Low-Tech Esthetics

by

Justin Klocke

B.F.A., Iowa State University, 2005

A Report Submitted to the Lamar Dodd School of Art
of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment
of the
Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF FINE ARTS
Low-Tech Esthetics

by

Justin Klocke

Approved:

Typed Name, Major Professor

5·2·12
Date
My methods, attitudes, materials, approaches, and techniques changed over the
course of my graduate studies. These were partly conscious decisions, and partly
unconscious. I discovered the underlying theme in nearly all the work was defined by
minimalism, aesthetic and material conservation, and a reaction to excess. I started
focusing on digital techniques (especially video work) midway through my studies,
which lead to an unexpected body of work. My work in video and sound lead to
discoveries within my process of thinking about and creating art.

I entered my studies with an object-making focus excelling at creating small,
precision pieces of jewelry with moving components. My interested lied in how a person
would react to the ways in which the work moved. I used the boxes to create an
appreciation for the works through movement.

Quality of craftsmanship\(^1\) was a driving focus in my work, as well as interaction
by holding and operating the work gained more importance. The ‘Box Series’ consisted
of handheld fabricated boxes with complex, yet unnecessary mechanical movements.
They were kind of hand held machine without a purpose like 5072 - 11 - BR – NI
pictured below. They were no longer jewelry, which I had been making prior to the
series.\(^2\) The boxes were held, and not worn. Exploration in form became a focus; the
boxes lost aspects of precision, and gained a more personality.

---

\(^1\) At the time, my brand of craftsmanship was steeped in precision, cleanliness and
highly finished work. I didn’t use patina, as I felt it acted as a distraction from
properly finished surfaces.

\(^2\) 5021 - 09 – SS, sterling silver and 5035 - 10 - SS - AU -X are from this series.

Eventually all function was lost. It was, at this point, my thesis work was conceived. I was, at the time, unaware of the connections the “Fold Series” and its
minimalist qualities would have with my thesis and video work. From this point on, I started to decipher a difference between ‘objects I like to make’ and ‘art I like to make,’ machines being the former and video and sound work being the latter.

While making a transitory body of work that was still researching movement, use, and mechanism, my digital calipers\(^3\) broke. I decided it would be a good exercise for me not to replace them. I already knew how to work precise. Filing pieces down to exact dimensions made things over worked and too perfect and too machine like. This was the start of a ‘loosening up’ phase, not just in how I constructed pieces, but it also made my thought process more fluid.

Ornament had never been a prominent trait of my work. Much of the form earlier work was ornamented by function and precision. Previous sentence not clear. As my work lost the need for function, I looked to form. I started with bending, crimping, and unfolding sheet. I liked the esthetics of objects made without hammer marks, or other identifiers of the hand. The downside to such work is that it appears cold and disconnected from the handmade process. Folding allowed me to make graceful manipulations, but did not leave the hammered surface. It allowed just enough information to show the work was handmade.

Eventually the folding process became more subtle. I started making models from sheets of paper with simple cuts and crimps. The metal gained personality from the bends, and didn’t require going back in to remove any remnants of the process. Instead, I selectively filed certain edges to highlight specific areas. What came from the work was a

\(^3\) A measuring tool used for accuracy within .10mm.
more fluid and 'warmer' sort of minimal form. They were clean, crisp, but most importantly, they were poetic.

"Folded Cortona Bowl." copper intaglio plate, sterling silver, 2011

My practice had departed from the skill in which I was trained in, jewelry and metalsmithing, and procured a sculptural form. The materials I chose are commonly found in a construction site, and are generally associated with "quick" building techniques. As my practice and process developed, I started to see an opportunity for interaction in video, light, and sound. The tactility I sought in the earlier boxes could be replaced with a type of interaction we experience every day on computers, radio, and television based in video and sound.
Video Influences and History

In my second year I was able to take a video class, and I have worked in the medium since. The medium was completely new to me, and I felt completely free to explore. I had been focused in object-making since starting my undergraduate studies, and had not had an interest in a medium outside of the 3D crafts realm. The act of editing in Final-Cut Pro is based on the same techniques film editors were using, which was done by hand. Editing in Final-Cut Pro did not require learning the skills of cutting and gluing the "correct" way, only using the correct buttons and functions to edit digitally. This erased any of my prior notions of what I thought was the proper way to build an art piece. Part of my attraction to video is the process. Final Cut Pro is all digital editing, however the basic techniques are quite tactile – cutting, moving, pasting. It is much easier to experiment in the digital formant, which allowed me to go out on a limb and make mistakes.

Film and video as an art form is barely over a century old, and is quite young compared to other forms of art. The division between cinema and film became apparent in the early part of the century but by the 60's, especially with the Fluxus artists, film was starting to define itself. It’s still quite open as to what film/video art can be, and in my opinion, it could be most anything that uses the media in any way. I became interested in a few video artists in particular – Bas Jan Ader, Wolf Vostell, and Nam June Paik. Paik and Vostell used objects along side their videos. Paik often used televisions and physically altered their working parts to create his work, and was know for his creation of video art through altering and making his own machines. Wolf Vostell is the

---

4 Fluxus art included works in a wide variety of mediums, and favored simplicity over complexity. It was open to any material and technique.
first artist to use a television in his work, and created work that used the TV as a means of displaying moving media and sound. In my video work, I have combined space with video and sound, looking into creating a connection between the viewer, space, and the work; blending all three together.

Video provided a turning point, as I was able to remove myself from an object-making mindset and approach my work from new angle. I retained the tactile and physical qualities of an object-maker, and was able to apply them in a new method. It also let me make my objects for the videos and sound in a less precise and craft driven manner with parts made of foam and duct tape.

Video became a medium and material. I used light produced by video in Cones, and Pulse Wall, but also works as a medium on its own as in the Corn Series.

"Cones", video, mixed media, 2011.
Wolf Vostell, “Sun In Your Head,” 1963

Bas Jan Ader, “Fall I,” 1970


**Corn Videos**

While working on the sound pieces, I was using a more literal representation to explore consumption. Corn. The US economy relies heavily on corn commodity for fuel, plastics, and food. We find corn or corn by product in nearly everything we eat. Corn is the reason for a complex mixture of farm subsidies, national politics.\(^5\) The “Corn Series” allowed me to explore more with my video content. I was able to experiment with

\(^5\) Would corn and wind energy production be national topics if Iowa’s political caucus was later in the presidential nomination process?
composition as well as become more expressive. I became an actor in the videos, which was outside of my comfort zone, but is a necessary component in telling a story.

The corn based works were based on absurdity and humor. They are a little odd, and sometimes, a little disgusting. "HFC" mocks the process of taking raw corn and turning it into edible food. At the end of the video, I eat what has been made into "food" by a series of quirky and clunky handmade processing machines.

![Video Stills from "HFC, "2012](image)

**Sound Work**

The sound work started through studying interactive works like work by Ben Rubin and Mark Hansen. One piece that had a particular influence was Haroon Mirza’s "The National Apavilion of Then and Now," a piece I was fortunate enough to see at the Venice Biennial. The piece was a sound and UV proof room built in the gallery. The viewer walks into a silent room and soon, they are bombarded with finely tuned sound and light. The sound and light builds simultaneously and in a very crisp manner is terminated, making the absence of sound or light stronger than the sound or light that existed a second before. This piece was important in to me in the way I thought about sound and light and how sound, in particular, could have a strong effect if the visuals were not overpowering the sound.
I wanted to use sound as more than an accessory to a video or installation making it less of a soundtrack and more of an integral part of the work. Mirza’s ‘Then and Now’ uses physical properties of the sound and light. “Pulse Wall” (pictured below) was created a few months before I saw Mirza’s work, and uses a similar method of building light and sound. “Pulse Wall” projects white circles onto plaster blocks above the viewer’s normal viewing plane. As the video progresses the pulsating light and sound become more intense and sharp then eventually cease and the sequence is restarted.

Haroon Mirza “The National Apavilion of Then and Now,” 2011, Silver Lion Award winner, Venice Bienale
Big Box Influence

I grew up in Audubon County, Iowa, in what is known as America's Heartland. Presumably, any area of the 'Heartland' would be strongly representative of America. Sprawl and "big box consumerism" wasn't a thought in Audubon County\(^6\), and sets it apart from the average American consumer's purchasing experience. I lived 30 minutes\(^7\) away from the nearest "big box" store.

\(^6\) Only near the end of my final term in my graduate studies did I learn that my home county is the third least populous county in Iowa\(^6\).
\(^7\) Distance is often measured in minutes of travel in the rural Midwest. Usually a 30-minute drive is approximately 30 miles.
"Spending Eternity / Victims of Endless Convenience," Thesis Exhibition

After almost a year of continually simplifying my work (especially my jewelry and metal work), I started to understand why I felt the need to do so. The "Fold Series" that started as a formal study, started to make sense in the greater picture of my process. I was reacting against excessiveness. That reaction comes from the place and way I had been raised in rural "miles away from 'box stores," Iowa. Upon discovering this, I realized I was starting to make truly personal work – something I had not done in the previous two years.

"Spending Eternity / Victims of Endless Convenience" looks into the balance between spending for necessities versus desires. A quadraphonic soundscape is created using familiar sounds of a "big box" store parking lot. References are made to contemporary building techniques from sprawling urban development. The installation uses a simple palette and is made of foam, duct tape concrete, and the audio track. The color is subtle and the materials are simple and could be foam and duct tape are taken out of context enough that it takes a second to understand what they are made of, but most people can still identify them.

I sourced the sound for "Spending Eternity" from a Wal-Mart in Athens. I had been intrigued by the big box parking lots since 2006 while living in Eagle County in the Rocky Mountains in Colorado, another relatively small community. I found the space had a soothing quality at night, and recorded all of my samples in Athens after dark, as the sounds were calmer then. From the recordings I was able to select specific sounds and compose a more active, yet still soft soundtrack for the installation.
Another redeeming quality of the parking lot was its transitory status. The lot is the space between the consumer and the store. It is forgotten or ignored while the consumer walks in to buy their goods. With “Spending Eternity” I ask the consumer to rest in the transitory space, and think about what it is they are doing here. Are the items they are buying necessary? Where do they come from? What kind of effect do they have on the rest of the world?

"Spending Eternity / Victims of Endless Convenience", 2012
3D drawings of components and forms for “Spending Eternity.”

The shape of the funnel or cone became important when I was thinking about simplification. Not only did the cone reference the source of the sound like a gramophone, but also the funnel is a means of taking a large amount of matter and sending it through a small port. The funnel shapes originated while working with sound, and thinking about combining the object that put sound in space. Cones cooperate with and help define the space in which they were presented. Using sound required using speakers, and I had to determine how to present the sound. The speakers could be hidden out of sight and incorporated with the space. The viewer could still look into the cone and see the source of the sound after closer examination. The cones and installation create a space for the viewer to listen and become surrounded by the sounds of excess.
Concept and Process: Full Circle

My research in sound and video work started from an interest in exploring outside my comfort zone. My approach was relaxed and open. In comparison, my approach to making precious metals objects was very calculated and I did not allow myself to take risks or explore in ways that did not guarantee success. That thought process changed by adapting to and exploring with new media. In my mind, at the start, they had little connection to each other.

Now the folds of my jewelry and metal work have a direct connection in conceptual process to my video and sound work. My process started as a control and understanding of technique in materials. Now it has grown to allow that process to move and alter itself creatively, not hindered by proper techniques. It has become personal and has a direction in a reaction to excessiveness in whatever medium my art is created.