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A Lesson in Art: Understanding and Questioning Distraction, Play, and Human Nature

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COLUMBUS STATE UNIVERSITY

A LESSON IN ART: UNDERSTANDING AND QUESTIONING DISTRACTION, PLAY,
AND HUMAN NATURE

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE
HONORS COLLEGE
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR HONORS IN THE DEGREE OF

BACHELOR OF FINE ART
DEPARTMENT OF ART
COLLEGE OF THE ARTS

BY

JOSHUA L. NEWBEND

COLUMBUS, GEORGIA

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A Thesis Submitted to the

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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COLLEGE OF THE ARTS

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Abstract

In making artwork using stuffed animals and video performance, I have been able to construct visual means of questioning society and its focus on interaction in nature and adolescence and adulthood. The videos in the body of artwork seek for the viewer to question the repetitive, distracting, and anxiety-inducing notions within the artwork. From Dadaism to artists like Bruce Nauman and Mike Kelley, the art world has changed and grown from times of crisis and absurdity. This set of artworks not only fits within this area of the art world, but also seeks to expand it into a contemporary light with new media such as TikTok as well as focus on current and ongoing issues.

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Statement

When the world comes to an end, and all the people are gone, what will be the most important lessons we have learned? Lessons are a fundamental aspect of life for an individual. Whether it be those we learn from teachers, parents, ourselves, or the world around us, they shape every aspect of our lives. These foundational elements start before we are even born and continue long after until we move on from life to death. If society as a whole, from governments and parties to companies and individuals, were to thoroughly examine which of these lessons progress the human race the most, we might be surprised and learn even more. However, it seems we have not done such a thing and will continue to avoid the idea of examining anything such as this entirely for now. For now, it seems, the individual is distracted with things governments and companies have put in place, and these entities are distracted by the very policies and actions they once thought were helping. Distractions are defined as “things that prevent someone from giving full attention to something else.” In other words, there seems to be a problem in which society cannot come together and give full attention to anything because it is distracted constantly. In the artwork I have made for this thesis, I intend to have the viewer question what is happening in the world while simultaneously distracting them from the world, thereby pointing out to those critical enough how simple doing this may be and proving to those who view it how silly the world and its distractions can be.

As an artist, I strive to connect the world with art and new ideas that challenge the way we live and think. Through experimentation and lots of planning and thinking,

my artwork is typically able to develop through lots of perseverance and determination to stick with my intuition. This means sticking with gut feelings along the way and finding ways to keep motivated even when I feel burnt out or exhausted, such as listening to music. I have found artwork which is succinct in vision and style, while also being able to command space and inspire new ways of thinking.

Within my past artwork, I have covered many areas of interest and mediums. From working in public art and sculpture to more complex and abstract gallery works, I have found different ways of getting my art to different kinds of audiences. My artwork tends to follow a few paths: the artwork represents an abstract and simpler form of natural guises or has an implicit method of questioning facets within the fabric of society. With the latter, I focus on power structures and wish to ask in all, "Who's in charge?" The ability to create an object that represents new ideas and new ways of thinking is a highly powerful method of communication.

In the artwork for this thesis, it became an absurd response to the events occurring around me. Once the COVID-19 crisis began, I had to flip scripts of everything I had been working on and was pulled toward these methods of making and these ideas that question how we got where we are right now. Moments of crisis and absurd decisions by those who have the power to make them have been a recurring theme in spurring artwork that questions society's ethics and powers. In times of war and desperation such as with Dadaism, we come to absurd means of making and thinking to address these issues we experience. As we are in the art world today, new media is a prevalent means of making and so I turned towards the TikTok application to serve as

one way to visualize these feelings and thoughts I had about what was going on all around me.

Research

Throughout art history, movements have shaped and driven art to new bounds and pushed what we know art to be today. These ideas in art, however, have been around for quite some time. In the early 1900's, Dadaism became part of art history and with it some ridiculous, dark, and comical notions of what art can and should be. The systems in place and the ongoing events did not make sense to those living during the time, and thus, they created art that did not make sense either.

Dadaism is defined broadly as an avant-garde intellectual movement starting around World War 1 where artists, being fed up with the war and capitalist society at the time, created artworks of nonsense and protest.ⁱ The war made everything feel strange and unnecessary, thus inspiring the artists to push art to a very different level full of oddities that reflected such a world. Such art includes performances with lobster claws on their hands, displaying dissected collaged images of bodies, and taking everyday objects (such as a urinal) and signing them as their art. One of the epicenters of this movement was Zurich. There, artists such as Hugo Ball would focus on complex ideas in philosophy and politics in places such as the Cabaret Voltaire or the Galerie Dada.ⁱⁱ To be in such a place in time must have been one of the oddest and most provocative ways to push one's mind. Ball apparently goes through several stages of his life which affect Dadaism, which warps his thoughts on reality and theology. He goes into modes of anarchy and nihilism and furthers thought about society and the church on how they

need to be revolutionized against. This goes to say revolutionary acts against society are not new, let alone these ideas being interpreted in art. In fact, these days in Zurich inspired many others to follow in similar ideas of Dadaism.

Not only were there many pieces of poetry and visual art that touched on revolution and destruction, there were also those of nonsensical and playful value that debased the establishments these artists railed against. These artworks, I feel, helped to create a new sense of what art-making can be, compared to more serious, romantic, and classical assumptions. Pieces like the performance of *Karawane* (Figure 1) recited by Hugo Ball and Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven's performances with tin can headwear showed dismal ideas and could be interpreted as sad in a way, but are also silly and playful.ⁱⁱⁱ Not only that, they are indeed performances for a reason. As Demos points out, "What appears to be the radical element of Dada is precisely the publicness of its performances as constitutive of a new form of community."^{iv} Performance, especially public performance to others as an audience, not only provides a sort of community, but in that a way to connect. This means connecting in rebellion, new thinking, and of course, play. This playfulness was one of the key contributors to the art world as it invited artists to be more creative than ever before. The play that ensued for decades from Dadaism inspired philosophical thinkers and experienced artists to use material and ideas revolutionary for their time.

Moving from Zurich to areas like Paris, Berlin, and New York, Dadaism moved from artist to artist. The ideas transitioned to become even more comical and absurd, pointing out societal norms that showed to be toothless and nonsensical. For instance, Marcel Duchamp's famed *Fountain* (Figure 2) showed great inspiration from this

movement and consistently provided works which questioned art and society.^v His pieces changed what we understand as art and what it can be. He also directly inspired Bruce Nauman, who was a pioneering artist in the art world, with his works and ideas.^{vi} Artists like Bruce Nauman, who cultivated a new sense of relation to the viewer that was not entirely recognized before, were able to change and expand how art could function.

In artworks such as *Self-Portrait as a Fountain* (Figure 3), Nauman pushes the viewer to recognize themselves as cognizant of the work and, more importantly, a part of it.^{vii} Not only that, but the artwork became a part of the conversation of what was going on in the world and what it contributed to the world itself. The viewer starts to become a leading force in what the art is about and how it is interpreted. Forcing the viewer to consider a human as a fountain shows the viewer the art is not just something to stare at anymore, but something to think and decide about. This sort of power-play continues in his and others' works to change what art can be by using new methods in relation to the audience or the pieces. Furthermore, it continues to move toward ideas of playfulness, especially considering a man squirting water from his mouth like a fountain is quite silly in the grand scheme of things.

This notion of play is talked about in many areas of art history, but is rocketed into almost excess, starting with Dadaism and moving towards more Postmodern artworks. For instance, artist John Baldessari, one of CalArts mentors to artists such as Mike Kelley, played with his art by pushing it to be the opposite of what he felt at the time was art. In taking purposefully senseless photos and film stills and creating a composition, he pushes the medium and understanding of what art can become.^{viii} This approach characterizes many of the ideas artists start with today when researching their

work's concepts. Additionally, this reflects the rebellion of Dadaism by going in the opposite direction of what he feels others think art is about.

In other instances of rebellion against establishment and understanding society, Jean Baudrillard had many theories on what society was becoming based on his knowledge and experience. One idea is on how reproduction will overpower the real someday.^{ix} This can obviously hark to today's virtual reality capabilities and things such as artificial intelligence, which can predict situations and personalities. Baudrillard was not directly thinking about virtual reality and artificial intelligence, but they do portray this sense of society becoming more interested in what can be imitated than what is already done. Baudrillard also comments on older technologies around his time, therefore possibly being redundant, but his comments nonetheless can inspire debate and thought about technology.^x He is mainly referring to his theories of simulacra and simulation, in which he pushes to connect reality and society to culture and its formats of shared experience. This directly connects to the work in how it is a form of reproducing cultural experience through a shared format in society of our time.

This leads to Mike Kelley and his use of video art and absurdism to question societal norms and play with new media of his time. Kelley was known for stepping outside of the norm in art, even using things such as nail polish to paint and stuffed animals (Figure 4).^{xi} He was using projection to capture audiences with swirls of sound, light, and color to give attention toward his seemingly maniacal and orchestrated video artworks.^{xii} This displays Kelley questioned norms in new ways through play while still connecting seriousness and morality into the equation. These methods proved to launch his career further and showed the world a new light on art. Not only that, but he showed

art that questioned what the viewer was looking at by representing something similar to reality, but often staged and warped through artistic means. Everyday subject matter and offensive norms become angled to represent society in a theatrical and bold manner. The manner in which it was displayed and the notions he was pointing towards about society itself proved to be captivating and fresh at the time of their creation.

Now, as we have moved almost a quarter into the twenty-first century, art has continued to change and evolve. With technologies like the internet and social media having advanced so far, there are many more ways we as humans and artists can push our own work. Technology and its advances are not the end all be all of new and of progress; however, compared to the past, they provide a way of existing, which was not possible before. For instance, in the social media app TikTok, viral for its comical and eye-catching videos, gives users the ability to create and edit a short film with effects and settings now used more than ever before. However, these functions are normal for those most familiar with current popular culture. If you went to a class and brought up kombucha, the fruity and slightly alcoholic drink, many students in their minds would most likely think of the “kombucha girl” as she is referred to in her viral TikTok video. This is a phenomenon that is quite ritual for those known to use apps such as TikTok and continues to advance. I feel utilizing social media, just like projection in a gallery, can change the way people see and interact with art. It also provides a context just as projection does. The TikTok app and its many functions and videos is specifically designed towards a never-ending consumer ideology. That is to say, it has designed the app to create limitless content which is algorithmically connected to your interests without becoming dull due to repetition. Now, songs are getting viral dances and themes

attached to them which they may not have had before. For instance, “Savage” by Megan Thee Stallion was released and not long after a viral dance meme using it was created on TikTok.^{xiii} The artist came to credit the dancer/TikTok user in a video using the dance with the songs music and lyrics playing. Being able to embrace this culture of sharing has its benefits, however, it can also become numbing and negative for the consumer as time goes on. This is evident as one watches the videos over and over, similar to how the actions Mike Kelley portrays are not only based off of society's numbness to these ideas, but also to push it as an aspect of the art itself.

There seems to be a common theme within many TikTok videos in which they utilize the video editing functions and sound to draw the viewers' attention without providing much for original or provoking content. This is where I found my artwork becoming separate from the more typical and popular videos on the application. Though the performance itself may have been interesting from a bystander perspective, the excessive sound and distracting edits can hinder its originality and interest for a viewer. Eventually, a song or dance is done one too many times, and the meme fades, not really becoming much more relevant than before. This happens rapidly and peaks quickly before interest falls into the background. Instead of wanting to analyze and understand something, it is a way for the viewer to distract themselves from either boredom or unwanted necessary actions. I hope to push the viewer to question why they are watching the video in the first place and thus question its content. This is why the artwork has such provocative and intentionally testament-like titles.

Process

This body of artwork consists of pieces made using stuffed animals titled in a way which pushes the understanding of the pieces. Utilizing a helix form, a bodysuit, a vacuum, and video performances in the suit, there are motifs including adolescence, natural forms, and the human experience. These themes put the viewer into a train of thought to question society, the interaction of humans and nature, and how adolescence and adulthood are not only linked but how they may function together. By bringing in the use of stuffed animals and the use of popular culture media, I am seeking to focus on the ideas of younger individuals. In utilizing the vacuum and the suit on myself, the artwork aims for a reaction which questions cleanliness and what one might put on themselves to aid in being an individual, and an adult, within society.

The video artworks are a way for me to place the body of work in a cultural context while also focusing the viewer on aspects of social interaction and the distraction by larger entities away from provocative thinking. Each piece is also able to use popular music media and their contextual representations by the artists as a base for the artwork and its title. For instance, my piece *Repetition is Historic; Change is Revolutionary* (Link 1) has connotations going back to Dadaism of needing change and trying to push new ideas which better suits those struggling the most. The creators of the app are perfectly content, but I feel it distracts those that could make the change from feeling as if it is needed. The artwork references a viral dance in using the popular section of the song without actually performing said dance, which is in direction to changing what would be typical of such a video. In this, it also continues this repetition of movement throughout each video and in turn begins to represent the mundane

repetitive acts the artwork seeks to question. This goes back to attempting to force the viewer to question why the artworks are repetitive and distracting. *Rid Yourself of Unnecessary Anxieties* (Link 2) acts as a fortune cookie line for the user to think about why they need things that only cause more anxiety in their life in the first place.^{xiv} For instance, the song itself is about a girl who is trying to find her Juul, a known cause of anxiety in youths that were intrigued by the vape product when it first came into popular culture. Not only that, but the video uses an intense and transitional flow using the editing that goes along with the anxiety that these videos cause and that the title asks you to rid yourself of in the first place.

In all of these video artworks, there are methods used to have the viewer question the reasoning behind watching them in the first place and what the content is or why it is necessary. In excessive edits, repetitive motion, and similar background and use of the same suit, each video is catalyzed by its title and the sound that goes with it which, in moments, can seem irrelevant. The video *Wealth is Not the Only Positive the World Can Benefit From* (Link 3) is titled so to reflect on society's value of money over most everything.^{xv} Another example is shown in the video *Reality Only Has One Side To Things* (Link 4) in pointing out there are no other realities except our own.^{xvi} We want so badly to mimic our own reality to create a better one, but why is this one not better already? The viewer may even question the causes of such a reality and what may in turn make their own a better one. In *Distractions Synchronize; Ignorance is Bliss* (Link 5), the viewer could question how a seemingly positive focus may be there to keep your attention on just you, as if it is a command.^{xvii} If it is a distraction, should we not question why or what that is? *Groove is Fun; Reliance is Dependence; Independence is Key*

(Link 6) can point to how being independent is important for being able to express yourself and have fun, but that means you should focus on not having to rely on outside factors to do so.^{xviii} What things do you rely on and why? Could there, or should there, be better ways of functioning to have more fun and less dependence?

Even the suit itself (Figures 5 & 6) as a piece is titled *Adolescence is All Fun and No Play; Adulthood is All Play and No Fun* in trying to communicate how I feel as we transition from childhood to adulthood, we gain responsibility but lose the enjoyment of the everyday. In my helix piece (Figure 7) *Do Not Mistake the Unexpected For Lies*, I wish to talk about how people seem to base prejudice on things they do not understand instead of what is truly false or fact. Each of these artworks have the potential to bring even one more person to similar ideas of questioning the world, which I feel is highly integral to art and how we interact. Otherwise, we may accept everything as it is and never change, unlike Ball, Duchamp, Kelley, and Nauman who all changed the norm of what art is and how society could be. I intend to continue questioning society and push my art to do the same, just as these artists have done. The world to me has shown its absurdity in the face of crisis and pushed me to examine what realities I had not noticed and I intend to further point this out to whoever becomes my audience. One final question I may ask is why we must go through a crisis to examine the world around us so intensively?

Reflection

For now, the body of work seems closer to what I truly wanted to make artwork about than when I first started this project. The distracting and excessive videos with the

childish but fully developed bodysuit and the simple and natural helix all layer concepts I wanted to delve into. This includes how society may seem to force individuals to live, how we interact with each other and nature, and what happens in transitional periods between childhood and adulthood. Through the use of stuffed animals, performance, and video, the work allows many ways to interpret and connect its intentions.

The artwork did not start off with the terms I set as the helix form was made before the crisis, and the rest was conjured afterward. However, I feel the pieces are highly cohesive and able to direct attention in a way that contributes to the work's themes. The method of utilizing this material throughout which connects the artwork combined with the distracting and concerning videos provides an absurd and divergent site for the viewer to be drawn in with. The way in which the app almost force-feeds you video after video I feel mirrors how our society works in many other aspects such as consumer gratification, monotonous business practice, and typical standards set for people in which they must keep doing what they are doing to enjoy anything. On the other end of this whole idea is these are creative and entrepreneurial works people all over the world are putting out for their own and others' enjoyment. Not only that, but doing so to keep some semblance of normalcy and enjoyment where they may lack in other areas of life.

In the end, the artwork is a simple and contemporary mode of making similar to those in Dadaism, which associated itself with more urban and poetic themes in the items used and by being much more philosophical. Albeit, the artwork is more fun and lighthearted to look at, it carries similar notions of bolder intention by those it chooses to question. These times are strange, and I want to further push that as a reminder of how

not only would we most likely not be here without certain leaders making rather large mistakes, but also because of our own actions in not constantly questioning why they have their authority. If the artwork is quizzical and distracting and fun and plausible, then I feel it is successful. There should never be a moment in our lives where we should sacrifice so much because of someone else's own choices, but there are many times where this happens, and it is highly unfortunate for most, if not all, involved. We must push to question what we see and hear and understand what is around us. Only then can we push to further what we already have.

Figures

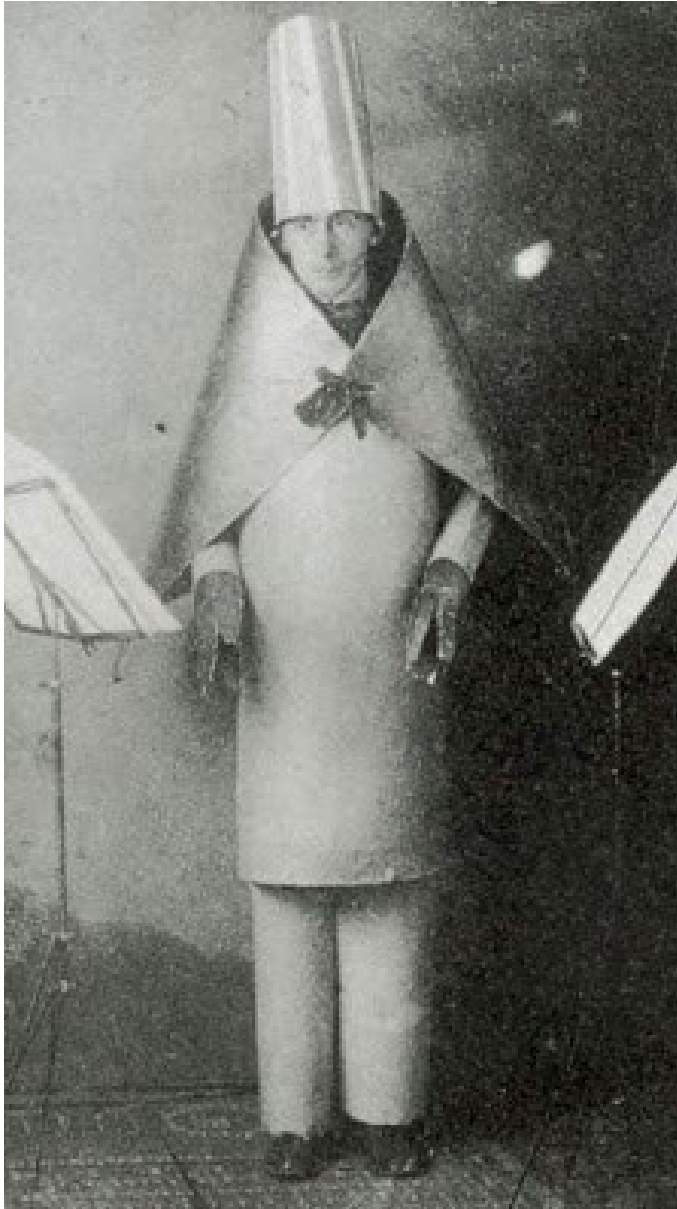


Figure 1: *Karawane*, Recitation and Performance by Hugo Ball, 1916



Figure 2: *Fountain*, Urinal signed by Marcel Duchamp, 1917



Figure 3: *Self-Portrait as a Fountain*, Performance by Bruce Nauman, 1966



Figure 4: Multiple Stuffed Animal Works by Mike Kelley, 1987



Figure 5: *Adolescence is All Fun and No Play; Adulthood is All Play and No Fun (Front)*, 5'x5'x1.5', Stuffed Animals, 2020

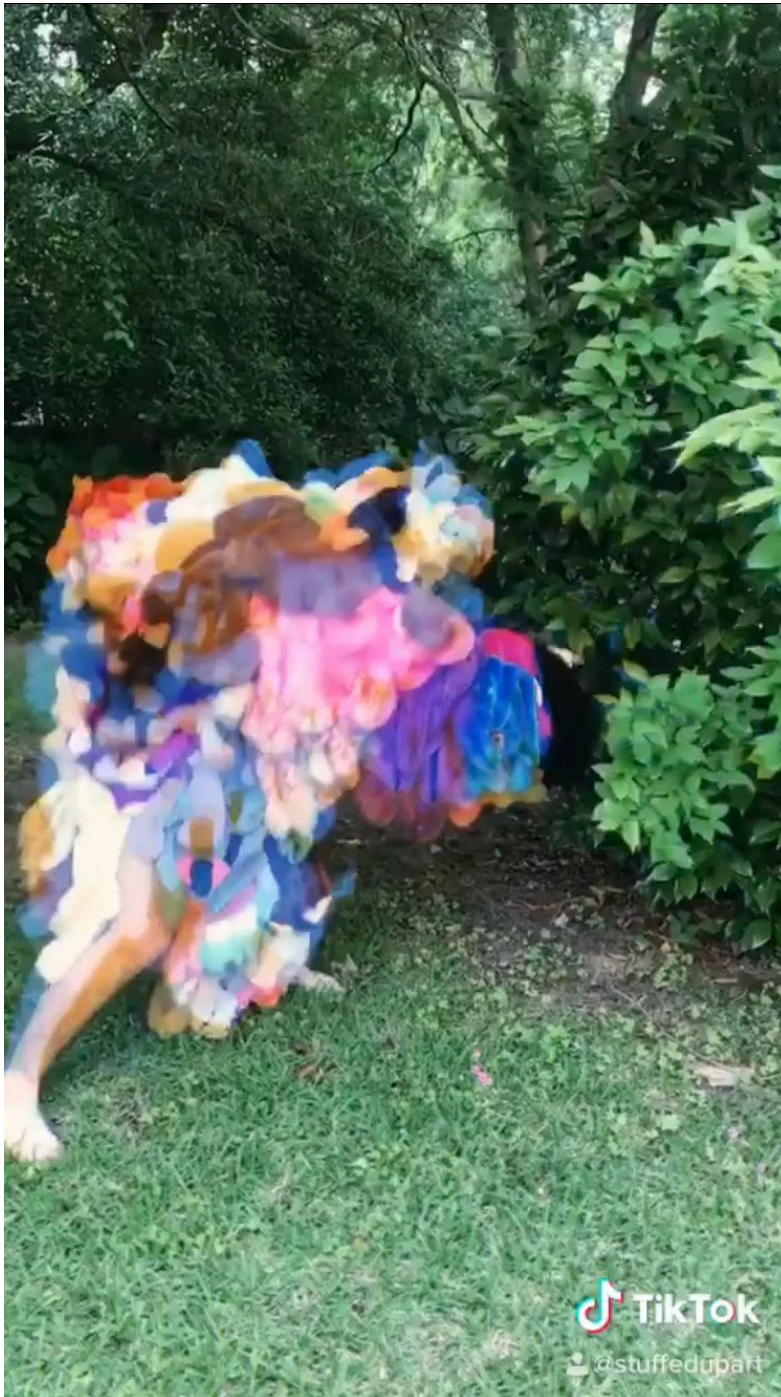


Figure 6: *Adolescence is All Fun and No Play; Adulthood is All Play and No Fun (Back)*,
5'x5'x1.5', Stuffed Animals, 2020



Figure 7: *Do Not Mistake the Unexpected For Lies*, 6' From End to End; 3.5' At Widest Point, Stuffed Animal Pieces and Steel, 2020

Links with Stills



Link 1: *Repetition is Historic; Change is Revolutionary*, Video Performance, 2020

https://www.tiktok.com/@stuffedupart/video/6821686645927070981?u_code=dc37g5gd84525d&preview_pb=0&language=en&d=dc37g7g2g6jl57×tamp=1588378249&utm_campaign=client_share&app=musically&utm_medium=ios&user_id=6818625879662412806&tt_from=sms&utm_source=sms&source=h5_m



Link 2: *Rid Yourself of Unnecessary Anxieties*, Video Performance, 2020

https://www.tiktok.com/@stuffedupart/video/6821686459603406085?u_code=dc37g5gd84525d&preview_pb=0&language=en&d=dc37g7g2g6jl57×tamp=1588378226&utm_campaign=client_share&app=musically&utm_medium=ios&user_id=6818625879662412806&tt_from=sms&utm_source=sms&source=h5_m



Link 3: *Wealth is Not the Only Positive the World Can Benefit From*, Video Performance, 2020

https://www.tiktok.com/@stuffedupart/video/6821686927629077765?u_code=dc37g5gd84525d&preview_pb=0&language=en&d=dc37g7g2g6jl57×tamp=1588378275&utm_campaign=client_share&app=musically&utm_medium=ios&user_id=6818625879662412806&tt_from=sms&utm_source=sms&source=h5_m



Link 4: *Reality Only Has One Side To Things*, Video Performance, 2020

https://www.tiktok.com/@stuffedupart/video/6821687031891070213?u_code=dc37g5gd84525d&preview_pb=0&language=en&d=dc37g7g2g6jl57×tamp=1588378283&utm_campaign=client_share&app=musically&utm_medium=ios&user_id=6818625879662412806&tt_from=sms&utm_source=sms&source=h5_m



Link 5: *Distractions Synchronize; Ignorance is Bliss*, Video Performance, 2020

[https://www.tiktok.com/@stuffedupart/video/6821686751984094469?u_code=dc37g5gd84525d&preview_pb=0&language=en&d=dc37g7g2g6jl57×tamp=1588378259&utm_campaign=client share&app=musically&utm_medium=ios&user_id=6818625879662412806&tt_from=sms&utm_source=sms&source=h5_m](https://www.tiktok.com/@stuffedupart/video/6821686751984094469?u_code=dc37g5gd84525d&preview_pb=0&language=en&d=dc37g7g2g6jl57×tamp=1588378259&utm_campaign=client%20share&app=musically&utm_medium=ios&user_id=6818625879662412806&tt_from=sms&utm_source=sms&source=h5_m)



Link 6: *Groove is Fun; Reliance is Dependence; Independence is Key*, Video Performance, 2020

https://www.tiktok.com/@stuffedupart/video/6821687464307002629?u_code=dc37g5gd84525d&preview_pb=0&language=en&d=dc37g7g2g6jl57×tamp=1588378292&utm_campaign=client_share&app=musically&utm_medium=ios&user_id=6818625879662412806&tt_from=sms&utm_source=sms&source=h5_m

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