I am real, I am here

Dana Haugaard

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I AM REAL, I AM HERE

by

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE OF CONTENTS</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PREFACE</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I AM REAL, I AM HERE</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BELLIES</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A WHITE BOX, WITH LIGHT</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIBRATION STIMULATION</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THIS ISN’T MUCH UNLESS YOU’RE HERE</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Belly 1, 2009 4
Figure 2: Belly 2, 2009 5
Figure 3: Belly 2, (detail) 6
Figure 4: A White Box, With Light, 2010 7
Figure 5: A White Box, With Light, with people 8
Figure 6: The lighting temperature difference in A White Box, With Light 9
Figure 7: A White Box, With Light, ceiling view 10
Figure 8: Red Plinth (240Hz), 2010 12
Figure 9: Mirror Wall, 2011 13
Figure 10: This Is You, Here, 2010-2011 14
Figure 11: Big Naked Me (Vibrate), 2010 Relief Print 15
Figure 12: This Isn’t Much Unless You’re Here, 2012 Installation View 16
Figure 13: This Isn’t Much Unless You’re Here. View from floor, uninhabited 17
Figure 14: This Isn’t Much Unless You’re Here. Floor and mirrors vibrating 18
Figure 15: This Isn’t Much Unless You’re Here. The bench, seemingly innocuous. 19
The only experience we have is that of you and I experiencing. There are many photographs in the following text, most of which do not do the experience of engaging in my artwork justice. In an attempt to provide some sense of the experience I am going to treat this as a discussion between you and I where I attempt to describe how these situations existed and how they affected me and might have affected you. That said, nothing can ever replace the actual quality of being there.
I AM REAL, I AM HERE

How am I certain that I exist, that I am here, in this room and in this world? What proof do I have that I am here, present among others beings, and not a figment of my own or someone else’s imagination? Even if I were utterly certain, how would I prove such a claim? I’m not sure I could beyond citing relative circumstantial evidence that would rely heavily on my word.

I am real, though. I do exist, and I exist here.

I will stand by that. I have no choice but to believe, unconditionally, that I am.

I am, and I believe that I am, because I can see my image in the reflection in my mirror. I see my image and it reacts the way I think it should. My reflection moves the way that I understand my body to move. I have to trust this mirror because not trusting it means that I cannot trust my own eyes. There was a time, I’m sure, that I could not recognize myself in a mirror. I guess it could be argued that, at that time, I did not exist. Logically, I know that I did not always exist. I assume that I began to exist when my physical presence arrived here. I could very well be wrong. I cannot prove, even to myself, that I was before I could recognize that I was.

I recognize that I exist now, and I exist here.

I know I am here because I can feel what here feels like. I can touch here and move the things that I touch. I can look around and tell you what here looks like to me, as well as what it smells and sounds like.
I rely on my senses to reassure me that I am and continue to exist. I am self-aware because my senses allow me to measure myself against my perception of myself as well as my environment. Just as I as I know I exist, I know you exist too. Existence as we know it, has been engineered to be experiential. Every moment of our lives, conscious or not, our senses are experiencing some sort of stimulation. The input is constant. Our bodies are highly tuned sensors that inform our actions and our awareness. Our bodies are so highly tuned that it has the ability to filter out the immediately crucial stimulation from the ever present, non-pertinent information. We feel discomfort and pain so that we can react to it quickly and prevent further harm. We are aware of pleasure so we can identify its cause and seek it out. We, however, do not feel the normal. We know we are normal when we feel an absence of stimulation.

This system of sensory aversion and attraction works. The postindustrial world that I, and most likely you, exist in has been engineered to avoid the majority of discomforts and embrace the pleasure as it comes around. This means, though, that the majority of our lives are spent feeling normal and we acclimate to it. All of our stimulation gets filtered out because there is no immediate need to react to it.

My life, I guess, is normal and I find myself loosing consciousness of myself. I only realize it, though, as my existence changes from normal to something new.

Exiting the interstate after hours of driving, the change in speed, sound, and the feeling of the road stimulate me in new way to inform me to my new situation; stimulation as a reminder that I exist now. Also I have a sensation and realization that I had not felt myself for some time. Logically I know that I was real and existed here moments before,
as I exist now. But I cannot prove it just as I cannot prove that I existed before I was aware of myself in a mirror. I must have existed, otherwise the awareness of an absence would never have occurred. I must have existed; I have no choice but to.

These moments of jarring or unexpected stimulation have become crucial moments, as they remind me that I am aware and that I do exist. I have been trying to use my art practice to craft these moments, to engineer experiences that will hopefully instigate some sort of heightened self-awareness, brief reminders of body, place, and existence.
BELLIES

I began by replicating recognizable parts of the human body and presenting them in a gallery setting. I was hoping that by using very recognizable forms, common to everyone, you might be able to very quickly identify with the forms.

Figure 1 – Belly 1, 2009
Figure 2 – Belly 2, 2009
I presented bellies because we all have one, and yet none of us seem to be happy with it. You might be able to see yourself in these imperfect, soft, fleshy, and slightly androgynous forms and have a moment of self-reflection. I wanted these to act as a mirror and perhaps facilitate a little thought about our relationship with our own bellies as well as the rest of their bodies.
A WHITE BOX, WITH LIGHT

To prompt self-awareness by presenting a cast of a body part is a good gesture, though very passive. The idea of actually physically affecting a body, causing a moment of physical change, seemed a much more direct approach to engineering moments of self-awareness.

I created a large, suspended environment that could be explored and engaged with. The size and orientation designed to maximize close physical interaction and enable the subtle physical stimulation to be experienced.

Figure 4 – A White Box, With Light, 2010
Figure 5 – A White Box, With Light, with people
The box was lit with two different temperatures of white fluorescent lighting. When on one side of the interior space with the 6500K lighting, the opposite side appears warm and yellow/pink-ish. When on the side lit with 3500K, the other side appears cool and blue. As you moved from one side to the other, your eyes would have to reacclimatize to the new lighting causing a subtle, but oddly jarring optical sensation.

Figure 6 – The lighting temperature difference in A White Box, With Light
Figure 7 – A White Box, With Light, ceiling view
VIBRATION STIMULATION

Being confronted with physical stimulation, it is almost impossible to not have a heightened sense of self-awareness. Even if it is as simple as the optical nerves re- adjusting to a new lighting environment, there is a moment of elevated consciousness. Vibrations are one of the more effective stimuli. It can be pleasurable or painful. They are undeniably sexual, though they also carry the connotations of work and labor. Regardless of its origin, vibrations travel through the body with remarkable effectiveness. Each bone, joint, and area of flesh carries and transfers vibrations to every corner of the body. Everywhere the vibrations travel you cannot help but be aware of.

Red Plinth (240Hz) was engineered to vibrate to the limit of pleasure and discomfort. The electric red plinth was still and silent until it was stood upon. The moment it was occupied, it made a furious buzz and vibrated the soles of your feet. The experience is startling, and intensely stimulating. The vibrations traveled through to the base of the skull. Even after stepping away from the plinth the sensation lingered in the body. There was nothing subtle about Red Plinth (240Hz). It was the extreme case of a moment of awareness. It takes a lot of gumption to get on a red, noisy, intensely vibrating sculpture, especially if you know what is about to happen. There are other ways to vibrate a body.
Figure 8 – Red Plinth (240Hz), 2010
Our self-image is a central part of our self-awareness. To alter that image is another way to instigate some reflection about our physical self and how it measures up to corresponding mental equivalents. This Is You, Here and Mirror Wall both distort one's reflection based on your relationship and interaction with a mirror. By addressing and investigating your own image, the mirror vibrates and alters your reflection. The vibration quality changes based on your physical relationship to the mirror. The reflection pulses, stretches, and pulls apart as you move closer or farther away from the mirror. You are never able to get a clear glimpse of your own reflection even though the mirror is directly reacting to your movements. There is some element of control, but the reflection never resolves itself.

Figure 9 – Mirror Wall, 2011
Figure 10 - This Is You, Here, 2010-2011
At the same time I was also experimenting with optical illusions as a means to trigger physical stimulation. Big Naked Me (Vibrate) is a relief print and an attempt at a more analogue approach to sensation.

Figure 11 – Big Naked Me (Vibrate), 2010 Relief print
This installation, as the title suggests, isn’t much unless you are present in the space, engaging with the environment and the situation I have facilitated. On a formal level, the space is spare and minimal. The room is bisected by a run of warm hard wood floor, spanning the entire width of the space. On either side of the floor, facing each other, are two large mirrors. A simple bench with a white face and a polished wooden seat runs the length of the rear wall. This series of architectural elements are very much a part of the space. The room is just a room unless you, or anyone for that matter, enter it and begin to interact with it. You become part of the space, reacting to space and in turn, the space reacts to you. The run of hardwood floor, when stepped upon, slowly begins to deeply vibrate, as do the mirrors with the same frequency. As you move around the space
the frequency of the vibrations change and intensify creating more sensation to your feet and then up through the rest of your body. The mirrors (facing each other creating an infinity reflection) pulse and shake. Though the mirrors create a repeating reflection, your image distorts and is pulled apart in the rhythm of the vibration. You can only see yourself in the mirrors while on the wood floor, but the wood floor vibrates constantly when it is inhabited never allowing a clear image to emerge. The sensation and vibrations created by the floor, responding to you, increase and change as more and more people engage in the situation, eventually resulting in a swell of aural, optical, and physical sensation. If you choose to stay engaged in the experience for long enough for it to become your new normal the experience will stay with you once you decide to remove yourself. When you step off of the floor and remove yourself from the situation, a bit of the stimulation remains. A ghost, almost, of the sensation.

Figure 13 – This Isn’t Much Unless You’re Here, View from floor, uninhabited
The bench also responds.

By taking a seat, your engagement results in a new vibration. The frequency is much higher than that of the floor. If others join you on the bench they add new frequencies to the vibration. The frequencies are engineered to create a dissonance, which causes the vibration to pulse. With enough people, in the right configuration, as a group you can create a very intense throb to both the sound and the vibration that is stimulating your hindquarters.
Figure 15 – This Isn’t Much Unless You’re Here, The bench, seemingly innocuous.

When in the space, you can also just stand on your own in the white walled, concrete floored room. When nothing is engaged it is a quite space with even soft light. It is a calm space.

With this installation, as with the rest of my work, I hope to facilitate a sense of body and of self. Both you and I have the opportunity to engage with the situations that I’ve created, as well as those that I have not, and experience self. We are real, and we are here. There is a primacy to the body. It is the tactile, tangible part of me that informs how I feel, how I make decisions, how I go about in the world. Every time I have an opportunity to recognize and remember that, I am reassured in the validity of my existence. We exist and affect our environment. We know we exist because our environment affects us. We are here, We are real.