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Mortality and Artifact

Alexander Perrelli
CUNY Hunter College

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Mortality and Artifact

by

Alexander Perrelli

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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INTRODUCTION

My current work titled, *Mortality and Artifact*, represents a major departure from my previous work over the last six years, the three most recent spent within the Hunter MFA program. Through fabricating a physically enclosed and fractured space that houses a single sculpture, I have created an immersive environment meant to present the idea of an imagined space of survival through the lens of personal and artistic crisis and a lifelong interest in science fiction films. Further, the work draws meaning from the anxiety surrounding my fear of death and anxiety about my art practice. My primary goal is to examine these personal qualities through the popular culture aesthetics of science fiction films, as well as the underlying theme of such films, the question of individual or species survival. For me, this question resides in the moments when I find myself feeling alone, when the weight of life becomes absolutely overwhelming to a point that my environment becomes confining and seemingly unfamiliar. How I proceed from these states either presents a new path of self-awareness or will contribute to the feeling of isolation, of feeling trapped. I am interested in the infinitesimally thin states of transition, when the mind and the body are at a brink that leads to improvisation as a tool for survival. These moments speak to our humanity and our self-awareness of Being, as well as our ongoing awareness of death. For this current work, my goal is to encompass the viewer within an unfamiliar environment that depicts a site of the anxiety of the dystopian as a bridge to a larger questioning of the relationship between mortality and artifact.
THE WORK: PART I: PHYSICAL PROPERTIES

The installation itself is an isolated room with a ceiling built into the gallery space approximately sixteen feet in width, fourteen feet in depth, and eight feet in height. The walls and ceiling are constructed out of aluminum metal studs and lined with large panels of aluminum sheet metal screwed into the studs. There is a single point of access in and out of the space that was built into the center of the exposed 16-foot wall. Scattered within the structure are five floor to ceiling walls of varying widths, also made of metal studs and sheet metal that haphazardly fracture the interior space and act as the support for the ceiling. During the process of installation I allowed the sheet metal panels to bend and dent as I secured them to the studs. Within the structure I distributed a large amount of sand on the concrete gallery floors, approximately four inches in depth to create an uneven and unconventional terrain, and in certain areas such as the various corners of the interior space I piled the sand higher than four inches. I piled sand in specific places along the exterior of the structure, as well letting sand from the interior spill out of the entrance and into the gallery space. In the back of the structure is a sculpture of an astronaut’s spacesuit. The spacesuit is made largely out of 100% clear acrylic vinyl. The spacesuit is illuminated by three LED tubes that produce a bright, white/blue light, four feet in length, that are mounted to the walls at the floor facing the sculpture at the back of the room.
CRISIS: PART I

In my early twenties I began experiencing heart palpitations. At first it was just one. A mere half-second pause in the rhythm, then an extra heavy thump. A year later it happened again, a few times in one month. In the months to follow it grew in frequency to a point that I got scared and finally went to a doctor. I had been abusing drugs and alcohol consistently from a young age, which I assumed was the culprit, and the cardiologist I went to confirmed this. “If you continue using drugs and alcohol you are going to kill yourself,” he told me. The palpitations never went away, even in my sobriety. As overly sentimental as it is, I recall the first time I fell in love when I was resting my head on my first girlfriend's chest and listened to our heartbeats as they synced, beating in unison for almost an hour. Long before then, the sound of my mother’s heartbeat made me feel safe. These are shared experiences, in one way or another. But ever since that doctor appointment the sound and feeling of my heart beating has only served to remind me that some day I am going to die. What once served as a condition of life for me, is now a condition of death. Even to this day I have trouble falling asleep because it is impossible to escape my heartbeat. Many nights I find myself laying in bed staring at the ceiling, imagining my own death, but it is impossible for me to conceive of that final moment. In these late night, anxiety-ridden states, what I believe I am actually imagining, or rather being overwhelmed by, is the formlessness of the fear of death. It is debilitating to consider the narrowing of possibilities on a daily basis. Generally speaking, we all experience extended moments during which we circumvent our anxieties and fears, in a way that is similar to our ability to not constantly feel our clothes on our bodies. It is only when we put our clothes on, or
take them off, that the transition reminds us of our clothed state. In terms of my fears, these moments of transition occur when my heart palpitates, snapping me out of whatever I am doing, reminding me of the inevitable.

I want to leave more than a memory of a person after my passing. I have always made things, both music and visual art, and now that I have had a decade of living with this intensified acknowledgement and fear of my own demise, I know that this notion is intimately tied to my identity as an artist. Making art is my way of pushing back on the uncertainty of crossing over to the other side. Emotionally and psychologically it is a form of sustenance, in this way, being an artist is a type of survival.

CRISIS: PART II

In the fall of 2016 I came to an impasse. I found myself struggling to produce anything in my studio. Every time I entered what should be a sanctum, I was brought to my knees with anxiety. For months I had been carrying around in my backpack a U. S. military survival handbook from the 1970’s (a way to break away from the last few years of reading art theory and art criticism). In late November I was riding the train home and flipping through various sections of the handbook, and my interest in practical, life-saving techniques was made suddenly clear. At first, this text was merely a form of escape from academic structure. But in that one moment I realized something profound. “A source of information to deal with crisis scenarios,” became “I am in a crisis, and this is fertile material.” I spent the next three months sketching out various ideas and objects that I would make. It seemed I had found a new avenue for my creative process to reignite. At the time, I was considering my interest in anthropological exhibits at various natural history museums as a source of inspiration for how I could build and describe
my own experience. I wanted to use the known framework of the diorama to create objects and scenes that encapsulated the anxiety of my studio practice. I saw the absurdity of treating the museum diorama as an art installation as parallel to the absurdity of depicting survival skills with skills the artist needs to survive. Once I began to create these objects I found myself running up against my lack of skill sets with respect to the materials I was using. Everything fell apart. My perceived transition from unknowing to knowing disintegrated. I watched my new intuitions devolve into a space of total anxiety, another crisis. After a significant amount of time feeling yet again trapped in a mental loop of self-doubt amid the pressure of the impending end of my three years in graduate school, the idea of actualizing my anxiety and fear of death into an object opened the way to the work I am exhibiting in the thesis show.

ARTISTIC TRANSITIONS

When I was fifteen years old I started carrying a camera with me at all times. The camera was my filter, my shield and my megaphone. This lasted until I was twenty-nine when I began to feel that the medium of photography was falling short of my pursuits as an artist. My urges to explore new materials guided me to Hunter, where photography is one of the least practiced mediums. I spent the first five months of the program working with a mixture of paint and cornstarch that I would apply in layers to the backside of the canvas, so that when the thickened paint dried it left an impression of its shape and consistency on the front side of the canvas (Fig. 1). This removed the experience of color from the element of the painting and altered the relationship between the viewer and the canvas in a way that was as much about light as it was about the physical aspects of the painting. As I continued to experiment with this process and with the
paint and cornstarch mixture more generally, I began to consider how I might apply my ideas behind this process to reconfigure traditional aspects of photographic mediation, specifically to film itself. This was my return to photography, experimenting with the medium in an expanded field, the film as the object rather than the means to a print. For the following year I was making exposures of ambient light onto medium format and large format film. I would fold and wrinkle the film prior to exposure in the complete darkness of my bathroom at home, and using the crack under the bathroom door as the aperture, would expose the film to the light from sunrise. These film pieces would then be installed on the wall mounted to metal rods in various orientations, so when light passed through the film, a secondary image would be cast onto the wall like a slide projection. This process of layered mediation was fully engaged in the technical and presentational. Its engagement with the material ended at film’s formal characteristics and lacked psychological depth. In an attempt to bring a sense of emotional and interiority to the process, I began making photographs (using the traditional approach) on large format eight by ten-inch sheet film depicting spaces in my apartment that I considered to express a feeling of “nowhere” and “threshold,” such as a displaced, water-stained panel of the dropped-ceiling in my bedroom, the drain in my shower, the space underneath my bed. Similarly to the abstract pieces, I installed the film on the wall in various orientations, sometimes hitting the film with light at a severe angle to greatly distort the projected image. Ultimately I was unable to form a connection between the materiality of film’s active components and images of neglected spaces. As this was unsatisfactory I put the project on hold and moved on.
This current work I present as my thesis represents an even greater shift in my practice than my experimentation with painting and photography. While basic conceptual threads from my past work continue in this new work, the physical manifestation and scope of the project create an entirely new situation for me. The materials and processes are new territory, but a major shift is the necessity to delegate a portion of the labor to others who have the skills and experience needed to produce this piece. The greater scale of this piece is intended to affect the viewer, hopefully creating a shared experience of introspection and questioning of one’s surroundings. This piece physically engages the viewers’ bodies since they have to “leave the gallery” to enter my work and navigate and confront its enclosing space to participate in my imagined space of uncertainty and dystopia. I want the viewers’ perceptions of the space to oscillate between literal and metaphoric readings. When the experience becomes physically immersive and architectural in scale, one’s apperception of the work is heightened by necessity to locate oneself within the environment.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

There is much historical precedent for this in art. Movements and practices that have worked on an architectural scale have included Constructivism, Post-Minimalism, Earth Works, and works of the Light and Space scene, to name a few. More specifically I point to the practices and/or work of Gregor Schneider, Chris Burden, and Rachel Whiteread to bring historic context to my new piece.

Gregor Schneider is at the forefront of artists working with a constructivist derived method of installation. In 1985 he began a project titled, Haus Ur, where he modified the
rooms in an existing house to transform the rooms within (Figures 4-6). The viewer cannot discern original from re-made parts of the house. The built spaces are often modular, using motors and moving walls to conceal or reveal the rooms or passageways within the building. Each space he “re”-created within the pre-existing space was given a specific number and title. In this first iteration of this work, staged in Mönchengladbach-Rheydt, Germany, he often leaves the created spaces relatively barren. Parquet floors, white walls, perhaps a window or two. Uninhabited as they are, the rooms become filled with a fabricated emptiness, spaces of domestic ambiguity. In some cases, he installed a bed and nightstand in the room, or in another, a small kitchen table dressed with plates and flatware as if waiting for the presence of company. Yet the walls hold no framed photos, no flowers on the windowsills, nothing else to indicate human presence. It seems that the implication of the viewer being present in these sites activates a bifurcation between the “filled emptiness” of these spaces and the potential for human inclusion within the space. On Schneider’s website, for a description of a solo show on May 16th, 2016, titled, Double Life, Schneider relates his work to the viewer’s experience by saying, “It is as if one were to wander through the layers and undulations of one’s own brain in pursuit of the mechanisms of perception and knowledge.”¹ I am interested in this idea of using architectural space to form psychological experiences.

Chris Burden has run the gamut of performance art, sculpture, installation, video, and photography. I refer to his piece, Exposing the Foundation of the Museum, 1986-1988. In 1986 he was commissioned by MOCA for a show titled, Individuals: A Selected

*History of Contemporary Art, 1945-1986*, where he excavated the museum floors in three adjacent locations within one of the MOCA gallery spaces, exposing the actual foundations of that section of the museum (Figure 7). Each of the three ditches has a wooden stair set allowing the viewer access to the foundations. The spaces he revealed beneath the floor disrupt the perception of the other work exhibited by physically changing the institution. By unearthing the foundations of the museum, Burden was exposing as well as reinforcing the constructs of the aesthetic experience as framed by the institution of exhibition.

Rachel Whiteread is an artist whom I admire greatly. As a visual artist she exemplifies the profound quality of repetition and simulacrum, as her works depict segments of physical yet invisible space, as well as time. By creating casts of the space underneath the seat and between the legs of chairs, the space around a staircase, or the space between the four walls, floor and ceiling of a room, Whiteread confronts the viewer with the physical “negative space” of the institutional, domestic, and transitory spaces we inhabit. She works in a number of different materials, but what emerges regardless of the material is an uncanny austerity. Her work implicates the viewer in their apparent blindness to these spaces, forcing one to consider more deeply the point of intersection between perception and the invisible. In a video on the website for the National Gallery of Art, while discussing a specific piece titled, *Ghost*, she describes her work as “[trying to] ...mummify the air in the room”² (Figure 8). This comment alone speaks volumes to my intentions as an artist. My intention is to make the viewer aware of something invisible, and to tie that experience to our sense of mortality.

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These artists explore ideas that I relate to my own, which I define as the architectural uncanny. My goal with this work is to force the viewer out of one space, into another, and into yet another. Leaving the gallery to enter my installation, confronting the confinement and severity of the interior space, then confronting the sculpture of the space suit, yet another interior space, one which defines the line of survival, the line between life and death. This is the interlocking of my real and my imaginary. The metal environment is both foreboding yet concealing and the transparent spacesuit is both sustaining yet revealing. Like an exoskeleton, these two separate shells protect as much as they prohibit, they provide stability yet have the potential to instill fear. In a similar sense, the object quality of both the structure and the space suit denote a localized experience that connotes a non-localized experience. The aesthetics of the environment and the sculpture as a space suit refer to an imagined experience in some far off reality, likening this work to the aesthetics and narratives of science fiction. Yet the experience of the work as an immersive installation re-locates your body in the present, in the physical space of the work. What I want to emerge is a moment of self-awareness as the viewer connects their own experiences to the harshness of the interior space and the emptied sculpture. At the same time, the nature of the installation subtly depicts a separate narrative. The space suit sits, waiting for something to come, ostensibly waiting for all eternity. This is why I titled this piece Mortality and Artifact. It exists as an excavation of my fear and anxiety about my death, an action that reveals the foundations of what is mostly imperceptible, like the air in a room. But unlike the daily experience of air, we come to an end, and the images portrayed here in my work
have the potential to exist indefinitely, like a pottery shard, or water frozen at the bottom of the arctic ice sheet.

THE WORK, PART II: THE SPACESUIT

In considering the potential of this idea of survival, and the progress of my thinking towards a personally relevant and tenable representation of this idea, I arrived at the spacesuit. Not only does it relate to science fiction and a renewed popular topic of space travel, but as an object it allows life to continue as it maintains a suitable environment in which the body and mind can continue to exist. Beyond its relatively thin extent lies virtually nothing other than the vacuum of space. Functional spacesuits have 14 layers of various materials and functions. I have reduced this sculpture to essentially a single layer of transparent acrylic vinyl and packing tape in order to intensify the minute distance between life and certain death. Equally essential to the object is the notion of certainty versus uncertainty. The interior environment of a spacesuit is the certainty of life and just beyond the outer surface are the ideas of nothingness and endlessness. This barrier that the suit creates therefore represents the point of transition from one state to another, from the conditions of the possibility of life to the last surface or layer dividing life from death. This moment is in essence abstract. The point of departure from life is unknowable, because it is here that consciousness, as we know it, dissolves. In psychological terms this is “the intimate edge,” the space where therapy does its work. All our traumas and our repressions reside here, in a nearly imperceptible space. This is precisely why I find so much meaning in the object quality of a spacesuit. It forces us to confront that which we fear most whether it’s the idea of

3 Jason Rudolph, conversation about therapy, May 9, 2017
death or the effects of the past on our present mind. We react to such moments of realization with coping mechanisms we have very little control over. Anxiety itself is a natural tool of the survival instinct, a form of self-preservation. When threatened, we are vulnerable and often act rashly. This is why I built the spacesuit with a transparent material. It is meant as a mechanism to consider the perception of the imperceptible, to reveal how our bodies and minds are hardwired to exist without continually questioning our own mortality. In the end, I want it to be a reminder for others in the way my heart is a reminder for me.

**THE WORK: PART III: THE STRUCTURE**

My original plan for the structure was to build a series of narrow corridors that wrapped around the inner perimeter of the structure, opening up into an interior chamber where the spacesuit would be displayed. My thought was to create a space that transports the viewer from the gallery into a psychologically compromised space, akin to the experience of a maze. I was allocated limited space for this exhibition and had limited funds so I reimagined my structure to accommodate these resulting restrictions. What I arrived at is a single room made entirely out of metal. The interior space is fractured by floor to ceiling walls, specifically placed to obscure an overview of the space itself. This is meant to produce a physical experience of confinement and a state of anxiety. The placement of the walls as well obscures the view of the spacesuit sculpture, forcing the viewer to navigate the space in order to encounter the spacesuit up close. I am interested in the potential for this interior space to project the idea of anxiety while conversely embodying a space of contemplation. The tension of this
dichotomy parallels the thinness of the transitional space discussed above, between life and death; “the intimate edge.”

THE RELEVANCE OF SCIENCE FICTION

My thoughts about this work have changed significantly over the course of the last 5 months. It wasn’t until the end of March of 2017 that I landed on the idea of creating a maze-like structure with a spacesuit inside. As mentioned earlier, it was the notion of survival that started me down this pathway with respect to creating sculptures based on skills for wilderness survival as a metaphor for survival skills as an artist. After a frustrating process of forced reconfiguration of this idea, I came to the realization that at the core of all science fiction narratives is survival, or self-preservation, on the level of both the individual and the species. Whether the introduction of conflict is an alien species, artificial intelligence, or a post-apocalyptic world pitting humans against humans, what is at stake is always life itself.

Escapism is a natural part of being human. For me, science fiction films have been my go-to as an avenue of escaping life. I find it interesting that my escape from life resides in a narrative of the struggle for life. There are plenty of things I could identify to describe why I am drawn to science fiction, but most would not actually reach the core of the genre. As I consider it more thoroughly I have realized that my personal obsession over my own mortality, specifically the extent of that moment of passing, is what I have found to be the reason for being so drawn to the genre, to the fantasy of imagined struggle. Science fiction narratives portray a direct and boiled-down view of the human condition: consciousness and fear of the other. In the words of Kaja Silverman in her book, *The Miracle of Analogy*, “[...]we are not ‘ourselves’ when we are
isolated from others. Two is the smallest unit of Being." Yet to be conscious (as we know it) is to be isolated, to be singular, one life, one necessity. Through the differences that we perceive of the other we grow an understanding of the self. This formative experience allows for social tolerance as well as violence, both being tactics of self-preservation. Generally speaking, our brains are necessarily built to perceive our own personal relationship to our world to be "correct," and therefore to value our perspective over that of others, making defensive strategies that have the potential to lead to forms of violence as a quicker avenue towards self-preservation, rather than the more peaceful and self-aware approach of tolerance. Ultimately it is the fear of the loss of one’s own life (or culture) that acts as a reminder of the inherent isolation of one’s own life crossing the threshold to death. The uncertainty of that space of transition plagues us all at varying degrees of intensity and continuousness. What I have come to find so fulfilling about science fiction narratives is that regardless of the specific content of the films or books, there is constantly the fear of death (the Alien series), or, the fear of the loss of self (Invasion of the Body Snatchers, Night of the Living Dead). Science fiction as a genre reflects an imagined space of such fears as well as an imagined space of survival.

\footnote{Kaja Silverman, The Miracle of Analogy or The History of Photography, Part One (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 88.}
CONCLUSION

*Mortality and Artifact* is as much about our relationship to time as it is about states of psychological transitioning, fear of uncertainty and death, my identity as an artist, and the depicted fantasy of survival in a threatening world. Time is inherent in all of these points of consideration. The unidirectional experience of time is what accounts for the fear of uncertainty as we cannot experience the future until it transitions to the present. Anxiety is an instinctual stress mechanism to heighten our senses for accurately navigating the future unknown, for surviving. Imagined spaces of survival take place in fictional timelines allowing escape to be far removed from the present, from the real. And of course time is how we delineate and divide our experience of consciousness before death. As an artist, the consideration of your own death becomes less about how you as a person will be remembered and more about what works you leave behind that will act as artifacts of a world born of your mind. In this way, these works “cheat” death for you by acting as placeholders for your past interventions into the world, an umbilicus or passageway connecting your past essence to a future present.

The idea of time is most strongly reinforced in experiencing my installation as a tomb. Cultures around the world have constructed tombs for millennia, as spaces that function as sanctuaries for the dead. Most notably are the tombs of the ancient Egyptians, created for pharaohs and queens as gateways to the afterlife, adorned with various objects such as canopic jars filled with the deceased’s organs, burial masks depicting the likeness of the deceased, ornamented handheld fans, games such as Senet (which translates to “passing” and was played by the people of Egypt for thousands of years) for “downtime” in death, paintings relating to triumphs of the
deceased, tools made for hunting, among other things that will aid their transition to, and existence within, the realm of the dead. These tombs function as spaces outside of time, as they bear the necessary elements to sustain the soul throughout eternity of death.

In essence, in *Mortality and Artifact*, I have created a tomb for myself. The structure itself manifests as a separate entity from the gallery space that houses it. As you cross the threshold through a single point of entry, you are immediately confronted by the metal walls and ceiling, scattered collections of sand along the walls, in conjunction with a shift in light temperature from the warm yellow light that illuminates the surrounding gallery to the cool white/blue light that emanates throughout the interior of my piece. This manipulation of materials creates a dramatic environmental shift that evokes the feeling of being displaced to an unfamiliar realm or alternate reality. The experience of crossing the threshold echoes the passing from life into death. The space suit, designed and constructed based on my own body proportions, is hanging from a chain in the ceiling, and acts as a magical effigy of the dead. Its air supply unit is separated from the body, like the canopic jars holding the organs of the deceased. My handprints from the process of building the structure are seen all over the interior of the space. They carry my unique mark, the swirl patterns of my fingers and lines of my palms, in a way, my likeness. The suit itself hangs drooped from a hook, evoking a sense of sorrow or loss, aloneness. It is a shell of a body. My handprints from the process of building the structure are seen all over the interior of the space. They carry my unique mark, the swirl patterns of my fingers and lines of my palms, in a way, my likeness. The suit itself hangs drooped from a hook, evoking a sense of sorrow or loss,
aloneness. It is a shell of a body. The work as artifact functions as a symbol of my sense of self, imbued with my fears and anxieties that in part define who I am as a person and who I am as an artist. In 2014, during an interview for attending the MFA program at the International Center of Photography, Justine Kurland asked me, "In your work, what is at stake for you as the artist?" At that time, my response was, "I do not know. I suppose this is why I want to go back to school." Now, I can firmly stand behind this answer to that question: What is at stake in my art is self-preservation, the making of objects that represent my exploration of the concealed and vulnerable spaces of my psyche. I present this work, Mortality and Artifact, as a monument to my internal struggle, as a symbolic act to reclaim control over death and obliteration.


FIGURES

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Mortality and Artifact, Thesis Installation view 12, 2017
Mortality and Artifact, Thesis Installation view 13, 2017
Mortality and Artifact, Thesis Installation view 14, 2017
Mortality and Artifact, Thesis Installation view 16, 2017
Mortality and Artifact, Thesis Installation view 17, 2017
Mortality and Artifact, Thesis Installation view 19, 2017
Mortality and Artifact, Thesis Installation view 20, 2017
Mortality and Artifact, Thesis Installation view 21, 2017
Mortality and Artifact, Thesis Installation view 22, 2017
Mortality and Artifact, Thesis Installation view 23, 2017
Mortality and Artifact, Thesis Installation view 24, 2017
Mortality and Artifact, Thesis Installation view 25, 2017
Mortality and Artifact, Thesis Installation view 26, 2017
Mortality and Artifact, Thesis Installation view 27, 2017
Mortality and Artifact, Thesis Installation view 28, 2017
Mortality and Artifact, Thesis Installation view 29, 2017
Mortality and Artifact, Thesis Installation view 30, 2017