

Integrative Project

Artist Thesis

David Kloc

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The project I have developed uses performance and humor. I have been taking my own humoristic writings and manifesting them in different visual formats. I have been working to see what works best in a comedic sense and how big of a role does context play in delivery.

My fascination with humor has been one I have left untouched by academia until this year. I have always felt that even though I have always been, "The Funny Guy" in social situations, that there was no place in any sort of school setting for me to use my humor progressively or even positively. Never before this year have I been able to synthesize the creative mind with my comedic mind.

Comedy has always been something I have considered close to my heart. I have been consciously trying to study its roots in history and its role in society throughout time. Being raised Jewish, I have always been told that humor is something Jews have used to combat oppressive behavior and to cope with dark times.

After World War II comedy found a much larger role in the fabric of American culture. Comedians were given a power that was not available during the dark days of the depression and its surrounding war focused administrations. Through television and radio comedy evolved as rapidly as other forms of art. Dada, Fluxus, and surrealist movements changed the way we viewed artistic work and absorbed meaning.

As artists questioned how we respond in the consumerist world, comedy followed suit with the heightened role of the inspirational humorist. Comedy went from very tolerable performance of comedians such as Eddie Cantor to the very outspoken and politically loaded Lenny Bruce. People said that Bruce was an offense to comedy at the same time people thought Jackson Pollock was simply "splattering paint". But how close is the experience of viewing comedy and viewing art? Are they the same and if so – in what ways.

In my work I have drawn influence from New York based comedian / performance artist, Eugene Mirman. Mirman has amassed an impressive series of video shorts where he assumes eccentric roles and acts them out – mostly in his apartment. Mirman, a Russian immigrant as a child, often plays a Russian man lost in New York, playing with the stereotypes and dramatizations often given to them. Though also a stand up comedian Mirman's experimentations with video performance have helped blur the gap between art performance and comedic performance.

English comedian Daniel Kitson can be considered more of a storyteller than just a comic. His stories border on tragic yet he always tells them with a smile and garners many laughs that come along with an odd feeling of discomfort. Kitson's work with story telling as a comedic medium, not the typical stand up routine, has been an inspiration in my work as well.

My project deals with personal monologues put to video and PowerPoint presentations; albeit two very different forms of work but both driven by humorous intent. Where the PowerPoint performances utilize the typically dull context of a lecture or a slideshow in a dark quiet room, the video work can be seen anywhere yet the works within it contain tremendous juxtaposition of location and content.

The final works, writings, and recorded presentations will serve as a panoramic view of where I think comedy and art can intersect under the guise of performance. Much like the early works of William Wegman's, well before he was taking pictures for calendars, video conveys the crucial element of timing in comedy. While reading a comedic piece can elicit one sensation having it read to you by the writer is another and adding performance over that can bring many of these sensations together to create a truly great work of art.

In terms of written work I have created a body of texts that are inspired by the self-deprecating and introspective works of Woody Allen and a long list of turn of the century Jewish humorists.

Two professors at the Art School, Holly Hughes and Danielle Abrams showed me through their work and classes I was fortunate enough to be able to take with them, that humor can be used in a variety of ways in art.

I was always conflicted with the conceptual difference between theatre and performance art. This spring I was able to be a narrator in someone else's performance piece, and it ended up being like theatre for me. In contrast to that, being able to write and perform my own work, felt very much like performance art, as it was my own creation and came from a different part of my mind and ultimately my heart.

One specific piece I completed this year was titled, "Impedimental" This piece deals with my having quite a pronounced lisp and in fact another speech impediment that detracts from my ability to pronounce "ch" sounds. The piece shows me sitting on a stool, in a suit, boasting about my newfound method of avoiding my lisp in public. This method, proves to drive me somewhat mental (Impedi-mental, if you will.) I end up crumbling down into a nonsensical series of flubs as I can no longer create logical lisp-less equivalents for words such as "stegosaurus" or "salamander", and I begin to roll around and make silent gestures. I finally end up completely tumbling off stage, all set to classical music.

My final performance this year was a presentation in the Video Studio. I created a PowerPoint presentation detailing my coming to grips with graduation and what the implications of having an Art and Design degree actually mean. The performance also acted as a pseudo valedictorian speech given by myself, someone who has never been close to obtaining the position of someone who would give such a speech. I managed to broach topics such as the banality of the city of Ann Arbor, the existential ponderings of babies and their appeal to me as a graduating senior, and vitamin water. The images presented on the screen behind me, during the presentation, served as an accent to the typical pacing of comedic monologues. While I work up to a punch line with words, the pictures can come in as a quick jab from any direction while the words can continue behind them. The experience of performing and presenting is one that I find truly rewarding and entirely unique. Through years of playing in bands and performing on stage as a bassist in front of sometimes five and sometimes hundreds of people, I have learned to calm any inner doubt of ability before taking the stage. But the time under the lights delivering a speech that I wrote over the course of several weeks, going through serious moments of doubt and anxiety mixed with fits of comic eruption was the ultimate moment.

I have yearned to become a humorist. Despite the fact I wanted to be a medical illustrator for many years, the talent that was most closely tied to passion was my gift at joke-smithing. I have only this year found the appropriate resources to combine my academic life with my passion for humor. This project is my attempt to create humorous works that can be viewed by any audience, and be seen as comical and thought provoking. When I asked established performance artist, Dynasty Handbag, what she thought the difference between a comedy performance and a piece of performance art was, she said simply, "Marketing." The hardest part of my work this year was done very much behind the scenes. Less than ten months ago I was strictly an illustrator. I have spent many hard months this year, as cliché as this may sound, finding my voice. Though illustration is a skill I have honed and am quite proud of, this year developing my comedic and autobiographical lenses has been what truly will stick with me.