Signs of Life

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Signs of Life

by

John Kohlepp

An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements of the degree of

Bachelor of Science

in

University Honors

and

Art Practice

Thesis Advisor

Eleanor Erskine

Portland State University

2023
My University Honors College thesis—Signs of Life—is in interest of earning a BS in Art Practice major. The Thesis is an art installation and short video documentary exploring perceptions, identities, groupings, and reasonings as shaped by elements chosen from my life story during the recent pandemic imposed isolation. The conceptual underpinnings of this installation will lean on concepts gleaned from theories of reasonings explored in how our brain functions and how we as human beings perceive objects and meanings. The materials themselves as well as the formal elements are influenced by my past experiences as a carpenter (home improvement) and the fine craft of picture framing. In this prospectus, I will describe my creative process in the following sections: the initial inspiration, the media I chose and its treatment, the planned arrangement for the physical installation. I would like to also share the thesis’s intersection with my research of Manuel Delanda, and the thesis’s reference to heuristics and reasoning research, and—lastly—and most importantly my hopes and questions for the viewer’s experience.

The inspiration for this project started from the isolation, anxiety, and focus on my immediate environment stemming from the pandemic isolation starting in March 2020. Many of us became disconnected from our communities and work lives due to need for social distancing. I started to become fascinated by the elements of my world and within my immediate
neighborhood, contemplating and reorganizing small, everyday objects. I started painting these objects along with creating trompe l’oeil frames.

Trompe l’oeil—“deceives the eye” in French (“Trompe L’oeil”)—is an artistic style which strives to create an uncanny illusion of reality in a typically-shallow space. Objects are rendered in a one-to-one scale with consistently-cast shadows and highlights, as if the painting were real objects mounted in a shadowbox. This style presses forward into the viewer’s space rather than opening up to a greater world as a landscape painting would; I feel this “pressing in” effect reflects this project’s origin and initial inspiration during isolation. The trompe l’oeil style historically also goes light on expressive brushstrokes and owning of abstract qualities; this in turn sublimates the artist’s hand to interface with the project’s conceptual ideas with physical materiality.

The order and repetitive patterns of the “frames” anchored my anxious mind, as well they called back to my past knowledge as a picture framer. I chose 3/4” birch plywood as a substrate for its stability, beauty, and to reference my family’s carpentry business. I grew up with the scent of cut lumber, and utilizing this material as a substrate soothed my then unsettled spirit. The raw exposed plywood substrate is intended to be visible on the surface of each painting as
well as the exposed natural plywood cross sections. These fragile structural elements significantly are intended to be in contrast with the illusionism of the images themselves.

I’ve installed hanging hardware and felt bumpers on the back of each piece. This feature both calls back to my time as a wood craftsman and reinforces the ideas of bringing completeness to the wholeness of every aspect of the object of art. These physical components are a significant part of the art experience rather than an unconsidered afterthought.

For the paint media, I chose acrylic for the base layer of the frames and underpainting of the trompe l’oeil objects. Over this initial acrylic layer, I used oil glazes to complete the frame portion and a more painterly application of solid oil paints for the objects. In rendering these images, I use a one-to-one scale and a consistent light source for all images (45° from the top right). This approach creates aesthetic consistency and unity as well as the appearance that all elements of the installation are playing under the same illusionary rules of physics, scale, and place.

The January 2023 installation at MK Gallery includes an introductory statement showing the biographical catalyst for my exploration of trompe l’oeil, a general statement of the shows philosophical underpinnings meant for a general audience, and a brief artist’s statement. This is
made in support of the body of work which is meant to be semiotic in nature and, therefore, self-describing.

The major part of the installation is an assortment of nineteen pieces with trompe l’oeil paintings. These pieces are interchangeable and recombinable, such as typeset or letters in the alphabet. For instance, pairing the Bic lighter with the moth could be “Moth to a Flame”. Linking together the thread, measuring tape, and scissors could be “Fate”. The whole set of objects could be grouped as “Painting of a Framed Art Show”.

The final section is a complete representation of a chess set along with a painted white plywood substrate with sixty-four stainless steel screws installed in a grid. The “Chess Set” is made both as a painting and as a functional chess set able to be played. These recombinable assemblages illustrate Manuel Delanda’s concepts of “endogenously generated stable state” and “emergent quality”.

Identity as subject is observed as an “endogenously generated stable state”— energy and material finding a stable yet persistent state, like a soap bubble or a solar system (Delanda, 500). This evidences the arbitrary origins of identity and how my art installation in general can be grouped as an entirety or recombined as discrete concepts, like the “alphabet” is a grouping, and so is the word “tree”. The chess set in particular highlights Delanda’s concept of emergent
properties—“An assemblage is…not its components. It is rather characterized by emergent properties not found in its components.” (Kleinherenbrink, 290). A chess piece is not a chess set; even a pile of chess pieces is not a chess set. A chess set requires all of the individual pieces as well as a “board” (the wall and the sixty-four hooks) in order to characterize the full form and functionality defining a true chess set.

In addition to researching Delanda’s concepts, my installation touches upon the theories of reasoning and heuristics explored in Keith Stanovich and Richard West’s research study in “Individual Differences in Reasoning: Implications for the Rationality Debate?”. This study references the “dual process theories of reasoning”. In a nutshell, Type 1 reasoning deals with muscle memory, amygdala-related behaviors, and heuristics while Type 2 deals with purely rational thinking associated with the pre-frontal cortex (Stanovich and West, 659). Heuristics (hands on learning) gets a bad wrap, but it dovetails into assemblages and endogenously stable states. The useful quality of heuristics is that broad-brush definitions take little energy and work in most situations (a stable state demanding the least energy paired with the greatest efficacy). Looking at heuristic tendencies, a viewer will typically bypass the “frame” to look at the subject first even though most of the painted surface and depth of detail are in the actual frame element itself. This relates to this thesis because I would first like the viewer of my installation to bring
their own automatic conclusions about “meaning” and then be prompted to confront the almost-
irresistible power of their own conceptions and preconceived notions about how “meaning”
translates through objects of art, ideas, and illusions.

The ultimate goal is for the audience of this installation to be challenged when asked to
see the installation simultaneously as a whole entity and also as smaller, recombinable sections
with their own discrete identities. The chess set will be less reducible but in some ways a more
accessible example of identity as an emergent property. Is a chess set missing one piece truly still
a chess set?

The desire is for this thesis installation to be an aesthetically pleasing experience for the
viewer. In its uncanny achievements, in its ability to “push into” the viewer’s physical space,
that it will inspire a different kind of thought-provoking thinking about identity, the potentiality
of groupings, and experiences of individual perceptions.
John Kohlepp

Signs of Life

Reception Thu Jan 19
5:30pm - 8:00pm

MK Gallery
PSU Art Building | 2000 SW 5th Ave
January 9 - 26, 2023
Signs of Life documentary by Christopher Diana-Peebles
In the beginning

When I was furloughed and stuck in my apartment, I started painting simple subjects and with trompe l’oeil frames. The repetitive patterns of the canvas calmed my nerves while subjects like the crow spoke to my love of hieroglyphs and symbolism.

In addition to objects found around my home, I collected crow feathers, plant material, and photos of the occasional moth. These fed into the assortment of subjects which finally developed into this show.
Ideas are Beautiful

I've come to believe the meaning of the world and its materiality are all one thing. Humble elements combine to create new stable structures of meaning and identity. Identity itself is not held by an isolated element or the collective whole — identity, in my opinion, is fluctuating state capable of vast change as patterns collect together and break apart.

Collectively, the pieces in the gallery can be considered one object: a painting of a framed art show. Within the body of the show, subtexts exhibit their own identity when considered in combination: the thread, measuring tape, and scissors can be "kifs", the arsenic and fountain pen combine to make a "poisoned pen"; the moth and lighter become "moth to a flame". I invite the viewer to consider other possibilities of meaning, maybe even creating a story for the entire show itself.

The chess set is the most pointed example of collective identity in the show. Would a chess set be identified as such without all 32 pieces? Can a chess set really be a chess set without the ability to move pieces? In this respect, the 64 screws are as integral to the chess set as are the chess pieces. I also enjoy considering that the chess pieces are actually the squares of wood while the paintings of each chess piece merely symbolize each piece’s function.
About the Artist

John Kohlepp is a Portland-based artist originally from Silver Spring, Maryland. In addition to painting, John produces a line of greeting cards. In his past, John has worked in hotels, picture framing, and home remodeling.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BEAM category</th>
<th>Full Citation</th>
<th>Key Elements</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>Delanda, Manuel. &quot;Immanence and Transcendence in the Genesis of Form.&quot; The South Atlantic Quarterly, vol. 96, no. 3, 1997, p. 499-.</td>
<td>The concept of &quot;endogenously stable state&quot; inspires how to present my installation and how it will be perceived. Stable yet persistent states can happen in an art installation as the viewer will subjectively create groupings and sets and project their own meaning. Depending on how expansive a perspective a viewer takes, the identity could be the entirety of the show as a singular identity, a subset of elements, or even down to the singular element. The variable &quot;endogenously stable states&quot; will be more the product of the viewers' consciousness than an immutable quality of the installation itself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>Kleinherenbrink, Arjen. &quot;Metaphysical Primitives: Machines and Assemblages in Deleuze, DeLanda, and Bryant.&quot; Open Philosophy, vol. 3, no. 1, 2020, pp. 283-97, doi:10.1515/opphil-2020-0103.</td>
<td>Assemblages (groupings) and metaphysical primitives (singular, irreducible components) described in this paper are a great jumping off point for a viewer to contemplate my thesis installation. Although these terms are outward-facing models applied to the observable world, I believe it can be turned inward to interrogate the observing individual and their preconceived notions. This in turn relates to my exploration as an artist of groupings and of the viewer of my art installation creating their own groupings based upon their subjective judgements. Each viewer arrives at a different meaning for my show because their perceptions are part of the assemblage defining my work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>Stanovich, Keith E., and Richard F. West. &quot;Individual Differences in Reasoning: Implications for the Rationality Debate?&quot; The Behavioral and Brain Sciences, vol. 23, no. 5, 2000, pp. 645–65, doi: 10.1017/S0140525X00003435.</td>
<td>The “dual process theories of reasoning” and this study’s exploration of heuristics dovetails into my preceding resources. The use of Type One Reasoning (amygdala-based processing, muscle memory) is a default method of navigating the world. Observers will be confronted by their own preconceived methods of perception; for example, looking at the objects first then the trompe l’oeil frames even though the frames compose most of the visual space. Frames are meant to be in most cases transitional elements, quickly traveled over. The use of raw and exposed birch plywood substrates is meant to create a mildly disruptive tension which will hopefully inspire viewers to consider their automatic habits, thereby activating a bit of Type Two Reasoning (prefrontal cortex).</td>
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Cited Sources


