What Adds Up To Being: The Work of Tanna Burchinal

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WHAT ADDS UP TO BEING: THE WORK OF TANNA BURCHINAL

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
Visual Arts

by
Tanna L. Burchinal
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Accepted by:
David M. Detrich, Committee Chair
Todd A. McDonald
Beth Anne Lauritis
ABSTRACT

My practice takes form around embodied experience. I affect signifiers of the human body within the ordered grid, the scientific text, and the logic of the machine, to highlight the interdependencies of physical bodies and those social constructs that produce and influence identity. We are a part of these constructs that both extend and limit; we are enacting and interacting with them. I do not aim to eradicate these structures of power (without them, our identities are in chaos). Instead, I point out the pitfalls of these constructs that are perceived as unchanging, by making interaction and experience integral to the experience of my works. I seek to break down the boundaries between the viewer and work. I aim to not only show that corporeal being does not encompass all that we are, but also to question our placement and authority within social contexts.

I make artwork dependent on interaction, in the works Salt and Grid; I give the audience an agency to act within or upon the work to highlight their connection and potential disruption to neutrality and order. Untitled is a personal staged performance. With Removing Oneself from the Body, I challenged the logic of self by dissecting a scientific context and thus separating it from the signifier of self. In #39854 and The Machine has Empathy, I have taken into consideration how the audience both encounters, and is encountered by the work through sound and material. The audience and the machine are driving a new subject that emerged from within the text by the “I”s. In every instance I have explored how identity is lost, changed, and built from contexts that are resistant to the physical body.

I contend that showing an art object as a concrete fixed point, or in an unchanging
state, is problematic because this is inaccurate. The contexts I adopt carry powers that are very rarely seen as transformative, impermanent, or flawed. I am uncomfortable with the division between permanence and ephemerality. I reject how the body is seen as this prehistoric thing and is excluded from these economies. That is why I place them together fusing the corporeal with logic until the contexts shift to accommodate for human interaction.

I use corporeal markers differently than I affect cold and clinical contexts. I recognize I have biases, and I take responsibility for the elements I adopt, including my suspicions of physical constructs that read as permanent and hierarchies that seem to exclude or define bodies, even though these constructs are in fact plastic. The audience should be inside of the work, but also affecting it, understanding of its power and their placement in it to better question and reconsider what adds up to being.
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This text is dedicated to the faculty of the Art Department of Clemson University, especially David M. Detrich, Todd A. McDonald, and Beth Anne Lauritis. It is an honor to have the opportunity to work with y’all.
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CHAPTER ONE

AFFIRMATION OF PRESENCE

The terrain, pale and shimmery, robs moisture from the air. An atmosphere of white obscurces architectural boundaries and establishes an alluring but difficult to navigate matrix. Footprints indicate the passage of bodies, overlapping, pushing and pulling new signifiers, disrupting the galleries perceived stability. Weighted feet crunch out the ephemeral markers of individuals. With every new mark, the disappearance of another, a simultaneous erasure and affirmation of presence.

My practice takes form around embodied experience. I affect signifiers of the human body within the ordered grid, the scientific text, and the logic of the machine, to highlight the interdependencies of physical bodies and those social constructs that produce and influence identity. We are a part of these constructs that both extend and limit; we are enacting and interacting with them. I do not aim to eradicate these structures of power (without them, our identities are in chaos). Instead, I point out the pitfalls of these constructs that are perceived as unchanging, by making interaction and experience integral to the experience of my works. I seek to break down the boundaries between the viewer and work. I aim to not only show that corporeal being does not encompass all that we are, but also to question our placement and authority within social contexts.

*Salt* (Image 1.1, 1.2, Video 1.1), was constructed after experimenting with silhouettes. Its formal and sensory qualities transformed the space in observable and less observable ways. It made the gallery walls and floors merge with a hazy edge, extending the galleries perceived neutrality. I gave the viewer a stake in claiming a position within
that neutrality because of their literal impressions. With participation came inclusion, tracing the viewer’s marks as one in flux, until dispersing under the weight of the others.

The salt shifted under slick concrete making the space unstable. This slight difficulty slowed down the movement of the viewers and heightened their awareness of their mark making, flipping the gallery as untouchable on its head. The benefit in facilitating this gives the audience permission to approach an otherwise unaccommodating context; thereby promoting change to the treatment of a space that typically resists the viewer’s marks.

Keeping interaction in mind, I shifted my material use to the index. In the piece *Grid*, (Image 2.1, 2.2, Video 2.1), I questioned the stability of ordered lines to reveal fragile interactions. The grid is a representation of both science and spiritualism, in opposition to what is real or natural.¹ That is why I have adopted its name in the title. My goal is to impact spaces that are void of reference to the physical body with residues shed from the body, namely human hair. I strung the rows of hair near a passageway. The result is a continuous strand of linked hairs growing from within the wall. By organizing hair this way, I have infected an otherwise pristine space with the ambiguity and ephemerality of the body.

The finished work is airy, nearly invisible to the viewer, moving when the audience creates a gust, changing when the viewer acts (sometimes without the viewer even knowing). This tension, commenting on what order implies, is limited. We are not quite a part of the gallery or the ordered lines, but not fully removed from them.

That power is lost in neutrality; the viewer cannot affect what is seemingly placed at a hierarchy outside of their economies, but it is not lost with the hair. Hair viewed separately from the body can be seen as abject, but it is also familiar, a marker of being human, broad yet specific to an individual. It sits on the perimeters of identity, integral to our makeup as beings, and a threat that is rejected when displaced from the body.

By the audiences affecting the composition, lines changing and binding, further puts the viewer’s perception of the work at stake. The top of the work keeps its integrity but over time the hair matts and tangles. As the marks change it is hard to resist reordering the matted lines, as the act of viewing pushes the composition closer to disorder. What marks are kept as valuable and what marks are rejected as dirty exist together in this work.

Subtlety, process, and personal experience are important to the execution of my work, to reach a broader and powerful breadth of meaning. My work develops this on different levels. I would like to compare my practice to Ann Hamilton’s. Her art is engaging, and poetic while at the same time accomplishing an intimacy, cultivated by a form of embodied knowledge. She centers her work on the goals of making tangible the intangible within a group experience, what she calls being “alone together”. I relate to her practice in that I produce works and installations that have disparate elements, connected by evidence of labor. I am in continual rotation in my practice, of allowing time to develop tedious processes and stepping back to see how the elements work together. I see these as two separate but important steps in developing my ideas.

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Early in her career, Hamilton's goal was to have her art evoke the questions she felt as a society we need to be asking. Later, she questioned: how do we be together? The question I am asking in my work is what are we in relation to social constructs? I contend that showing an art object as a concrete fixed point, or in an unchanging state is problematic, because these constructs are malleable to our interactions. That is why I engage specific contexts that have an implied order and logic: the grid and its systematized mathematics, the industrial machine, text as a tool of knowledge, all carry powers that are very rarely seen as transformative, impermanent, or flawed.

It is not social constructs I affect that I am most suspicious of, but their representation as immutable in the face of interaction and encounter. The contexts I adopt carry powers that are very rarely seen as transformative, impermanent, or flawed. I am uncomfortable with the division between permanence and ephemerality. I reject how the body is seen as this primitive thing and is excluded from these economies. That is why I place them together, fusing the corporeal with logic until the contexts shift to accommodate for human interaction. This is perhaps more revealing of my psychology than I want it to be, and because of my suspicions, I cannot claim my work to be neutral, even though it is sparse, but rather it is disruptive of that claim.

CHAPTER TWO

DRIVING THE VOICE OF THE SUBJECT

After obtaining a copy of *Gray’s Anatomy*, and researching the history of anatomy art, I came across a black and white illuminated letter with an image of cherubs dissecting a pig. In the image titled *Cherubs carrying out vivisection on a pig*, dated 1543, in Andreas Vesalius's 'De Humani Corporis Fabrica', the cherubs were menacing as they worked. They hovered over the pig, tied down at its hooves, and split open at its front. The image, was not a scientific illustration, but instead a satire about practices of anatomy. I saw in this image an example of how different contexts allow us to approach, handle, and express the complicated emotions around abjection. Through satirical, religious, artistic, and scientific practices’, some are permitted to immerse themselves into what is considered abject.

I was thrown off guard to see the cherubs portrayed as mischievous anatomists, because later anatomy images are much more clinical. When I saw the image I realized I had been in this space before. I had been invited to hunt deer in East Texas by my former boyfriend’s family. I saw this as a kind of initiation. When a boar was killed, the process of cleaning the animal was made awkward, because the boar had been shot in the back leg. As a result of its severing limb, it had to be cleaned differently.

In watching the family handle the situation, I saw in them what I had originally feared from the boar. I thought of the boar as a monster, but now this creature had lost its power. The manner in which the father figure of the family disregarded all other’s advice to slaughter the animal and enforced his position was more aggressive than the actual
killing. The familial interactions during the butchering, and their discussion about the best way to divide its body highlighted the xenophobic, homophobic, and patriarchal family of which I was becoming a part. My perception of the family changed in a sudden and painful way.

This change in perspective inspired me to create the work *Untitled* (Video 3.1). In this performance, I made literal connections using my body, my hair, and the skull of a boar, building a tangible relationship between these elements. The performance was delicate but invasive. The cleaned skull became a relic of what the animal was and a reminder of its violent passing. I worked to connect the hairs to the sensory areas of my face. My new understandings are tied with my body and the body of the boar through the abject hair. By systematically tying the hair I was able to reconstruct connections with my visceral experience that can be seen as an empathetic awareness built from unease. Through my labor I was able to handle the hair, facilitating what would otherwise be impossible or intolerable. Capitalizing upon the ephemeral nature of the hair made me aware of how the connections we build can be so easily destroyed. It is a reminder that my being was shaped by this breakdown in understanding the boar.

This use of labor continued in my work *Removing Oneself from the Body* (Image 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4). The scientific context of *Gray’s Anatomy* was interesting to me because of its ability to control how the human body is viewed. I realized it was not working for me as a filter, as I found it cold and intimidating. I proceeded to dividing the text by cutting out the letter “I”. The anatomy book, standing as a metaphor for the knowledge and logic behind the understanding of our physiological being, and “I”,
referred to all parts of us that make up our identity separate from this order.

By dissecting these economies of language and self, I questioned what we add up to and compromised the importance of the anatomy book as scientific knowledge, through the destruction of the book and measuring of the “I”s. There is a tension that recalls Robert Morris’s *I Box*, 1963, where subjects and objects were separated but representative of the same being. In my work, the audience does not need to understand the entirety of the text to visually recognize the obsessive pursuit through tedious removal. By placing the book in a surgical setting, I am using its own clinical context to undermine itself, by the presentation of a scalpel and surgical tray. There is a bit of nonsensical darkness in the futile process of segregating the corporal being from the cerebral self but through this separation I have carved out how identity is lost in its context, when in fact we are apart of it.

But there was also another play on its text that happened when I began to separate the “I”s from the book, a first person outside myself was created. I came by this after switching from cutting the “I”s to punching them from the pages. The increase in productivity allowed me to see the body of text differently. I was not focused on one page, but seeing the whole text.

Researching the origins of modern anatomy imagery and how the science community handles sources of knowledge obtained through humanitarian crisis. The protective blanket of science hid more from the books origins than I expected. Many collections in universities have obtained physical artifacts that have origins from times of

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war, and slavery. Some book sources that are in use today also carry this burden, but all is held on a level playing field in the text. To be left with a first person subject in a context that masks those beings, uproots the books unbiased nature. I was confronted, through my work, with its contents as not being on equal ground anymore.

Focusing on what I had just made, a pile of punch cards, I dove into how the body fit into that technology. I came across the five-dollar chemistry set. Manu Prakash, Assistant Professor of Bioengineering at Stanford, created a programmable diagnostic tool out of one of the first computers ever made; a punch card music box. By attaching a plate underneath the player, he created a tool that is capable of testing on with medical diagnostic. I was intrigued by the history of the music box and by sound. Sound is experienced differently from visual properties of art, take for example Robert Morris’s *Box with the Sound of its own Making*, 1961. The unembellished wooden cube, with the recording of its construction, disrupts the mystery of the object’s origins. The sound cues the audience to its making, witch emits from within the box, making it appear to be contemplating its creation.

I wanted to see how the audience would react to sound. I first created a small music box called #39854 (Image 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4, Video 4.1). When encountering the work the audience is aware of the materiality first; the wood composition adds warmth and its

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scale is approachable. The sound is soft with a short note range characteristic of lullabies. The result was a player that facilitates an intimate exchange, made unsettling. There is a joy in operating the box but also an implication of domination by the viewer driving the voice of the subject and the images, disembodied from their book format.

This did not satisfy me, for as darling and somewhat repulsive as it was, having a box operable by the audience, I wanted a more intimidating context. I achieved this by making *The Machine has Empathy* (Image 5.1, 5.2, Video 5.1). The range of the composition and player operate on a different level from #39854. I switch the small object and wood for steel and a monolithic structure reminiscent of minimalist sculptures. The form expressed something esthetically mass-produced and inexpressive from its industrial surface, coupled with a random and rich sound. The moveable composition suggestive of technology is rooted in the tower, which spits out and consumes the programed strip. The work confronts us with sound first. I was not expecting the power of that encounter, focusing on the form itself as being the most intimidating thing about the work. I created the slits down its faces, showing its inner workings to break up the forms power, causing tension between the interior and exterior, but in reality, the sound became more powerful than the machine. The subject that was removed is chaotically sounded out, the box mimicking what has been programmed into the pages. It is important that the anatomy imagery is visible in the scrolling composition, to cue the audience in on the connection between the body and the machine. Unlike Morris's box it is not trying to express a form of selfhood, but instead is driving a subject.
CHAPTER THREE

CONCLUSION

I make artwork dependent on interaction. In the works *Salt* and *Grid*; I give the audience an agency to act within or upon the work to highlight their connection and potential disruption to neutrality and order. *Untitled* is a personal staged performance. With *Removing Oneself from the Body*, I challenged the logic of self by dissecting a scientific context and thus separating it from the signifier of self. In #39854 and *The Machine has Empathy*, I have taken into consideration how the audience both encounters, and is encountered by the work through sound and material. In every instance I have explored how identity is lost, changed, and built from contexts that are resistant to the physical body.

I use corporeal markers differently than I affect cold and clinical contexts. I recognize I have biases, and I take responsibility for the elements I adopt, including my suspicions of physical constructs that read as permanent and hierarchies that seem to exclude or define bodies, even though these constructs are in fact plastic. The audience should be inside of the work, but also affecting it, understanding of its power and their placement in it to better question and reconsider what adds up to being.
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