

2009

Hey, Whats Up?

Justin Kemp
University of Massachusetts Amherst

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hey, whats up?

A Thesis Presented

By

Justin Kemp

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2009

Department of Art

hey, what's up?

A Thesis Presented

By

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Finally, I would like to thank my mom and dad for all their support over the years. My father studied art all through college, but never completed his degree. I have vivid memories of seeing his artwork as a child and like to of him as one of my earliest influences (in particular his ceramic 'boob sculpture' period). My artistic endeavors have always been in part to exercise the creativity and weirdness he bestowed upon me. I see the completion of this degree as enough to go around for the both of us.

ABSTRACT

HEY, WHATS UP?

MAY 2009

JUSTIN KEMP, B.S., UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN LA CROSSE

M.F.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Susan Jahoda

My work does not aim to answer a question or solve any problems; it tries to activate a conversation around the content. I intend to keep things playful and entertaining because not only is that how I relate best to the subject, but I find it helps animate aspects of culture that people enjoy responding to and thinking about. Like “The Real World,” or Facebook, my work entertains me, but it has a way of slowing down certain aspects of life, letting someone take a breath, have a conversation and maybe LOL.

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CHAPTER 1

PSEUDO-EVENTS

“You may fool all the people some of the time; you can even fool some of the people all the time; but you can’t fool all of the people all the time.” ~Abraham Lincoln

These days people have come to accept (and at times enjoy) the pseudo. In Daniel Boorstin’s pioneering book, “The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America,” he argues that culture is made up of fabricated, inauthentic, pseudo-events. Boorstin defines a pseudo-event as one that is not spontaneous, but planned, “for the immediate purpose of being reported or reproduced.”ⁱ He suggests that the pseudo-event holds an ambiguous relation to an underlying reality of the situation and that the question, *what does it mean* takes on a new dimension. Written in 1961, Boorstin’s book laid the claim that events, such as ribbon cutting ceremonies, press conferences and anniversary celebrations exist only to be photographed and/or televised. He believed that society placed meaning and value on situations that lacked any great significance in life. In contemporary society, Boorstin’s ideas and theories not only hold true, but are expanded and understood in a variety of new situations and medias.

Boorstin examined the historical progression of American newspapers, which grew in publication frequently from being monthly to daily in most US cities. He argued that society, in response to this increase in reporting, began to create events solely to be published. The definition of a good journalist was transformed from someone who could report on news that mattered, into one capable of *finding* the story even when the news was dry. Boorstin’s observations only become more relevant as technological innovation

continues to shape contemporary media culture. Daily newspapers to nightly newscasts, spawned what is now twenty-four hour, around the clock news. Watching segment after segment of live-stream news reinforces Boorstin's point. The repetition of stories, mundane events and awkward pauses makes for an almost constant flow of 'pseudo-event' filled news.

I love the banality and corniness of fabricated news events. I find the irony of staged activities to be an entertaining way to understand notions of the pseudo. In the piece, *Pseudo-event*, I collected and montaged images taken at ribbon cutting ceremonies, an event created solely for publicized documentation. The images present everyone from corporate businessmen to elderly ladies, all lined up behind what becomes a never-ending red ribbon, the piece playfully mocks the collective participation of such a ritual. Individually each image tells a different story about a new home, office space or retail store, but together they are understood as a nonsensical act of publicity, an event for event's sake. In each image one might guess there are more people participating in the ceremony than people in the audience, a notion the collage attempts to exaggerate by its' excessive accumulation of images.



Figure #1 *Pseudo-event*. Collage, 16" x 325", 2008

The collection of found photographs in *Pseudo-event* evokes what Guy Debord called the Spectacle. In his book, “The Society of The Spectacle,” Debord writes, “The Spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.”ⁱⁱ The collage can be understood as an illustrative example of society’s relationship with pseudo-events. Unified as one ribbon, the piece formulates the idea of a social relationship based on a fundamental acceptance of the Spectacle. Debord speaks of a way in which the Spectacle, “...appears at once as society itself, as a part of society and as a means of unification.”ⁱⁱⁱ *Pseudo-event* appears as a single red ribbon, spanning across a population, unified by their support for the Spectacle.

The flood of pseudo-events in society tends to spread further than news related activity. Television programs like “The Insider,” and almost anything referred to as ‘reality television’ exemplify culture’s embrace of these fabricated realities. The notion of “reality television,” a simulated broadcast of ‘real’ people doing ‘real’ things, reveals not only people’s ability to generate these scenarios, but also society’s desire to blanket itself with the pseudo. Reality television can be seen as a rupture point when humans began to use their own creation of pseudo-events as both entertainment and as a learning device. By watching ‘real’ people engage in ‘real’ situations, people are easily able to then simulate what they have seen. Just as a child learns from its parents, viewers learn from ‘real’ characters. The only obvious difference about the latter is that viewers are learning from people living an entirely pseudo-reality, in turn understanding less about what is real and further building a pseudo-pseudo-reality surrounding their lives. It can

be understood as more than just the creation and absorption of a pseudo–reality, it becomes a practice of maintaining the Spectacle. Debord writes,

“Understood in its totality, the spectacle is both the outcome and the goal of the dominant mode of production. It is not something added to the real world – not a decorative element, so to speak. On the contrary, it is the very heart of society’s real unreality. In all its specific manifestations – news or propaganda, advertising or the actual consumption of entertainment – the spectacle epitomizes the prevailing model of social life.”^{iv}

The fabrication of pseudo-events functions to support the framework already experienced through the Spectacle. They absorb our time and encourage complacent acceptance of an overarching pseudo model.

Another example of society’s impulse to embrace the creation of pseudo-events can be found in the social networks and user-generated content of Web 2.0. Sites such as Facebook, Youtube, Myspace and Twitter lend themselves to the constant stimulation of pseudo-events. Creating profiles, filming video diaries, blogging and updating statuses have become ritualistic activities in many people’s lives. Though the use of these sites can be attributed to aspects of forming community and collaboration, they also fuel one of the more recent pseudo-events society has encountered, *You*. The very same concept that was named Time Magazine’s 2006 Person of the Year, *You*, relates closely to the pseudo-event.



Figure # 2 *Time Magazine Cover*

Jean Baudrillard made reference to this idea when describing the watershed of a hyperreal sociality,

“Such is the last stage of the social relation, ours, which is no longer one of persuasion (the classical age of propaganda, of ideology, of publicity, ect.) but one of deterrence: “YOU are information, you are the social, you are the event, you are involved, you have the word, etc.” An about-face through which it becomes impossible to locate one instance of the model, of power, of the gaze, of the medium itself, because *you* are always already on the other side.”^v

The act of creating and updating an online profile/personality allows users to place value upon aspects of their lives that have, in the past, been rightfully overlooked. Sites like Twitter enable users to publicly highlight their current activities or emotions. While in the past, definitions of one’s “status,” may have been understood by achievements in their profession, social class or even fame, popular culture has adapted this notion towards more or less anything a person might like to declare. Users of Twitter or Facebook are provided a platform to construct an ongoing list of what they are doing while simultaneously informing the greater public. While in the past, activities such as, “trying to decide on a haircut today,” may have been understood as mundane, today it can

be made public, announced for all to hear, therefore now understood as *something* rather than *nothing*. The age old question, “If a tree falls in the forest and nobody is around to hear it fall, does it make a noise?” can be a helpful way to understand the workings of *You*. One could spend an entire day doing absolutely nothing meaningful or productive, but when given the ability to make public all their non-activities, people are creating ‘non-events’ based on themselves. If a person updates their Facebook or Twitter status to, “*doing nothing today*,” and a friend later posts a response comment on how they too did nothing the entire day, an aspect of that exchange is transformed into *something*, a pseudo-something. The ability to always ‘hear’ means a person is always doing *something* and that the role of listening and making the noise is continuously interchangeable. Social networks support a transformation of non-events into a simulated-You. They have become a platform that assists people in the embodiment of pseudo-events, which in turn epitomizes the Spectacle. *You* creates, embodies and maintains the Spectacle.

Boorstin wrote, “In many subtle ways, the rise of pseudo-events has mixed up our roles as actors and as audiences – or, the philosophers would say, as “object” and as “subject.”^{vi} This blurring of identity, as it relates to a public or private self, is evident in contemporary western society. Youtube and other user-generated websites help collapse the roles of spectator and spectacle. One can watch *and* create content within a heavily populated social interface. The mere popularity of Youtube, since its creation in 2004, is enough to support both Boorstin’s idea of mixing social roles and exemplify popular culture’s desire for such a reality. On such sites, viewers can experience community and fame while, simultaneously, receiving education. Users create video diaries to vent their

frustrations or display their creativity, all completely aware that this diary, a once private aspect of their lives, is now on public display. The entire system is founded and supported by a community of viewers and creators, performers and critics, actors and audiences, all joining together to support and create a reality of pseudo-events.

CHAPTER 2

SIMULATED GESTURES

“Even before the ubiquity of a billion cell phone cameras, we were already in rehearsal for the pose, the look, and a diminished sense of privacy. “In a Youtube world, one’s home is no longer one’s private retreat: it’s just a container for the webcam,” as the New York Times recently put it. Wars, sports events, weddings, graduations, and even funerals are staged.”^{vii}

Human beings enjoy surprises. Surfing the web, one can find thousands of videos and images of all different types of surprises. Birthdays, anniversaries, announcements, proposals, and pranks are all regularly recorded and published online for the world to see. And few would argue that the attraction of these events is the candid reaction of the one being surprised. In 2007, one of the biggest Internet memes involved a viral video called, “2 girls, 1 cup.” The video, an abject one-minute pornography trailer, featured two girls defecating and vomiting into each other’s mouths. As the popularity of the video spread, more and more people started to set up scenarios where a friend would be invited to watch the video and have their reaction recorded on webcam. What started as a few nauseated individuals providing a more or less authentic response, then turned into thousands of videos, each with the same premise, but often lacking authenticity. Soon it was easy to find people who had seen a number of ‘reaction’ videos, but never the actual movie trailer. If a person had seen the trailer, most will admit they watched at least a few reactions to the video before the actual screening. Later in the year, as, “2 Girls, 1 Cup,” was losing popularity, I often asked people if they had seen the clip. The most common response I received was something along the lines of, “It wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be.” When presented with the abject, popular culture successfully creates

strategies to cope with the material. This behavior is a perfect illustration of what Jacques Lacan called the Image Screen. Lacan formulated a diagram which theorized the relationship between different perspectives of seeing; one in which the subject gazes at the world and another which the world or the object gazes back upon the subject. The image screen is centered between the subject gaze and the object gaze, functioning as a filtering device. According to Hal Foster, in his book, “The Return of the Real,” Lacan’s screen, “...*mediates* the object-gaze *for* the subject, but it also *protects* the subject from this object-gaze.”^{viii} In “2 Girls, 1 Cup,” the object-gaze is the content of the video, the abject, and the screen can be understood as the viewing of response videos which, in turn, mediated the traumatic visual. With “2 Girls, 1 Cup,” society prepared itself with a plethora of different ways to respond. Once confronted with the actual *thing*, the simulation of learned gestures serves as a mediator to desensitize to the images.

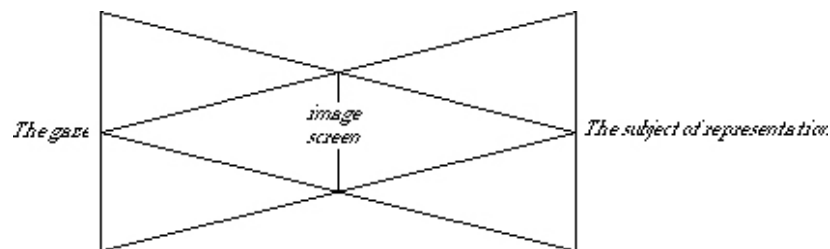


Figure # 3 Jacques Lacan's Diagram

Simulating certain behaviors can be observed in a variety of different social situations. Things such as protection and social advancement are common motives for simulation, but more often one sees examples of simulation used to simply sustain an already simulated lifestyle. Don DeLillo may have said it best in his 1985 novel White Noise, “We’re not here to capture an image, we’re here to maintain one.”^{ix} Each new Facebook profile or every new episode of ‘The Real World’ can be understood not only as simulated-realities, but also subconscious (or at times conscious) attempts to perpetuate an already simulated-lifestyle. Baudrillard’s famous example of Disneyland as, “a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulacra,”^x fits this notion of image maintenance well. He argues that, “Disneyland exists in order to hide that it is the “real” country...” and that it is, “...presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real...”^{xi} Society has a way of creating things that are perceived as ‘fake’ to help conceal what can be understood as real and to further maintain the Spectacle. Like Disneyland, our internet avatars and reality T.V. stars are acknowledged as being somewhat fictional, but are created to help maintain the Spectacle.

I have always been interested in the ways people reproduce gestures or behaviors they have observed. I can remember when my friends began talking like Beavis and Butthead or the time when I started skateboarding without wearing socks, both behaviors instilled through media. Growing up in an image saturated culture, the act of simulation always seemed to be something I was being invited to participate in. There existed a veil over the reality of why this invitation was on the table, but that never seemed to be something my peers were overly concerned about. Anyone who saw the Wizard of Oz

was conscious of the man behind the curtain, the impostor responsible for so much hope and anxiety. However, as a child this awareness was not understood as a metaphor for the monumental aspects of culture like advertisement or entertainment. It was not until I was older that I began to understand the ways in which different gestures and lifestyles were being sold to me.



Figure # 4 *Perfect Profile Pic*. Digital Video, 2008

In the video, “Perfect Profile Pic,” I compile segments of video that epitomize both the sale of gestures and the notion that there is a *man behind the curtain*. Using Getty Images, a website used by advertisement agencies to easily obtain images or video, I did a simple search for the phrase, “people taking pictures of themselves.” The results provided a rich selection of footage exemplifying the ways in which common gestures are bought, sold and consumed. With the copyrighted Getty Images watermark the piece references its creator (the man behind the curtain). *Perfect Profile Pic* takes its title from

the way in which people commonly understand the footage, the online profile picture.

The work takes on multiple layers of simulation, from actors and actresses creating the clips, to Getty selling it as stock footage. Part of the success of the piece is understood as viewers imagine themselves or others simulating those very same gestures.

CHAPTER 3

REPOSITIONING

My work is less about technology or the digital medium and more about people and/or observation. In her essay, “Lost Not Found: The Circulation of Images in Digital Visual Culture,” Marisa Olson used the term, “pro surfer,” to categorize a movement of artists working with web-based appropriation. Olson argues that, “...the work of pro surfers transcends the art of found photography insofar as the act of finding is elevated to a performance in its own right, and the ways in which the images are appropriated distinguishes this practice from one of quotation by taking them out of circulation and reinscribing them with new meaning and authority.”^{xii} The value to artists, associated with the act of repositioning, can be linked to a number of art historical canons including, Duchamp’s readymades and Cornell’s assemblages among others. My work combines finding culturally significant objects or images and housing or recontextualizing the material in a different context for understanding. Like artists before me, a key component of my work is that the act of finding is as important as the gesture of making. Observation plays a vital role in my practice because the success of the piece is contingent upon my ability to place myself both within the culture of the observed and the arena of the observer. The intention is to create a work that generates a new understanding when reposed, therefore the act of finding becomes a critical component of the piece. Like a camera, finding functions as a tool that plays an essential role in the execution of the work.



Figure # 5 *New Media Cowboy*. Digital Video, 2008

New Media Cowboy illustrates the importance of the act of finding in a works creation. The work consists of a Marlboro cigarette advertisement with a found Youtube video, resized and placed over it, creating the illusion that the cowboy is smoking a cigarette. The piece is both a playful and critical response to advertising. In addition the work references Richard Prince's series of cowboy 're-photographs,' wherein he depicts Marlboro cowboys imitating the real, representing a reality through the myth of the American cowboy. Like Prince's images, *New Media Cowboy* plays off the irony of the advertising campaign's success. By collaging a video made by an unknown smoker, who clearly takes an interest in his own consumption of cigarettes, the piece activates a noticeable absence in the advertisement namely, *the cigarette*. Marlboro has been criticized for the obvious exclusion of actual cigarettes in some of its ad campaigns. Also, it is widely known that the three men who appeared in the image all died of lung cancer. The subtle, yet essential aspect of this piece lies in the act of finding. The closeness in which the found video fits in with the original advertisement suggests the

theory that if I search the internet long enough, I am bound to find whatever I desire. It is almost as if the Youtube video was made with the intention of being found and reposed.

Much of my work derives from the internet because it provides a rich environment of digital media for not only observation, but also appropriation. Discussing the difference between analog and digital photography, Fred Ritchin helps to better understand the connections between digital culture and appropriation:

“What served in place of the digital photograph before the camera’s invention? The answer might be more playful, having more to do with conversation, even speculation. The past would be recreated, rethought and reinvented, the process more resembling an oral tradition where divergent views of the community are taken into account.”^{xiii}

The notion that contemporary digital culture is more like oral tradition is compelling. With its complex layers of simulation and effortless accessibility, digital culture completely lends itself to appropriation. I use the internet as a starting point to access and understand popular culture because the infinite variety and plethora of raw material fuels my desire to create content and meaning from it. Like an oral tradition, the stories or subjects I find become mine to remix and pass along to others. This gesture of appropriation resonates with what Walter Benjamin called, “the decay of the aura.” In his essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin describes the aura as, “...the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be.”^{xiv} In other words, the aura can be understood as the sense of wonderment when encountering a unique object. Benjamin believed contemporary culture desired to, “bring things ‘closer’ spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bend toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction.”^{xv} With new mediums of art came the ability for mass reproduction to break down the aura of the original and,

“...emancipate[s] the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual.”^{xvi}

Benjamin’s theory resonates, when applied to the internet (just think of the term *World Wide Web* and its primary function of connecting the world), and has been an influence on my studio practice.



Figure # 6 *Bruce 2.0*. Digital Video, 2007

In the video, *Bruce 2.0*, I engage notions of reproduction and the aura by remixing a well know artwork by Bruce Nauman. In the original piece, Nauman is seen alone, stomping around his studio for what appears to be no apparent reason. His behavior mimics something one might see at a marching band rehearsal or inside a psychiatric ward, while his actions throughout the performance never fully lead to a better understanding of what is being communicated. It’s through an understanding of art history and the conceptual framework of Nauman’s work in the 60’s that one begins to grasp his intention for the piece. My approach for making *Bruce 2.0*, is a playful and

humorous response to how one might make meaning of such a work of art. I use Unk's song, "Walk It Out," as a simple way to interpret Nauman's actions and add entertainment to the piece. According to Benjamin, Nauman's original work of art disrupts the aura because it's a reproducible film, however it has now been inserted into the 'high art' market, so consequently only a limited number of copies are available. Contemporarily the piece can be understood as a unique art object (though still reproducible) and my remix of the video intends to be an addition (an upgrade) to help insure its reproducibility and capability to decay the aura. If watched closely, one will see my video is actually a spliced excerpt of Nauman's original, as the video in its entirety is nearly impossible to find.

CONCLUSION

I began surfing the web more seriously when I realized it was the easiest way to watch people and grasp culture. It reminded me of people watching at a mall, but with way more personal information and of course from the comfort of my own home. The way I can contextualize my interests and, in turn, entertain myself while conducting research, speaks to the complex and contradictory nature of our engagement with media culture. My practice is not a judgment of what I find, but rather a demonstration of the way in which I discover and understand information. Whether seen as humorous, ironic or critical, the work functions as my response to certain aspect of culture. I define my practice of making art around finding and rearrange existing content. The creation has already happened, it's my observation that helps articulate the conversation around the subject. Most pieces have a way of neutralizing the content, pulling out more information then its original placement.

My work does not aim to answer a question or solve any problems; it tries to activate a conversation around the content. I intend to keep things playful and entertaining because not only is that how I relate best to the subject, but I find it helps animate aspects of culture that people enjoy responding to and thinking about. Like "The Real World," or Facebook, my work entertains me, but it has a way of slowing down certain aspects of life, letting someone take a breath, have a conversation and maybe LOL.

TECHNICAL INFORMATION

Pseudo-event, 2008

Collage using images found through Google Image Search
Lambda prints arranged on wall using acid-free adhesive Zots
Dimensions approx: 17" x 400"

Perfect Profile Pic, 2008

Digital video using footage found on Getty Images (<http://gettyimages.com>)
Running time: 02:50 (looped)
Exhibited on flat screen, wall mounted monitor

New Media Cowboy, 2008

Digital video using found Youtube video and Marlboro advertisement
Running time: 02:37 (looped)
Exhibited on flat screen, wall mounted monitor

Bruce 2.0, 2007

Digital video using found footage
Running time: 02:53 (looped)
Music: Unk "Walk it out"
Exhibited on flat screen, wall mounted monitor

Venn Diagram (US Weekly), 2009

Collage using every head from one issue of Star magazine
Dimensions: 28" x 17"
Exhibited in wood frame behind glass

Blonde to Brunette (People Magazine), 2008

Collage using every head from one issue of People magazine

Dimensions: 28 1/4" x 21 5/8"

Exhibited in wood frame behind glass

Celebrity Color Wheel, 2008

Collage using magazine images mounted on tagboard

Dimensions: 11" x 11"

Exhibited on wall using pin through center

Perfect Profile Pic Opportunity

Digital camera mounted on wall at optimal self-portrait angle

Dimensions: 3 1/2" x 2 1/2" x 7"

Exhibited on wall mount

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Figure #7 *Photo of Artist-at-work.*

IMAGE IDENTIFICATION

1. Celebrity Color Wheel, 11" x 11", Collage, 2008.
2. New Media Cowboy, RT: 02:37 (looped), digital video, 2008.
3. Blonde to Brunette, 28 1/4" x 21 5/8", collage, 2008.
4. Perfect Profile Pic, RT: 02:50 (looped), digital video, 2008.
5. Venn Diagram, 28" x 17", collage, 2009.
6. Pseudo-event, 17" x 400", Lambda prints, 2008.
7. Bruce 2.0, RT: 02:53 (looped), digital video, 2007.
8. Perfect Profile Pic Opportunity, 3 1/2" x 2 1/2" x 7", mixed media, 2009.

ⁱ Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Psuedo-Events in America* (New York: Vintage Books), 11.

ⁱⁱ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books), 12.

ⁱⁱⁱ Debord, 12.

^{iv} Debord, 13.

^v Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), 29.

^{vi} Boorstin, 29.

^{vii} Fred Ritchin, *After Photography* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company), 21.

^{viii} Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (The MIT Press), 140.

^{ix} Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (Viking Penguin),

^x Baudrillard, 12.

^{xi} Baudrillard, 12.

^{xii} Marisa Olson, *Lost Not Found: The Circulation of Images in Digital Visual Culture* (Words Without Pictures), 1.

^{xiii} Richin, 58.

^{xiv} Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Marxist Literary Criticism), III

^{xv} Benjamin, IV

^{xvi} Benjamin, IV