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THIS IS NOT A TREND

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THIS IS NOT A TREND

By

MICHAEL TIMOTHY WORKMAN

Undergraduate Thesis

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Bachelor of Fine Arts
in Art

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Missoula, MT

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Approved by:

Elizabeth Dove, Faculty Mentor
Fine Arts

ABSTRACT

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Art

THIS IS NOT A TREND

Faculty Mentor: Elizabeth Dove

This is not a trend is a multi-media art installation that examines the valuation system of contemporary art by creating an absurd situation that mimics a real commercial experience. The manner in which value is placed on art is artificial. Both the monetary and intellectual value of art is decided mostly on the reputation of the artist, their fame, and how well their work is marketed to the public. These characteristics are marketed to art consumers in order to sell them an authentic “art” experience. They are being sold the idea that they can be in the presence of genius; whether the art speaks to them or not is irrelevant, anything the artist touches becomes precious and valuable. Art making then becomes more about celebrity than thought. I am interested in analyzing the idea that an artwork’s value is directly attributed to who the artist is and how well they have established their genius.

I address these concerns by creating a multimedia art experience that utilizes these marketing tactics in order to sell the viewer my unique touch as a commercial product. I distill the touch into its most basic and literal form, the finger, in order to disingenuously suggest that all artistic value resides within the unique touch of the finger. Each finger is a plastic resin cast of my right index finger. They are sold for \$1.00 out of a vending machine. The unique value of my artistic touch is dismantled through its overt replication and sale. An infomercial manipulates the viewer into buying this product. While a series of art works with fingers mounted highlight the disconnect between the stated goals of some contemporary art and its relative ineffectiveness at commenting on complex social issues. By employing the same tactics used by advertisers I attempt to ultimately sell my touch as a useless consumer product, meant to be bought and tossed aside.

This Is Not A Trend

This is not a trend examines the valuation system of contemporary art by creating an absurd situation that mimics a real commercial experience. The manner in which value is placed on art is artificial. Both the monetary and intellectual value of art is decided mostly the reputation of the artist, their fame, and how well their work is marketed to the public. These characteristics are marketed to art consumers in order to sell them an authentic “art” experience. They are being sold the idea that they can be in the presence of genius; whether the art speaks to them or not is irrelevant, anything the artist touches becomes precious and valuable. Art making then becomes more about celebrity than thought.

There are common traits in the commercial world and the art world regarding approaches to between marketing and consumerism. Both industries are selling their customers a product, and both use facades of need to make their target demographic purchase the item. There is a level of deception and manipulation present in all forms of marketing and advertising. This is also present in the art world, where the level of celebrity of the artist is nearly the sole source of the art’s value. Artists like Jeff Koons, Andy Warhol, and Damian Hirst each made enormous amounts following a strategy of overproducing commercially successful work. Their work then becomes a parody of itself, more about their own celebrity than originality or concept. I am interested in analyzing the idea that an artwork’s value is directly attributed to who the artist is and how well they have established their genius.

This is not a trend examines authenticity in art making, specifically how art gets commercialized and commodified. I explore the authenticity of the art object by rejecting the notion of originality and uniqueness; I do this by using reproduction as a means to divest the value of the work. Touch is present in my work only in the most superficial way, there are no

marks being made, instead only a replica of the instrument that could create marks. By employing the same deceptive tactics used by advertisers I attempt to ultimately sell my touch as a useless product to consumers.

Throughout the exhibition I wanted to create a sense that there was no actual touch or mark-making present. The exhibit is intended to be experienced sequentially. It begins with the infomercial which absurdly hypes the product as something unique and precious, and attempts to entice the viewer to buy it. This video is the core of the installation; it sets up the major themes and gives the viewer a conceptual access point to interpret the rest of the work. The video displays the fingers as a commercial product, the shot styles are directly taken from actual infomercials. The narrator never explicitly states what he is selling; instead he superficially builds up the product as something genius that needs to be purchased. I am attempting to employ the same tactics that commercial advertisers use to sell products to the masses. These tactics are deceptive, manipulative and superficial.

The next facet of the exhibit is a series titled *The Touch*. This series examines the tendency to trivialize complex issues in contemporary art. The pieces consist of plastic fingers suspended upon the surface of a white plastic backdrop. The execution is clean and sterile, similar to the video work. Throughout this body of work I use white to reinforce an environment completely devoid of any human touch. Instead of using traditional high art materials, I opted to use plastic because of its relation to commercialism and its reputation as a low quality and cheap material. Each piece is named in a systematic fashion. The first word is the subject matter and the next word is always “Touch”, for example “Identity Touch” or “Erotic Touch”. Touch becomes the branding of the series, while the customized subject matter becomes the buzzword attracting people based on their interests. The fingers are displayed in manners that address the

subject matter in a trivial way. These pieces highlight the disconnect between the stated goals of some contemporary art and its relative ineffectiveness at commenting on complex social issues.

The second video depicts a gelatin cast of my right hand getting its index finger severed. I used gelatin because of its flesh like qualities, its malleability and its skin-like texture. The same white-gloved hands from the previous video appear and sever the finger with a razor. I am interested in addressing the violent nature of consumption and the dangerous perpetual repetition of the act of consuming.

The vending machine hangs at the end of the exhibition, and becomes the gift shop. It is literally the place where one may consume the art. The fingers are packaged in plastic cylindrical capsules; inside the capsule is a piece of paper that says “Genuine Replica” with copy of my signature underneath. These cards ostensibly authenticate each finger; like the fingers the signature is still only a replication. Actors play the roll of the store employees. Wearing matching uniforms with the title *This is not a trend* on their polo shirts, their dialogue mimics that of the infomercial. They use the familiar tactics to entice audience members to consume a product they may or may not want or need.

My critique of idea of consumption in relation has many precedents. In 1960, proto conceptual artist Piero Manzoni held an exhibition called *Consumption of dynamic art by the art-devouring public*. The exhibit consisted of Manzoni fingerprinting individual hard-boiled eggs, and then letting the audience members eat them as they pleased. Manzoni was addressing an issue that his idol Marcel Duchamp had dealt with in the early 20th Century. Duchamp felt that Cubism was too shallow because of its emphasis on aesthetics, or the “retinal” as he put it. He believed retinal art was meant to be consumed in three days on the way to something else (Santacatterina). Manzoni wanted to sardonically address how art that is purely based in

aesthetics and devoid of idea can be consumed as quickly and shallowly as any commercial product or food item. He used his thumbprint as a shallow way to transform the eggs into art, then enticed the viewers to literally consume the art. Like Manzoni, I am interested in addressing the nature of how artwork is marketed, bought and consumed. Also like Manzoni, I want the dispensed fingers to be consumed by the public in just as quick and shallow a way as his eggs. I priced the fingers at \$1.00 and put them in a vending machine that resembles one used for selling soda or snacks. I am attempting to take this symbol of genius and devalue it into a simple plastic commodity under the guise of art.

The idea of reproduction plays a key role in *This is not a trend*. I use reproduction and the multiple as a way devaluing the work because there is no longer an “original”. This is juxtaposed with the narrator of the infomercial telling the viewer that what they are consuming is in fact unique and authentic. In Walter Benjamin’s pivotal essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, he states, “mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an even greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility. From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the “authentic” print makes no sense. But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being ritual, it begins to be based on another practice – politics.” (Benjamin). He believed that reproduction reverses the authentic experience of art, therefore object ritual is abandoned for politics. Similarly I want this body of work to embody the very idea of inauthenticity, because that leaves only the idea as the work’s value.

The system of valuation in the art world is contrived. *This is not a trend* examines this value system by creating an absurd situation that mimics a real commercial experience. I am

interested in creating an art experience rather than an art object. I challenge the artificial system of declaring the material worth of an art object in order to elevate its intellectual value. I use touch as a symbol of artistic genius, and then I reproduce and sell it as a commercial product. I deliberately devalue my work by replicating it over and over so there is no original. Ultimately my intention with *This is not a trend* is to challenge the arbitrary nature of how value is assigned in art by employing overtly deceptive and manipulative techniques to sell the viewer something they do not want or need.

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