

Pop Abstraction, Humor, Narcissism, and God  
(Not God, Really. It's Just That When I Say "God" I Usually Mean  
To Say Something Like "Sex" and/or "Death.")

Thesis

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by

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**Dedicated to the following:**

Aubra Fletcher  
Patricia Stone  
Tony Trigilio

**And the memories of:**

Linda S. Trigilio  
The Tiep Hien Order  
The former Soviet Union

**With kind thanks to:**

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I'm not interested in achieving immortality through my art. I want to achieve it by not dying.

– Woody Allen

If you can't rock steady, shut up already. Damn.

– Prince

Everything we need that is not food or love is here in the tabloid racks.

– Don DeLillo

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## **Introduction**

As I have become increasingly self-obsessed, creating introductions for myself has become a strain. Perhaps, like an Academy Award winner or the President, I need no introduction. I explore issues of cultural context in terms of popular media and narcissism. Much of my work seeks to deconstruct the nature and performance of obsession, both personal and political.

My method of presentation often incorporates humor, engaging the viewer/listener immediately. I am interested in the responses a viewer might have once the joke is over and one is suddenly left with the lingering subtleties of violence and social disease. In my visual and musical process I employ the techniques of appropriation and sampling, gathering information that communicates ideas beyond the visual/aural sense. It is important that the presentation be slick enough to communicate my ideas clearly while not communicating the idea of slickness itself.

Creating short video works facilitates my attention to detail and simultaneously co-opts the pop standard of three-minute chunks of information. The *Untitled Book Series* exists as a non-linear selection of short videos ranging between thirty seconds and five minutes in length. Some of the videos maintain direct relationships to respective books while others are more abstractly related. Each video is a fully focused, conceptually insular packet of cultural, literary, personal, or historical information. These pieces, when taken together, are essentially a self-portrait — a pop abstractionist personality composite.

## **Anecdote I**

The first time I saw an uncircumcised penis was Christmas Day, 1992. My mother had bought me a copy of *Robert Mapplethorpe*, a book of photos spanning the artist's career. She wrapped it up and put it under the tree along with all of the gifts for the family (I also got a copy of *The Graduate* and of Pink Floyd's *The Works* on CD). After we finished opening all our gifts, my brother, father, mother and I would usually go off in different directions to play with our new toys and gadgets. I promptly went to my room and, after putting on the Pink Floyd CD, began looking through my Mapplethorpe book. I thought I was a real intellectual looking at a book of photography by this famous and controversial artist. I was flipping along, just pretending to really "get" the composition, lighting, and modeling of various flowers, models, and sado-masochism photos. As I turned a page, there in front of me was a long, thick penis drooping lazily out of a pair of slacks. I was seventeen years old at the time, and was a little concerned about my own obvious inadequacy next to the length and girth of this man's enormous cock. What

struck me most, though, was the wholly unfamiliar and startling presence of a foreskin. I kept looking at it, asking myself, "Is that normal? Is there something wrong with me? Whose penis is normal, his or mine?" I put the book down and left my room, slightly shaken, to go eat the cinnamon rolls my father always made from a can on Christmas Morning – a gesture to thank God for giving us His only Son to save us from sin.

Later in the afternoon I called my lifelong friend Adam Ferguson, whose father was a physician, and asked him to come over. I showed him the unusually constructed penis in the Mapplethorpe book and asked him if his penis looked like that too. "Oh. He's just uncircumcised. We've been circumcised, but he still has his foreskin. Don't worry." God bless Adam Ferguson.

## Humor

An essential component in my artwork, my sense of humor is based entirely on a sense of cultural time and expectations. When I make fun of Christ, blaspheme against the Holy Spirit, or speak of my alleged sexual affair with Donald Rumsfeld, I'm aiming for a laugh based on cultural assumptions about Christianity or American politics. My own cultural assumptions can be way off at times, but the hope is that I'll have enough of my finger on the pulse of contemporary American culture that I'll be able to pull off a joke. If I misjudge cultural assumptions, or if I get too cocky about the assumptions I have made, then the joke is either offensive or embarrassingly unfunny.

The basis of sarcasm is a combination of lying and exaggerating. In my own use of sarcasm, I attempt to make sure that all the parameters in a given narrative or joke are "straight" or believable. When I then exaggerate or lie about one isolated element in an otherwise believable narrative, humor occurs. In "Book 15" from the *Untitled Book Series* (in which I recount my former job as Prince's rehearsal keyboardist), I challenge my own believability and an audience's faith in me. If one were told of my career working with Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh rather than of my experiences with Prince, the video would be less amusing. The very real anguish and corruption associated with my Thich Nhat Hanh work becomes hyperbolic and even banal when applied to my work with Prince; religious leaders and rock stars communicate different comic information.

In his essay *Jokes and The Unconscious*, Sigmund Freud addresses the unconscious phenomena between a joker and an audience. However, Freud argues, "as soon as the aimless movement [of a joke or comic situation] does damage, or the disappointment causes pain, the possibility of comic effect is at an end."<sup>1</sup> It is precisely this abrupt end to "comic effect" that I enjoy working with. The relationship between exaggerations, lies, and other uncomfortable social interventions (voyeurism, exploitation) and acceptable social interaction is tenuous when a "comic effect" is in play.

Isolating one aspect of normal life and then exaggerating or lying about it is something I started doing in the performances of my *Starve* series. *Starve Prince (Live)* mirrored ordinary street performance in that I assumed the role of an anonymous street performer playing songs by Prince on an acoustic guitar. That the piece lasted exactly four hours was not so unusual — strolling down Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley, one is likely to see some musician playing songs for hours and hours. I did, however, isolate and

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<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and the Unconscious*, (London: Hogarth Press Ltd, 1960), 228.

then hyperbolize the role of the audience. I invited people in advance of the performance to reserve time to chain themselves to my leg in half-hour shifts while I played the Prince songs. These participants were allowed to do anything they liked while I performed (eat, talk, read, listen, sing along). They and I played it straight during the performance. The participants in the performance could be seen to be captive to an element of potential sexual discomfort as they of chained themselves to my leg and listened to highly sexualized music by Prince. Passers-by then took notice of the guy on the street playing Prince songs with “some guy chained to his leg.” The joke, and the crux of the piece, rested on the self-bondage of the participants. This focus then allowed the passer-by to consider the undercurrent of the piece: captivity, obsession, and sexuality.

The *Untitled Book Series* attempts to use humor and sarcasm as an enjoyable hook with which to establish a serious subtext underlying any given piece. Freud suggests that there is a correlative interplay between mental distress and humor. “The subjective determinants of the joke-work are often not far removed from those of neurotic illness.”<sup>2</sup> I would extend this idea to apply not only to my own neuroses as a humorist, but to our culture’s own neurotic illness as well. In “Book 12,” in which a boy will only eat from his Robert Mapplethorpe plate, the humor is understood almost entirely on the surface, an almost superficial, imaginative joke. The subtext of the piece deals more delicately with childhood development in regards to homosexuality, perversion, and cultural assumptions about contemporary suburbia and the United States’ South. The scenes in which the boy is eating at the restaurant table or playing baseball are sweet and innocent, yet eerily disturbing in relationship to the imagery most often associated with Robert Mapplethorpe.<sup>3</sup> So while I genuinely intend to amuse and entertain an audience with the novelty of the “Mapplethorpe plate” idea, what is also addressed is this thing I’m calling social disease, or our culture’s own hedonistic self-obsession and fear.

### **The *Starve* Series**

In 1996 I began work on a series called *Starve* which I continued through 2001. Basically creating a “brand name” from the concept of starvation, my work in the *Starve* series took form in published instructions, guerilla performances, installations, videos, multi-media performances, marketing, music, and websites. In a direct way, the *Starve* series addressed political and social issues regarding pop-culture and the incongruous yet ubiquitous disparities between suburban affluence and war, poverty, and starvation. The subtext of this work, however, dealt largely with the interplay between cultural and personal narcissism as it related to American foreign policies and American attitudes towards the global underclass.

Some of the most successful pieces in the *Starve* series were the long performance pieces, including *Starve Performance* (1997-99), *Starve Interviews (24 Hours)* (2001), *Starve Prince (live)* (2001), and *Starve Moe’s* (2001). These pieces were conceived as overtly narcissistic works which referenced the body art performances of Chris Burden

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 142.

<sup>3</sup> Significantly, the plate is never actually seen in the video, forcing the viewer to conjure mental images of what one might find printed on a “Mapplethorpe plate.”

and Linda Montano. My primary interest was to further the work into a pop-political arena, a push that I intended to be fueled by my own personality and self-conscious persona. In *Starve Interviews (24 Hours)* I prepared an extensive “information kit” with pertinent biographical information and interview suggestions (to “get the ball rolling” for those interviewers who might be shy). Participants signed up for one or two-hour slots of interview time over a twenty-four hour period. Superficially, the piece dealt with sleep/sense deprivation and endurance. But because it was so focused on me personally and was staged as a production, the work took on a hyperbolic narcissistic meaning. Since I created a situation in which I talked about myself for twenty-four hours, I relied on my own personality and the perception I believe others to have of me to project a sense of do-it-yourself celebrity. As I created press kits and websites promoting interviews *of myself*, I was essentially turning media commercialism onto myself. As I had made a “brand” from the horrible reality of starvation, I now was promoting my own biography as a consumer item. I toyed with the fine line between shameless self-promotion and the cult of the celebrity manufacturer. *Starve Interviews (24 Hours)* became a pop abstraction in that it played on the most localized and self-absorbed aspects of Warholian notions of fame and self-importance.

### **Pop Abstraction**

What I mean by the term “pop abstraction” is the notion of abstracting from pop culture those threads of social, sexual, and narcissistic information that lay beneath the surface of contemporary media and ordinary pedestrian interaction. Our lives are unconsciously filled with messages about sex, power, and fear. A cursory examination of the *New York Times* or television ads for antibacterial soap reveals a pop culture obsessed with itself and, ultimately, its survival. Creating an abstract of this cultural information is to uncover the psychological phenomena that underlie the very essence of pop culture. I manipulate this pop abstraction in my work to appear as autobiography. Through experiments in video practice, performance, and self-conscious revelation, I present the viewer with a composite of my identity based on a pop abstraction. In “Book 21,” in which I focus a video camera on actors portraying panhandling superheroes, I reveal information about my gaze, expectations, and judgments. At the same time I mirror the gaze of a culture that encourages cults of celebrity. I thrive on the idea of collecting elements of pop culture (songs, video games, movies, postcards, celebrities, and politics) and pushing them through a sieve to strain out the juicy toxins of media culture. What’s left is the sullied, spent flesh of American culture’s underbelly.

The phrase “pop abstraction” has taken on a largely vernacular meaning.<sup>4</sup> When Warhol, Ruscha, and Liechtenstein were developing the aesthetic we today think of as Pop Art, their primary materials were not colors and shapes, but ideas. Pop was an

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<sup>4</sup> In 1998, the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (PAFA) exhibited *Pop Abstraction*, a show including work by pop artists, minimalists, and contemporary artists with similar formal concerns. The show, curated by Sid Sachs, was largely a collection of highly colorful minimalist work (Donald Judd was included), traditional 1960s pop fare, and like minded contemporary art. Seemingly ignoring the Finish Fetish school of California sculpture, of which John McCracken may be the most famous member, Sachs appears to be conflating the palette of pop with the objectivity of minimalism (and the subsequent ubiquity of post-minimalism) to define whatever it is he is calling “pop abstraction.” In actuality, the show was simply high quality 60s art, installed alongside works of its descendents.



examination of culture far more than it was an examination of form. When thinking of pop *abstraction*, one must consider that from which one is abstracting. If one abstracts from the world of pop culture, then one must be clear about the nature of pop in the early 21st century.

Pop is the language of consumer culture and media obsession. Given the largely unacknowledged assimilation of postmodernism into American media culture, Levi's ads become more sophisticated than art commonly understood as "pop abstraction."<sup>5</sup> It makes more sense to think of the contemporary pop culture as a hyperactive culture of information, ideas, and artifice, diseased by an undercurrent of self-absorption and hedonism. This social disease is evident just under the surface of every pedestrian interaction and intellectual discourse. Therefore, to create an abstract of this pop culture, one must work in its own realm of information and artifice. A pop abstractionist subverts the self-congratulatory cannibalism of media culture by creating abstract recreations of it by means of information and artifice. As mass-media is the dominant language for contemporary popular culture, an abstraction of popular culture can best be achieved through the understanding and manipulation of mass-media. In response, the *Untitled Book Series* subverts cultural expectations about cinematic narrative, media entertainment, and television.

Americans consider themselves a culture of media critics, and as such, feel as though they really understand the ways in which media communicates and entertains. With a pop abstractionist approach to video, I manipulate assumptions about media literacy while also genuinely intending to entertain. For instance, in "Book 6" (in which a cult member is deprogrammed), I interpret a scene from Don DeLillo's 1992 novel *Mao II*. The stylized opening shots of a young woman walking towards a man in a car strictly adhere to cinematic rules of continuity and balance. At a point in this opening sequence, the viewer is disturbed by the sexualized dynamic between two apparent strangers and the sexual power disparity between them. The manipulation of traditional cinematic style communicates an unnerving sense of normalcy in the midst of a highly abnormal context. Furthermore, it is DeLillo's own writing that informs this pop abstractionist video work. DeLillo's material directly utilizes the language and ideation of pop culture as tools for uncovering the undercurrents of isolation and social distraction.<sup>6</sup>

In the novel *White Noise*, DeLillo uses the hyperslick environment of the supermarket to reveal deeper relationships between individuals and their religion, politics, and collective fear. The first video in the *Untitled Book Series*, in which grocery items rapidly move across the screen, is significantly based on *White Noise*. The barrage of grocery items achieves a level of frenzy against the voice of a man asking for medical help in German. The images are disturbed and harried, yet they remain beautiful and appealing, as in DeLillo's own descriptions. The effluvia of the supermarket are beautiful. DeLillo's character of Murray Jay Siskind explains that supermarket tabloids "ask profoundly important questions about death, the afterlife, God, . . . yet they exist in an almost Pop Art atmosphere."<sup>7</sup> Postmodernist appropriation is transported to a psychosocial sphere; grocery stores are temples and televisions communicate "psychic

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<sup>5</sup> If the work of Ingrid Calame, for instance, is an abstraction of candy-store colors, is it not then simply an abstract painting in bright pinks and blues? Of course, what Sachs means by defining this aesthetic as Pop Abstraction is that the work appears to recombine separate traditions, namely Abstraction (particular the color field painters of the New York school) and Pop. But just using these words "pop" and "abstraction" as if they have no other meaning outside of the art movements that bear their names is semantically absurd.

<sup>6</sup> DeLillo's work is a reminder of Andy Warhol's "Disaster Series" which uses the common language of crime photography to reveal a cultural narrative that belies the aesthetics of pop.

<sup>7</sup> Tom LeClair, "DeLillo: Language of the Supermarket," *White Noise: Critical Edition*, (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1996), 408.

data.”<sup>8</sup> Frank Lentricchia writes that DeLillo’s work conflates “terror and wild humor as the essential tone of contemporary America.”<sup>9</sup> Lentricchia’s analysis is a springboard for my own pop abstractionist aesthetics within the *Untitled Book Series*.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Frank Lentricchia, “Don DeLillo’s Primal Scenes,” *White Noise: Critical Edition*, (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1996), 412.

## **Anecdote II**

At an early age I began a process of sorting and organizing my possessions and personal effects so that my biographers would have an easy time of researching and writing about me. At least once a year I sit down among an ever-growing assortment of original tapes, writings, CDs, videotapes, photos, and clippings, sorting and filing them in archive-preparation. Many of the tapes and videos are of performances or recordings of my own music (or music from teenage bands Kishke', Nevermore, and The Blue Buddha Band). There are tapes of performance art works, collaborations, field recordings, announcements of my work, etc. Many of the cassettes are of recordings from National Public Radio. I still record miscellaneous stories, debates, and interviews on NPR, thinking that someday I'll use these recordings, though I have only on rare occasions. If the process of organizing and sorting wasn't so obsessive, it would appear somewhat scrapbook-like. However, scrapbooks are receptacles of hobbyism and my collections of tapes, videos, writings, and clippings speak more to my own idiosyncratic sense of identity and personal mythology. My therapist tells me that this obsession with organizing these artifacts of identity is directly tied to my fear and obsession with death.

In this vein, I've been planning to write a memoir of my life between the ages of ten and thirty. So far, these are the chapter titles I've come up with:

1. Italian matriarchs, you know?
2. With every thrust, an exclamation.
3. I stubbed my toe on my own shoe.
4. You should know that Aubra wants to have the "Michael-Is-Head-Over-Heels-For-You-And-That's-Okay-With-Me-Conversation" tomorrow afternoon.
5. I cut my finger on a rubber bathtub stopper.
6. Naturephobic: Won't Go Camping
7. He was never married to Mia, Soon-Yi was Andre Previn's daughter, and he met her when she was twenty-one.
8. What Ever Happened to Cary Galasso?

## **Serialization**

I was raised on James Bond movies. I was enamored with the sexuality and charm of the high-tech spy and his myriad contrivances and predicaments. All through my childhood, my father, who had taped all the Bond movies from television, would comment on how each film was stylistically consistent with each other film. Each Bond movie begins with those swiping dots across the screen which pause long enough for the Bond silhouettes to walk on, swivel, and fire a shot at the camera, pausing as the flush of a bloody red graphic oozes down the screen. This sequence, followed by a short vignette displaying Bond's affable charm and death-defying escapes, is then followed by the title

credits and music (the montage of which always sequenced silhouettes of beautiful nude women in provocative poses).<sup>10</sup>

This highly ordered sequence of events is reliable and has become a "signature" of James Bond films. However, after examining the entire Bond oeuvre, it seems that a signature opening montage is less a marker of serialization than of trademarking. The trademark elements of Bond movies impart serialization, though only superficially, the way a can of Coca-Cola imparts mass production or mass-produced consumer choice. The Bond movies are less a serial than a franchise.

Interestingly, the franchise of James Bond is insular in that each Bond film resolves itself in the end, resolving the storyline and character development within the terms and conditions of a particular film. An example of a more serialized media franchise is the burgeoning "Law & Order" franchise which has only recently spun off into other shows with the "Law & Order" music, titles, sound-design, and basic cinematic structure. "Special Victims Unit," "Criminal Intent," and "Crime & Punishment" all match the original show in terms of style and content. Even the now defunct "Crime & Punishment," which was a reality-television style show portraying actual court cases, was shot and edited to look like the fictional dramas of the other programs. While this "Law & Order" franchise embarked on the same trademarking and stylistic consistency as James Bond movies, these television programs differ importantly in terms of serialization. Almost all television dramas are hour-long serials broadcasting weekly, usually with a season-long arc for their characters and plot-points. The "Law & Order" franchise is unique in that each episode of any given program of the franchise is insular and resolved within itself by the end of the episode, while the cast of main characters develops only slightly throughout the season. One can come into the franchise at any point, knowing little or nothing about the show, and presumably understand and enjoy an episode.<sup>11</sup> As the various programs of the "Law & Order" franchise are broadcast weekly, and the show is renewed from season to season, the "Law & Order" franchise exists as a regular serial upon which viewers can rely.

Crucial aspects of serialization, then, include consistent stylistic elements among the various objects in a series (as in Bond films), predictability, reliability, and thematic unity. Also important is the dichotomy between self-contained elements of the series and global narratives and meta-narratives. Comic books, one of the oldest forms of serialization, specifically address the question of internal and global narratives. Each issue of a comic book has a self-contained plot of some kind. At the end of a comic series the cumulative elements of each issue are resolved.<sup>12</sup> In this way, separate from the Bond movies and the "Law & Order" franchise, serialization occurs not just in terms of style or character development, but also particularly in the narrative itself. Comics capitalize on

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<sup>10</sup> Doing a little fact checking, I emailed my father to confirm the consistency of these Bond film trademarks. His response: "Hi, Mikey... your answer follows: The Bond films that we all know and love were done by United Artists, produced originally by Harry Saltzman and Albert Broccoli ... when Saltzman died, Broccoli took over and kept it going. The original film, *Dr. No*, had the opening sequence and the original John Barry theme music ... starting with *Goldfinger* (#3), a theme song was added to the opening credit displays and followed ever since. All of the Broccoli films follow the same format ... you might be thinking of the 2 Bond films that were not part of this UA Production: *Casino Royale* with David Niven and Woody Allen (a comedy, obviously) and *Never Say Never*, a take off with an older Sean Connery and Kim Basinger (was actually a remake of the original *Thunderball*, the 4th UA Bond film)."

<sup>11</sup> This is different than shows like "The West Wing" or "The X-Files" in which the soap-opera narrative follows from week-to-week. Someone tuning into the fifth season of "The X-Files," for instance, would undoubtedly be bewildered by the interactions and relationships of the characters, having missed the preceding seasons and respective episodes.

<sup>12</sup> A good example is Frank Miller's *Batman: Dark Knight Returns* (New York: DC Comics, 1985).

stringing along their readers from episode to episode. Readers are compelled to purchase each new issue in the storyline.<sup>13</sup>

My own work is most successful when made within the framework of serialization. By creating works that interact with one another within a broader conceptual framework, as in the *Untitled Book Series*, I clarify relationships between disparate ideas and styles to elucidate a more comprehensive aesthetic agenda.

## Identity

Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* series is a powerful example of the technique of serialization as it exists in the context of pop abstraction. In *Untitled Film Stills*, Sherman places her own body into tightly constructed anonymous narratives within each individual photograph. Nevertheless, Sherman never completely resolves the individual narratives in her work. An examination of only one or two of these photos leaves me unclear as to what exactly is "happening" in the photo. Is she scared? Where is she going? Why is she here?

I had the opportunity to see the entire series on display in Austin, Texas in 1999. Moving from photo to photo, I suddenly was able to place Sherman's own identity in the various insulated, yet unresolved, narratives in her series. After looking at one, and being a bit confused by the open-endedness of it, I'd move to another photo, which was itself equally open-ended, yet distinct in terms of the anonymity of its story. The open-endedness of these fragmented micro-narratives afforded Sherman the opportunity to explore and construct cultural clichés into which she could insert her own identity. Cindy Sherman as ingénue, Cindy Sherman as housewife, Cindy Sherman as small-town girl. Sherman's classification of her work as film forces the viewer to imagine the broader context of each individual "still;" for instance, one imagines from where this character emerged and to where she is headed.

In the *Untitled Book Series* I have made a series of videos that are similarly fragmented and unresolved. Like Sherman's series, the meta-narrative resolution of the series is evident in the larger context of the piece. Watching "Book 2," in which I describe my lifelong fear of surveillance, I never articulate how this particular neurosis has developed beyond the narrative of the video. Watching "Book 3," in which one hears a telephone conversation between me and a well-known artist, my stammering nervousness on the telephone confirms and complements the narrative of "Book 2." My nervousness about being watched highlights my nervous chatter on the telephone. Later in the series, "Book 14," in which I describe working for Prince, leaves one with a sense of my own personality as I insert myself into a narrative taken out of time. At the end of the Prince video, I never tell the audience what happens after Prince fires me, but one can piece together some sense of my own identity when viewing this video with the others in the series. This interweaving of ideation and resolution allows me to experiment with my own identity as I choose what to reveal and what to hide. I ultimately subvert my own self-consciousness through this narrative structure of interdependence. Although I might

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<sup>13</sup> Daytime soap operas are similar in that they are largely incoherent out of the context of the season-long (or series-long) storyline. Daytime soap operas, however, do not require the viewer to purchase each episode.

want to conceal an aspect of my personality in one piece, it is that very aspect which is highlighted in another.

This kind of inadvertent self-disclosure does not occur in Sherman's work. After looking at her series, I learn nothing of who Sherman is as a person, only of what clichés into which she has inserted herself. Sherman manipulates the viewer's *expectation* that narratives revealed through motion pictures elucidate an understanding of identity in a special way. She allows the collective history of cinematic clichés to inform her self-portrait; a non-motion medium made to look like an outtake from a film (i.e., a mistake) illustrates an invented and staged identity. Sherman conceals her own personal identity while creating fictional micro-narratives that look like parts of movies. She freezes these moments in time, not allowing the natural accidents of human expression to inform an understanding of her own biography. As Sherman cites film as her media reference for her photographic series, I have cited books as the media to illuminate my work in video. In the *Untitled Book Series*, I serialize videos which relate to books as a way of experimenting with my own identity and providing a composite of my own personality. It is as if Sherman's series and mine travel in opposite directions towards respective media (films to photographs, books to videos). The subject matter of the videos in the *Untitled Book Series* is similarly contrived as generic or cliché images such as those found in Sherman's series. However, I actually am obsessed with Prince, I did spend my adolescence believing there were cameras in my eyes, and I do use a Berhinger direct box to record my electric bass. The autobiographical content of my work is then surfaced from the tension presumed by the sources of my work, which are of course, books.

## **Annotated Obsessions**

### **1. National Public Radio**

In many ways, NPR mirrors many of the serialized principles that I see in my own work. There is a re-occurring "cast of characters" from whom we hear the news and other stories of human interest. The reliability of the NPR format is soothing and calming. One always can rely on a NPR news update with Anne Bozelle, Cory Flintoff, or Corva Coleman during the first ten minutes of any given daytime hour. Likewise, waking up to Bob Edwards in the morning and driving home with Linda Wirthheimer in the afternoon adds a regularity and formulaic sanity to any given day. As a paranoid cynic, I'm aware of the role NPR plays as a "centrist" mouthpiece for the government. Using a critical ear though, it isn't so bad if you just want to have a friend like Neil Conan on the radio while you do your dishes.

### **2. Don DeLillo**

There is no greater living writer than DeLillo. I read critics who yammer on and on about Thomas Pynchon and Philip Roth, but it is DeLillo who captures in each of his novels the undercurrents of a sickened, fractured American culture with grace, style, and humor.

### **3. Prince**

A self-consumed genius who wears makeup and high-heels. What more does one need for an obsession? It is only because of Prince, really, that I studied and learned to play all the instruments I use in my recordings. Being sufficiently megalomaniacal, I decided that the best way to make the music I wanted was to

do it the "Prince Way," which has served me well for the last ten years. (I think of this as unilateral multi-instrumentalism as opposed to instrumental multi-lateralism.) Prince is also the queerest rock idol to navigate successfully the homophobic crosscurrents of American pop culture.<sup>14</sup> Prince's sexually charged explicit lyrics remain unparalleled in pop music, even in the increasingly bawdy hip-hop culture that has risen up in the wake of Prince's own popularity. Most songs about sex, especially those sung by men, bespeak the singer's own perceived sexual power, irresistibility, and ability to sleep with many different women at will. Prince's sexual songs, uniquely, are about masturbation, cunnilingus, female and male orgasm, and kink.

#### **4. The Watergate Scandal**

I became enamored with Richard Nixon and the Watergate scandal when I was in college. I don't know how it happened. I heard a Bob Woodward interview on NPR at some point. Later I read something by Howard Zinn about Kissinger and Machiavelli's *The Prince*. I started casually reading and researching the whole Nixon presidency. By the time President Clinton was impeached, I was flailing about San Antonio, wildly making distinctions between Nixon's absolute abuse of power, and Clinton's stupid, prurient sexual transgressions. I do pretty well on Trivial Pursuit, as a result of this particular interest.

#### **5. David Bowie**

David Bowie is simply gorgeous. Bowie's music, considerably less dynamic or explicit than Prince's, is the erotica of drama queens. Less self-indulgent than Roger Waters, Bowie's thematic incarnation as a glamorous melodramatic troubadour is a compelling trait for an aspiring pop icon such as myself. Bowie is the most sexually attractive man in media today.

#### **6. Sex and Sexuality**

I have always been obsessed with sex and the way sexuality performs its various roles in our culture as well as in my own life. In all of my blaspheming and deconstructing of social mores, it is still with sexuality that I have a delicate relationship. There is an interpersonal edginess to sex that I don't find in religion or politics. Thinking about sex is not so much arousing to me as it is dumbfounding. How did I get this way? Why do I find this person sexually appealing and this other person unappealing? What is it about certain men who are sexually attractive to me in ways different from women? My relationship with polyamory, queerness, and my own body impacts the sexual underpinnings in my videos and my thinking. Sexual decisions seem to be simultaneously arbitrary and irrevocably consequential. It is also important to consider Freud's analysis of neurosis, humor, and sexuality, the "individual components of a person's sexual constitution. . . can appear as motives for the construction of a joke."<sup>15</sup> I do love a good joke.

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<sup>14</sup> David Bowie did this well in the 1970s, but his success was largely relegated to the United Kingdom during his queerest glam rock period. In the 1980s, when Prince's queer identity personae reigned pop music alongside Madonna and Michael Jackson, it was Bowie who ironically "recanted" his bisexuality.

<sup>15</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and the Unconscious*, 143.

## **7. Coca-Cola**

Writing this, it seems crazy to be obsessed with Coca-Cola. But I am. Even Andy Warhol's relationship with Coca-Cola is too simplistic relative to my own. I drink it compulsively. I adore the colors, the styles of the bottles and cans, the differences in taste between cans, plastic and glass bottles, the various flavors that seem to wither in the shadow of the "original" Coca-Cola formula. When Coca-Cola made Diet Coke, people liked it so much that it began to outsell regular Coca-Cola. See, when they made Diet Coke, they didn't just replace sugar with NutraSweet. They created an entirely different flavor . . . "just for the taste of it." Well, since Diet Coke was beating its predecessor in taste-tests, the manufacturers decided to just take the new Diet Coke flavor formula and simply add sugar to it. This they called "New Coke." People said they preferred it in blind taste-tests. But New Coke failed because people sensed a betrayal of the Coca-Cola idea. Fortunately, the manufacturers released Coca-Cola Classic, which is what we know now as Coca Cola.<sup>16</sup> I also collect Coca-Cola cans from around the world.

## **8. Religion and Fundamentalism**

I stopped believing in God before my sixteenth birthday. Even as a Catholic child, I never did understand how I was saved. It didn't make any sense because it didn't explain the Holocaust. I later transitioned from outright atheism to Zen Buddhism, which is the only religion I can think of that approximates atheism. After nearly four years of life as a lay-priest in a religious order, I gave up on religion for a second time. Nonetheless, my obsession with fundamentalism, be it Islamic, Christian, or Buddhist, continues. I am especially struck by the astounding convergence of evangelical Christianity and American conservative politics.

## **9. Death**

Most of my time is spent avoiding my constant fixation on death. I spend a great deal of daydream time thinking about ways to commit suicide or imagining what my closest loved ones would do upon hearing of my tragic death. I keep my personal effects, memorabilia, and other possessions neatly organized so that my grieving widow, family members, friends, and investigators will be able to sort through the remains of my life without much strain. My main problem is an inability to compartmentalize my fears, stressors, concerns, and worries. I basically fear everything all at once. My dreams, most of which are about dying, murder, or the return of my deceased mother, are remarkably unsubtle, devoid of cryptic meaning or symbolism. Once I dreamt that my mother returned from the dead after six years just to tell me that the reason she hadn't resurrected sooner was because I was not a good person.

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<sup>16</sup> This history is explained at the *Cokelore* website on Snopes.com (<http://www.snopes.com/cokelore/newcoke.asp>).



### **Anecdote III**

The nurse led me to the examining room. I sat on the table and she took my pulse, after which she let me know that she "secretly" took my respiration as well, while I wasn't looking. She does my blood pressure and hands me a pamphlet on domestic violence: *Relationships Shouldn't Hurt*. "No they shouldn't," I said. She started over-explaining why they give that to every patient and I tried putting her at ease saying, "No, really, they really shouldn't. Relationships really shouldn't hurt." I really meant to sound sincere, and honestly, I was. And it really is good that they hand it out to every person.

She left the room and I sat there. I decided, well if I'm going to be in here alone and bored, I might as well read about why relationships shouldn't hurt.

The doctor walked in, and I said, "I'm reading about why relationships shouldn't hurt."

She looked at me, a little non-plussed. "Good! Well, is any of that an issue for you?"

"No, no. I was just reading it."

"Okay. So that's not why you're here then. That's good. So why are you here?"

I had this speech prepared. "Well, basically, I've taken a Zantac-75 every day for the last four months and I'm beginning to think this isn't the wisest regimen for healing."

She looks interested. She's sitting on a stool, and I'm up on the paper table, kind of looking down at her.

"I know a lot of it is my diet and plus, I've been under a lot of stress in my relationships and stuff." Now I was paranoid that she was definitely going to think that I was in an abusive relationship. "I've been seeing a therapist, and that's really helped."

She nodded and said empathic things like "Yeah" and "Hmm" and "Of course."

"I drink maybe three or four Cokes a day," I continued. "And maybe one or two bottles of iced tea too. I know that's kind of crazy, and I know I need to change it, so I will. I don't drink coffee." I had anticipated this question, and her response was one of satisfaction. "I don't really drink tea either."

"And what about the food you eat? Do you eat a lot of spicy foods?"

"Yes," I said. I don't really. I don't really eat a lot of spicy foods. I don't know why I lied about this. I very rarely eat curries and Thai food, and usually I ask for them to be prepared very mild.

"And what about tomato sauce?"

"Oh yes. I eat a lot of Italian food. All the time. Yes."

"Yeah, mmm, okay, of course," she said everything as if she were cradling my stomach in her arms and cooing it to sleep. "Well tomato sauce is very acidic. And what about fatty foods?"

"Well, yes. I eat a lot of junk food."

She understands me. "And what about alcohol?"

"Oh, well, one to three drinks a week." This was one of the options on the form I filled out in the waiting area. There was "Never," "1-3 a week," "2-5 a week," and "7 or more."

"Okay. Well, for instance, how many drinks did you have last week?" she followed up.

Well see, last week was unusual because I had discovered my favorite wine on sale at this Italian deli near my house and I was kind of self-medicating my depression

with it. Honest or not, I stuck to my average. "Oh, I think no more than three . . . Yes, no more than three."

"And how much would you say you smoked?"

"Five to eight cigarettes a day," I answered. This was an option on the form as well.

"Have you been in any foreign countries?"

"No, no"

"Have you drunk any stream water, like if you went camping or anything?"

"No, no. I'm too afraid of that. I would never drink stream water. No. I've never even been camping. I don't like nature."

"So no unpurified water or anything like that?"

"Jesus, no. I'm way too squeamish."

"How about your stool. Is it black? Have you examined it for blood?"

Examined my stool. I won't even go camping. "No, no I haven't even thought to look. I probably should have."

She tells me she wants me to stop taking the Aleve. That Aleve is horrible for the stomach lining. She tells me to stop taking the Zantac-75 right away. I don't think she actually said "right away," but, somehow, that's the way I heard it. She prescribed Prilosec for me. That's the purple pill from TV.

"So, are there many bad side effects with Prilosec?" I asked, pretending that I've been living under a rock for the past year and somehow managed to miss the onslaught of pharmaceuticals warning about the possibility of "oily discharge." If she didn't say the words "oily discharge" I'd be okay. I actually thought this.

"You know, I've never seen anyone have any problems with it."

This was reassuring. She looked at me like she wanted to just talk.

"So, what on this list can we think about minimizing or cutting out altogether?" She wanted to know what we could do, together.

"Well, the caffeine for one. I mean my wife's really worried about it, and I know it's kind of insane and so that can definitely be minimized."

"Great. Good. I wouldn't quit it altogether just because you don't want to start getting caffeine headaches so maybe instead of three to four Cokes a day, you could cut down to one or two."

"Yes, yes that sounds good."

"And how about we not really worry about the smoking right now. If you can cut down on it, that's always good, but let's leave the smoking alone. Now, the fatty spicy foods. How can we cut those out? Those really tear up your stomach."

I had to come clean with her. "Well, see. Here's the thing. In addition to all of this, I'm also a lay Buddhist priest. And, well, there's been a lot of strife and hurt in my religious order. And a lot of what I'm trying to do for myself is find ways to push boundaries that won't hurt other people, like drinking and meat-eating for instance. And, well, just this past weekend I discovered the quarter-pounder with cheese and bacon and it changed my life."

She was appropriately surprised by the words "Buddhist priest" and then was suitably compassionate as I said, "hurt in my religious community."

"I understand. I understand. Well, the fatty fried greasy foods are really the worst things in this situation so if there's some way you can maybe really cut down on that, that would be very helpful." She was being delicate.

"Pizza?" I asked.

"Well, I was going to mention that. Yes, pizza is the worst thing you could possibly eat."

I felt like weeping.

"Can I ask you another question?" I said.

"Sure."

"Well. I've never had Chicken Pox and I'm kind of terrified of it because, you know, people my age can *die* of it."

She looked a little amused and ordered a third lab test to see if I'd ever had Chicken Pox in my system and, if not, I'd get the vaccine.

I left her office, oddly satisfied. They're helping me, I thought.

### **Ethics (work, experimental, and otherwise)**

I heard Woody Allen talking about his working process on NPR. He was asked about his steady stream of work and answered as follows. When Allen finishes a movie, he'll go to the premier on a Friday night. He'll spend the following Saturday resting and by Sunday he's feeling relaxed, and is rested. On Monday he starts to feel bored, so he usually starts writing another movie. Regardless of the veracity of this story, this romantic hyper-professionalism on the part of a successful filmmaker was more than simply impressive to me. It was validation. Artists are obliged to subvert American cultural assumptions about art making (an assumption of art making as hobbyism) by treating work with the seriousness of other professions. Professionalism in art making may not always amount to profitability, but it does imbue the artist with a valuable sense of experimentation. It is important to reclaim the word "experiment" from the notion of the avant-garde and instead allow the word to have its original scientific meaning. An artist's job, in many ways, is like that of a scientist. The artist conducts experiments that take time to plan, execute, refine, and finally develop into actual pieces contingent upon the success of the initial experiments. Experimentalism, then, does not refer to a genre of art but is instead a method. Professional experimentalism, unlike hobbyism, requires dedicated time and energy.

To cultivate the needed time and energy to conduct such experiments in art and music, I have found it helpful to cannibalize my own personal eccentricities, obsessions, compulsions, and sundry artifacts of self-absorption as the content for much of my work. I equate the drive and ability to produce an enormous volume of work with my own personal value as a human being.<sup>17</sup> Serialization is an ideal tool for my compulsive art making primarily because it creates a conceptual bed upon which many of my experiments can rest and be refined. When working in music, this makes even more sense if one thinks about making a record — a collection of songs that relate to one another. When I began to explore seriously the technique of serialization with the *Starve* series, I found a conceptual framework for a great number of the conceptual and performance experiments I had imagined for years. Many of the pieces in the *Starve* series addressed my autobiographical neuroses in cool, stark, formal ways, self-consciously masking my own identity and personality. The *Untitled Book Series*, though, pushes my own narcissism into the foreground, allowing the humor and quirkiness of my own

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<sup>17</sup> My therapist thinks I spend all of my time working on art because I'm trying to avoid sitting still long enough to contemplate the emotional ramifications of my mother's lifelong cancer battles and death in 1994. Furthermore, she posits that it is ultimately my own death that I fear.

autobiography to inform the subtext of the cultural/political ideas I overtly addressed in *Starve*.

### **Sounds Like Pop Songs**

Given my fascination with 1) myself, 2) serialization, and 3) prolificacy, it follows that I would be cult-like in my adoration of Woody Allen and, to a lesser extent, Prince and Brian Wilson.<sup>18</sup> Whenever I refer to Wilson or Prince, I'm referring to their public personae, as opposed to their respective intimate biographies, of which I am largely ignorant. Prince's persona as a hyper-prolific eccentric obsessed with sex and his own image was oddly, yet powerfully, resonant for me through my adolescence and into adulthood. While his body of work encompasses hits and misses, the body itself is an impressive collection for any pop idol. As an aspiring pop idol, I've been hugely influenced by the conflation of experimentation and slickness in Prince's music. His *Sign O' The Times* LP is conceptually and artistically quite similar to Brian Wilson's breathtaking *Pet Sounds*. Both records are essentially concept albums, though they avoid the easy trap of becoming rock operas. Each piece on Prince's and Wilson's record is, in and of itself, well-crafted and sonically pleasant. However, when heard in the context of its complementary tracks, each song becomes a sonic event in a highly developed musical structure. On Prince's record, the relationships among "Play in the Sunshine" "Housequake," and "The Ballad of Dorothy Parker" evoke a musical narrative of elation, heartbreak, and confusion. This kind of convergence is common on pop records, but in the special cases of Prince and Brian Wilson, each artist's respective persona and work ethic have been especially influential in my own work.

The *Untitled Book Series* pieces converge in very much the same way as these records. I've discussed earlier how the pieces mirror Cindy Sherman's work in their use of my own body inserted into existing narratives. Additionally, the conceptual ground upon which these videos tread is not so much musical but literary. Nonetheless, it is no coincidence that my interests in pop-abstraction and the overwhelming influence of musicians like Prince and Brian Wilson manifested in a serialized piece that is ultimately a pop DVD. The length of the pieces, the relative popular accessibility of each video, and the non-linearity of the DVD format mimics the contemporary experience of buying a pop record. In the case of a pop record, I listen to the songs I like a lot over and over again, and sometimes listen to the whole thing in one sitting. The DVD operates in the same way. The viewer can choose to watch any video in the series or simply play the videos in order. Also, when considering the decisions I've made in terms of submitting pieces to various group shows, I treat a few of the videos the same way I imagine an A&R person would evaluate a single for radio play. "Book 12" (the "Mapplethorpe Plate" video), "Book 14 (the "Prince" video), and "Book 4" (the "motel room" video) all have

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<sup>18</sup> Brian Wilson, like many famous neurotics, lives what I consider fantasy life. Specifically, I fantasize about lying in bed for two years, wearing only my robe, and trotting downstairs from time to time to make a recording. The level of depression and discontent in a person like Brian Wilson is something I find often seeping from under my own skin.

enough weight and conceptual cohesion to successfully exist on their own, even without the other videos in the series.

### **Concluding: The *Untitled Book Series***

Just before beginning the *Untitled Book Series*, I made a video called *All of My Books and Compact Discs on October 13, 2001*. The piece, in homage to Sol Lewitt, simply displayed the front cover of each book that I own. The soundtrack consisted of the first two seconds of each CD I own. The video succeeded as a self-contained work that addressed the impersonal issues of cataloguing, consumption, and the aesthetics of introductions (by this I mean "judging a book by its cover" or a CD by its first few seconds). The video also opened the door to exhibitionism: as each book cover went by, and each sound clip melted into the next one, a subtle understanding of my own personality as the artist began to emerge. The book covers and sound clips began to communicate my political opinions, my religious beliefs, my sexual tendencies, and my aesthetic interests. After finishing the video, I decided to use books as the anchor from which to begin my experiments in a video series about my own personality and the relationships between personal narcissism and cultural narcissism.

My interests in pop abstraction, humor, serialization, and narcissism, when taken together, constitute the conceptual subtext of the *Untitled Book Series*. It is through the non-linearity of the series that I have been able to assemble a personality composite; each video in the series exists as a media facet of self-reflection, or as Rosalind Krauss would describe it, "auto-reflection."<sup>19</sup> By cannibalizing my obsessions and subsequently presenting them as modular works of art, I mirror our culture's parodies of self-obsession which are pawned off on the public as entertainment or art.

The programming of the various videos in the series is intended to be non-linear, though I also intend for the videos to perform well when programmed for screenings which require linearity. Consider the programming of the following three videos: "Book 20" (in which I have an argument), "Book 15" (in which I describe working for Prince) and "Book 11" (in which I test a direct box). In this combination, a viewer is conscious of my obsessions with Woody Allen and Prince, my precarious relationship with sarcasm and hostility, and my self-conscious perception of myself as an affable geek. The programming of these videos together creates a personality composite which is distinct from a program of any three other videos in the series.

I have not set an end-date for the *Untitled Book Series*. Like On Kawara's paintings, and my own *Starve* series, I continue to make videos for the *Untitled Book Series* alongside other projects. The DVD I have produced as a part of this thesis is a catalogue of the series as it exists presently. Inevitably, a future DVD (or other video medium) will be created for future collections within this series. I have begun a new series of videos which is made up of much smaller videos of no more than two-minutes in

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<sup>19</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," *New Artists Video*, ed. Gregory Battcock, (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978), 43.

duration each. In this new series, I continue to experiment with pop abstraction and narcissism, but in a less narrative format.

While writing this thesis, I told my colleague Tadashi Usami that my thesis was about "myself and more." Tadashi responded, "But in your case, it would be about yourself and less." Tadashi's Oscar Wilde-like joke is revealing. I would *love* to admit that I am not actually, in reality, all that self-involved. I would like to imagine that the whole "narcissism" thing is actually a performance and the "self-obsessed Michael" one sees in the video series is just a character.<sup>20</sup> This conclusion though, upon some self-reflection, is a dishonest one. It is no coincidence that either my body or my voice happens to be in nearly every video, performance, or piece of music I make.<sup>21</sup> The videos in this series do, after all, portray as their subjects my own obsessions with religion, Woody Allen, Prince, Don DeLillo, sex, etc. In "Book 2" (in which I have cameras behind my eyes), I describe my own paranoid, narcissistic tendencies outright. It is fair to say, however, that I manipulate and attempt to subvert my own self-censorship in order that this personality composite reflect popular media culture. My social intention in this work is to subvert media culture's yahooistic self-congratulation. In the *Untitled Book Series*, one certainly gathers an impression of a "Michael Trigilio" who is self-obsessed. But the content that lies beneath this patina of self-involvement reflects that material which lies beneath the veneer of American media culture: I am revealed as a paranoid, anal-retentive, fear-ridden neurotic, who is obsessed with idiosyncratic pop idols, crippled with insecurity and terrified of his own mortality.

That's how I see it, anyway.

## Appendix 1

### Annotated bibliography of books upon which the *Untitled Book Series* is loosely based.

**"Book 1"** (*In which I videotape supermarket items.*)

**DeLillo, Don. *White Noise*. New York: Penguin Books, 1986.**

Probably the most accessible novel written by Don DeLillo, *White Noise* was the first book that I thought would translate well into the video series. The ferocious, intense speed of the video, juxtaposed with the urgency of the German language tape in the soundtrack, encapsulates for me many of the most striking features of this novel.

**"Book 2"** (*In which I believe there are cameras behind my eyes.*)

**Orwell, George. 1984. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1949.**

I read a great deal about surveillance while developing these videos. I wrote the autobiographical story about my own paranoia (the belief, which I held through my entire childhood, that I was being watched by video cameras hidden behind my eyes), before I realized I wanted this piece to be a "book." I thought Orwell's novel about a paranoid surveillance culture was appropriate, and as such, kept this

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<sup>20</sup> This is what Woody Allen says about his own relationship to his respective characters in his films (quite disingenuously, I think).

<sup>21</sup> I am reminded here of here of Alfred Hitchcock's famous "Macguffins," the cameo use of his own body in all of his films.

novel in mind as I edited the video. (Inside my used copy of *1984*, someone had written on the title page, "Dream of mom and dad dying so kids could live.")

**Book 3** (*In which I have a telephone conversation with an artist.*)

**Bernstein, David and Hatch, Christopher, Eds. *Writing Through John Cage's Music Poetry & Art*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.**

The best thing about this book is the article by Jonathan Katz on John Cage's queerness and his aesthetic and political agenda of silence. Ironically, the basis for the video was a telephone conversation with one of the contributors in which said contributor badgers me about the publication of the book.

**“Book 4”** (*In which I sing about living in a motel room.*)

**DeLillo, Don. *The Players*. New York: Random House, 1977.**

DeLillo describes motel rooms as "this vast system of nearly identical rooms, worldwide, established so that people will have somewhere to be *afraid* on a regular basis. The parings of our various searches. Somewhere to take our fear." I wrote a song called "Motel Room" after reading *The Players*. "Motel Room" mixed the right amount of humor, irony, and sincerity to translate into a thoughtful and hilarious video. I especially enjoyed working in the pop music video format, a venue ripe for pop abstractionist experimentation.

**“Book 5”** (*In which two dolls have a conversation in a bathroom.*)

**Salinger, J.D. *Franny & Zooey*. New York: Little, Brown, 1961.**

I read and became obsessed with this book when I was fifteen years old. My wife and I had always wanted to make a puppet show out of the bathroom scenes between Zooey and his mother Bessie.

**“Book 6”** (*In which I describe the turmoil of a Buddhist leader.*)

**Nhat Hanh, Thich. *Being Peace*. Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1987.**

I was ordained as a lay Buddhist priest by Thich Nhat Hanh in 1997. I had become close friends with the founders of Parallax Press and Community of Mindful Living (CML), a publishing house and nonprofit organization established to encourage socially engaged Buddhism in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh. In 1999, Thich Nhat Hanh and his advisors perpetrated a corporate takeover of Parallax Press and CML, firing the founders of the organizations. These same founders asked me to stay on at CML, where I remained the program director from 1999 through 2000. *Being Peace* is perhaps the most important book written by Thich Nhat Hanh in that it presents Zen Buddhist practice clearly and with a strong emphasis towards social engagement.

**“Book 7”** (*In which a cult member is deprogrammed.*)

**DeLillo, Don. *Mao II*. New York: Penguin Books, 1991.**

I've read this novel half-a-dozen times and the beauty of the prose and the depth of the narrative is so striking that I have rarely found ways to describe my appreciation. The video for this book is a scene from the book itself, one which struck me almost viscerally in its imagery and structure, taking place over three distinct periods of time.

**“Book 8”** (*In which Mills College students impersonate Yoko Ono.*)

**Munroe, Alexandra and Hendricks, Jon. *Yes: Yoko Ono*. New York: Japan Society Gallery, 2000.**

This catalog of Ono's first major retrospective is a serious and comprehensive examination of the founding Fluxus member's career and ideas.

**“Book 9”** (*In which I display anal sex products.*)

**Morin, Jack. *Anal Pleasure and Health*. San Francisco: Down There Press, 1991.**

Demystifying the anus as a center for sexual pleasure, Dr. Morin explains the techniques, myths, and facts about anal sex for men and women. Living in the Bay Area, one has access to various "sex positive" retail stores where one can purchase a variety of convenient and useful anal sex devices and paraphernalia, such as flavored lubricant, anal plugs and beads, and latex hand (or finger) gloves.

**“Book 10”** (*In which I am seen reading in bed.*)

**Johnson, Steven, ed. *The New York Schools of Music and Visual Arts*. New York: Routledge, 2002.**

This collection of scholarly writing about the New York School is hampered by the very thing that makes it alluring in the first place. Steven Johnson assembled an eclectic group of scholars to write about such diverse issues as Morton Feldman's use of patterns in his later work, the color field painters of the Abstract Expressionist movement, sprinkled with musical analyses of Wolpe and Varese. Unfortunately, the art historians and the musicologists are writing in wildly different styles and for very different audiences.

**“Book 11”** (*In which I test two direct boxes.*)

**Huber, David Miles. *Modern Recording Techniques, Fifth Edition*. Woburn: Focal Press, 2001.**

I think the best way to record an electric bass is by using a combination of a direct box along with microphone in front of a bass amp. Although Huber suggests a compression ratio of 4:1 for bass recordings. I usually prefer about a 6:1 ratio with a medium-to-high threshold, just to make the bass notes really tight and punchy.

**“Book 12”** (*In which a boy will only eat from his Robert Mapplethorpe plate.*)

**Levas, Dimitri, ed. *Robert Mapplethorpe*. Los Angeles: Books Nippan, 1990.**

Mapplethorpe remains one of the few over-rated artists whom I really enjoy. While people I speak with usually refer to his portraits of flowers as "so beautiful," it is his S&M photographs that strike me. Their unabashed homoerotic, often pornographic panache is arousing and wonderful. These photos in particular walk a delicate line between Alfred Stieglitz and Larry Flint, and what could be more subversively pop than that?

**“Book 13”** (*In which one watches television weather reports.*)

**Auster, Paul. *Leviathan*. New York: Penguin Books, 1992.**

I couldn't really finish this book. It was terribly depressing. I only bought it because I knew that Auster was Don DeLillo's best friend. The video for this book does, however, attempt to match the sense of isolation and angst achieved by Auster's writing.



**“Book 14”** (*In which a woman and I speak nonviolently to one another.*)

**Rosenberg, Marshall. *Nonviolent Communication*. Encinitas, California: Puddle Dancer Press, 1992.**

Rosenberg perceives himself to have "developed" a method of communication in which people in conflict can express their feelings and their needs without anyone getting hurt or even miffed. There is a whole subculture of people who talk this way all of the time, attempting to interact as "nonviolently" as possible. Every phrase and sentence is well crafted not to offend, or incidentally, to not reveal the speaker's true opinions or judgments about any issue, ever. "When you commit genocide, I feel afraid and what I need is to understand more about why you committed genocide." "When you produce child pornography about raping my daughter, I feel angry and what I need is my child's protection."

**“Book 15”** (*In which I describe working with Prince.*)

**Nelson, Per. *Dancemusicsexromance:Prince The First Decade*. New York: S.A.F. Pub. Ltd, 1999.**

Prince used to be so fucking cool. He's a Jehovah's Witness now, and has lost it all as a result. Prince (and David Bowie) were the two men who first taught me about tapping into my own gender-queer desire for androgyny and flash.

**“Book 16”** (*In which a box is seen on a sidewalk at night.*)

**Abe, Kobo. *The Boxman*. New York: Vintage, 1974.**

Abe invents a first-person narrative in which a successful businessperson gives up his life to live inside a large box, joining an anonymous Tokyo underground movement of highly educated professionals living their solitary lives from within their own boxes.

**“Book 17”** (*In which I stare at Moe's Books for six hours.*)

**Pitcher, Don. *Berkeley: Inside/Out*. Berkeley: Heyday Books, 1989.**

Moe's Books is a Berkeley institution and after staring at it for six hours in 2001, I feel a much more kindred relationship with the store.

**“Book 18”** (*In which one watches images shot at a cemetery.*)

**Bendis, Brian Michael. *Ultimate Spider-Man Vol. 3*. New York: Marvel, 2002.**

At one point in this comic about a hip young Peter Parker who finds himself to possess super powers, Parker grapples with the role of power in his life. At one point he reflects on the irony of Richard Nixon's tapes, namely, why would a President who is systemically breaking the law and abandoning the Constitution continue to tape record his transactions? Parker's answer is that Nixon felt he was unstoppable and, ultimately, "above the law." This is, according to Bendis, the problem of Spider-Man.

**“Book 19”** (*In which I have an argument with a woman.*)

**Lax, Allen E. *Woody Allen: A Biography* New York: Random House, 1996.**

This biography of my media idol's career is too heavy on the early work and consequently too light on the brilliant mid-career work. The most alluring aspect of Allen's career is the reliability and prolificacy of his output. Albeit, his on-screen persona has been particularly validating since an early age.

**“Book 20”** (*In which two cartoon characters converse in a bookstore.*)

**Proulx, Annie E. *The Shipping News*. New York: Scribner, 1996.**

I read this book while living in a monastery in Southwestern France. It's a tale about a man who moves to Newfoundland to discover the truth about his ancestor's past. The video instead focuses on the experiences I've had helping customers who shop at Barnes & Noble outlets looking for award-winning works of literature.

**“Book 21” (In which Superman gives Wonder Woman money.)**

**Miller, Frank. *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. New York: DC Comics, 1985.**

The best part of this graphic novel is that Batman ultimately humiliates Superman. I had nightmares for three nights while reading this book. I think I had the nightmares because I'm afraid of living in a world with no order or structure and I know objectively that there is no such person as Batman.

## **Appendix 2**

### **Annotated fears**

#### **1. Nature**

This includes insects, animals, camping, picnics, parks, zoos, and any other interaction with the "wild." My fear ranges from squeamishness to actual terror. Based largely on a fear of disease, injury, or pain (rashes, bites, sores, etc.), my fear of nature has mushroomed in adulthood. Where once I might have enjoyed a picnic with family as a child, I now spend most of my time at a picnic worried about mosquito bites, reminding people about ticks, and trying to avoid non-concrete surfaces. One can imagine what a car wreck would do to one's body. How, though, can I even begin to imagine the impact of an attack by a wild bear or mountain lion or something? Nature is essentially unpredictable and dangerous.

#### **2. Abject poverty**

A recent fear, the fear of poverty was sowed as a child of public school teachers. After graduating from college and getting "real" jobs, I realized that money was easier to come by and went farther than I thought it would. Graduate school, however, has reinvigorated my fear of poverty by igniting a scarcity mentality that had nearly been vanquished from childhood. I'm terrified of debt, always worried that I'll end up like one of those people with the "mounting credit card debt." I spent a vast amount of my copious worry time on money.

#### **3. Pregnancy**

Some of my most severe anxiety attacks have occurred while waiting to see if that little blue strip appeared in the pregnancy test stick. I associate the birth of a child with the end of joy and freedom. I generally like children and am always happy for friends who themselves are happy to have children. But few things could ruin my life like the advent of a child. I'm obsessed with condom use. I always follow the instructions when applying a condom, never putting one on hastily in a

- moment of passion. I even sometimes interrupt lovemaking to make sure the condom is intact and not compromised. I've considered having a surgical operation, but I'm terrified of surgery.
4. **The death of Aubra**  
Nothing is more tragic than a widow/er. I fear it with a fervor, especially when driving.
  5. **Totalitarianism**  
All of the aspects of American culture that I think of as diseased (hedonism, fear, hatred) have been increasingly transparent in this early 21st century political climate. As America asserts its position as an outright empire, the inevitability of totalitarian social order emerges as stronger possibility. The complacency of the citizenry and the maniacal corruption of the government is Caesarian at best and Hitlerian at worst. The power of this political infrastructure is so massive that I am reduced to insignificance, and thus, my own vulnerability surfaces palpably.
  6. **Prison**  
My worst nightmares are about going to jail. I can't watch movies or television shows where people are in jail. I don't find "prison humor" amusing any more than a racist or homophobic joke. I associate prison with torture. I'm a weakling, I can't fight, and my fear of physical pain and sexual assault is so intense that I would go so far as to name names in order not to spend time in prison. Or I would kill myself first. My greatest fear is being accused of crime unjustly, especially a sexual crime.
  7. **Religious conversion**  
Having been raised Catholic, converted to Buddhism, been ordained a Zen priest, resigned from said priesthood, and partnered with a woman from an evangelical born-again Southern Baptist family, I am nervous about my apparently delicate relationship with religion. My strict adherence to atheism (to which I held tightly through my sacerdotal relationship with Zen) speaks more directly to my confidence in reason and an empirical understanding of the world. Religion largely demands a "leap of faith" which trumps the assurances of logic and reason. I basically fear that one day I will eventually surrender to the desire for metaphysical certainty.

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People often say God speaks in mysterious ways but those who say this may just have a hard time listening. I would argue the way that God speaks isn't mysterious at all but rather simple, we just have to be present. Too often we look to prayer to solve all of our problems instead of focusing on meditation. God always answers prayers even when the answer is no. Sometimes we don't get what we want because God wants us to be independent. Instead of using God as a crutch he wants to know if we still have faith even when he doesn't give us what we ask of Him. We think God will bless us in a mysterious and miraculous way when really it could be much easier if we just take the time to be present. Ok, but what if it takes a really long time for him to respond? Wait. Be patient.