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M.F.A. Thesis Quest, or, I Went into the Wilderness and I Found Alec Baldwin

Steven Snell
University of Massachusetts Amherst

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M.F.A. THESIS QUEST

or

I WENT INTO THE WILDERNESS AND I FOUND ALEC BALDWIN

A Thesis Presented

By

STEVE SNELL

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

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2011

Department of Art, Architecture, and Art History
M.F.A. THESIS QUEST

or

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A Thesis presented

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Steve Snell

Approved as to style and content by:

_____________________________________________
Jerry Kearns, Chair

_____________________________________________
Young Min Moon, Member

_____________________________________________
Mario Ontiveros, Member

_____________________________________________
Young Min Moon
Director of Graduate Programs
Department of Art, Architecture, and Art History

_____________________________________________
William Oedel, Chair
Department of Art, Architecture, and Art History
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“He’s half grizzly, half killer whale, and his name is Steve Snell.”

- poster for *M.F.A. Thesis Quest*
ABSTRACT

M.F.A THESIS QUEST

or

I WENT INTO THE WILDERNESS AND I FOUND ALEC BALDWIN

MAY 2011

STEVE SNELL, B.S., B.F.A. MIAMI UNIVERSITY

M.F.A. UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Jerry Kearns, Assistant Professor Young Min Moon, and Assistant Professor Mario Ontiveros

I went into the wilderness and I found Alec Baldwin. This is not a lie. It is also a title for a video installation and this thesis. In it, I investigate three separate adventure-performances, providing a theoretical context for their existence, meaning, and relationship as a form of artistic practice. I call this practice ‘adventure-art’, using the term to describe a performance-based action in which the artist publically explores his or her reality through some type of physical adventure, search, quest, or challenge. It is an attempt to engage oneself and others at both at the physical and mediated levels, reconciling, confusing, and merging the real with the simulated. In this thesis, I explore the confluence of consumption, creativity, the real, and the simulated within American popular culture from the perspective of a middle-class, suburban, white-male, art student – me, Steve Snell.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Allow me to introduce myself. Some call me the ‘King of the River’ while others just call me Steve Snell. I was born and raised in the suburbs of Columbus, Ohio, where I watched a ton of great television and often rode my bike to Taco Bell. As a graduate student at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, I pursued a master’s degree, in hopes that it would provide me with a more authentic method of experiencing and contributing to my reality (in a professional, artistic manner of course). The thesis that follows is my account of this pursuit.

Over the course of my final year of graduate school, I undertook a series of adventures that sought to explore the mediated and the physical reality of American popular culture and my relationship to it. I searched from the mountains of Western Massachusetts to the wilds of Yakutat, Alaska. I floated rivers, walked backcountry roads, flew over remote glaciers, and kayaked into distant, pristine waters. I found eagles, otters, beavers, CNN, abandoned cabins, lost dogs, kind strangers, Alec Baldwin, and Art.

In this thesis, I attempt to contextualize these adventures within a larger theoretical framework, drawing upon contemporary art, popular entertainment, and my own personal interests, history, and experiences.
A favorite television show of mine growing up was called *Wild America with Marty Stouffer*. It ran on PBS from 1982 until 1994, airing 120 different episodes on various aspects of North American wildlife. This show was produced through the lens and perspective of naturalist and videographer, Marty Stouffer. In his autobiography, *Wild America*, Stouffer traces the roots of his interest in creating such a television show; to the moment he became somewhat disillusioned with the portrayal of animals in his own favorite childhood programs. He “wanted to know what [the animals] were really like, in all the inherent dignity of their everyday lives, rather than some exaggerated perspective conferred upon them by Hollywood.” Stouffer wanted to bring a sort of truth to the experience of the natural world, via television.

The show ran according to what became a rather predictable format. A montage from previous episodes served as an opening for the program, accompanied by a symphonic theme that seemed to reinforce the greatness and majesty of the natural world. Marty then would appear, usually in an outdoor setting relevant to the episode and always wearing a specific attire for that environment. He served as the master of ceremonies for the natural world, both physically interacting on camera with various animals, and narrating their lives and tendencies in voice-over when off screen. Although some episodes were almost completely story-driven, nearly every show contained some sort of a narrative to give context to the animals’ actions. The
editing process sometimes did this alone, setting up predator-prey relationships and the quintessential struggle for life that is the natural world. Music was employed to dramatic effect, especially during chase scenes. This format was highly successful in that it attracted an audience large enough to support the show for nearly 12 years.

Another source of entertainment for me at this age were the countless cartoons and Disney movies that utilized animal-based characters in their programs. Disney’s *The Lion King* was released in theatres in 1994 and became an instant classic. It told a timeless story of good and evil, right and wrong, and the circle of life, through a cast of anthropomorphized animals from the African landscape.

As an eleven year old in 1994, I understood and related to these sources of popular entertainment very differently. Although I enjoyed both, *Wild America* always seemed ‘more real’. I suppose this is partly because it wasn’t animated and the animals’ behavior was not completely modeled on that of humans. Also, being a weekly television show on an educational channel and not a Disney cartoon seemed to give it another badge of authenticity. I really had not thought much more about this perception until my own attempt at creating something ‘more real’ via a video camera. Now, I would argue that Stouffer created only another simulated variation of nature in popular culture, not really any different than *The Lion King*, and really no ‘more real’ than what I have been doing in my own work.

French Philosopher Jean Baudrillard famously wrote, “whereas representation tries to absorb simulation by interpreting it as a false representation, simulation envelopes the whole edifice of representation as itself a simulacrum.” He claims that places like Disneyland are presented as imaginary in order for us to accept that the
rest of our society is real, when in fact they are all of this simulated order. Basically, what was once our reality has now been replaced by various signs and images, which represent that reality. Our reality is a ‘hyper-reality’. Although the ‘real’ still exists, it is these signs and images that are relevant to our experience, more so than the underlying actuality of what once was. Therefore, we can really only experience the simulated version of nature. *The Lion King* reinforces Stouffer’s illusion of reality through his representation, yet it still remains a simulacrum. It is no more real than any other representation in this respect.

Perhaps this is a source of my own ongoing attempt for an authentic experience within the natural world, through the lens popular culture. *Wild America* and *The Lion King* are both part of the simulacrum in which I have grown up and are just as, if not more, relevant to my experience of nature than say living in the wilderness. Perhaps it is because of these mediated experiences that physical interaction within the natural world can seem so inauthentic. It is through my art practice that I attempt to reconcile these expectations, images, and experiences, consciously exploring the reality of the simulation.
CHAPTER 3

PSEUDO-EVENTS

We all have expectations regarding our experience of the world. Marty Stouffer expected something more real than Hollywood provided. I, in turn, expect something more real than Marty provided. Ironically, it is often through these artificial, image-based mediums, like television and movies, that these expectations are addressed, fulfilled, and perpetuated.

In his influential book, *The Image*, which was published in 1962, Daniel Boorstin writes that, “we are ruled by extravagant expectations [both] of what the world holds […] [and] of our power to shape the world.” He argues that to satisfy these expectations we have developed pseudo-events to fill any boring void. He describes the pseudo-event as a happening usually having four distinct characteristics.

1) It is a planned rather than spontaneous
2) It’s primary purpose is to be reported on and reproduced in the media
3) It has a very ambiguous relationship to underlying reality of the situation
4) It is usually intended to be a self-fulfilling prophecy

A classic example of the pseudo-event is that of the press conference. From politics to entertainment to academia, events are staged for the announcement of some self-fulfilling prophecy or plan. They are designed for the press or popular media and depend on such in order to attain importance.

Cultural critic, Neil Gabler expands and updates Boorstin’s idea and definition of the pseudo-event to life itself. He argues that the media has grown so much and “pseudo-events [have] proliferated to such an extent that one [can] hardly call them
events anymore because there [are] no longer any seams between them and the rest of life, no way of separating the pseudo from the so-called authentic.\textsuperscript{iv} He calls this artificial, mediated reality, \textit{pseudo-life}.

It is because of our ‘extravagant expectations’ that we believe and reinforce the illusions we create. We expect something exciting to happen in nature, so Marty provides us with a great chase scene. We expect something interesting to be occurring in our world at all times, so now we have 24-hour news programs. Even amongst our personal relationships, many now expect a constant supply of entertaining Facebook status updates, checking this online social media site as if it were the news.

Occasionally, something unexpected and very real does occur without our influence, like a natural disaster or a solar eclipse. Even still, we usually experience these natural phenomena through the mediated lens. The difference between our experience of these events and other pseudo-events collapses within our experience of the simulacrum. The pseudo-event has indeed become our reality. My art practice engages with this realization.
French theorist, Guy DeBord, refers to this world of pervasive simulation, pseudo-events, and hyper-reality as the *Society of the Spectacle*, which is also the title of his book (and later film) about the matter. He writes about the union of government, capitalism, and mass media and how our society has changed from one of being to one of appearing. Commodity culture, represented by images, has transformed our need for ‘having’ to more importantly, ‘appearing to have’. He defines the spectacle as “[…] a social relationship between people that is mediated by images”. He believes that “it is the very heart of society’s unreality. In all its specific manifestations – news or propaganda, advertising or actual consumption of entertainment – the spectacle epitomizes the prevailing model of social life.”

I understand this to mean that we create our own reality through the images we produce, consume and produce again. We identify and relate to one another through these images of what we have or appear to have and understand the world in similar terms. It seems to me that this spectacle-oriented society is even more pervasive and relevant now, in this digital era of online video, social media networks, and affordable high-definition cameras.

My art practice takes advantage of this accessibility. As an active consumer, I create my own spectacular images based off of and influenced by popular culture. Although I physically undertake an adventure, it is through these images and the appearance of adventure that I am able to most broadly connect with the public. I
believe that it is in this manifestation that part of the reality of the experience now relies. I remain ambivalent as to my own complicity with this spectacular, pseudo-event society, in my quest for authenticity. I desire to create more than just spectacle, however, I am not quite sure than I can completely avoid it.
CHAPTER 5
MYTHOLOGY

I think about this image-based, spectacular way of living, in relation to mythologies and ways of understanding and experience in the past. Although various functions can be applied to the reason for myth, both cultural theorist Roland Barthes and the mythologist Joseph Campbell write about the sociological function of mythologies. Basically, the idea that myth is often used to perpetuate and uphold a societal ideal or social order.

Barthes writes, “men do not have with myth a relationship based on truth but on use [...] according to their needs.” He argues that it is the people in power that use myth to support their own interests. My art practice engages with American mythology and stories that perpetuate the American experience. These myths are often sustained by the pseudo-event, spectacle producing entertainment industry, Hollywood.

As child and as an adult, I watch(ed) countless cowboy Westerns and historical dramas that portrayed the wilderness, frontier, and expansion of the United States. I enjoyed and still enjoy these spectacles of entertainment, even if I find their underlying signification at odds with my own morals and ideals. I desire to engage with these images through the construction of my own mythologies that both accept and reject their validity. There is a push and a pull. My work remains ambivalent and ambiguous and I believe that is only in this non-defining hesitance that I can authentically exist within an alternative mythology.
In his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell lays out a basic pattern for the mythic narrative of the hero’s journey from across different cultures and time. He calls this structure the *monomyth*, and attributes to these rites of passage, a basic formula of separation, initiation, and return.

“A hero ventures forth from the world of the common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.”

There are many steps, trials, and events in between these stages and not every myth includes them all. Although Campbell does make a compelling case for this underlying monomyth structure, I suppose it could still be disregarded as almost too easy or clean. Perhaps this monomyth structure becomes a myth in and of itself. Personally, I appreciate how this narrative functions and extends itself beyond prehistory and oral tradition and into the present day popular culture of Hollywood cinema. I wonder how the monomyth can be applied to my own experience in our simulated, spectacular world. Perhaps it is in this hyper-reality of image consumption, that the hero’s journey is sustained, even if it may not seem readily apparent, relevant, or even possible.
CHAPTER 6
IDENTITY

So what are the implications of this highly mediated, image-based culture on the individual, the artist, and me? How does it inform, effect, and affect my identity, knowledge, and understanding of the past? How does one authentically exist in this world of perpetuated simulacrum? How does our culture of mediated imagery and artificial reality relate to the mythology and story telling of those who came before? How does one experience this reality through a mediated mythology of oneself?
I have chosen to neither completely accept nor reject this simulated world, but engage with it through conscious artistic practice, in order to more fully comprehend its totality. Rather than simply discard the simulated pseudo-event as meaningless and corrupt, I would like to use it as a platform of artistic expression. The simulacrum of these spectacular mythologies are my experience and so it seems most appropriate for me to adapt them to my own language, for my own mythologies.

Influenced by the legacy of performance art, my body and person has become a primary vehicle for action and encounter in my recent work. I am especially fascinated by artists like Joseph Beuys, who have used the act of performance in conjunction with a multitude of other artistic disciplines in “construct[ing] a personal metaphysical and personal cosmology.”viii Although different in our intentions, I, too, am interested in the creation of a personal universe and mythology of artistic experience. I desire to create this myth from the language of the simulated, pseudo-life, which I already inhabit. It is with the tools of this mediated environment, like video cameras, newspapers, and online social media outlets that I am able to extend my performance and interaction with others beyond the fleeting, physical moment and into the realm of the interminable and possibly infinite.

I desire to exist within my creative art practice, not so much as a maker of objects (although I still do this), but as a participant within a particular way of existing. Contemporary art critic, Nicolas Bourriaud refers to the practice of
relational aesthetics, as one in which artwork becomes “[a] way of living and model of action within the existing real.”

This is how I view my current work. I call my artistic practice *adventure-art*, using the term to describe a performance-based action in which I explore my reality through some type of physical adventure, search, quest, or challenge. It is an attempt to engage others and myself at both at the physical and mediated levels, reconciling, confusing, and merging the real with the simulated. It is an attempt to construct my own mythology ‘within the existing real’.

According to Bourriaud, relational aesthetics is not so much a theory, but a form of practice. It is a sort of dialogue between the artist, the viewing participant, and the present culture at large. Spaces are created to provide interaction and so “the artistic practice thus resides in the invention of relations between consciousness. Each particular artwork is a kind of proposal to live in a shared world.”

The adventures I undertake have a relational aesthetic in that their meaning and direction changes with the collaboration of others. These ‘others’ are the very people I interact with and meet on the adventure. They are both the people who choose to participate via its mediated documentation as well as those who do not. They are the people with whom I share stories, ask directions, eat dinner with, and help me out when help is needed. Together, we establish meaning and direction collectively.

The word ‘adventure’ is misused quite a bit and I will be the first to admit that I do it. Daniel Boorstin believed this so much that he wrote, “the word ‘adventure’ has become one of the blandest and emptiest in the English language.” He argues
that pseudo-events and celebrities have replaced authentic adventure and real heroes.

Although adventure can be defined as an ‘unusual, stirring experience, often of romantic nature’, it is often used to describe actions that are anything but.

Saying this, it seems ridiculous then that one could have ‘an unusual, stirring experience of romantic character’ within the realm of the simulated and the artificial. It may also seem a bit irrelevant than to try and create one’s own monomyth-structured narrative within this artificiality. However, this is exactly what my adventure-art does or at least intends to do. Allow me to explain.
On September 22nd, 2010 around 7:30 AM, a boat was launched on the Hatfield side of the Connecticut River. This activity was not unusual in and of itself; however, it was immediately noticed and engaged by two local fishermen, smoking cigars on the riverbank. They called out, “it’s the guy from the paper and his couch!”

The boat was unusual in that it was built in the form of a love-seat sofa. Really it was no different than a love seat other than it was formed out of Styrofoam and covered in pine lattice strips, in the fashion of a Mississippi keel boat. Sealed water tight with a marine epoxy, the couch was completely sea-worthy. It was not only a couch, but a boat as well.

The fisherman knew who I was because I had premeditatedly built the adventure around the idea of its consumption by others. Using the convention of the Press Release, I declared myself, the ‘King of the River’, and an article in the local paper soon followed. Through local media outlets, I was able to promote this adventure, making it in known to the local community and inviting them to come witness my voyage. I provided the introduction of a story, complete with a coonskin capped character (myself) and a challenge to be completed. Popular media in turn collectively shaped the appearance of this adventure beyond my control, assigning a level of significance and meaning that I was unable to establish on my own. I both used and was used by a pseudo-event structure in order to perpetuate this myth.
The adventure was not only a physical challenge, but also a mediated adventure story for the public to witness.

The trip down the river took nearly eight hours to complete. Along the way I met local fishermen, leisure boaters, kayakers, and jet-skiers. I interacted with the people through ‘thumbs ups’, paddle waving, hooting, brief conversations, and other forms of social engagement. By the time I reached the Northampton Rail Trail Bridge (the place I announced to the public to come witness), I was exhausted and overjoyed by my own adventure. Dozens of people (I heard someone say over 60) lined the bridge with cheers of enthusiasm and support for this journey. It was through the mediated outreach of the pseudo-event, that I was able to most effectively interact with others and encourage public participation on a physical level.

While some people were aware of the adventure from the local paper, others had no idea. Generally, people were just fascinated by this out-of-place couch and greeted it with smiles of approval. Despite the out-of-placeness, many people accepted the adventure as a good thing to do, despite its ambiguity to any underlying reality. One person even verified my position as ‘King of the River’ through the tribute of a medallion with multi-colored ribbons. With the help of the local media, the expectations of the public, and my couch boat, I had indeed become, the ‘King of the River’. Like any successful pseudo-event, it was a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Although the physical action of the adventure ended around 5 PM, the story continues on in a mediated form. That same evening, local NBC Channel 22 ran a story about the unusual boat and its coonskin-capped helmsman (me). This story was distributed across affiliate news channels around the country, from Austin, Texas to
Toledo, Ohio to Portland, Oregon. A short segment was even shown on CNN and posted to their twitter page, alongside pop star Lady Gaga and Iranian President, Mahmud Ajmedinijad. Countless local blog posts and Facebook pages featured various peoples’ interaction with the adventure.

Why was this story worth the time and money of so many other people? Why was it posted alongside world leaders and rock stars? Was this even art or was it simply entertainment and no different than any other pseudo-event?

I think all of the above are fair questions. One answer would be that I was lucky. Perhaps there was nothing deemed more entertaining to air or write about on the same time and day. I provided something that fulfilled an ‘extravagant expectation’ even if it was not something that people expected. It was ‘news’ because it was so out of the ordinary. Something as insignificant as floating down a river became important, simply because it was done on something as extraordinary as a couch.

In a contemporary art context, King of the River (the title of the adventure-performance) seems to fall into the practice that Nicolas Bourriaud describes as relational aesthetics. I was searching for an alternative way of interacting with an existing reality and the boat-couch provided a vehicle to do just that. From a few short conversations and brief hoots to the gathering crowd awaiting my arrival on the bridge, an alternative reality was built between my character and those who met or witnessed me. The adventure was a brief intermission from the common and the ordinary, providing an idealistic, fantastical, simulated vision of adventure as an alternative. I would argue that this alternative was a ‘better way’ of living (however
short) ‘within the existing real’, in that it brought people together through a common interest and enjoyment. Through this adventure, I was able to create a dialogue and produce a ‘specific sociability’ between the local community, mediated culture, and myself.

The experience of *King of the River* initiated a ‘call to adventure’ in my artistic practice. It showed me that I could create and do something that is personal and social, physical and mediated, real and simulated. It blurred the lines between my art, my life, and the lives of others. It showed me a new way to experience the world.
CHAPTER 9
THE BELLY OF THE WHALE AND THE ROAD OF TRIALS

As a graduate student, there are certain expectations as to the resolution and context of my artistic practice, set by myself, my peers, and supporting faculty. This culminates in the final year of the MFA program, in the form of a Thesis. Feeling this pressure for resolution, I decided to create another adventure, directly addressing this situation and expectation. Titled *M.F.A. Thesis Quest*, I headed into the wilderness of western Massachusetts on a trek across the state and back to my studio on the UMASS campus. Under the pretext of a “search for enlightenment and inspiration”, I walked over 80 miles, sleeping outdoors, and continually recording the adventure for a later mediated encounter by others and myself.

In the context of the monomyth, this is where I entered the ‘belly of the whale’, undertaking both a figurative and literal, ‘road of trials’. I separated myself from my community in order to fulfill a personal rite of passage and initiation, hoping for a sense of purpose and enlightenment regarding what I should be doing for my thesis. I would encounter the unknown, both privately and publically undertaking an adventure in the realm of the real, the simulated, the physical, and the mediated.

I began the adventure from the Summit of Mt. Greylock, the highest point in the State of Massachusetts, which coincidentally has served as inspiration to range of artists and writers in the past, from Henry David Thoreau to Herman Melville. For me, it was less a matter of its historical artistic relevance as much as its place as the highest point around. From there I hiked through small towns, down backcountry
roads, up steep power-line trails, and through the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art. I met people from across the country, including gas station attendants, RV vacationers, local property-owners, and even the famous movie-star, Alec Baldwin. I engaged as many people as I could with the adventure that I was on, telling them of my story, challenges, plans, and art. I recorded these experiences in video at nearly every possible moment, bringing the movie of my life to the people that I met, including them in the story as it developed. I brought the adventure to them, to experience in their own reality. It was just like the movies.

A week after beginning the journey, I staggered into my studio on the UMASS campus. I was sore, tired, and full of a sense of accomplishment. Although still unclear of any definitive direction for Thesis, I had emerged from the ‘belly of the whale’ and was now back into my known reality of school, friends, and mediated entertainment.

Soon after, I wrote a travel article for Hampshire Life Magazine in order for the local community to experience this adventure. Titled, “Steve Snell’s Wilderness”, the article recounts my journey across western Massachusetts and almost providential meeting of Alec Baldwin. Although lucky in my encounter with a celebrity, it seems fitting that my quest into the wilderness would bring me face to face with the popular culture that in so many ways inspired it. Daniel Boorstin writes of the celebrity as merely the human form of the pseudo-event, who is “known for his well-known-ness.”

Alec Baldwin would bring a level of importance to my adventure with his endorsement and image, simply because of his familiarity with so many people. I am
not sure that I would have been given the opportunity to publish and article without this ‘well-known-ness’.

The story was written for the extravagant expectations of others, based in truth yet exaggerated with hyperbole. It fulfilled my own expectations as a real adventure story. Popular media would again provide a platform for the dissemination of my adventure to others. *M.F.A. Thesis Quest* continues on in various mediated forms, from the Hampshire Life article to videos posted to my website and YouTube, allowing people from around the world to experience my ‘road of trials’.

The performance was in many regards my ultimate attempt to live as though my life were indeed an adventure movie. Not only did I create a costume, complete with an orange hat and flannel shirt\(^1\), but also certain parallels in my actions seemed to occur between my experiences that week in October and the experiences I had vicariously through Hollywood cinema. When I took a bath in a small pond, I thought about how the actor Kevin Costner had a similar bathing experience in the movie, *Dances with Wolves* (1990), and so I recorded my bath accordingly. When I tried to convince a dog to stop following me, I remembered Ethan Hawke in the movie, *White Fang* (1991). Movies inspired my adventure and the adventure reflected these movies. My video work regarding this adventure again reflects the influence of these mediated experiences on my own encounters within reality.

Film theorist, Laura Mulvey writes about how people project themselves into the characters they watch in films. She writes, “cinema satisfies a primordial wish for pleasurable looking, but also goes further, developing scopophilia in its narcissistic

\(^1\) Joseph Beuys was again a big influence in this regard. I liked his hat and vest and how that became a part of his identity as an artist in a way.
aspect."\textsuperscript{xiii} She compares the act of looking at film to the way Jacques Lacan describes a child recognizing him or herself in a mirror and how there is something in this act that is pivotal in the construction of one’s ego. She writes that in watching movies, "the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist [and] projects his look on to that of his like […] the more perfect, more complete, more powerful ideal ego conceived in the original moment of recognition in front of a mirror."\textsuperscript{xiv}

I probably recognize or subconsciously project myself onto the characters that I watch in these cowboy Westerns and historical dramas of the American experience that I enjoy so much. I can also see how there may be something extremely narcissistic in this adventure and how I decided to record and frame it. However, it is in \textit{M.F.A. Thesis Quest} that I confront these desires, perceptions, contradictions, and influences. I do not want to come across as an egotistical, self-indulgent jerk, but rather as an individual struggling for identity and searching for meaning amidst a world of simulated spectacle. It is the physical journey and challenge of walking a great distance that becomes the vehicle for this action. I search for this meaning honestly, with humor and integrity, and it is in this ‘genuineness’ that I believe my experience goes beyond complicity and reveals my own ambivalence to the underlying situation. \textit{M.F.A. Thesis Quest} is an adventure into the unknown landscape of western Massachusetts (at least for me) as well as into my character and person.
CHAPTER 10
THE RETURN

Before moving to the Pioneer Valley to attend graduate school, I lived in a small, remote village in Southeast Alaska, called Yakutat. There, I was the art teacher in the local school, teaching grades K-12, with about 112 students all in all. I lived on a floating house anchored in the harbor, where I encountered sea lions, otters, grizzly bears, and more bald eagles than I can remember. I spent two years there and looking back on this time in my life, I view it as a very real, movie-like experience.

This past January, I returned to Yakutat, on an adventure to bring “an authentic winter wilderness” back to the Pioneer Valley of Massachusetts (my current home). I was interested in how one’s mediated experience informs the way one enacts the physical. I wondered about my past experience in Yakutat, and how much of it may have been informed or influenced by popular culture. I wondered what even drove me there in the first place and how much of it was because of movies like Disney’s *White Fang* (1991).

For one week, I installed a green-screen stage in the A.P.E. Gallery in Northampton, MA. Opposite the stage were a video camera and a television, which looped a simulated video of me experiencing a simulated Alaska. I would pretend to interact with appropriated Alaskan landscapes from various documentaries and movies. Below this television was a letter addressed to the viewers of the installation. It explained that I was currently in the wilds of Alaska, searching for the landscape.

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2 This is from my press-release announcing the adventure
for them to ‘experience’. It invited them to participate in the project by recording themselves on the green-screen stage. There were few rules as to how they may interact, that choice was mostly up to them.

The stage remained open in the gallery for one week. At the end of the week, nearly 75 people participated in the Alaskan adventure. I then returned from the physical Alaskan reality with hours of landscape video footage to provide these actors with their background. Eventually, there will be a video installation of the gallery participants in the Alaskan landscape, which will be shown in the same gallery, this June.

Although this project is not yet complete, I can speak to its social component or relational aesthetic, which is perhaps much more collectively involved than the previous adventures. *Alaska Wild!* invited people from the community to directly involve themselves with the adventure, allowing them to become the primary characters behind its mediated experience. Although my presence is carried through the recording of the various landscapes and the editing process, it is the participating public who compel the personality and direction of the experience. Whereas in past adventures, my own character was the driving influence, in this project, it takes a back seat, allowing for a much more open, “invention of relations between consciousness[es].”

Parallel to this open-ended, mediated social engagement, is the experience that I encountered while in Alaska. Although not a direct part of the video, it was a socially engaged component of the project in a much more physical, personal way. In *Alaska Wild!* I had returned back to the place in which I lived prior to graduate
school. In the monomythic sense, I viewed this act as my ‘return’, in which “the hero comes back from [a] mysterious adventure (in my case graduate school) with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.” Now, I did not truly believe that was going to ‘bestow boons’ on the people of Yakutat in the form of some secret knowledge or power that I had gained, but I did like the idea of returning. Alaska Wild! provided me the opportunity to share stories and experiences with friends, former students, acquaintances, and strangers about the art that I had been making since I had left. This took the form of adventure-art storytelling, in which I perpetuated the mythic narratives of King of the River and M.F.A. Thesis Quest. I shared with people stories of my adventures. They especially wanted to know more about the float-couch, and my encounter with Alec Baldwin. I then returned to my new ‘home’ in order to share with people of the Pioneer Valley, the Alaskan landscape.
CHAPTER 11  
THE THESIS EXHIBITION  

From April 11th until April 15th, 2011, I will exhibit my Thesis in the Herter Art Gallery at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. An important question I have for myself is: how do I show adventure-art in the gallery space, without just providing proof of an event that has already come to pass? If adventure-art exists in both the ephemeral constraints of a physical time-based period, as well as the perpetual confines of popular media through the Internet, what is the roll of the art gallery for adventure-art? I had already used a gallery space for the production of Alaska Wild!, but is there another way to utilize the space that is not such a direct appeal to participation? I realize this is not new territory for the presentation of contemporary art, especially previous performance-based works, but it is new territory for me, and my own intentions. My aim is to provide a video-based mediation of adventure that requires the gallery for a new experience.

For the show, I will re-create my most recent version of M.F.A. Thesis Quest for the UMASS community. I say most recent, because I view this mythology of adventure as a continuum that evolves and changes over time. I do not wish to conclude anything, but rather continually engage and live with it.

This version of the M.F.A. Thesis Quest will be told through a video installation, simultaneously showing days one through seven, morning until night. It will be presented in what I call a ‘super entertainment center’. Using multiple TV cabinets, seven televisions will be placed in close proximity to one another, each
representing a single day of the adventure. Surrounding this console will be a large faux-bear-skin carpet with a bean-bag chair, encouraging visitors to sit, stay, and watch.

The story of the M.F.A. Thesis Quest will then play over a thirty minute time period, in which the gallery viewer can attempt to experience the entire journey simultaneously. I say attempt, because with seven televisions playing concurrently, the viewer will have to make decisions as to what parts of the adventure to focus on. As the producer of the video, I will have a certain amount of influence and direction over this focus, but ultimately the viewer has a choice.

The videos themselves are a montage of different levels of mediation. Unedited, straightforward footage plays alongside highly manipulated, idealizations of what I wanted the adventure to be. Perpetuated Hollywood standards are revealed and diminished by my own sometimes awkward and uncomfortable personality. Moments of intensity and drama compete with meditative silence and monotonous walking. Juxtapositions are be made from television to television regarding the people, places, events, and nature of the adventure. Depending on when a person enters the gallery, how long they choose to stay, and what they choose to watch, a very different impression might be had and perhaps an expectation will be fulfilled or negated.

Compared with previous manifestations of adventure-art, this exhibition places emphasis on the passive act of entertainment-consumption. My own character and personality becomes the surrogate from which the public experiences the adventure. Although mediated in nature, the active performance resides in the visitor
sitting, watching, consuming, and projecting himself or herself into *M.F.A. Thesis Quest*. It is through its over-the-top presentation and self-referential environment that I hope to go beyond providing just another movie-theatre or TV-Room. I desire to confront the spectacle that is the adventure, its later mediation, and resulting exhibition.
A significant drive for my desire to engage with adventure-art is perhaps inspired by my fascination with television and movies. Growing up with a rather constant consumption of entertainment, it makes sense that I desire my own reality to uphold the same level of enjoyment. Although I do not necessarily want to be a famous movie star or an actor, it seems rather do-able to instead elevate my own situation and reality to the same level of entertainment I get from others.

These three adventures constituted the beginning for me of a new artistic practice, understanding, and way of experiencing the world. I engaged my local community on a personal level through physical adventure and direct interaction. I attempted to engage a broader audience through the established framework of image consumption and promotion, utilizing resources outside of the traditional art context such as newspapers, television, magazines, and online social media networks. The adventures are very real in the physical sense and are reinforced, altered and perpetuated by their mediation in the digital.

It is through a combination of physical performance, digital mediation, personal storytelling, objects, artifacts, and art shows that I attempt to re-create a mythic narrative. I use my own experience and character to tell this story. It is produced and consumed on different levels, by different people, at different times. I shaped a framework and continue to utilize methods of reinforcement to perpetuate this image – maybe if I do it long enough, others will do the same.
TECHNICAL INFORMATION

*M.F.A. Thesis Quest* is a video installation that plays on seven synchronized televisions sets. Each TV is designated a single day of the adventure and together they loop every 30 minutes. The gallery space itself is converted into mythic, shrine-like, TV-room environment of sorts, centered around the adventure that plays on the televisions. It is comprised of multiple entertainment centers, each decorated with kitsch nature décor, artifacts from the adventure, nature books, as well as various trinkets and objects that somehow relate to images of nature in popular culture. There is a brown bean-bag chair on a faux-bear skin carpet. On the back wall is a display of various objects/artifacts from the weeklong journey itself.
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