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Master of Fine Arts Thesis Abstract 2013: "Taking Place"

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"What is taking place within and without me?" It is a question that has come to inform my work within the MFA program at the University of Chicago. A question that confronts the self through two perspectives as it experiences place and time: What is becoming within myself consciously? What is physically happening within the place around me? I turn this to question my process of using moving images. As I record, edit and project, what is taking place within the frame of the image? And what is physically happening outside of it? How do my internal conflicts inform the image and how is the environment reflecting this expression? It is the meeting point between an internal inspection and the external environment that I have begun to explore and bring to the surface.

All places are marked by time and time frames every place—place and time are interwoven and hold meaning, containing traces of how we interact with the world today. Marked and framed by time and place, I see rural and urban landscapes, interior and exterior spaces, private and public sites as stages where natural and built environments conflict and bind us. I am drawn to where these environments converge, where emptiness is revealed and a sense of separation emerges. I want to relate these experiences to the tensions in finding a sense of place within our current time, and I observe this more attentively through the act of filming, editing and projecting.

I use video and film, the computer, digital images and projectors to capture, build and project installations as a way to draw out our relationship within place and time. Through the formal and conceptual guides of distance, light and movement I abstract my impressions through displacements and shifts of time and place, projecting my expressions into environments and onto surfaces and forms to create meditative public experiences.

Distance: My first project in the MFA program was *Skyway* (2012, three channel sd video with audio, 20 minutes), which began an exploration in drawing out what was happening within and without me as I observed the relationship between a built and natural environment. East Chicago is an area along lake Michigan connected to Chicago through the Skyway Bridge that crosses the Calumet River. It is an industrial area containing steel and petrol plants, historic neighborhoods and recently developed casinos—a place that was a major part of a chain of production and now part of chain of consumption. As I filmed from various spaces—river and port, hotel and casino, train and car, beach and golf course, industrial complex and bar—a thread of loneliness connected these places. To reinforce this feeling, I introduced the figure of the filmmaker, myself, entering the frame at moments during the film. This was a narrative device used to symbolize the self, unable to find orientation within an environment that was exploited and then abandoned by industry, where a misuse of place continues through newly developed casinos. The attempt in joining a narrative thread to a meditative documentation on place and time proved to be problematic as I tried to shift the viewers experience without breaking their attention. Staged movement such as looking out of the hotel window, or a figure carrying a suitcase countered this desire. But when I moved more naturally within the frame, allowing place to direct my activity, such as during the projection of maps on the hotel bed or where traces of my body moves across the three video channels, a level of focus was maintained that would shift but not break the viewer's attention. The use of this narrative device opened possibilities to reform these conceptual and formal themes.

In *Diga* (2012, single channel HD video, 4:00 minutes) what was explored in *Skyway* is condensed into a much more fluid experience. It is one continuous extreme wide shot of the second largest dam in

Switzerland. If the viewer remains attentive to the projected image, at a certain point a bungee jumper is seen falling through the frame. As time passes the figure reappears suspended in mid-air and is lifted in and out of the frame. Through framing, I allowed for time and an action to unfold. What was revealed is the symbolic figure introduced in *Skyway*, where the convergence of natural and built environments conflict and bind the body's placement within them. The figure is disorientated, falling and then pulled against the immense backdrop of a structure that enforces our will over nature, which is now being re-used as a twisted source of accepted entertainment.

I have certain habitual ways with working with film and video that have developed over the years. I tend to shoot long steady wide shots due to my work in creating live visual projections where I needed images that could be easily manipulated in real time. I've also had the tendency to avoid the use of computer-generated affects, so I look for these affects that occur naturally within the world: such as superimpositions and shifts of movement. Lastly, I tend to carry over emotions that are evoked during the locations I film to the editing process. These tendencies, their positive and negative affects, are used in *Parabola* (17 minutes, single channel HD video).

I traveled into three areas in the Ticino region of Switzerland during which I felt a sense of emptiness as I moved within the controlled natural environments—a feeling of being within nature yet completely removed from it—as if there was no room for myself within the curated landscape. While on these excursions I filmed mountains of the region through long shots of a construction site, where cranes in the foreground moved against the landscape. I also captured footage traveling up mountains with Funiculars to tourist destinations. During the editing process I began juxtaposing all three areas. It was through a dissatisfaction and disappointment of my habitual ways of filming where I began to push the materiality of the image. In manipulating the high definition footage by blowing up and cropping the image in the computer, the time and space within each shot was extended, giving me the possibility to scan and abstract the physical material of the image, finding new situations that were unknown to me while filming.

It was during this process of discovery that I was able to use the natural affects between surface and form occurring in the world, like superimposition and reflection, to reveal a sense of displacement that occurs as natural and built environments meet. Whether it is the water from a reservoir shifting from obscurity to clarity; to the image of a man talking on a phone within a glass balcony that contains a superimposed image of a landscape with advertisements; or the pan of a steel bar containing shades of light. I wanted to be able to draw attention to the sense of visual displacement that is happening within materials if we look closely. These affects are then solidified through the push and pull of the distance and closeness of the original image and its blown up version.

Light: The ability to see hinges on the availability of light, but what is illuminated is not always understood. The use of light and shadow, and the interaction between what is known and not known, seen and not seen is explored in the installation *Attraction* (2012, two channel SD video projection). Filmed in the Water Tower Place mall, I wanted to document a loop of actual movement in the world occurring in a post-modern space created for the activity of shopping.

The consumer is observed shopping and becomes the observer within this work. Through medium and close up shots the camera movement is fixed and focused onto two locations: interior, within a glass elevator; and exterior, on various floors following the elevators movements. The materials of the actual environment such as glass, marble and steel are framed to create superimposed layers where bodies enter and exit the image. The final composition is split allowing for the interior and exterior perspectives to be compared—highlighting the loop of human and mechanical activity and referencing back to the mechanics of film and image reproduction.

An act of loosening happens through the projection of these impressions that are presented to the public. A spatialization of the moving image occurs by its physical projection onto surfaces and forms. As the moving image is displaced into a new environment, it has been loosened and de-attached from its original place and time, placing the viewer in between image and object where their subjectivity becomes a new focal point. My films and videos explore the formation of an elliptical loop between image, expression and viewer while reflecting back conceptual ideas I've formed from the experience of confronting place, time and self. I believe that through loosening the attachments we have to images of place and time, and their accepted ways of being seen and experienced, a new space for feeling and thought can be created.

My exploration with this process can be seen in *Attraction* where the Water Tower Place is de-constructed through the projection on two objects/screens. Composed of 1" thick painted white MDF material, each object stands 7' (h) x 3.5' (w) and are placed side by side with a gap in between. Together they compose a flat screen like surface on one side where the video is projected. On the other side, two panels of the same size and material are joined at two different intervals acting as supports for the screen. Here the same video is projected but the images are slightly distorted, creating a feeling of slippage. Through the spatialization of the projected image onto the object, the light from the projector displaces the image through cuts and gaps between the objects, bleeding over the surface—extending light and shadow further, along the ground, and against the walls of the room. Within the enclosed silent space the displaced images allow the viewer to move in and out of this altered experience. This process references back to what is occurring within the images they are seeing, and in turn comments on how we are affected by our interactions within a specific place and time.

Movement: September 11th 2001 marked not only a period of global uncertainty, but also a moment where images gained a new sense of power. The repeated images of the tragedy through mass media reinforced the deep affect images have on us, revealing the ease in which meaning can be manipulated through its repetition, speed and use. Confronting this event, through this image based experience; I was pushed as a filmmaker to question what the role the moving image has in a society that is so fractured. The digital image today can be seen as having a vernacular quality, as it is just as easy, or even easier, to take a picture and express oneself with an image than in any other medium. In working with a medium that is so abundant in our to day-to-day lives I feel that I need to counterbalance how I use the medium in relation to how it is being used within mass media and the public.

I do this through attentiveness to duration and subject matter. I use stillness and slowness to allow time to unfold. I create durational works where the experience of seeing is slowed down, going against the way we've conformed to consume images. I want to give the viewer the time look at and to then look through the image. The classical idea of the sublime and the figure confronting landscape is also a way to counterbalance the subject matter of the majority of everyday moving images that are produced today. Through creating durational works that use natural and built environments that contain a sublime quality my intent is to bring a greater attention and weight to that which is being seen and expressed.

Place: I do not see a division between cinema and art. I want my work to be experienced in different places and times, for different types of audiences. Within the MFA program I've explored the 'white cube space' of the gallery where the viewer is immersed within an environmental installation as in *Attraction*. In *Skyway* I used the traditional space of the cinema theater in an unconventional way by fragmenting the screen into three frames. I experimented with projecting works outdoors within a public setting such as in the art-science initiative grant project *Opening* which was projected on the University's Brain Research building.

My desire to project the moving image and the approach I have to film and video is inspired from three artists. Michele Antonioni's use of landscape as a character to address themes of alienation influenced me in seeing how cinema and art are one in the same, where narrative and structural film qualities are delicately balanced. James Benning uses landscape as well, yet does not interfere with the frame. He uses an awareness of place and time and personal mode of production to allow an action to take place in front of the camera. Chris Marker introduced the genre of the film essay, which fused narrative and documentary modes of production through a pronounced subjectivity. I take the importance of place and time that Antonioni and Benning have given and attempt to create visual essays— personal expressions of how and what we see when we try to make audio-visual sense of the world.

The language of cinema is very young yet through the past century many conventional modes of presentation and structure have been entrenched creating certain expectations. By branching off from artists like the ones noted above I feel that there is room to explore different modes of production and presentation while also pushing off of and incorporating conventional ways of experiencing film and video, sculpture, painting, and performance. I want to continue to explore how my expressions can live within the gallery and cinema theater while reaching out within public settings where I can move the viewer by raising poetic flags of feeling and thought.

As my camera points to an external world an internal inspection of my role as filmmaker is also in question: So where is my place in all of this? How is it that I see and build my meanings and from which vantage point do I look from? As a maker of images who needs to sustain his work through commercial art markets? As a privileged middle-class white man from the Southside of Chicago? As a first generation Italian-American, having grown up within a feeling of in-betweenness within two cultures?

These are questions that I have become conscious of and through my filmmaking process some of these internal weights can be released, allowing for new directions within my work. As life moves forward through tragedy and beauty and all that is in between, my craft and the materials I explore will be founded in finding new ways of exploring the question: what is taking place within and without me.