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Fort, Da : The World of Play

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THESIS APPROVAL

The abstract and thesis of Kevin Marc Ginger for the Master of Fine Arts in Art: Sculpture were presented May 30, 2000, and accepted by the thesis committee and the department.

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ABSTRACT

An abstract of the thesis of Kevin Marc Ginger for the Master of Fine Arts in Art: Sculpture presented on May 30, 2000.

Title: *fort, da*: The World of Play

The theoretical and contextual placement of my work is informed by child development psychology. The intention is to evoke and analyze what children do, not to imitate. My use of faux fur, comforting blankets and the form of play balls all function to create objects and environments that lend themselves to absurdity, humor, and of course child-like play.

"fort, da" is titled in spirit from Sigmund Freud's observation of a child throwing a toy with an accompanying statement *fort*, German for "gone." The child then delights in retrieving the object while exclaiming *da* or "here."¹ The anxiety of loss is mastered in this game, literally with an object. The child passes over from the passivity of abandonment and loss to the activity of the game, much as my work asks a participant to move through only *looking* at the art to the actual *interaction* of the "game."

FORT, DA: THE WORLD OF PLAY

by

KEVIN MARC GINGER

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS
in
ART: SCULPTURE

Portland State University
2000

I wish to dedicate this work to Almira for her enduring support and
playful inspiration.

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"fort, da: The World of Play" comes from an understanding of traditional sculptural materials, processes and forms, at the same time this work is informed by theories of developmental psychology. The integration of these two diverse areas of inquiry informs my studio process and places my work in context as an artist in community. It is my belief that the fantasy involved in play serves a function: it satisfies the need to mediate between what is real and what is imagined. My intention is not to imitate, but rather analyze and evoke what children do naturally.

During my last year at the Columbus College of Art and Design I began my investigations into the theories of child development psychology. These theories have become the core of my conceptual investigations and an invaluable tool to unlock the mystery of my need to create objects and how they interact with the world. My need to build a tactile vocabulary has led me through ceramics, metals, fabrics and found objects, a process of understanding that coincides with my knowledge of how children learn. This paper examines three aspects of my work: first, a move from making passive objects to creating interactive environments; second, my theoretical development and study of developmental psychology; and lastly, the relationship of these first two projections to my own creative process and the child at play.

During my undergraduate studies I had the fortune of receiving a gift from my ceramics professor, Charles Brown. Being fluent in contemporary theory, Charles introduced me to D. W. Winnicott's essay "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena: A Study of the First Not-Me Possession" (1954). This information came to me after I had been making molds of baby bottles, rubber duckies, and various other objects related to infancy. I had used baby bottles intuitively, based on humor and the

naiveté of child's play. *Bottles and Spheres* (1996, figure 1) is a typical example of my work during my last year in undergraduate studies. Charles Brown recognized the relationships of these objects to Winnicott's theories—I found that the information fueled my critical thinking.

Winnicott proposes that the transitional object, an inanimate object in the infant's immediate surroundings, serves as a buffer between the internal "only me" perception of the child and the reality of the external world. This theory is related to but departs from Freud's theories of the development and suppression of sexuality based on the child's awareness of its own body rather than inanimate objects.

Winnicott describes the kinds of relationships infants make between objects and the functions they serve during times of anxiety and reality testing (that is, challenging the perception of what is internal and external). The relationships between transitional objects and transitional phenomena are the first experiences of separating from the mother. In other words, Winnicott is concerned with how children bridge the gap between egocentrism (internal only perception) and the recognition of the external world. His study examines (1) the nature of the object, (2) the infant's capacity to recognize the object as "not-me," (3) the proximity of the object—outside, inside, at the border (of the infant's immediate surroundings). An action characteristic of this phenomenon is when the infant takes a blanket in its mouth, caresses the blanket, and accompanies mouthing with sounds of babbling. The function of this, again, is not only to construct a reality of "other-than-me" but simultaneously to mediate between

the inner reality and outside world. Upon observing infants, Winnicott noticed that the object chosen aids the child in falling asleep and is a defense against anxiety. Parents are quick to recognize the importance of this object and carry it when traveling, as the continuity of the object is of utmost importance. The nipple, the pacifier, the blankey are referenced in my work, which illustrates the value placed upon these transitional objects by infants. The object eventually loses meaning—becomes diffused, spread out over a broader sense of inner reality and the external world. As the child matures, the need for the transitional object dissipates.

In the beginning of infancy, the child fantasizes that the mother's breast is part of the infant. The child "produces" the breast over and over again, not only out of need, but also out of its illusion of control. The mother gradually disillusiones the infant by weaning, by recognizing the child's capacity to use an *object* substitute to release anxiety related to the disillusionment process and allowing the child to build an *external* vocabulary of *external* objects. This task of reality acceptance is never completed—no adult is entirely free from the influence of unconscious fantasy or infantile anxieties. Relief from this anxiety is provided by an intermediate experience, which in our culture may be found in aesthetic or religious encounters—and observed/experienced by the child *and* the artist who become "lost" in play.

Upon graduating in 1996, I continued to build my own vocabulary of external objects and processes. After working with ceramics for three years, I began working with metal fabrication and incorporating found objects into my sculptures. I also

drifted from recognizable imagery relating overtly to transitional object theory. *BB Balls* (1997, figure 2) was made from wax cast ball bearings laid in a “canopy bed” of fur to suggest transitional object by referencing the maternal body, comforting the precious spherical forms. Material and imagery concerning childlike experience and the transitional object still inform this piece, but not nearly as literally as baby bottles had in *Bottles and Spheres*. At this time my titling describe the materials and functions, while the deliberate pairing of identical objects echoes the symbiotic relationship of the mother and child. Initially, the child does not see itself as different from the mother; it is a unity—symbiotic relationship of two, an inner and outer reality that are no different—one and the same.

We spend our entire lives learning what is real and not, creating outward reality and challenging it. My process of experiencing the world and exploring possible interactions with the viewer in my work led me to incorporate materials like moving water, as in *Cascade* (1998, figures 3 and 4). The water cascades over the edge of the television tube, which is halfway immersed in a tray of water. Small pumps are immersed with the tubes, pumping the water into the tube and out the top, shimmering across its silvery glass surface back into the tray. My conscious intention was to engage more than one sense (hearing) as well as to capture the passing of time, a new development in my work and a different quality of interaction. The unconscious result is perhaps a commentary on the television as a source of comfort and solace, much like the mother’s breast.

Having a richer understanding of object making, I continued to employ the groundwork of object relations but now wished to push my work into new experiences—the viewer’s and mine. It had become too easy for me to make aesthetically pleasing objects with overt relationships to the transitional object; I wanted a more subtle narrative of materials, imagery, and functions. *Tank, Filtration* (1998, figure 5) adds more subtlety to this narrative. Growing mold and water stains change the work over time; again sound plays an important role, and the charcoal inside the canvas sling is to serve a function, that of filtering. The six-foot length of the tank symbolically references the body and how we occupy physical space, an idea I will expand upon in my later work. *Robots* (1999, figures 6 and 7) were among my first experiments in kinetics and were very much inspired by the kinetic work of Rebecca Horn. *Robots* were produced during my first year of graduate school and were not by any means finished in a visual sense, but served as “sketches” for new ideas and media. They initiated an interest in moving objects, which I pursue in my current work.

Fuzzy Towers (1996-7, figure 8), an infrastructure of eight-foot tall bass chambers covered in faux angora fur, represents my early attempt to engage the active participation of the viewer. She or he is invited to sit in the chair between the towers—to listen and feel both the auditory warmth of the sound and heart-beat-like rhythm resonating from within and to also feel the tactile texture of the fur. I had moved from static objects, to changing (water flowing) objects and kinetic objects. I

now wanted to create *situations* that would require the participant to take an active role—situations in which my objects would react to their presence. The experience I want to create is one we can all relate to—the fascination of the child at play. I want to emphasize that my activity in the studio recreates the scene of the child at play; the creative process itself is in my case an intuitive response to materials and forms. After the initial idea or joy of “playing,” I complete the work using the cognitive skills I have acquired through my training and technical investigations.

My creative process is a game/problem waiting to be solved. The participation I solicit from an audience when I want them to play references a time in childhood when play and fantasy were accepted. One function of playing games is learning to master loss. In “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” (1920), Sigmund Freud describes a child throwing a toy with an accompanying statement *fort*, German for “gone.” The child then delights in retrieving the object while exclaiming *da* or “here.”¹ Freud interprets the game as the child’s rejection of his having allowed the mother to go away without protesting. The mother’s departure is played out in this game and is necessary to prove her joyful return to the child. The anxiety created by loss is mastered in this game, literally with a cherished *object*. The child passes over from the passivity of abandonment to the active control of the game, much as my work has moved through passive interaction with the beholder “only” looking at it, to the *actual* engagement of the “game”—as the audience can now play with my art.

My interest with spheres continues in *Fuzzy Spheres* (1999, figure 9) which was my first piece that used an electronic sensor. A group of ten eighteen-inch spheres are covered in light tan faux fur and attached to a motion sensor. When the viewer approaches them, they wobble via motors inside each one of them. Movement activates the work, or completes it; the viewer must get near, and receives the joyous return of “someone” to play with. “The artistic play and artistic imitation carried out by adults,” Freud reminds us, “unlike children’s, are aimed at an audience.”²

Continuing my interest in the game or child’s play with *Inflatable Spheres* (1999, figures 10 and 11), I used a sound sensor. I sewed six thirty-five-inch beach balls from thrift-store blankets ranging in color from deep scarlet to sea foam green and flower patterns. The balls are networked by an “umbilical-cord” duct hose connected to a central line leading to an exhaust fan hidden in the gallery ceiling panels. In silence, the balls are completely deflated. When the game is discovered, the viewer can “play” with them by talking, yelling, or clapping in order to inflate them. To add to their mystery I give only a clue to the means of their function through the title. My choice of old fabrics is intended to evoke memories of the blankets we might have had at some time in our childhood, and extends my interests of the last four years utilizing inviting materials and forms.

Play as I define it, is the activity and creation of fantasy. In “Creative Writers and Daydreaming” (1908), Freud describes how children and creative writers both create fantasy worlds. These worlds may function as a source of pleasure during real

life situations that are stressful. Although Freud relates this theory to the creations of writers, parallels can be found in my work that invites the viewer to play, and indeed, requires their play to complete the piece. Freud makes very interesting comparisons between the creative writer (artist), the child at play, and the adult who daydreams: “The creative writer does the same as the child at play. He creates a world of fantasy, which he takes very seriously—that is, which he invests with large amounts of emotion—while separating it sharply from reality. [Visual] language has preserved this relationship between children’s play and poetic creation.”³ Here Freud emphasizes the relationships and actions that make communicating through artwork possible. The logical conclusion is that adults have the capacity to fantasize, play, and be just as creative as children.

Play has become the core motif in my work today. Moving from passive objects to active environments in which the viewer is transformed into participant has led me to research more advanced technology. My interest in electronic music composition and working with computers has often created priority conflicts between what I wanted to accomplish as an artist and what I wanted to compose as a musician. Over the last three years it became evident to incorporate these different interests into my sculptural work and the interactions of an audience. After working with the several different sensors and devices in my recent work, especially in *Fuzzy Spheres* and *Inflatable Spheres*, I began a two-year research process during my graduate studies to

find computer interfaces and programs that could connect to a physical object (sculptures). I wanted to trigger sound by the presence and participation of an audience. By consulting experts via the internet and seeking out the possibilities of computer programs and hardware designed for multimedia or interactive installation art I found a solution to my needs that were accessible and affordable to the consumer.⁴ Originally designed for dancers, the technology I am now using allows a computer to “sense” the viewer’s interaction with my sculptures in the gallery and respond with sound in real time according to proximity, velocity of movement, and color. It is important that the sounds be abstract, as I wish to describe the age of infants before language association to particular sounds. In *Experiment* (1999, figure 12) a forty-inch red rubber ball is triggering the sound as the participant moves the ball. The room is mapped out into zones, each with a distinct sound corresponding to where the ball is placed and moved. This is just one example of the many and complex possibilities that can be set up by the programmer (me). In *Another Experiment* (2000, figure 13), I created an environment of three different colored balls, ranging from thirty to sixty inches, made of humorously bright colored teddy-bear fur. Each sphere has its own sound according to its color and size and how the viewer/participant moves it. The gallery is now intended as a place to create improvisational/abstract music.

In my thesis exhibition, *fort, da: The World of Play* (2000, figures 14- 16), I am taking my understanding of technology and its relationship to my theoretical context to the next level, by adding more sounds, objects, and more complex behaviors that respond to the participants' interactions with them. I suspended fifty to sixty balls from the ceiling by bungee-cords that are tied from the ceiling to the floor. The balls range in size from ten to sixty inches and will have a color scheme of bright orange, yellow, blue and green. Again, each color and size will have its own accompanying abstract sound. The floor is covered by carpet padding, further supporting the idea of play or rumpus room. A wall is at the entrance of the gallery, not only to separate it from the outside world, but also to enhance the viewer's perception of the world that I have created inside. Also on this wall, greeting the viewer, a small video screen shows a tape loop of different people playing in the gallery as instruction to how the art functions—a room for playing with space and the relationship of the body to sound, space, and object.

fort, da is a foundation of infinite possibilities, for continuing the exploration of the different kinds of interactions between participant, object, and environment. The psychological research and the employment of new technologies will provide a place in my future work which will further the boundaries between social event and artistic presentation; between dynamic sound and static form—between music, dance, and other traditional art mediums.



Figure 1. *Bottles and Spheres*, 1996.

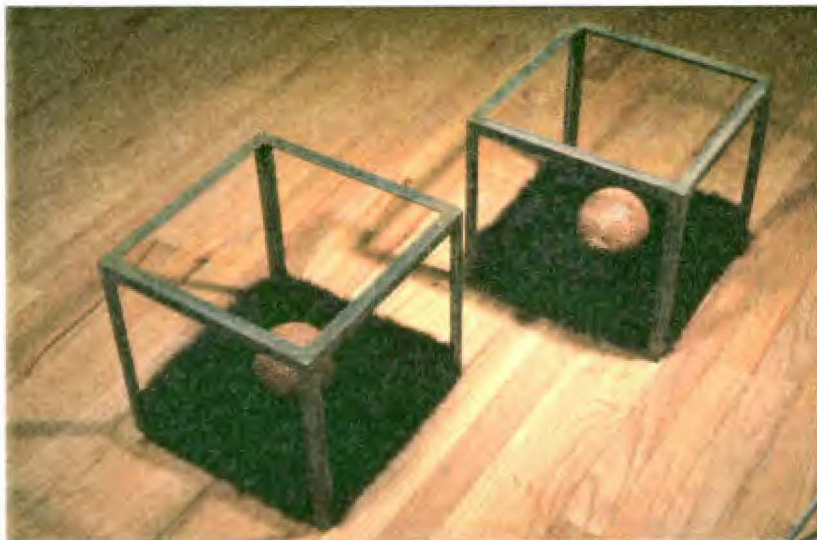


Figure 2. *BB Balls*, 1997.



Figure 3. *Cascade*, 1998.



Figure 4. *Cascade (detail)*, 1998.



Figure 5. *Tank*, Filtration, 1996.



Figure 6. *Robot*, 1999.



Figure 7. *Robot*, 1999.



Figure 8. *Fuzzy Towers*, 1996-7.



Figure 9. *Fuzzy Spheres*, 1999.



Figure 10. *Inflatable Spheres*, 1999.

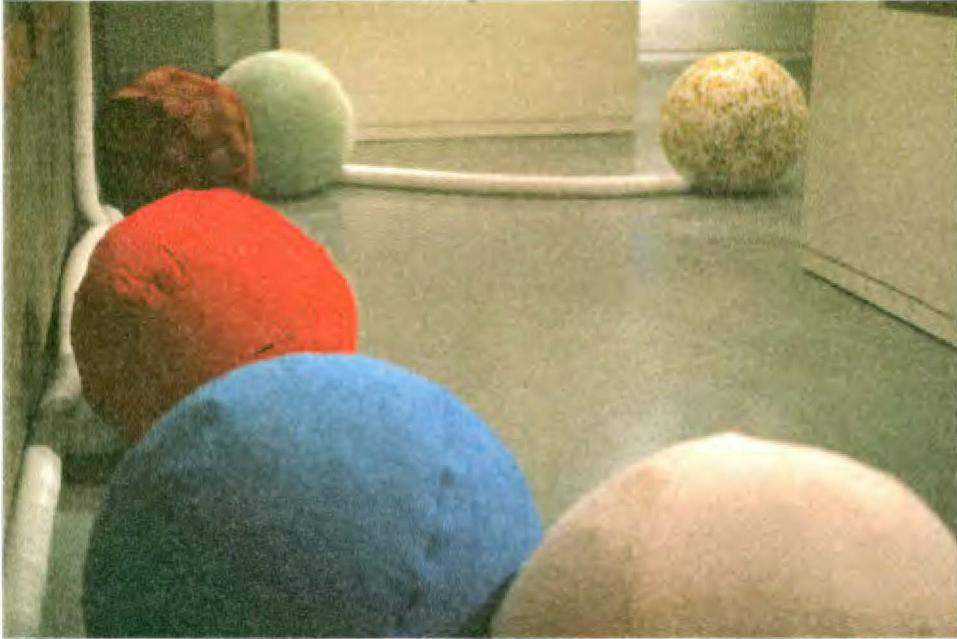


Figure 11. *Inflatable Spheres*, 1999.



Figure 12. *Experiment*, 1999.



Figure 13. *Another Experiment*, 2000.



Figure 14. *fort, da* Installation View, 2000.



Figure 15. *fort, da* Installation View, 2000.



Figure 16. *fort, da* Installation View, 2000.

NOTES

1. Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1920). In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 18. Translated by James Strachey. London: Hogarth and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1959, 15.

2. *Ibid.*, 17.

3. Sigmund Freud, "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming" (1908). In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 9. Translated by James Strachey. London: Hogarth and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1959, 144.

4. Substantive Note. Hardware: Power Macintosh G4. 350 MHz processor with 128 Meg RAM [<http://apple.com>], ATI video digitizer card (Xclaim vr128) [<http://ati.com/>], and Audiowerks 2x2 audio card [<http://www.audiowerks.com/>]. Software: Macintosh Operating System 9, Bigeye video interpreter [<http://www.steim.nl/bigeye.html>], Reaktor virtual synthesizer [<http://www.nativeinstruments.com/>], Open Music System (OMS) inter application communication device.

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