Mind the Gap

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Overlooked

The overlooked. I want to expose the shadows of painting that we pass over. I want to make painting available. Accessible. Personal and portable.

The unexpected, or perhaps, the most expected, intrigues me. Situations in life that seem so ordinary, nearly mundane, but when intersected with something special, combined with something radically poignant, becomes beautifully serendipitous.

I find that the most spectacular may only exist when compared to something, well, less spectacular. Can we realize the beauty of silence only when the draining noise of a vent switches off? May we appreciate dim, warm light only when exposed to glaring fluorescence? This notion of comparison is vital. We may only judge based on preconceived experiences.

Courtney D. Coyne Jensen, Professor of Design in Denmark, describes the intersection of dark and light as disparate worlds standing amongst one another. Life, like moments, live in pockets of light, but only due to the defined edges of shadow. It is this contrast, of the ordinary, the cold, to the brilliant light, that allows us to experience the thrill of mundanity. It is only when one can recognize contrast, when we can participate in change, that may we better appreciate and learn from it.

The In Between

Moments of the before, the now, and the future define every instant. In his book, *History Repeating*, photographer Ori Gersht cites Robert Capa's "Fallen Soldier" (Figure 1), a fighter in the Spanish Civil War photographed neither dead nor alive, transcending life's stages as a victim to time. These captured images highlight the brilliance and value in transitions, helping viewers understand both tragedy and consequence by comparing what was, what is, and what will be (Gersht).

How can we compare moments? How do we notice change? Monotony is not derived from a lack of activity. Rather, it grows from a sense of rhythm, melodic imagery that affords viewers sufficient time to find comfort, recognize, familiarize. A few moments of tempo, a pulse of color is enough to attract and engage.

Duration is key. Marina Abramovic comments on her notion of time: "I have found that long durational art is really the key to changing consciousness… not just the performer, but the one looking at it" (Interview Magazine). Duration does not become a component of the work; duration becomes the work. Confronted by durational work, the viewer becomes the performer, a contributor to the work's resilience, a participant in it's lifeline. Without public engagement, the work does not exist; it becomes only a framework, an outline without it's true colors. Time stands still, and progress never begins.

Product Here and There

Elongated time, combined with patience and surprise, dictates the viewer's experience. The subject of surprise, and prolonged duration, must be realized in a work before it may possess transcendent qualities. How can duration hold value? How can an artist render time, captivate an audience without requiring viewers to remain? How can participation become a necessary attribute, without notifying viewers of such obligation? Can interaction become intuitive to those unfamiliar?

There is innate beauty in product. Meticulous, thoughtful consideration makes up our every surrounding object. A process of researching, sketching, conceiving, designing, iterating. To create and to materialize, requires an arduous, daunting and exhaustive process. Nonetheless, it is human. Production feels nearly infinite in our constructed environment. It surrounds our everyday, dictating how we experience the world and make sense of it.

Despite the overwhelmingly abundant sense of production in our built environment, to most, our surroundings just seems ordinary. We pass over the most complex, advancements in life. We naturalize, debasing technology to the simplest terms and considering our most impressive constructions just constructions, expectations of our modern society.

Are we just naive? Too used to the good life? Or have we been manipulated, contrived into considering our surroundings as typical, anticipated. Apathetic. If the most sophisticated becomes the most basic, will we ever impress? How can we lose breath from beauty if beauty is all that surrounds?

Koyaanisqatsi, a 1982 film directed by Godfrey Reggio and with a score composed by Philip Glass, explores cultural habits that are so familiar we've lost awareness of them. The film affords viewers the opportunity to enter a typically inaccessible consciousness. The existence of repetition dominates the work through traffic patterns, industrial productions, pedestrian walkways and the deconstruction of existing construction. Contrasting imagery of the everyday, Koyaanisqatsi employs music of extraordinary melody, overlapping hums, and a repetitive phrasing of the film's title that induces meditation (Hickman).

It is through comparison, a vital contrast of life's typical and life's reality that delivers the film's cultural commentary. Object's in the film become personified by human mannerisms, while actual human characteristics are void in the monotony of life's patterns. The direct comparison between lifeless action and vivacious objects prove the beauty of the mundane. Once we become a component of this rhythm, our actions become collective, together they become more significant than any single activity. We realize, through habit, that we exist collectively, communally, as a single entity, and we must consider even the most ordinary contains ingredients of our complex culture.

The Curator's Say

Interaction is an intuitive component of public work. When paintings hang in a gallery, the paintings' forward plane becomes interactive space. When crossing a sidewalk, the same principle is enforced, thus public interaction is activated by simply walking past.

In 2012, four NYU Graduate Students decided to explore the principle of activating public mundane (Figure 2). *Bird on a Wire* is "a projected displayed created for a pair of storefront windows at the corner Mercer St. and Washington Pl. in Manhattan. By calling a number, a passerby can set birds perched on telephone wires into motion" (birdonawire.info). To me, activating the work by simply walking past isn't enough. It is only through direct interaction, chosen from the viewer, that the mundane of bird's sitting may be transformed into something special. However, does life require participation? Does the ordinary require action to become extraordinary? True, passing by and experiencing the new is a reward, but active participation may add value.

Intersections

Koyaanisqatsi gives life to the lifeless. However, at what point does an object feel like more than a product? When is the precipice of personification? How do elevator doors gain attitude? When does an exhausted lightbulb stop flickering and start humming? These intersections, realized through duration, repetition, and rhythm, must be poignant, striking and perhaps out of context.

Rene Magritte used the everyday to help viewers see beyond the canvas. A red apple in a gentleman's mouth. A bird cage replacing a person's rib cage. A balcony of coffins. A fireplace with it's own set of train tracks. My favorite, a painting of the exact landscape that unfolds behind the canvas. As Magritte describes, "The mind loves the unknown. It loves the images whose meaning is unknown, since the meaning of the mind itself is unknown" (artbook.com). Magritte used this notion of the known to look beyond what is consciously available. Stark juxtaposition--that very instance with the serendipitous, the seemingly random--allows viewers to realize beyond. If we do not look at what already exists, how may we observe beyond our own reality?

The Task

So, how do we combine the accessible, the everyday, and the extraordinary? How can art spark a moment? How can duration hold value, process feel exciting, the most obvious become mysterious? My work will consist of the public. It will pertain to architectural, digital, and time-based constraints. Only through comparison, may we, and myself, look beyond.

The Work Gallery

When I learned of the possibility to exhibit work in downtown Ann Arbor, to create work that would exist among the hustling of Midwestern city life, I was beyond intrigued. I was determined. With personal work previously constrained to the computer or mobile screen, I wanted to break away from my own comfort zone.

Screen Savers

Criticism to my initial ideas was about digital limitations and was rooted in people's preconceived notions. I was told if something digitally animates, and it's shown on a computer screen, then of course, it's a computer screensaver. I heard this over and over. Perhaps, I was never even told this, but repeating and criticizing myself for this very idea made every critique dance around this insecurity. How do I bring the digital life to life?

I create most of my work through computer code, and of course, code is made for the people. It is open source, a root of intelligence that is only generated, maintained and advanced by public contribution. Many working as one. A feasible exhibit for this show would be out in the public, on State Street, among the people of Ann Arbor and the footsteps of traffic that give this city life.

This production, this possibility of connection, or reevaluation--of cultural realization, introspection, and reaction--is only active once we confront the most ordinary, yet pervasive qualities of life. The qualities of the street, most commonly, pertains to people walking. People walking everywhere.

The sidewalks overflow with individuals passing each other by. Walking steadfast, heads down, without regard for those who walk beside them. Every person for him or herself, every step another foot farther from regarding those surrounding. I sat for days downtown, quietly observing the activities of the street. Deriving inspiration from the surroundings, I searched for a connection between each chain restaurant intertwined with pockets of the old family run businesses, a connection between what is, what was, and what will be.

What will be, in this monotonous landscape of passers by? How can a work illustrate this habit? This past summer, I was fortunate to sit down with the television creator of *House of Cards,* Beau Willimon. In our discussion, we spoke of collective habits, cultural routines that could be transformed through the use of artistic retrospection. Mr. Willimon spoke of this true notion of a *swerve*, the completely serendipitous deviation from routine that occurs when an individual is conscious of their actions, or receptive to change. This openness is vulnerability. It is the active decision to desire the new, to allow life to generate it's own random experience.

The Code

I decided to use the context of the street as the heart of my inspiration. Through a simple algorithm code, I was able to randomly generate people walking by, from the waist down. I have always been, for some odd reason, interested in the bottom half of things. I created a poster last year for the Undergraduate Art Exhibition and in years past created paintings of what was going on at dinner parties just below the table. There is something intriguing and mysterious about the characteristics, and mannerisms, of people just below the waist.

The waist below gave everyone hidden character. While you walked past, you could guess what conversations were being had. Who was holding hands. Who was carrying what. It gave everyone on the street an equilibrium, a place of default which made the street hold no hierarchy. It was an ideal street, where no one is compared, where value is given to all who participate.

Within six weeks, I had created over 200 variations of people, all walking across a colorful plane full of nothing but people. They all walked at random, at random speeds, at random times, with random combinations of clothing and skin tones (Figure 3). They were all individual moments. Pockets of life that existed within mere seconds of complete randomness, determined by nothing but life itself. Illustrations of street life, of people walking past, adorned the gallery's storefront windows in the evening time. Pastels flooded the street, and the store's facade transform the closed shops and quiet street into living light.

Next Steps

My intentions to first create this work was an attempt to pursue something radically different than my past. I was trained in website and mobile app design, visual identity and company branding. Pursuing this project, from a practical standpoint, was not in my best interest. I had to learn animation, develop an illustrative style, and create an algorithm that was self-cleansing. Through my difficulty, however, I was able to collaborate with multiple developers and consult with peer artists and advisors. Not knowing the answer or the end goal allowed me to engage in a conversation about creation that I never felt compelled to discuss.

Friends and family ask if I am satisfied with the work. I am not satisfied, though I am intrigued. This is the beginning of an exploration between code and color, an itch that I have developed where I have no endpoint, no answer, but a substantial beginning. How can I illuminate the undertones of cultural tendency? How can I help myself and others evaluate the future by examining the present? We may become more cognizant by rejecting normalcy and questioning oddity. Let's familiarize ourselves with the unfamiliar.

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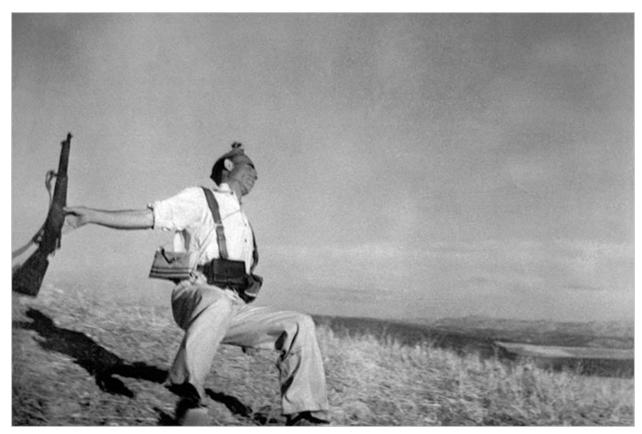
Figure 1: Robert Capa, *Fallen Soldier*, September 5, 1936

Figure 2: Bird on a Wire, NYC, October 26th 2012

Figure 3: Mind the Gap, Work Gallery, Ann Arbor MI