

MY TITLES ARE ALWAYS IN PENCIL:
PROJECTS IN THE ABSURD

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ABSTRACT

MY TITLES ARE ALWAYS IN PENCIL: PROJECTS IN THE ABSURD

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The Absurd, in terms of existentialist philosophy, is born out of the conflict between the human tendency to seek inherent value and meaning in life and the inability to find any (Absurdism). Through my work, I examine the conflict of the individual's role and search for the state of freedom in which Absurdism leaves us. This is not to question the necessity or aim of society for the common good but examines the social roles that are imposed on individuals within a given society.

Absurdism describes how we, as humans, desire order, purpose and meaning in life. As a result, we are left unsatisfied by what Camus calls the "silence of the world (Camus 20)," and its unwillingness to unquestionably provide us with such answers. With no meaning to our lives, there seems no point in living. Yet, suicide is also meaningless. This brings us to a position of existence where we are left living our lives with no meaning. An acceptance of this meaningless state of being alive is supposed to leave us living in total freedom. (Camus 20)

In our social positions, the stage is set for us to play a perceived intended role. In the universal pursuit of meaning and happiness, we find ourselves together on this stage in which we must ask ourselves if we can find truth in the role we are playing.

According to Jacques Rancière in *The Emancipated Spectator*, the stage desires to be a “magnifying mirror where spectators see the virtues and vices of their fellow human beings in fictional form” and its purpose is “to prompt specific changes in their minds” by producing “the dual effect of intellectual recognition and appropriate emotion.” The critique of this goal manifesting through the stage lies within the passivity of spectators versus the role of actors who are knowingly performing. Rancière poses the alternative and better solution is a pensive (“full of thoughts”) image. An image exists as such when it refuses to give a finite answer because it never ceases to pose relevant questions thus always inhabiting a contemporary conversation. (Rancière 62 – 132)

By observing and investigating common social scenarios, my work induces conversations about social conditions and promotes change within the individual. By shedding light on the absurdity of social roles, viewers are prompted to ask themselves whether the role they play in life is merely an act or if there is some truth in who they are and the potential of whom they can become.

“One of the temptations of the artist is to believe himself solitary, and in truth he bears this shouted at him with a certain base delight. But this is not true. He stands in the midst of all, in the same rank, neither higher nor lower, with all those who are working and struggling. His very vocation, in the face of oppression, is to open the prisons and to give a voice to the sorrows and joys of all.”

-Albert Camus, *The Artist and His Time*
(Camus 126)

INTRODUCTION

My work finds its base in the philosophy of the absurd, as written by philosopher, Albert Camus and is inspired by the effects of social interactions. This paper gives a brief synopsis of the absurd, referencing Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* and defines the *phantom community* as understood by Sociologist, Jefferey Ulmer. After presenting the underlying philosophy and psychological effects of society, Jacque Rancière's *pensive image* is defined and presented as the ultimate goal of a successful work of art. Examples of art works are interwoven to support this thesis.

“The important thing is to find out how people get away in the first case and why people stay in the second case (Camus 20).”

THE ABSURD STAGE

The Absurd, in terms of existentialist philosophy, is born out of the conflict between the human tendency to seek inherent value and meaning in life and the inability to find any (Absurdism). Absurdism describes how we, as humans, desire order, purpose and meaning in life. As philosopher Albert Camus explains in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, man has “an appetite for clarity (Camus 13).” “If man realized that the universe like him can love and suffer, he would be reconciled (Camus 13).” But, humans are left unsatisfied by the “silence of the world (Camus 20),” and its unwillingness to unquestionably provide us with such absolutes. “The absurd is essentially a divorce.” (Camus 21) “It is that divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints... (Camus 33).” With no life meaning, there is no point to live. Yet, suicide is also meaningless, forfeiting the state of nonexistence as a viable meaningful option. As Camus explains,

The fundamental subject of *The Myth of Sisyphus* is this: it is legitimate and necessary to wonder whether life has a meaning; therefore it is legitimate to meet the problem of suicide face to face. The answer, underlying and appearing through the paradoxes which cover it, is this; even if one does not believe in God, suicide is not legitimate... it sums itself up for me as a lucid invitation to live and to create (Camus 3).

According to Camus’ logic, this brings us to a position of existence where we are left living our lives with no meaning. The acceptance of this meaningless state of being alive supposedly leaves us existing in total freedom. (Camus 20) “I don’t know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I do not know that meaning and that it is impossible for me just now to know it (Camus 34).” Camus explains that as humans, we can only comprehend life in human terms. Therefore, it is impossible to

fathom anything that transcends the human life as it is lived and experienced through human perception. (“All thought is anthropomorphic.” “The cat’s universe is not that of the anthill.” (Camus 13)) The recognition of the impossibility to acquire this knowledge while living a mortal human life gives us permission to live free of any known meaning outside of pure real-time experience.

However, our social positions include phantom communities¹, social constructs, expectations and indoctrinations that put us on the stage to play a perceived intended role. In the lifelong universal pursuit of meaning and happiness, we find ourselves together on a stage in which we must ask ourselves if we can find truth in the role in which we are playing.

Camus explains our relationship to each other in regards to these roles: “It is certain that apparently, though I have seen the same actor a hundred times, I shall not for that reason know him any better personally (Camus 9).” Of each individual, Camus says, “...this life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity (Camus 6).”

Artist, Jana Sterbak deals with identity conflicts rendered by society’s gender judgments. In *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt*, Thomas McEvelley describes how Sterbak’s work signifies “falsified or vacated identity (McEvelley 298)” such as in her work, *Vanitas*:

¹ “Phantom community” - referring to all information given to each individual regarding social roles, knowledge, morality, etc. that resonates in our minds as a constant voice of the collective masses. The term is most widely used in Sociology. In *Commitment, Deviance, and Social Control*, Jeffery T. Ulmer expands on the effects of the phantom community and uses Sociologist, Lonnie Athens’ definition: “The phantom other is both a single and multiple entity because the individual phantom companions, when taken together, comprise a phantom community, which provides people with a voice and sounding board for making sense of their varied social experiences. Through soliloquizing, [actors] interpret situations that confront them daily in their corporeal communities, and, on the basis of their interpretations, assemble their actions. (Ulmer 318 - 319)”

Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic where clothes are left empty, vacated of human existence. This meat dress is a time-based piece that was originally shown on a model then moved to a dressform to undergo its natural life cycle for the remainder of the exhibit. The short shelf life of this piece is indicative of the ephemerality of human life.

The balloon series confronts the same issue of mortality. Take *Midlife Crises* for example (figure 1). The smiling balloons are gathered around in a group, each at different phases of shelf-life – not completely deflated but fully realizing they are no longer full of helium and the day will come when they will have no helium left.



Fig. 1, *Midlife Crises*, Amy M. Anderson, 2015. Sculpture

Realization of the absurd “bursts from the comparison between a bare fact and a certain reality,” “...the disproportion between intention and reality... (Camus 10).”

When the absurd is realized, “an odd state of soul” is experienced in “which the void becomes eloquent... the chain of daily gestures is broken, in which the heart vainly seeks the link that will connect it again... It is then that the “stage sets collapse. (Camus 10)”

FROM THE STAGE TO PENSIVE IMAGE

In *The Emancipated Spectator*, Jacques Rancière frees the viewer from the stage in art. The stage desires to be a “magnifying mirror where spectators see the virtues and vices of their fellow human beings in fictional form” and its purpose is “to prompt specific changes in their minds” by producing “the dual effect of intellectual recognition and appropriate emotion.” The critique of this goal manifesting through the stage lies within the passivity of spectators versus the role of actors who are knowingly performing. Spectators are given the luxury of *just* watching the scene and are not forced to participate, leaving the outcome of the goal fairly unpredictable. According to Rancière, the alternative is a pensive (“full of thoughts”) image. A pensive image refuses to give a finite answer because it never ceases to pose relevant questions thus always remains part of a contemporary conversation. (Rancière 62 – 132) Viewers confront art pieces one on one and have no choice but to play an active participant.

A pensive image always has “meaning in reserve (Rancière 123).” This resonates with absurd thought, “there is no truth, but merely truths (Camus 29).” According to Rancière, a pensive image occurs as a suspension of activity (Rancière 120), a moment in time. “An image is not supposed to think. It contains unthought thought... (Rancière 107).” The work of art is “the direct representation of a thought or a feeling; and the poetic figure that substitutes one expression for another in order to enhance its power (Rancière 121).”

I refer back to the absurd to explain the origin and manifestation of ideas that produce a pensive image. “These are facts the heart can feel; yet they call for careful study before they become clear to the intellect (Camus 4).” Camus refers to great works

of art noting that, “The man himself is ignorant of it (Camus 5).” He goes on to say that “great works... always mean more than they are conscious of saying (Camus 8).”

Because of this fact, my titles are always in pencil. A constant conversation surrounds my pieces that evolve as experience grows and understanding deepens.

Rancière refers to the film *Roads of Kiarostami* by Abbas Kiarostami as an example of pensiveness in contemporary art. By ridding the scenes of color, black and white images of roadways register more like drawings than landscapes “or even exercises in calligraphy (Rancière 125).” Of this phenomenon, Rancière says it “evokes the literary metamorphosis of the banal (Rancière 125).”

In my piece entitled *Viola* (figures 2 and 3), banal objects interact with each other transforming the space and working together to create new meanings. Common objects are used as material choice to help the viewer relate to the piece. There is a comfort in the known that invites viewers to inspect the piece closer. Further inspection reveals the need to redefine the role of a common object.

An iRobot vacuum rolls out beneath a kitchen valance that resembles a stage curtain. The vacuum performs a unique show with every run but will inevitably knock down the walls that intimidate and pretend to contain the performance making a loud and dramatic, “CLACK!” Much like Kiarostami’s black and white photographs that momentarily abandon their landscape for the sake of composition, the iRobot works to create its own linear drawings. As the vacuum explores the boundaries of its containment, it creates drawings with the straight lines of the wood, constantly rearranging the composition. The iRobot represents the phantom community and this act of recomposing the stage symbolizes the shaping and reshaping of society. The machine

will also randomly nudge the female mannequin head positioned in front of her own reflection until she can no longer see herself in the setting in which she exists. With the common objects stripped away from their common uses and environments, they are given a new purpose. After recognizing the objects' new purposes, viewers are invited to reflect on themselves and their roles in society.

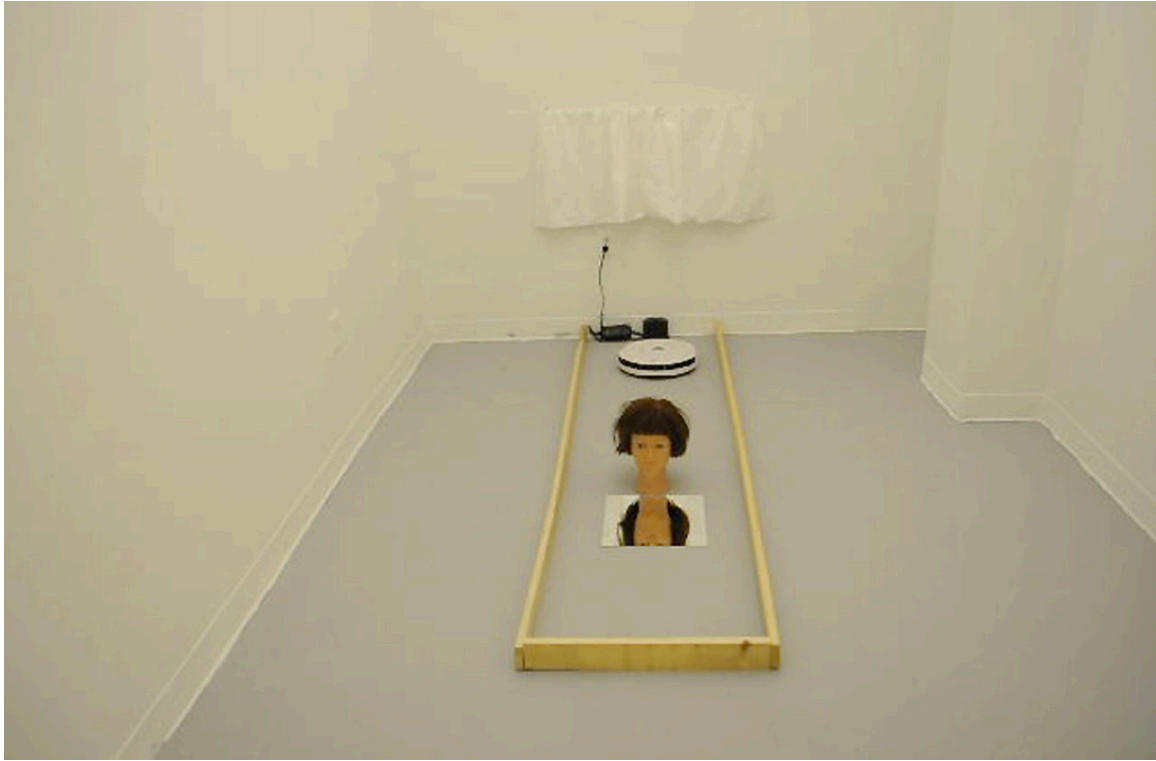


Fig. 2, Viola, Amy M. Anderson, 2012. Sculpture. Video Still, 1 second Digital Video.



Fig. 3, Viola, Amy M. Anderson, 2012. Sculpture. Video Still, 18:30 second Digital Video

PROCESS – MY WORK AS PROOF OF THE ABSURD

“We must simultaneously serve suffering and beauty (Camus 126).”

The pencil has always been my refuge. As my work matured, the pencil has evolved to represent any media needed to physically and visually portray the idea at hand. A successful piece² will stop a passerby and force him/her to confront the work in silence, consider what it represents and recognize the connection made between self, piece and idea.

In *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees*, Lawrence Weschler tells the tale of Robert Irwin “pulling plugs (Weschler 40),” battling the same psychological phenomena on the island of Ibiza. Irwin’s description resonates with Camus’ earlier statement in which “the void becomes eloquent (Camus 10).”

And what happens at a certain point as you get down to the last plugs, it’s like the Zen thing of having no ego: it becomes scary, it’s like maybe you’re going to lose yourself. And boredom then becomes extremely painful. You really are bored and alone and vulnerable in the sense of having no outside supports in terms of your own being. But when you get them all pulled out, a little period goes by, and then it’s absolutely serene, it’s terrific. It just becomes really pleasant, because you’re out, you’re all the way out. (Weschler 40)

My artwork shows evidence where I am pulling at the plugs in which Irwin describes. In *The Emancipated Spectator*, Jacques Rancière describes a seemingly instinctual act: “...the thought is in the muscles, which are like stone waves; but there is no relation of expression between the thought and the motion of the waves. The thought has passed into something that does not resemble it by any clear analogy. And the

² For the purposes of this paper, I talk in terms of successful pieces being pensive because that is my personal goal. However, I am not proposing a piece produced by another artist has to be pensive to be successful. For example, a purely formal piece (void of concept) can be successful solely on the beauty and perfection it presents.

directed activity of the muscles has passed into its opposite: the endless, passive repetition of the motion. (Rancière 122)”

It is in this endless passive way that we have accepted our phantom community’s ideology. My work investigates my phantom community face on – a community that thrives on living in the periphery and attempts to disguise itself as my conscience, hinting at values and gauges of self-worth. Weschler quotes Robert Irwin talking about his painting, “Who really put those two lines on like that? Was it really spontaneous intuition or is it rather cultural indoctrination (Weschler 76)?” In process, I now isolate these seemingly instinctual waves to determine each wave’s validity and its proximity to truth. The culminating artworks represent these remnants. As Rancière describes a pensive image, it “is the image of a suspension of activity,” a “figure that substitutes one expression for another in order to enhance its power, and one that always has “meaning in reserve” by denying the viewer “narrative logic in favour of an indeterminate expressive logic” (Rancière 120-123).

For example, refer to *Wedge Left* and *Wedge Right* (figure 4). The initial goal of the wedges is to create an environment that mimics the feelings presented between humans without the sculptures themselves being anthropomorphic. The work is designed to be overwhelming a little confrontational but not violent and, a little absurd. Rancière is repeated here: “It is a direct representation of a thought or a feeling; and the poetic figure that substitutes one expression for another in order to enhance its power (121).”

The forms stand eight feet tall and mimic a sound architectural structure but the placement and material choices suggest otherwise. The arch is known to support substantial amounts of weight. However, the wedges are a broken arch making each its

own independent entity, *Wedge Left* and *Wedge Right*. Made of hollow corrugated plastic and cardboard then covered in spray foam, the structures reference reality but are indeed just objects on the stage. The tangible structures are free-standing forms there to enable our act but cannot support anything real.



Fig. 4, *Wedge Left* and *Wedge Right*, Amy M. Anderson, 2012. Sculpture.

Art piece by art piece, I pull the plugs. I confront my phantom community, question their definitions, roles and expectations to find my truth – a result removed from society’s ulterior motives. The infinite investigation excites me and because of it, the work grows with every perception change. It is in that decision to publicly expose the illogic of my phantom community, even if momentarily, that I feel freedom.

What I am compelled to create manifests itself through work that is both conceptual and formal. Visually, the piece needs to draw in and hold a viewer’s attention. Materials and technique represent a means to an end and are considered only in

the way that each cannot be separated from the overall final interpretation. In material choice, I quote Rancière, “The set of relations that constitutes the work operates as if it has a different ontological texture from the sensations that make up everyday experience (Rancière 67).” They are tools that support the concept, not take away, unless of course, that is the intention. I have no interest in tedium beyond doing exactly what is necessary to subtly push a concept.

Subtlety is a key element in my work. When I say, “subtlety” I do not mean in presence. My goal is art that commands presence in a space. But every subtle detail is considered and informs the outcome of the piece. I typically use raw materials with unconventional readymades or found objects and make no attempt at hiding the components. What the viewer sees is fact and truthful components, raw and honest.

Consider *the lineup* (figure 5) for example, a piece in which all components clearly declare their identity. Unadulterated unfinished wooden 1x3s form the support of thirteen yellow incandescent light bulbs that are suspended from store-bought brass and wire light kits. Under no illusion of life, the power strips and bright orange, red and black extension cords boast their duties. Again considering mortality, the viewer is aware of the ephemerality of the main show. Eventually the bulbs will burn out but for a few moments in time, we can enjoy the luminosity each bulb projects while on its stage.



Fig. 5, the lineup, Amy M. Anderson, 2014. Sculpture.

The light bulbs hang at a length just below eye-level so the viewer can look at the entire piece without having to look directly into the light. This also allows the light cords to play an active role in the piece. Standing in front of the piece, a viewer is a spectator, another silhouette in the crowd. But if the viewer ventures behind the bulbs, he/she will realize he/she is now on the stage. While illuminated by the bulbs, the viewer can look out into the audience but will realize the cords that hang in front of his/her face resemble that of jail cell bars. While the viewer is on stage, he/she is imprisoned by that stage and the spotlight it provides.

In terms of process implementation, I begin with an idea, not yet fully developed into a “plan” because I cannot neglect the organic process of creating a work of art. The original idea is merely a starting point that is not only free to evolve but expected to change during implementation of that idea. In an interview with Klaus Ottman and the

Journal of Contemporary Art, Jessica Stockholder illustrates a similar process. Of her work, she says, it “often arrives in the world like an idea arrives in your mind. You don’t quite know where it came from or when it got put together, nevertheless, it’s possible to take it apart and see that it has an internal logic (“Jessica Stockholder”).” In her Art21 excerpt, Stockholder continues to describe her process.

I think it’s a little bit like watching people play the piano. Obviously, people’s fingers learn how to play; they don’t sit and think about each note. Working with color, form, shape, and things physical—in the way that I’m working—I know what I’m doing on some level, both physically and conceptually. There’s a kind of thinking process that goes on that I can’t tell you about. I can’t think about each and every one of those little tiny decisions and put words to it, and still work. There’s a lot going on that you have to just go with and trust that it’s significant.
(Art21)

If the thought alone can fully manifest the desired outcome, then I leave it in my notebook or in a front porch conversation³. The art piece takes form and embodies a depth that plans and words alone cannot capture. I then, analyze all the components that seemingly came to fruition intuitively – never expecting all the answers to be revealed immediately. As Camus explains, the work comes from a place in the soul that the conscious mind cannot readily articulate (Camus 8).

The *breathing machine* (figures 7 and 8) lies motionless on the floor. A light comes on and a large clear plastic bag inflates for one minute. After the minute is up, the light goes off and the bag is allowed to deflate. The same pattern occurs in this cycle throughout the exhibition. Just as in *The Lineup* and *Viola*, all components making up the sculpture are easily identified: a light bulb, clear plastic bag, air compressor and extension cord. Ordinary objects come together to form a metaphor of a living thing.

³ “front porch conversation” - literary phrase used to depict the visual of an informal conversation between friends or colleagues.

The inhale and exhale of the bag mimic the necessity of breath. The light comes on during compression, putting the piece on stage but when the light goes off the bag decompresses representing the potential suffocation from illumination of society.

Through the use of everyday objects and easily recognizable materials, viewers are invited to consider each work, its components and the meaning given to the piece by the intentional combination of these objects and their new functions.



Fig. 6, breathing machine, Amy M. Anderson, 2013. Sculpture. Video Still. 1:24 second Digital Video.



Fig. 7, breathing machine, Amy M. Anderson, 2013. Sculpture. Video Still. 56 second Digital Video.

CONCLUSION

“From the moment absurdity is recognized, it becomes a passion, the most harrowing of all. But whether or not one can live with one’s passions, whether or not one can accept their law, which is to burn the heart they simultaneously exalt – that is the whole question. (Camus 16).”

My studio practice combines the use of readymade objects with unconventional materials to create an environment that promotes conversation. By shedding light on the absurdity of social roles, viewers are prompted to ask themselves whether the role they play in life is merely an act or, if they can uncover a truth exclusive to their individual being.

“Perhaps we shall be able to overtake that elusive feeling of absurdity in the different but closely related worlds of intelligence, of the art of living, or of art itself.”

(Camus 9)

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