Rochester Institute of Technology

RIT Digital Institutional Repository

5-30-2017

Transcendence

Jamie Katz
jk5758@rit.edu

Recommended Citation

<u>Rochester Institute of Technology</u>

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences

School for American Crafts

In Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts,

Glass

Transcendence

by

Jamie Katz

May 30, 2017

Thesis Title: Transcendence

Student Name: Jamie Katz

Thesis Committee Final Approvals

Chief Advisor:

Michael Rogers _____ _____
    Print Name   Signature   Date

Associate Advisor:

David Schnuckel _____ _____
    Print Name   Signature   Date

Associate Advisor:

Andy Buck _____ _____
    Print Name   Signature   Date

Chairperson:

Glen Hintz _____ _____
    Print Name   Signature   Date

I.   Thesis Proposal and Elaboration

I am inspired by this digital age we live in. Technology like Instagram, Facebook, and Google Hangouts all allow us to exist outside of the reality of normal life. We transcend the physical, and experience the world in such a way that has never been possible before. I will make work that explores what new possibilities might appear when I start to merge the non-physical digital realm with a physical material like glass. I will use glass, projection, and printed imagery to give form to something that does not have a physical existence of its own. My work will aim to give a greater awareness of the digital duality that is inherent in contemporary life.

There is significance in that we live in a time where technology allows us to overcome challenges of physical existence. Presently we are able to talk face-to-face with another person who is across the country. People can document their lives digitally and share it with all of their friends and family. With increasing frequency, we are using technology to expand what it means to exist.

We live in a time where technology has made more possible than ever before. I want to create work that investigates these possibilities in relation to glass, the same way in which they relate to people. What happens when the non-physical digital realm is given a physical body? By making work that investigates this duality between physical and digital existence, I hope to give a greater awareness of how inherent it is in our daily lives. We live in a time of great possibility, and the work I make would not be possible without the existence of this digital age.

II.   Abstract

This written thesis is an overview of *Transcendence*, a body of research culminating in an MFA thesis exhibition in the spring of 2017. This paper explores that research in relation to the history of video art and philosophy, followed by an analysis of each of the works considering material choice, and formal choices such as aspects of sound and positioning. A critical analysis of the body of works follows, investigating the successes and failures of each piece, individually and as a coherent body of work, in relation to the thesis proposal. The conclusion includes an examination of the process from thesis proposal to finish, and the future potential of this work and my artistic career.

III. Discussion of Research

A. Video Art

Origins of video art date back to the 1920s. Dadaist films such as *Ghosts Before Breakfast* by Hans Richter display an onslaught of different random images meant to challenge the current art standards of his time by presenting obscurity to the viewer. "Richter attempts to increase the viewer's knowledge of reality, by showing them surrealistic fantasy" (Cartman 1). The challenge of making video art in this time was the need for large, heavy, and expensive equipment.

In 1967 the first battery-powered lightweight video camera became available to the public. Called the "Portapak" this camera allowed anyone to create video (Susik 6). This invention led to a surge in artists utilizing video as an artistic medium. Artists like Nam June Paik created work that would disrupt one's typical viewing experience. In Paik's 1969 piece *Beatles Electroniques* he disrupts the visual image of a Beatles performance. Using synthesizers he agitates and disturbs the trance-like state that people experienced when watching the Beatles perform. Paik felt that television was captivating and did not allow for critical objectivity, this work was his attempt to overcome that (Serwer 6).

Nam June Paik
Beatles Electroniques
1969

Another influential video artist of that time is Vito Acconci. In his 1972 piece *Undertone* Acconci engages the viewer in an intimate and perverse situation. The film is simply him sitting at the end of a table, hands hidden underneath, and he begins to chant, trying to convince himself there is a woman under the table. Then he turns to the viewer and tells them he needs them there watching. Acconci returns to his chanting, this time convincing himself there is no woman under the table, then back to the viewer telling them he needs them to be there watching. This piece is pretty disturbing to watch because you are seeing a man participate in an intimate act, which should be kept private according to societal standards, and then he turns to you and involves you in his actions. This is a very revolutionary use of video because for perhaps the first time the viewer is directly involved in this piece (Rabinovitz 114).

Vito Acconci
Undertone
1972

Peter Campus' *Three Transitions* 1973 is a seminal work of video art. In this piece Campus creates three exercises in transition in which he employs different visual and spatial effects. Campus uses video art to create work that is a contemplation of perception and self (Hanhardt 67).

Peter Campus
Three Transitions
1973

Artists continued to make video art through the 1970s and '80s, but always presented it on a monitor or a television screen. In the 1990s Tony Oursler wanted to break apart the conventions of video art and come up with something new (Reserve Channel 1). His approach to doing this was by creating work that used a projector to present the video onto some sort of sculptural stage that he made. Oursler's work seeks to break the face up into different elements and recombine them. He is inspired by the Cubist tradition to break the face down into components and see what happens when you recombine them (Reserve Channel 1).

In Oursler's works *Goldie* and *Cyc,* he has recorded each element of the faces separately. Each of the eyes and the mouth are all individually recorded. He uses projection mapping technology to reassemble these pieces into a new face.

Tony Oursler
Cyc
2003

Tony Oursler
Goldie
2012

I draw inspiration from Oursler's approach to making work. He creates a jig to hold the actor's head still, and records each element of the face separately. He combines these video elements to create a completely new face. In my pieces *Together* and *Conversations* I took a similar approach. I created a jig to hold each actor's head still and I recorded each eye and mouth separately. I was then able to use projection mapping software to recombine these elements into a new projection.

I see my work as a continuation or evolution of what Oursler has done. He draws inspiration from his observation of society's preoccupation with staring into televisions. He wants to create work that exists within that space (Reserve Channel). For me, that space has evolved into the digital realm; people today are looking into that space all the time. By seeing work that begins to merge digital technology with a physical form, people gain a greater sense for the digital duality that is inherent in contemporary life.

Tony Oursler's recording process for projection.

Jamie Katz recording videos for projections used in *Together* and *Conversations*.

B. Philosophy

Simulation vs. Simulacrum

Philosopher and cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard defines simulation as the imitation of a real world process. For example, an architect might create a future building in computer software first to simulate how it will actually look and function.

Baudrillard defines simulacrum (plural simulacra) as an imitation that bears no relation to any reality whatsoever. He gives an example of this in his 1981 book *Simulacrum and Simulation*: "You don't need a new car because you can't live without your old one. You need it because it shapes your social status: what it implies is more important than what it is," (Baudrillard 63). Your social status is not part of the real world; it exists only in our minds and therefore is simulacrum.

Many of my pieces are a simulation, while others are simulacra. *Ebb and Flow* is a simulation of a very small piece of beach from California. In copying the rocks and recording the tide, I am literally attempting to recreate something that is real.

Being a Passenger is attempting to recreate the real world activity of driving through a real place. I am simulating the experience of driving through my hometown, but in Rochester, New York.

In the Sky is a recording of a real place, but it is not presented in a way that you would experience it in the real world. Looking down and seeing a moving image is not a real world process and therefore is not a simulation. This piece falls in between simulation and simulacrum.

Conversations involves two mouths having a conversation with no words. This piece is investigating ways in which we communicate other than by talking. A conversation is a real thing, something that can be simulated, while two floating talking mouths might be simulacrum for the way in which we communicate in society today.

Together combines two people's eyes and merges them into one set. This piece is not simulating anything, but is simulacrum for people's existence in the digital realm. Two people can interact in the digital world, have a relationship and "merge" into one, although the merging never exists in the real world and is more of a concept than a reality.

IV.   Discussion of Works

In each of these pieces I see a common thread of considering aspects of life within the context of this digital age we currently live in. Contemplations of distance, time, and place seem to arise within each of these works. These pieces serve to overcome issues of distance and place through simulation of a reality that is out of reach.

A. *Conversations*

Conversations
Float glass, borosilicate rod, hxtal, desks, chairs, video, projection
64"L x 26"D x 46"H

This piece explores how through the use of modern technology we can overcome issues of distance and place to have a conversation with anyone across the world. Until very recently it was only possible to have a conversation with someone who was physically in front of you. It wasn't until 1775 that you could write someone a letter and very slowly have a conversation with another person across the country. In 1876, with the invention of the telephone, one could finally talk audibly to another person. Finally in 2005 it became possible to talk face-to-

face with someone in real time over video chat. In 200,000 years of human existence it is only in the last twelve years that you could have a face-to-face conversation with someone who wasn't physically in front of you.

I chose to create two glass computer monitors made of float glass and very thick borosilicate rod. I wanted to recreate my actual computer monitor and these forms of glass seemed to be most appropriate in completing that task. I sandblasted the backs of the monitors so that when projected on from behind, the video recording is visible to the viewer and the viewer's body does not come between the monitor and the projector. I put each of the monitors onto a desk with a desk chair providing the necessary context for the viewer to understand that this is a conversation through computers.

I created a jig that would steady each of the video actor's heads, and I recorded just the mouths having a conversation. I projected this conversation onto the monitors, but chose to remove the sound. The result is two mouths having a conversation without any words. Words are not needed to have a conversation; one can look at this piece and see a conversation is taking place. The computer screens are positioned facing each other, creating the appearance that the monitors are actually talking.

In my own relationship with my partner we lived 3,000 miles apart for four years and were able to easily maintain a relationship. Talking each night face-to-face as if we were right in front of each other, we were able to be together without physically being together. I think it is fascinating that we live in a time where issues of distance are less and less of an obstacle to human connection. A conversation can exist as if physically real, but actually existing only in digital simulation.

B. In the Sky

In the Sky
Sandblasted float glass, video, projection
34"L x 38"D x 4"H

     In the Sky investigates the endless distance we overcome through the use of modern technology. Consisting of a large sheet of sandblasted float glass laying on the floor, an endless loop of flying through the clouds is projected onto the glass. On a trip home from school, I set up my camera looking out the window of the airplane and recorded the journey home. The sky looked so perfect and ideal, almost symbolic of this physical journey I was taking. I wanted to somehow capture this experience I was having, but a photo was lacking and simply could not convey the distance.

     The video plays on an endless loop to give the feeling of how immense the physical distance is that people traverse through the use of technology. The piece is set up atop a black floor pedestal, giving the impression of a still photo. An ideal, never-ending sunset being captured with clouds sailing by communicates the idealism and anticipation of traveling home. A flat piece of float glass seemed to be the most appropriate form to capture this footage.

C. Together

Together
Blown glass, projection mapping, laptop
24"L x 4"D x 12"H

      This piece utilizes a new technology called "projection mapping" that allows one to combine two separate projections into one. I drew inspiration for this piece from the tradition of giving "Lovers Eyes" during the Georgian period of Great Britain. At that time, if two people were perceived to be from difference classes of society, it was not acceptable for them to be together. Choosing to maintain a clandestine romance, one sign of affection they could display was to gift a locket displaying a portrait of their secret lover's eye. In this way they could keep a symbol of their love, and if anyone ever saw it they would have no way of knowing who's eye it belonged to. I likened these challenges of eighteenth century dating to the challenges of distance relationships must overcome in the twenty-first century. Two people are able to date despite great distance, and through digital modes of communication come together to form a relationship. I was drawn to the fleshy feel of blown glass for this piece and feel it lends itself well to hosting the eyeballs. Projection mapping was the perfect method of combining two projections into one to symbolize this coming together, which exists only through a digital simulation.

A "lover's eye" on a brooch, circa 1790 (Kahn 1).

D. Ebb and Flow
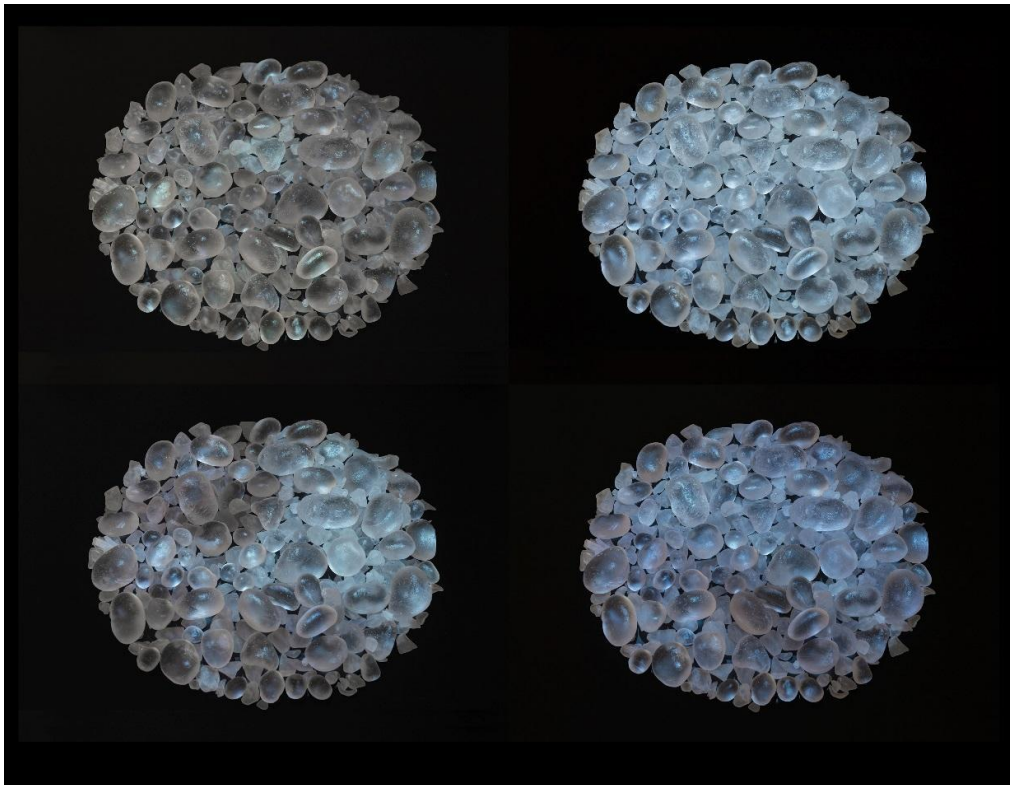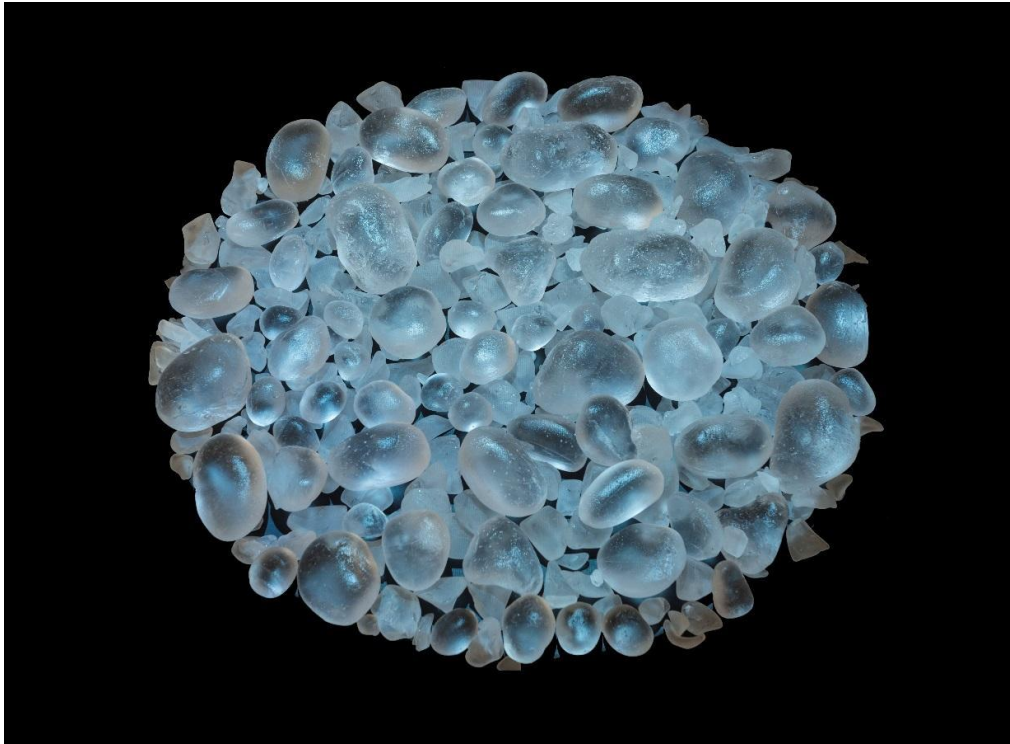
Ebb and Flow
Cast glass, video, projection, sound
36"L x 36"D x 5"H

Ebb and Flow is about creating a simulation of a place I longed to go to, but was not able to physically be. The town I am from in California has beautiful rock beaches, something I associate greatly with being home. When I think of my home, I gain a sense of nostalgia and longing to be at these beaches. While visiting them over a break, I had the idea of trying to recreate this place, but back in Rochester on the other side of the country. I took video of the shoreline, right where the water meets the rocks. I then gathered some of the rocks from the video and brought them back with me to school. The best way I could think of to replicate the rocks was to make a mold of each of them, and then cast them in glass. In this way I would have an exact copy of the beach I was trying to recreate, while also creating a screen to project the video onto. The video of the beach projected onto glass rocks, along with the sound of water crashing through rocks, creates this feeling of standing on this beach. By employing as many of the senses as possible, the sound and the visual of the beach, the glass is activated and serves as a vehicle to experience a simulation of something that is not really there. This is a perfect example of how we can interface between digital and physical reality to experience something that is real and a facade at the same time.

D. Being a Passenger

Being a Passenger
Car door and seat, video, projection
48"L x 36"D x 50"H

   Being a Passenger is a piece about recreating the experience of driving through my home town. The experience of sitting in the passenger seat is one that everybody knows. Sitting in a car seat looking out the window, was easily replicated by welding together a car door and seat. I sandblasted the glass window of the door so it could serve as a projection screen. While home over break, I recorded footage of driving down the main street in my town. When this recording is projected onto the glass from behind, the participant is able to have the same experience of driving through this town without having to physically be there. I have created a simulation of something you would normally have to travel across the country to do, and this experience can be sent anywhere in the world.

## V.	Critical Analysis

This work does operate well as a cohesive body of work. Each piece is a contemplation of my life within the context of the digital age we live in today. Considerations of distance, time, and place are prevalent throughout these works. The use of projection onto glass lent itself very well to talking about these topics. The ability to simulate experiences through the use of digital technology was a very appropriate choice when paired with the ghostly physical form of glass.

The type of glass chosen for each piece is appropriate. In *Conversations* I sought to create a simple computer monitor. Rather than trying to sculpt or cast something, it seemed like the most effective choice would be float glass. It is flat and straight and has machine made qualities, just like a computer monitor. Sandblasting the back of the monitor turned it into a screen to project on, giving an effect very similar to an actual computer monitor.

In the Sky again used float glass to create a flat image on the ground. The picturesque scene above the sky gives the impression of looking at a photo that is capturing this long journey of going home during this perfect moment.

Together appropriately employs blown glass to create the eyes of two people becoming one. The sand-blasted blown glass has a very fleshy feel to it, more so than any other form of glass. It's smooth and round without sharp edges and speaks perfectly to becoming an eye. The projection mapping was even symbolic, in the way it combines two projections into one, much as these two people are becoming one.

In *Ebb and Flow* the goal was to replicate a place I wanted to be. What better way to replicate than to create a mold and make an exact copy? When the kiln cast rocks are combined with the projection of the place that they came from, one gains a sense of being in that place. The sound component was crucial, clarifying what is happening in this piece. The amount of rocks I made for this piece took a great deal of time, but I believe this piece has the potential to be much larger to reinforce the simulation captured in this piece.

Being a Passenger utilizes a form of glass we interact with all the time but never give significance to. Looking out the window of a car is a relatable experience, and by putting this in a gallery setting, one can potentially travel anywhere. The window of the car door becomes a movie screen, and by looking through it, a new reality is presented.

In each of these works, there is the desire to contemplate aspects of our lives in the digital age. Issues like distance, time, and place and how these topics can be overcome with use of digital technology. Each piece seeks to be a simulation or simulacrum for something that is not concretely present, and is only possible by the paring of glass and projection. Each of these works transcends the physical reality we all live in and begins to cross over in the non-physical digital world.

VI.   Conclusion

Creating the work for *Transcendence* has taught me for the first time to think of making pieces that will form a coherent body of work. It was an interesting challenge to set a goal for myself at the beginning of the school year in the form of a thesis proposal and to use that as my jumping-off point for all works made that year.

The thesis proposal served as a guide throughout the process. I set out to use glass, projection, and printed imagery to give form to something that doesn't have a physical existence of its own. I never ended up using printed imagery in any of the pieces, though there is potential for that in the future. The combination of glass and projection absolutely gives a physical form to the non-physical digital media. This combination is very rich territory for making work, and I will certainly continue to investigate this avenue more deeply.

The final line of my thesis proposal stated that "My work will aim to give a greater awareness of the digital duality that is inherent in contemporary life." While it may be possible that some people left my show with this heightened awareness, I do not think this ended up being significant to the work in the end. I could have omitted this line from my thesis proposal as it ended up not being very much of a guiding force. What I was not anticipating about this work was that I would start to contemplate my own life in relation to the digital possibilities of our day: being away from my home, moving 3,000 miles across the country to attend graduate school, and being away from my partner. All of these issues seemed to be more visible topics of consideration that arose in my work. It appears that I have a fascination with overcoming these challenges in my life through the use of technology. I became home-sick while away, and the possibility of creating a simulation of home, to be able to physically stand in front of a piece of my home was comforting. Through this process of contemplating these issues in my life, I have stumbled upon vastly rich territory. It is exciting to feel like at the end of my graduate experience, I have actually just begun a new journey into my artistic future.

Looking forward, I would like to start exhibiting my work at top glass and contemporary art venues in the country and abroad. I would like to reach out to Susie Silbert, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Glass at the Corning Museum of Glass, to exhibit work in the Contemporary Art and Design Wing. This is a prime venue for exhibiting glass art as new and inventive approaches to glass are regularly on display. My work is in line with the type of pieces exhibited there, and this would help generate exposure as the museum is highly attended.

I would also like to exhibit at Heller Gallery in New York City. Head Curator Douglas Heller seeks glass artists who are working with the material in a new way. Glass artists such as Norwood Viviano and Katherine Gray have exhibited at this gallery and used the opportunity to create works of glass in ways that had not been done before. My work has a place at this gallery as it achieves a similar innovative approach. I would like to connect with Mr. Heller to create an exhibition for this space.

Besides reaching out to glass venues, I would also like to connect with contemporary art galleries that work with video artists. The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA in Los Angeles is an ideal match for my work. Senior Curator Bennet Simpson has featured video artists here such as Steve McQueen and Doug Aitken. Both of these artists have a very unconventional approach to presenting video art such as using a giant screen that hangs thirty feet in the air, or the use of multiple screens that interact with each other. I will reach out to Simpson to have my work exhibited here as it fits in with the unconventional approach to presenting video art.

In Paris at the Musée d'Orsay, Head Curator Laurence des Cars has set up exhibitions with video artists like Tony Oursler to use his particular process to reinterpret one of the pieces on view at the museum. I would love the opportunity to be selected for this type of exhibition. I will be reaching out to des Cars in hopes that she will invite me to make work at the museum. My process of combining glass and projection in the context of recreating an artwork from one of the most famous art collections in the world could really take my work into some interesting new directions.

For future works I am interested in making some very large glass and projection simulations. One example is creating a piece like *Ebb and Flow* but on a massive scale. A venue such as the Tate Modern in London, where Ai Weiwei had his sunflower seeds piece and Olafur Eliasson exhibited *The Weather Project* would be the perfect venue for something this size. By making a piece of this scale I could simulate an entire beach, instead of just a small section. I will have fans blowing air, and the smells of the ocean giving the viewer a more immersive experience. I will contact Maria Balshaw the head curator of the Tate Modern to set up exhibition of this piece.

I look on to the future, eager to pursue these new opportunities. I will keep making new work and making connections with curators and artists who are in line with the kind of pieces I make. I have a wider audience than most as both people who are interested in glass art as well as those interested in video art will gravitate toward my work. People who are interested in contemporary art in general, who make up a much larger audience, may take a liking to the relevance of my work as well.

Transcendence is a body of research culminating in an MFA thesis exhibition in the spring of 2017. This work combines glass and projection to give a physical form to the digital world that does not have a physical body of its own. In today's world, we are always staring into the digital realm on our phones or computers. This work seeks to merge these two worlds and attempts to create a reality that transcends the physical. In creating this work, I contemplated aspects of my own life in relation to our digital age. Time, place, and distance and the ability to utilize digital technology to over overcome these challenges of contemporary life, drove me to create this work and will continue to be the impetus for my artistic creation.

Works Cited

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994. Print.

Cartman, Joe. "Ghosts Before Breakfast." Ghosts Before Breakfast. N.p., n.d. Web. 06 July 2017. <http://people.wcsu.edu/mccarneyh/fva/R/Ghosts_Before_Breakfas_351.html>.

Hanhardt, John, and Peter Campus. "Peter Campus." *BOMB*, no. 68, 1999, pp. 66–73. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/40426190.

Kahn, Eve M. "Cultivating a Love of 'Lover's Eyes'." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 02 Feb. 2012. Web. 07 July 2017.

Rabinovitz, Lauren. "College Course File: HISTORY OF AMERICAN VIDEO ART." *Journal of Film and Video*, vol. 38, no. 3/4, 1986, pp. 111–122. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/20687744.

Reserve Channel. Toy Oursler | Art in Progress. YouTube, 01 May 2014. Web. 07 July 2017.

Serwer, Jacquelyn D. "Nam June Paik: 'Technology.'" *American Art*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1994, pp. 87–91. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3109146.

Susik, Abigail. "Sky Projectors, Portapaks, and Projection Bombing: The Rise of a Portable Projection Medium." *Journal of Film and Video*, vol. 64, no. 1-2, 2012, pp. 79–92. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/jfilmvideo.64.1-2.0079.