. The subject may run the risk of appearing before author and viewer as a victim stripped of agency. This sort of representation can result in a politically charged but disempowering statement (such as Edward R. Murrow's "Harvest of Shame"). There are thus consequences stemming from a documentary

method that does not push for the sovereignty of its subject. How is the subject supported?

A simple way of using representational strategies to advance an idea of social reality might include a built-in map of the negotiation between active parties:



This triad can be rotated and rearranged in various ways. It may contain an author who is also the subject (such as in Ross McElwee's films) or a subject that is the medium itself (Alfredo Jaar's "The Sound of Silence). Although it is nothing new for artists to use reflexive devices to question the truthfulness of the documentary method, I have attempted to use spatial devices, which may be slightly more unusual – and, I hope, a formal and conceptual innovation. I must give credit to Prof. Bogdan Perzynski for his idea of "Spatial Montage," which I hope to elaborate upon. The structure itself, I argue, should be in service to the subject and not the narrative.

DONA IRMA

Figure 1 (Doña Irma in her kitchen)

I shot this piece during the first week of my return to Nicaragua, nearly a year before editing took place. Irma works every day of the year, making tortillas by hand. There are women doing this in practically every block of Léon. I lived a few houses away, and would come to Irma's home each morning. Struck by the look of her house, the smoke wafting up from the wood fire through the roof-beams, pierced by shafts of light, I asked if I could shoot. What seemed at first as a cathedral housing the unceasing labor of this woman, came to seem, as I returned again and again, more of a tomb. Irma works long hours, whether sick or well, on her feet long before daybreak - and the pittance she earns seems unjust compensation. Initially, I was motivated more by this

sentiment than by a desire to analyze the historical or economic context. However, I include this short film to show beginnings of a four emergent concepts in my practice.

- video as task-analysis (watching the flow of the human subject at work)
- reflexively stress the authorship and power dynamics of video
- observe the encounter between strangers: author and subject
- resolve symbols versus dynamics: the idea of the cathedral and the tomb as symbols of ideals and realities of work is subordinated to direct manipulation of audio and video-loop

The video has a narrative structure that seems at first to be observational. There is cinematographic emphasis on the motion of Irma's labor. Then, the viewer is suddenly confronted with an image of Irma's face (figure 1); several seconds of this shot is looped again and again to the pat-pat sound of tortilla making. Doña Irma has suddenly become Queen of the kitchen, confronting the viewer who was hitherto "observing" her.

The interesting discoveries for me were that covert manipulation of footage points out ethical problems, and the observational montage and narrative structure can be done away with and replaced by fixed images or loops. I wanted the looped shot of Irma as she confronts the camera to not only mark the project as a form of portraiture; I wanted to also identify authorship and editing, and thereby divide the video into two components: the environment (described through observational montage), and the individual (depicted with portraiture). These ideas will, again, provide a basis for later work.

EL FORTIN

Figure 2 (Don Pedro at the dumpsite)

"Nicaraguan literature is more interesting than Costa Rican literature because of the social problems they have there. All they have to do is write." (Henry, Costa Rican academic)

When I encountered subsistence scavenging at an open dump for the first time, I realized that a video could literally emerge from my being there and shooting footage. The first maxim of Direct Cinema seemingly had agency. I felt that the context of the dump, which was at the same time a historic fortress, could serve as a window into

Nicaragua's history of dictatorship and thirty years of American-sponsored civil war (namely, the revolutionary conflict and the Contra War).

However, as I began to video record, I additionally realized that I had to be more than present as a passive observer. Similarly, the editing process resulted in constant shifts in strategy. While discussing several versions of the project with colleagues and professors, I was confronted by a number of questions:

- Where are you (the author) in the video?
- Are the stories you tell us more interesting than the video itself?
- Do you have a good understanding of the situation that you attempt to describe?
- Is documentary video-making art?
- How can you connect your viewers to a foreign subject?
- Where is there precision in your process?

I was not able to immediately answer any of these questions. What I did find was that my viewers were largely confused and I had to verbally cover the historical context that they were not aware of. What I thought I could present as a series of fragments, in a removed Direct Cinema manner, was in reality unclear to my viewers. Not only did my message about Nicaraguan history fail in transmission, in general the footage seemed to be too foreign and shocking to interest the viewer, not so different, perhaps, as images of poverty they were used to seeing on the evening news.

These problems had several sources. For one, my viewership had by and large little to no knowledge of recent Nicaraguan history (i.e. the revolutionary and Contra War periods). Two, the video involved a number juxtapositions which were not explicit. Although I was attempting to render my own dismay and confusion through fragmented

footage, the result was unclear. I needed clear devices to pull the viewer in, so that the piece was not rejected, and was forced to link up the fragments in a more coherent way. I began the lengthy process of building myself into the video. I choose a reflexive strategy, along with a conventional narrative structure. In effect, this was a move from the Observational mode of Direct Cinema to a mixture of Expository[11], Participatory[12], and Reflexive[13] modes of documentary. Direct Cinema, despite the strengths is has in "leaving an opening" for the viewer, is a mode which lacks the tools of direct address and historicization[14].

El Fortín visually represents Nicaraguan scavengers, many indigenous. They are enterprising workers, but their work is grueling and dangerous, and the product of war and economic hardship (this hardship, I argue, is an American export). The scars of war must be relatively permanent, even greater the scars of a civil war, the flames fanned by foreign interests.

Economic exploitation, personal gain and exploitation of poverty are immediate accusations one must seriously confront with such subject matter. To say that I cannot speak from another's subject-position is one thing; to say that I cannot empathize with the

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[11] "This mode assembles fragments of the historical world into a more rhetorical frame than an aesthetic or poetic one…The expository mode addresses the viewer directly, with titles or voices that propose a perspective or advance an argument." (Nichols 167)

[12] "…the filmmaker does interact with his or her subjects rather than unobtrusively observe them. Questions grow into interviews or conversations; involvement grows into a pattern of collaboration or confrontation. What happens in front of the camera becomes an index of the nature of the interaction between filmmaker and subject." (Nichols 179)

[13] "Rather than following the filmmaker in his or her engagement with other social actors, we now attend to the filmmaker's engagement with us, speaking not only about the historical world but about the problems and issues of representing it as well. This intensified level of reflection on what representing the world involves distinguishes the reflexive mode from the other modes." (Nichols 194)

[14] "The bourgeois theatre emphasized the timelessness of its objects. Its representation of people is bound by the alleged 'eternally human'. Its story is arranged in such a way as to create 'universal' situations that allow Man with a capital M to express himself: man of every period and every color. All its incidents are just one enormous cue, and this cue is followed by the 'eternal' response: the inevitable, usual, and natural, purely human response." (Brecht 96 – 97)

state of another subject is a claim I find problematic. One can, or even must speak of the pain of others. We cannot choose silence. Especially when we (North Americans) are implicated so problematically in Central American politics….

So, how am I as a foreigner to speak to Nicaraguan politics, history, and economics? With what right? With the right of the honest mistake! I was periodically "made a fool of" but usually in a perfectly congenial way. In Nicaragua, as elsewhere, it gives others satisfaction when one is the jester, or when others can "dote," and this can be the beginning of a constructive exchange. A more of a painful association throughout the process involved two factors: my relative powerlessness (I attempted to solicit aid through civic and foreign channels with varying degrees of success) and my own "strangeness." This, I repeat, was an asset but also a curse.

Raúl Ruiz[15] points at the (privileged) ease with which a foreigner might make a documentary film in a "third world country." This factor can make for very bad filmmaking, as the subject may very well just give you what you want…wherein the filmmaker assumes to document; wherein the subject plays the clown, wherein the filmmaker unwittingly acts the clown…instead of enacting what might better approach historical accuracy. For me, I wished to represent the outcome of American Imperialist intervention in Nicaragua. I was able to arrive at visual and historical representations, finally, by visually representing myself as a sort of "ugly American" who has the best of intentions. My viewing public would be from the United States, therefore I hoped that through my performative presence, they might identify with (and recognize) their relation

[15] See Raúl Ruiz and his film "De grands événements et des gens ordinaires"

to the Nicaraguan people; that they might begin to understand the problematic of this relationship. Performing this role was key to communicating this problematic.

Figure 3 (Don Pedro and family with new roof)

Still, I found that the process of negotiation was not complete. I had seen to the needs of the viewer, but not to those of the subject itself. The subject, in other words, was not "satisfied," and the "conversation" was incomplete. I used the video as a fundraising tool, and managed to raise enough money to return and pursue roofing and transportation projects (figure 3 shows Don Pedro and his family in front of his newly roofed home). I saw the roofing material not as a gift, but a part of the "negotiation" process. Don Pedro had assisted me with video work, and deserved payment for services rendered. This was not underwritten by a commercial contract, but instead through tacit agreement - or at the very least, a hope of reciprocation. Don Pedro's community, in turn, responded to my

response by throwing a party for me replete with a dinner procured at the expense of all in attendance (Figure 4).

Figure 4 (Party thrown by the community to commemorate the roofing project)

I would now like to turn from politics and ethics to formal, practical, and narratological issues. Shooting the initial scenes was relatively simple. The narrative structure is mostly artificial. I decided to use older footage from a previous Central American journey, and in addition capture new scenes to give the narrative comprehensible logic. Several of the "added scenes" involve me reflexively, literally showing myself in the editing room, and market scenes when it became evident that only Julio Pachinga would be able to act as a "secondary protagonist" (myself being a first-

person protagonist). The film becomes a "journey film," and as often is the case in journey films, the narrator is also the author.

> "The quest, whether or not it is related to an actual journey, is a pervasive documentary impulse; the dilemma, though, has been how to give structure to that dangerously unstructured instinct." (Bruzzi 101)

So, the journey film is a formal structure with baggage and assumptions of Direct Cinema. I will address these "baggage" problems throughout the course of the essay. Suffice it to say that I attempted to piece together over 35 hours of footage very much along these lines (those of the "journey film"), but it was important to keep the original idea of El Fortín – that of the site standing as both a historical symbol and an actual space, an open dump. This problem, of depicting a space and its subjects within a narrative of conflict, has been the basic problem that I have grappled with these past several years.

THE WORKING HOMELESS: (http://vimeo.com/29397025)

Figure 5 (Panel discussion with author, subjects, and academics)

I made a number of decisions with this project without considering beforehand how they would affect the outcome of the work. As a result, my research frameworks were quite distinct from the formal devices that ended up in the piece. This was due to the gallery-space, a context that I had not previously designed work for.

The research itself was supposedly to go along the following line of thought: homelessness is a position with its own class of labor – panhandling. The installation "Working Homeless" was to present the viewer with this idea. However, the project became very entangled in deciding on a type of rhetoric. The problems were part and parcel of the overriding question: how does a documentary video become installation art in a gallery space? This question was to help me better understand the underpinning

structures of documentary video, and allowed the opportunity of questioning several of these structures.

"The Working Homeless" retained a core narrative structure: (i) a dual-channel video and (ii) a sculptural installation (figure 6 - 9). This narrative structure was in part determined by the research methods. Interviews with twelve individuals were loosely organized by prompts about economic, social, and psychological problems related to panhandling. The narrative addresses these respective topics, and consists of brief intercut statements by six individuals.

Several decisions were made in the presentation of these interviews. First, they retain the basic format of an interview – and are comprised of a standardized close-up/medium shot. This visually frames the speaking subject, but limits the environment. Second, image-contrast is dramatically increased resulting in a rugged, graphic character. This image-degradation was to allow a bump up in contrast, both to avoid excessive naturalism and to evoke the harshness of the environment. Third, the subject's voice is periodically interrupted by loud traffic noises. Fourth, a set of subtitles is projected onto a piece of cardboard set in front of the subject (figures 8, 9). This allows the viewer to read what has been drowned out by traffic. It additionally gives the piece a visual "hook," whereby, if we are to follow Pierce's rules, we achieve first off "impact" before exploring the subject matter itself[16]. The cardboard sign is the universal "nametag" or signifier for "panhandler." Fifth, I used upturned milk crates to situate the projectors; these are objects commonly used to sit on and panhandle.

[16] "Firstness is the mode of being that which is such as it is, positively and without reference to anything else." (Perice, 383)

Figure 6 ("The Working Homeless" installation documentation)

Figure 7 ("The Working Homeless" installation documentation)

Figure 8 ("The Working Homeless" installation documentation)

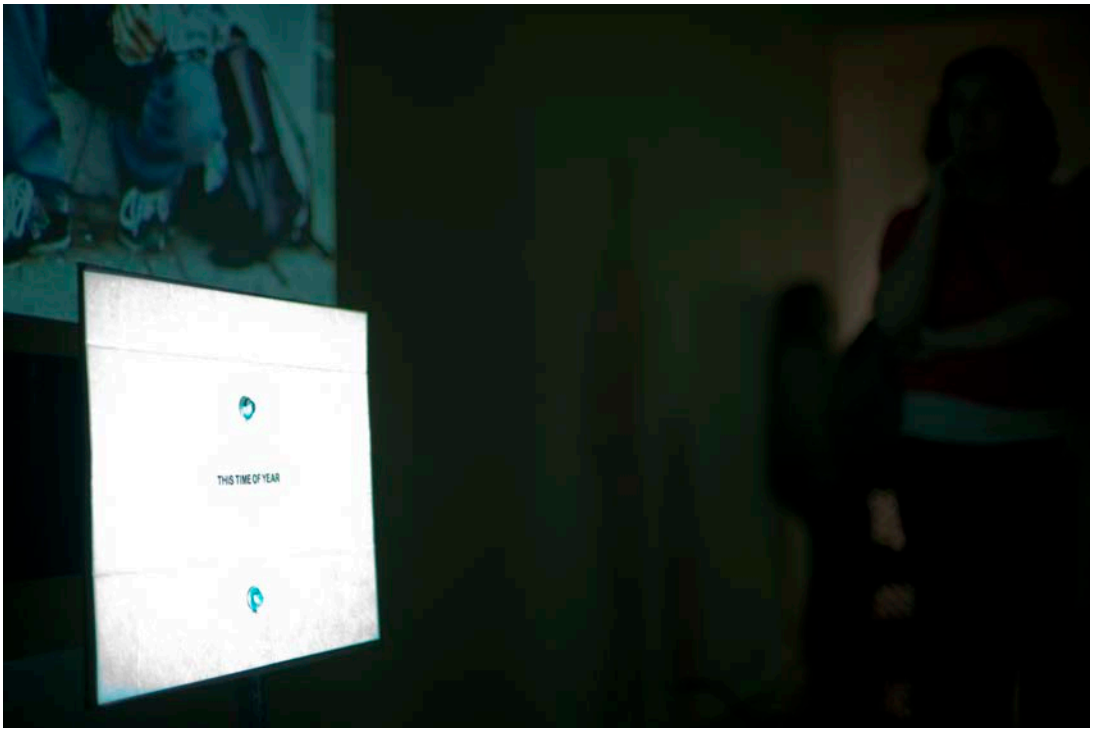

Figure 9 ("The Working Homeless" installation documentation)

These decisions can be summarized in the following way: the environment to which a panhandler is subject is referred to in partial terms; parts are present (the sound, some objects) but no attempt is made to "re-create" the environment itself. The parts remain discrete (which hopefully clarifies function). Finally, this dual-channel sculptural video installation was situated in relation to the remaining sculptures in such a way that the gallery space itself becomes a sort of "road" through which the viewer passes – and watches – the video (figure 7).

The project was publically shown at the Visual Arts Center, and encountered a viewership in this way. However, the dynamic between the viewer, subject, and author was not fully in situ. In a sense, I had even taken steps to alienate the viewer, as well as the subject, through the use of audio. For the show opening, I arranged with the gallery to stage a panel discussion. Several new dynamics emerged from this event. Not only did the viewership gain immediate reciprocation with the subject, a point was made about the relation of the subject to the nature of their "subjectivity": a panel of academics was invited to attend the event, and I ended up with these panelists on my left, and the subjects on the right (figure 5). The viewers, directly in front, could observe and interact with the tautological framework of the piece; contradictions and validations could emerge. In other words, whereas the installation attempted to use gallery space as a means of emphasizing the distance of the viewer from the subject (that is to say, the "strangers"), the panel discussion became more of a stage with the struggle between experts of subjectivizing knowledge and the subjects themselves. The burden of alienation was taken off the viewer. In its place, an emotional tone was struck between subjects, author and viewer, quite the opposite flavor of what the video installation

projected. The tone was one of celebration, interaction, discourse, and pure emotion (things began with Scott bursting into tears). I was, in these ways, more satisfied with the panel discussion more than with the installation itself.

Figure 10 ("Working Homeless" still image from KXAN news report)

The piece took a final turn when the local TV station KXAN covered the show; the subjects were at this point able to see their televised image; they were even recognized by friends and employees in the stores they frequented. There was at this point total reciprocation between subject as participant and subject as viewer. The TV coverage occurred in the gallery space as well, however, with the subjects absent form the site of the interview. The author (myself) was made subject to KXAN's platform (sympathetic to the idea of the "homeless plight") and therefore not only could subject become viewer, the author could become subject. This was a subjectivity out of my

control in a different sense – although I invited KXAN to come to the panel discussion, they chose to video capture the installation itself. This bypassed the dynamic of the panel discussion, and perhaps simplified their task of packaging the news story for a two-minute time bracket.

I see the installation, panel discussion, and news report as iterations on the theme of author-subject-viewer relations. My next project was to focus on rotating these relations in a similar fashion. I was once more interested in representing a subject who would also be viewer.

PROYECTO TESTIMONIO: (http://www.workersdefense.org/testimonio/)

Figure 11 ("Proyecto Testimonio" HD still image)

"Proyecto Testimonio" came about as the result of a broader body of work dealing with day labor, and a long collaboration with a local immigrant rights organization. The organization, called the Workers Defense Project, is comprised of professional activists, volunteers, and a working-class Hispanic membership base. I was working on another project dealing with immigrant labor, and wanted to be involved in a parallel project that would have immediate political efficacy. I was to realize that this would also mean diminishing my own role as author. I teamed up with a board member of the Workers Defense Project, and this relationship was to dominate the outcome of the project. I was asked to submit a detailed plan of the concept and aesthetics. I was discouraged from engaging in a meta-critique of the videos. The resulting product was therefore devoid of representational experimentation or reflexive representation, and the

visual representations of the subjects became little more than "figures of speech," reified documentary language.

"Proyecto Testimonio" consists of online video portraits of six active organization members. "Proyecto Testimonio" was designed to invite a prospective member into the organization and to serve a fundraising function. The main idea here involves seating each member on the front stoop (or some other personal site), and uses a combination of close-ups (fig. 13) and wide-shots (fig. 12) to establish environment, facial expressions, and objects around the home (fig. 11). The format is thus basically cinematic, and the camera work seeks to establish a closer link between viewer and subject.

The interviewee is shown in a frontal, staged position. The consistent cutting between close-up and wide shot should continuously remind the viewer of the "stoop," as both a context and a point of entry. However, we never come close enough to the world of trauma that each member must have experienced. Instead, exploitation is treated as a "call for action" to join the organization. However, it is this quality of the visual representations of the subjects that has an indexing function, which reifies the nature of their subjectivity.

The Workers Defense Project was satisfied with the videos, and I felt as though I was successful in forging a link between art, video production, activism, and PR. However, I was negligent in speaking to my community of fellow artists. In subordinating my will to that of the organization, I produced a reified work. The subject becomes viewer, but the subject wears a mask, becomes a "figure of speech" in service of the organization. My notion of "contributing to individuals contending dissatisfaction" encounters a major paradox – should individuals subordinate their satisfaction for the

greater good? I feel dissatisfied that the project was not able to escape the command of the administrative structure, but I am satisfied with the utility of this subordination and the reciprocal relation between author and subject.

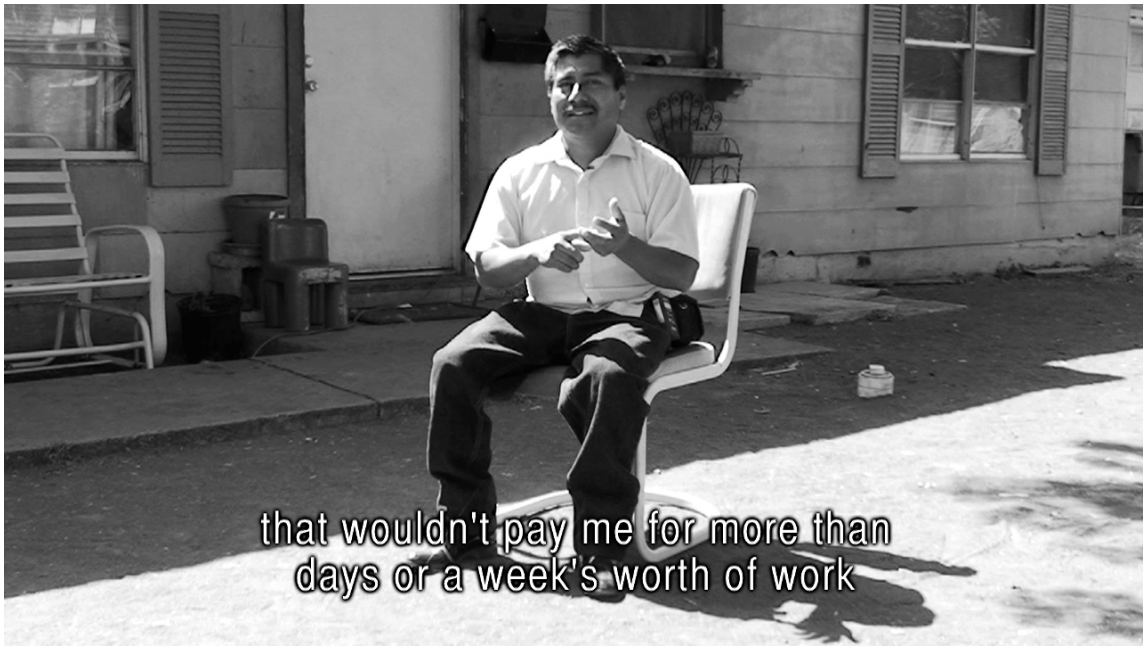

Figure 12 ("Proyecto Testimonio" HD still image)

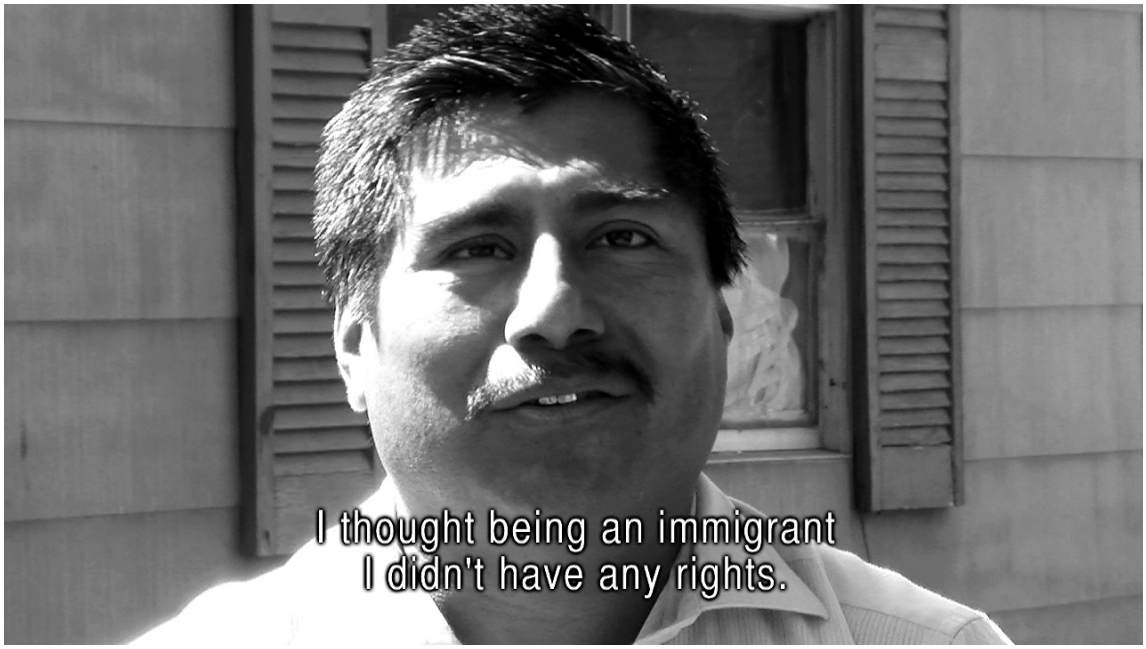

Figure 13 ("Proyecto Testimonio" HD still image)

DAY LABOR: (http://vimeo.com/37843837)

Figure 14 ("Day Labor" HD still image)

"Day Labor" does not arrive at this moment of reciprocity[17] until its end. The piece deals with space in a decidedly more emphatic manner, and is the first instance where I attempt to enact the idea of "spatial montage" as a response to documentary problems. The initial minutes of the piece represent the subjects waiting in their respective day-labor sites – individuals, in competition with one another, laboring by waiting. One worker commented to me that it was harder work to wait without finding a job than it was to be physically at work. In "Day Labor," each worker is paid to wait for the author – and the viewer. We see a series of movements from total alienation and spatial disconnect to more specific, factual statements by the subjects. The final scene

[17] "…a cinema of sovereignty should be based on the principle of reciprocity…some have even hoped to become mere instruments of their subject's will, thereby "facilitating their objectives in representing themselves"…oftentimes, a patronizing element still undergirds this well intentioned exchange, because the western image-maker must instruct the Native subject in the pitfalls of the medium…What is lacking…is instruction in the other direction – the establishment of a reciprocal relationship in which the photographer or filmmaker learns from the subject." (Lewis 191)

shows the subject viewing his own visual representation and responding to it. This piece deals with space in a decidedly more emphatic manner. It literally consists of a series of "pseudo-environments," which roughly appear to connect but are obviously fragmented. The multiple channels serve as a means of conveying fragmentation and at the same time serve an organizational function. The spaces are akin to architectural "niches," reminiscent of the proportions of a 4x8 sheet of drywall. Differentiating the space, I argue, gives the documentary video-maker the asset of dispensing with narrative structures and the opportunity to explore formal and conceptual structures. Author-subject relations in the piece should reflect a division of labor and subjugation that parallels the actual employer/employee division.

DAY LABOR: ST. JOHNS

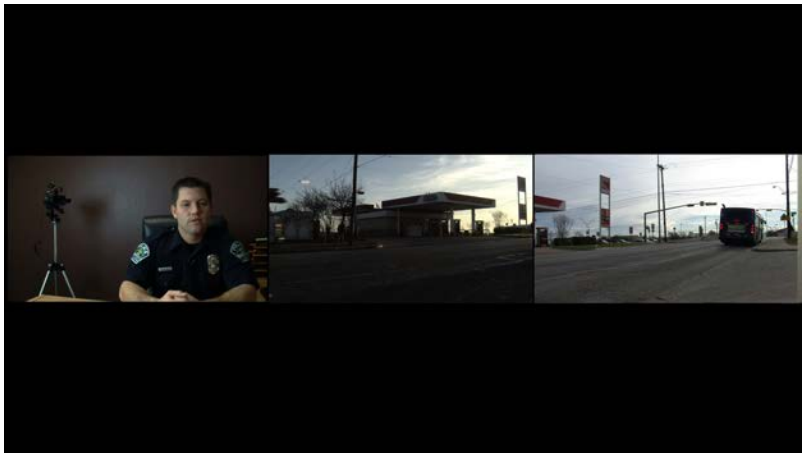

Figure 15 ("Day Labor: St. Johns" HD still image)

Figure 16 ("Day Labor: St. Johns" HD still image)

Figure 17 ("Day Labor: St. Johns" HD still image)

This piece is a continuation of the same body of work, but deals less with the power dynamics between author and subject, more with the dynamics of various parties in a contest over rights to a site – that of a gas station on St. Johns in North Austin. The idea for the piece originated by a vexing question about the previous work ("Day Labor"). I was attempting to investigate the exploitation of workers by their employers, but had difficulty articulating the extent to which I was mediating between parties. I was forced to focus on my own relation to the subject; my investigation produced a division of labor and subjugation that paralleled the employer/employee division.

I was doing little to solve the problems that I recorded, and less to mediate between the exploiter and the exploited. I decided to spend more time with the specific site and the power dynamics in play. I designed the piece for the viewer, who would play the role of a sort of judicator while each "player" presented his case. Owner (figure 17), Police (figure 15), and Worker (figure 16) contend for the opportunity to express their point of view, and in so doing, they occupy part of the "site" under contestation: the gas station on St. Johns, which doubles as an unofficial day labor pick-up spot. Each party occupies a distinct panel of the triptych; the remaining panels are occupied by a panorama of the gas station. This creates a second conflict, this time on a formal level, between the individual and the environment. "Day Labor: St. Johns" does not manage to mediate between parties, but does attempt to demand an active role on the part of the viewer.

UNDER CONSTRUCTION

Figure 18 ("Under Construction" HD video performance documentation)

This piece attempts to tie up several loose ends in the body of work at hand. I began to investigate public space as an important factor in documenting existing conflict, and explored various ways to give to the space coherent meaning. I attempted various ways of developing a reciprocal relation between the subject and myself, including a reversal of subject and viewer ("Proyecto Testimonio"), relation of site to conflicting parties ("Day Labor: St. Johns"), subjugation between author and subject ("Day Labor"). These projects also mean to explore distinctions between work-environment (the space) and the worker (the subject) and attempt to use spatial devices to represent these distinctions. I believe that division of class and alienation of labor need clear conceptual devices in order to avoid confused visual representation, or to fall into reifying symbolic representation (i.e. "figures of speech"). I have attempted to avoid tropes of documentary video and the narrative devices that single channel video often depend upon. "Under

Construction" attempts one step further. It divides interviews into near and mid-shots (fig. 19, 20 - which identify subject and subject-in-environment), and divides visual representation into two sorts of shots: the "interview" (fig. 19, 20) with subject facing forward, and the "b-roll" (fig. 20) with subject (myself, performing the role of the laborer) facing away from the viewer. "Interview" is a mode reserved for administrators, while "b-roll" is a mode reserved for artists and laborers. "Under Construction" attempts to visually and physically represent the labor involved in the construction of the site – and the piece itself. Labor, exhibition, representation, and site converge amidst a narrative of administrative command. The piece attempts to further connect the labor of the site with the physical site by drawing attention to its critical and actual deconstruction: a worker (in this case, myself i.e. the author) removes a piece of drywall, thereby "hanging" the piece and disrupting the image in the process (figures 19, 20).

Figure 19 ("Under Construction" HD video performance documentation)

Figure 20 ("Under Construction" HD video performance documentation)

As in "Proyecto Testimonio," "Under Construction" uses two cameras to depict a close-up and wide-shot. The close-up shot towers over the worker/author, whereas the wide-shot begins to approach the worker/author's body size. This amounts to a shifting visual hierarchy. As various administrators speak of their relation to labor and the "chain-of-command," they literally become smaller (i.e. their position within the hierarchy shifts). Their endless discourse about planning and command is alternatively interrupted or enacted by the worker, who faces them (and works with his back to the viewer). The worker speaks through his actions. His only communication is through the deconstruction of a section of the gallery space planned by these administrators. Does he damage or complete the representation before him? The answer to this unresolved question confronts the viewer, who actually occupies the physical site. Viewer and worker gaze into a narrative woven by the administration, and must decide whether the topic of the interview – the idea of chain-of-command - is one that actually delivers any satisfaction.

ENDINGS

Every journey must come to an end; documentary footage must undergo the re-inscription of a structure that is secondary to the nature of the primary footage[18]. This re-inscription is either "genuine" or "degenerate" (i.e. reified), and the nature of the structure will signify to the viewer the nature of its relation to the subject. My review of these very structures was born out of my personal cultural context and my education in Industrial Design. I discovered the affinity between my personal and professional problems and the basic subject of Direct Cinema. The idea of the "meeting of strangers" was intriguing and satisfying enough a problem to propel me towards a new profession altogether. It's corresponding structure - that of the "journey film" - satisfied my thirst to explore work-related problems, and moreover provided a non-reified structure for these explorations. However, I was to find new problems first in my relation to the subject, and second in my relation to the viewer. These problems amounted to a new reification, that of the documentary form itself, such that the subject became a "figure of speech" and the form no longer served the subject. I applied the basic principles of the Expository and Reflexive modes of documentary production to subsequent projects (such as "El Fortín"), but found shortcomings in these approaches. One solution to this problem consisted of the idea of reciprocation, where the terms of the video capturing were no longer entirely in the author's hands, but were instead contingent upon an exchange of ideas and services from the hands of the subject to those of the author. However, I found this process to be

[18] Again, Peirce offers a helpful idea: "The impression of stillness was an idea of Firstness, a quality of feeling. The piercing whistle does not allow you to think or do anything but suffer. So that too is absolutely simple. Another Firstness. But the breaking of the silence by the noise was an experience. The person in his inertness identifies himself with the precedent state of feeling, and the new feeling which comes in spite of him is the non-ego. He has a two-sided consciousness of an ego and a non-ego. That consciousness of the action of a new feeling in destroying the old feeling is what I call *experience*. Experience generally is what the course of life has compelled me to think. Secondness is either genuine or degenerate. (Peirce 385)

very complex, and sometimes, as in the instance of "Proyecto Testimonio," my product was reified by *through* the reciprocation. I therefore developed new techniques based on the notion of "spatial montage," and, using the parameters of the "white cube," attempted to satisfy the needs of subject, author, and viewer all at once, and with simple forms and arrangements. I hope that "Day Labor" and "Day Labor: St. John's" clarify the author-subject-viewer relationship. Subsequent works, such as "Under Construction," will likely have to address the context of viewership (i.e. the site of presentation - or "white cube") and will attempt to critique this context and the terms of production that govern its existence. They will also need to employ a more conscious visual language, such as that of a "visual hierarchy," in order to clarify the subject's work-related problem.

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