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# An obedient participant in late capitalism explains art

Andrew Allerton Haley  
*University of Iowa*

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AN OBEDIENT PARTICIPANT IN LATE CAPITALISM EXPLAINS ART

by

Andrew Allerton Haley

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts  
degree in Art in the  
Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

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Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Andrew Casto

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Graduate College  
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Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS

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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Andrew Allerton Haley

has been approved by the Examining Committee for  
the thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts degree  
in Art at the May 2017 graduation.

Thesis Committee:

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Andrew Casto, Thesis Supervisor

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Anita Jung

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Susan White

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Josh Van Stippen

I dedicate this thesis with love and affection to all those who care too much.

“I’m giving you a choice: either put on these glasses or start eatin’ that trash can.”

John Nada  
*They Live*

## **PUBLIC ABSTRACT**

Art making is silly. This is why it should not be taken so seriously. When topics are addressed with too much seriousness they become stagnant and rigid. This thesis addresses topics I find crucial to the process of making Art. I use popular culture references because of their communicable potential. Nothing is argued in the duration of this work. On the contrary, thoughts are shared in hopes to inspire the reader to question what type of journey and practice they involve themselves.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

While a plethora of literature exists discussing philosophical topics that I engage with there is a more enticing method to explaining my body of work, process and ambitions. As an obedient participant in late capitalism, I choose to define myself through examples of popular culture to assure I am not ostracized by ignorance of insignificant moments or having original, creative thoughts. Both can be lethal. I will address my work through concepts portrayed in popular culture references to make this digestible and communicable to the reader. I will reflect on my work and process through three lenses of relatively banal moments prescribed by major corporations. These include the movies *Cast Away*, *I Heart Huckabees* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

The life as an artist requires the individual to maintain a rigid search for the unattainable. In pursuing this impossible task, many aspects of our daily lives can be cast aside which allows for some interesting events. Answers, solutions, sound logic are things successful art resists. What ought to be encouraged in art for the hopes of it spilling over to daily life are the importance of questions, meditations of paradoxes and illogical thoughts that lead to irrational emotions. This proposal wishes to be sprinkled with anarchism but will degrade into a banal fetid statement.

## Chapter 2: Survival

Many things go into the making of an art, especially if it is fine. If we think about Chuck Noland, the protagonist in *Cast Away*, stranded on an island with little knowledge of how to survive and compare this story to that of the artist trying to make art we see a similarity. At the beginning, one is relatively hopeless and unable to conceive of the questions necessary to ask in order to survive. However, as we all know Chuck can portray wonderfully the ability to maintain a curiosity and engage with the surrounding world better than most. Further, Chuck is able to keep a sentiment of hope that someone cares that he is alive. The artist believes there is someone out there that cares about images and objects made.

Chuck also has the ability live in a world beyond right and wrong while stranded on the island. Throughout his stay, Chuck learns that certain methods of survival yield better results than others. When attempting to make fire, Chuck tries feverously to twist a stick to create enough heat but ends in futility. After a painful mistake with a new method, Chuck gets angry and throws his stick creating a crack. This he realizes is what is necessary to allow adequate air circulation to create fire. This is a perfect example of how important it is to maintain a curious mind. When considering an art we must be like Chuck and allow ourselves to become frustrated with a way of thinking and realize the necessity in starting over. Stubbornness can be lethal. In Chuck's case, he would have died from starvation, in the artists' case they will die from a rigidity in process and concepts.

## Chapter 3: Thought

Many things go into the thinking of an art, especially if it is fine. If we think about Albert Markovski, the protagonist in *I Heart Huckabees*, as the thinker we see a troubled life filled with intellectual wonderings about the meaning of life. Albert is faced with existential and nihilist theories of reality. The existential detectives he hires to solve a coincidence support theories of interconnectedness. To counter their efforts another detective, one of their former students, supports nihilism. This ultimately causes Albert much angst and he must rely on his own reasoning to make sense of the world.

When contemplating the meaning of a project I am working on I see this tendency to oscillate between interconnectedness and nihilism. The problem can be troubling if the tendency is to arrive at a solution. However, it is through the text of David Bohm, *On Dialogue*, that perceiving issues in terms of paradox instead of a problem/solution model creates an open terrain for thought and acceptance of new ideas. With the paradoxical lens to gaze through the thinking and conception of an artwork does not need to be a one-way street. The torment that results from problem/solution based thinking creates a small, closed circuit that is exemplified in Albert's way of thinking. Below is an excerpt of dialogue when Albert realizes the 'truth' about the two variations of existentialism.

*"You guys work together, don't you?"*

*"We don't work together at all."*

*"Really? It's not like some secret deal...where she picks up where you leave off, and then we come back to you?"*

*"There is no secret deal."*

*"Well, there should be, 'cause that's the way it works. You're too dark, and you're not dark enough. You three were close, right? Maybe too close. Then it*

*went sour and propelled you into one extreme and you into another extreme. So, voila'! Two overlapping, fractured philosophies were born out of that one pain."*

The significance of this moment is that it allows the artist to be concerned with questions instead of answers. It is necessary to be clever about how the artist questions issues in the world but impractical for there to be any solution from their efforts.

## Chapter 4: Intuition

Many things go into the feeling of an art, especially if it is fine. If we think about Roy Neary and Jillian Guiler, the protagonists of *Close Encounter of the Third Kind*, it is evident that an impulse to make can come from a place that is unknown or intuitive. Roy and Jillian, strangers that live in rural Indiana come in close contact with extraterrestrial life. They begin to see and produce a singular form in all aspects of life, which later is revealed to be Devils Tower in Wyoming. In the case of Roy, this urge becomes so strong that he creates a sculpture in his living room composed of chicken wire, dirt, rocks and bushes from his house. He and Jillian along with many other individuals feel compelled to travel to the natural monument despite government warnings of toxic gas exposure.

In this intuitive pursuit and creation of a form, I find an important lesson. If there is a strong enough urge to make certain shapes or objects with little or no reason the artist should follow this instinct. In many ways, this behavior is seen as illogical and problematic (financially or psychologically) in most societies. However, if given time and support a profound reason for this pursuit will reveal itself.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

Survival, thinking and intuition are three topics I have spent much of my time grappling with at the University of Iowa. The dessert island and the studio are places where rules or handbooks do not exist. The survival of the subject is dependent on their abilities of observation and innovation. While outside of the studio, thinking provides an abstract, disinterested perspective of what ought to be the product of time spent in the studio. This allows for overly rational judgements and I attempt to dismiss the results of this process when entering the studio. Lastly, intuition is the central aspect of my practice and is leading to experimentations with materials beyond ceramic.

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