

## Context: The Anxious Period

Two eleven-year-old boys ascend the Brooklyn Bridge to find “traffic howling in cages at their feet, the grey clotted sky clinging to the bridge’s veins, Manhattan’s dinosaur spine rotating into view as they mounted the great curve above the river.” That same flood of aggressive energy swirling through Jonathan Lethem’s novel *The Fortress of Solitude* engulfed me the first time I climbed the roof of a Brooklyn apartment building (Lethem 78). From that panoramic vantage point, the Manhattan skyline rushed at me from all sides, shrinking me, jolting me awake. Within the hour I had signed for a studio in that building.

My time in that apartment, in that building, in this city, has been a period of dramatic personal change. It is marked by several seminal crossings: from suburb to city, from community to isolation, from student to professional. Such drastic, rapid change often makes me feel as if I am being consumed by that spinal Manhattanite dinosaur—or, at least, makes me feel so alien in my own skin that being chewed up would almost come as a relief.

(But if it were up to me, I think I’d rather be devoured by a supersize version of something that I eat. If a giant, beheaded, de-feathered chicken snatched me up from the street and ate me, that would be a pretty worthy death.)

Being swallowed by a monster into a dark stomach-tomb is a common initiatory ordeal in many of the world’s ancient tribal myths. The anthropologist Mircea Eliade emphasizes that initiation is one of the few rituals where

participants regard death as *positive*—more than a dark tomb, death becomes the womb of transformation (Eliade 135-136). Initiates die a symbolic death, and in the process, they transform ignorance into enlightenment.

In the modern world, however, accounts of ritual and initiation are complicated by an increased corporeal awareness. Colette introduces *The Pure and Impure* by recalling the outsiders who made her aware of herself: “ephemera from the depths of my memory, phantoms I seem always to be losing and finding again, restless ghosts unrecovered [sic] from wounds sustained in the past when they crashed headlong or sidelong against that barrier reef, mysterious and incomprehensible, the human body” (Colette 18).

I’m writing this essay as I suffer through an intense bout of eczema that seems to strike every couple of years. The eczema arrived just as I was beginning to recover from almost two years of chronic insomnia, fatigue and bacterial infection. These are hardly life-threatening diseases—in fact, they’re probably just the mundane symptoms of a student overwhelmed by grad school and the city. Nevertheless, these frequently unrelievable irritations do make me more likely to apply the terminology of ghosts, phantoms, monsters, dinosaurs, barrier reefs, and wounds (at the very least) to corporeal considerations.

On a recent episode of the WNYC public radio program *Studio 360*, John Updike read from his essay “At War With My Skin,” explaining how his lifelong psoriasis influenced his career and artistic choices (*Studio 360*). Devising ways of concealing the leprosy-like symptoms of psoriasis always kept him thinking, and the self-hiding and self-examination that resulted from his condition has something to do with his choice to pursue writing, a solitary occupation devoted to the examined life.

I'm lucky in that my own skin condition only strikes sporadically, and that its visible signs are far less dramatic than that of psoriasis. But from what I've read about both conditions (American Academy of Dermatology), I think eczema can be as painful, with its sensation of being gnawed at. In its current manifestation in me, the rippling feeling of being bitten throughout the night is hardly visible during the day, but the incapacitation of it sometimes results in the need to hide, alone with anxiety.

It comforts me to think of my current anxious period as something linear and finite: something that had a beginning (around June 2002) and hopefully will have an end (soon?). But just as a Period ( $T = \text{the reciprocal of Frequency}$ ) can simultaneously exist linearly in Cartesian space and circularly in Polar space, I also experience this anxious period as an ebb, a flow, an ebb, and a flow yet again, often due to my own misguided assumptions and resulting routines.

Oh, the misguided assumption. That tragicomic seed, spawning the monster-prey dualism in each of us, coercing us to perpetuate cycles of mistreatment and consumption (see the next section). These cycles are not always harmful. They can be the charming spices that enrich a game of friendship or courtship. But these cycles gradually leave marks, insidious marks that occasionally grow so large that they turn destructive. Lower Manhattan, Enron, and Iraq are still nursing marks that grew into tumors and gaping wounds.

That ebb and flow of anxiety I've been going through is really this cycle, instantiated and intensified by what I now realize are some of the most misguided assumptions I've ever made. How did this happen?

I think it was those drastic changes—living in the city for the first time, let alone the city most bogged down with aesthetic myth and vocational delusion

(and of all delusions, I think I am most susceptible to the vocational sort); entering an institution expected to play a role in "launching" a professional life; falling in love for the first time; living in solitude for the first time—these changes are what I think led to such highly misguided assumptions and inflated self-expectations.

Though changes such as this affected me so much, I know they are hardly unique. Thousands of people from all over the world move to New York every day. Many people move with less financial security, more restrictive conditions, and more responsibility than me. Remembering this helps keep me to keep the personal in perspective, but this knowledge of our commonness pressures a me and a lot of people, even people I admire and respect, to treat their subtle cycles of mistreatment as trivial. This trivializing is a major yet incredibly subtle way that we mistreat, isolate, and destabilize who we are.

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***NeckFace* is a new media + performance installation that uses larval-poultry video, 3D animation, interactive sound, and sensor-triggered kinetic sculptures.** At different times in the process of conceiving and preparing it, *NeckFace* has been a device for mistreatment; at other times, *NeckFace* has been a device for renewal. It is my aim (probably quixotic) that *NeckFace*, as an art piece, ultimately becomes more neutral: a device to observe how cycles of mistreatment and generosity deepen and distort a personal understanding of isolation and instability. Nevertheless, as neutral as I would like this piece to remain, there is the veiled hope that *NeckFace* may formalize the anxiety of my transitory

experience into a meaningful transformation, imbued with the ache of loss and perhaps even the spirit of regeneration.

*NeckFace's* environment, its object-construction, and its performance reflect the major phases that I've managed to pinpoint in my anxious period: flesh, *technē*, and ritual.

The flesh and physical bewilderment were immediate issues upon moving to New York, and they seeped into the conception of *NeckFace's* environment. Elements of the environment turn the structural properties of my apartment/building/city into symbols of a monster that threatens and challenges the uninitiated observer. It was at this stage that the term "NeckFace" struck me as particularly appropriate. I first saw it as a graffiti tag proliferating artsy areas in Manhattan and Brooklyn (McWhimsey, Glowlab, Necky). The tag, and the roughly drawn creature that often accompanies it, resonated with the dysmorphia that I felt so intensely at the time. I was a stranger in a strange new land, and with chronic itchiness and insomniacal fatigue, I felt like a gnome: small and kind of gross. What then could possibly be a better name for my project than two 'normal' body parts (the face and the neck) thrown together, shaken around, and uncomfortably recontextualized into a weird dude?

Discomfort can be just as motivational as inspiration. Last spring, summer, and early fall, it motivated me to throw myself into the making of objects. Each object involved intense labor and repetitive, mechanistic action, but the exhausting work was ultimately therapeutic. Though the meaning of the Greek word *technē* (plural: *technai*) has been debated since Socrates' time (Parry), I use it in this essay to distinguish this particular kind of immersive routine, the

phase where I was most engaged in it, and its roots in engineering, craft, and cooking: all activities embedded in my youth and heritage.

Routine with a performative aspect can formalize into ritual, and I think of *NeckFace's* ritualistic performance as formally entwining aspects of the flesh and the *technai*. Using absurdist sound and cyclic movement, two performers entwine their language and actions into an initiatory ritual that is far from simplistically redemptive. Instead, their interplay examines the Janusian duality of the individual—there is a monster and there is prey, sometimes at the same moment in the same person. By deconstructing their environment and then reconstructing new objects, the performance suggests that the monster of death always has the potential to become a womb of rebirth—and vice versa.

*NeckFace* engages other techniques that follow initiatory models. These include: cooking and craft-making to fashion crude-looking, intricately symbolic sculptures in isolated space; juxtaposing colors (red / white) and lines (angles / curves) in an effort to synthesize death with birth; assembling text from early Proust and late Rumi to ground the novice-to-sage transformation in chant and recitation; and employing food (poultry) as a bimorphic symbol of monster/lover/prey.

The path to articulating *NeckFace's* performance in terms of ritual and initiation was itself quite a transformation. Early in the process, I focused on craft-making and cooking, two youthful activities I most often performed with the goal of making something. I hoped that drawing from these familiar physical activities would ground my first major attempt at constructing a series of art objects. It is also an attempt at a personally meaningful fusion of technology and physicality: When I was younger, I used computers just as much as I made crafts

and cooked, but only recently did I really begin to understand how the computer can be integrated into a personal art-making practice. With *NeckFace*, I was curious to explore how crafts and cooking could be integrated in this way.

Eventually, *NeckFace* changed focus from an interactive environment to a performance environment. This was a result of my long-standing interest and experience in time-based art and performance. Consequently, I started wondering about precedents in blending object- and time-oriented spaces: a gallery/theatre hybrid. Like with crafts and cooking, I thought about my past and whether it held any of these precedents. It did: I was brought up in the Catholic church. Rumination on the church led to a broader meditation on ritual. Further research led to my current focus on initiation rites. Future research will shape a way to synthesize the stylized primitivism of initiation with the sense of ludicrousness that's bubbled forth in the past few months.

Though *NeckFace* draws from ancient practice, it is grounded in the discomfort (and sometimes even disappointment) of dealing with the mind and body in contemporary society: Nabokov's "itch of being" (Nabokov viii) or Schjeldahl's "existential gawkiness" (Schjeldahl 12). This discomfort, made most acute in times of rapid change, is especially relevant to my generation, who came of age in the explosion of personal computers, high divorce rates, and a latchkey lifestyle. Constant transition is much more of a norm for this generation than for its parents: jobs, partners, and geography are increasingly fluid and changeable. In the midst of personal transformation that is cocooned in an age of such rapid cultural transformation, the use of seemingly esoteric ritual becomes more prescient. Uncertainty becomes a little easier to live with if it can be grounded in

a more certain historical context. The “itch of being” can be borne only if it is absorbed into all somatic existence—its absurdity, its trauma, its miracles.

## Objects: The Disillusionment of the Flesh

Before any real work commenced on *NeckFace* or its performance, I knew that I wanted to make four objects corresponding to the initial “disillusionment of the flesh” that struck me when I moved here. Literary biographer Judith Thurman coined this term (Thurman xvi) to generalize all the “wounds” that Colette sustains (see the previous section) in her sexual relationships and in her ruminations on intimacy and gender-based iniquity. I was reeling from this kind of disillusionment when I started grad school—the previous summer, I had engaged in a relationship so intense that its end severely exacerbated the disorientation I experienced upon moving to New York. It was the kind of experience that the young Clarissa Dalloway had with Peter: it was short and consequently banal to the outside eye, but the memory of it was ripe fodder for Mrs Dalloway’s inner life for more than thirty years (Woolf).

I’ve always been prone to inner conversations or scenarios with people that affect me, and I’ve always been sensitive to the point where a banal conversation or bit of gossip can become a painful part of these inner scenarios. The most wonderful thing about college was finding close friends who not only were prone to this kind of inner musing, but who valued it the same way that I did—as a way to take back control of their apprehensive selves, a way to

understand the harshness of ordinary living, a way to turn wounds sustained from collisions with other people (trite cuts that bled nonetheless) into sources of humor and wonder. “I burst out laughing—it does one good, when at a safe distance from the claws that have wounded us, to laugh at them, even when the old wounds are still raw and gaping” (Colette 65).

What seemed like a way to mitigate imaginary sociological wounds later played a role in deteriorating my actual health. Moving to New York and being overwhelmed with crowds, seclusion, and ambition, I began to question my own ambition. I began to turn more inward, and those inner conversations became Dalloway-like in scale and content: extended imaginings with an absent partner. Insomniacal four-hour nights have persisted ever since.

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In May 2002, I wrote an essay about an animation I had just finished. The animation focused on *“mundane and necessary systems of generosity and mistreatment*—social and psychological systems perpetuated by any person who interacts with any other person. For better or for worse, I take part in these systems—to give to my loved ones, I sometimes mistreat outsiders; to benefit myself, I sometimes mistreat my loved ones; and to serve an unrealized notion of who I should be (particularly in terms of relationships and work), I sometimes mistreat myself” (Ducao). I’m quoting myself because those ‘mundane systems’ are still an overarching concern, though recently that concern has tipped towards the solitary—the generosity and mistreatment I inflict on myself. Disillusionment of the flesh can start from the outside and work its way inward. As a result, I’ve *felt* the generosity and mistreatment much more acutely, and while this perhaps

leads to a greater empirical familiarity of these systems, it also led to a decreased analytical understanding—I may have felt it, but I didn't get it. John Updike's extraordinary foreword to *Franz Kafka: The Complete Stories* highlights Kafka as one of the first to chronicle this situation:

Seventy years after his death, Kafka epitomizes one aspect of the modern mindset: a sensation of anxiety and shame whose center cannot be located and therefore cannot be placated; a sense of infinite difficulty within things, impeding every step; a sensitivity acute beyond usefulness, as if the nervous system, flayed of its old hide of social usage and religious belief, must record every touch as pain (Updike ix).

Not being able to locate the center of the anxiety did not stop me from trying and thinking and trying again, but after much wasted thought, wasted sleep, wasted health, I find myself arriving at the same conclusions and collisions I pinpointed before I experienced the anxiety.

The arrival doesn't make the anxiety go away, at least not now.

For example, let me return one last time to my previous essay. I wrote about how I sometimes let the notion of a person surpass the reality of that person: "I spend more time intellectualizing a relationship than actually taking part in it. In those rarer moments that I do take part in the relationship, the simulations I construct can be destructive to the relationship—this is an example of *mistreatment* that I mentioned previously. Where this mistreatment has its greatest impact, however, is not on that tenuous external relationship, but on my state of mind and my ability to work" (Ducao).

I wrote about the dangers of intellectualizing people and how this can affect my ability to work, and then I went and engaged in these dangers!—including over-intellectualizing a relationship—that destroyed, not my ability to work (thankfully), but my ability to sleep.

Before I came here, I told a friend that I thought that moving to New York would “wake me up.” I think I meant that some dormant part of me was waiting to open, and that opening would make me more insightful *and* more competent *and* more capable. I said this at a time when I held down several jobs and classes, and I woke up punctually early to get to them.

Two years later, I’m awake more frequently and irregularly than before, and I’m far more nocturnal than before. I live in one of the world’s most densely populated cities, yet I feel freakish in my inability to operate on the schedule of most of that population. I am more awake, but I think that I’m actually less competent. And other than the fact that I have an equation for working out how many nights I can go without sleep before catching cold, I don’t think I’m much more insightful than before.

Updike characterized Kafka as one of the first modern writers. Perhaps it is this modernity that affects me so much. Namely, living in this city that flaunts its role as the vanguard of Modernity and Postmodernity and all things Contemporary—it gets to me, though I’m reminded of it in the most unexpected places: the peeling paint of an old building that is once and always modern, the magazine stand that displays the cleaned-up image of what is contemporary, the catwalk-like Bedford Avenue, where I walk home amidst people looking, talking, and moving according to what fashion dictates as ‘new.’ I grew up in the suburbs of Baltimore and went to college in a university town outside

D.C.—places where newness still has a sense of open-eyed optimism. Even in the cities, which are just as old and even more rough-edged and crime-ridden than New York, there is more of this fresh mindset—or at least the more southern mindset that time moves more slowly, and questions of new and old are moot. Here, I feel the acknowledgement—at turns wise, cynical, ironic—that everything new is really recycled, that nothing is truly pure.

Layers upon layers, dumpster diving, recycling the old into the new—this sensibility, heightened by living on a student wage in an expensive consumerist town, pervades *NeckFace*'s material construction. Materials like dirt, coffee, kabob skewers, plastic shopping bags, bubble wrap, foam, balloons, rocks, and wire form *NeckFace*'s physical environment. Even the name *NeckFace* is recycled. It fits that *NeckFace* is currently installed in a non-renovated office space, another instance of recycling that takes place before the place can conceal its age.

The use of electronics in *NeckFace* is an instance of the inner body turned outward in a way that, if not actually trashy, is hardly clean—more cybelene than cyber (Townsley). Every video image in *NeckFace* is either of an internal organ or of a more metaphoric internal space, both of which are far more spacious than the outside world of the piece. I think it represents a longing for that which is more spacious, more organic, and less chrono-centric than the experience I've made for myself here.

Such disillusionment, and the way that it spills from the itching, tired flesh, also stems from collisions with my own ambition and hunger in a place of great ambition. I had never worked on an installation before grad school, but I wanted to make an installation that was truly *installed*; an environment of large objects that had to be constructed on-site. Though three of *NeckFace*'s sculptures

are modeled on areas of discomfort (the apartment, the high-rising skyscraper, the city), those oblong models were at some point in New York's history great engineering feats. New York City is marked with feats of ambitious creativity that sometimes even kill its creators—in fact, the engineers behind the Brooklyn Bridge and the Holland Tunnel both died young, from the strain of driving their grand experimental projects (Lienhard 188-190).

I don't want to die from the strain of driving a grand project—especially if the project lacks the heroic innovation that built the bridge and tunnel. Looking back on overly ambitious undertaking of this thesis and the ignorance with which I threw myself into making big objects, it is clear that this is not a project to die for. Yet as I sit here writing, I also nervously, eczematically scratch away layers of my skin.

The confident ambition I possessed as a child has been marred into anxiety and aimless hunger as I continue searching for a way to live a substantial, examined life in family of bourgeois expectation, a city of empty ambition, a nation of judgmental rashness, and a world of increasing fear. Though the hunger and status-consciousness of many in this city have made me question the worth of my own ambition, I know it's not just New York. I have many peers outside the city who suffer from a similar malaise. There are various sources behind it: relationships, the city, parents, lack of jobs and affordable health care, a dishonest polity, skyrocketing education expenses—these all play a role to some degree or another. But the larger sense of betrayal, that “starvation for an essential nutrient” (Thurman xvi) is larger to pinpoint—perhaps it lies in my own unrealistic expectation of others and myself, in the idealized adult life I

thought I was going to live. But until that anxiety is pinpointed, I know I need to take some time to *not* think, to sleep, to heal, before I try and think and try again.

## Process: The *Techne*-cal (and Technological) Relief

The documentary film “Red Persimmons” follows cultivation of this hard-to-grow fruit that still survives and supports the livelihood of a few tiny villages in Japan. Much of the film focuses on the quirky harvesting tools that the farmers make, particularly a bicycle-gear mechanism that allows the farmers to peel the fruit in one pass—a vast improvement over slow, painstaking hand-peeling. A recent *New York Times* review highlights an unexpected aspect of the film: “Instead of deplored the intrusion of modernity into a traditional world—the knee-jerk response of so many American films about farming—‘Red Persimmons’ celebrates technology as a way of imposing order on a chaotic, recalcitrant world” (Kehr).

The older I get, the more chaotic and recalcitrant the world seems. When I was a kid, this did not bother me—with a child’s irrational confidence, I attributed any disorder in the physical and cultural world to the fact that I wasn’t in charge. I assumed that when I grew up, I wouldn’t have to follow my parents’ or anyone else’s rules, so everything would blossom under my independent capabilities. I had a gut feeling that confusion, embarrassment, and pain were things that I would experience most acutely as a child. They were things that would affect me less and less, the more I got used to being in the world.

Perhaps it's still irrationally confident, but I still cling to the hope that this assumption will turn out to be true in the long run, that it's just my notion of "adulthood" that needs some fine-tuning. The choices to move to New York, go to grad school, and take on huge fiscal debt all seem like choices that have to be made by an adult—choices made independently, choices fraught with sacrifice and responsibility. As a kid, I anticipated making these choices; I even looked forward to them because I thought that a poised serenity would arise, simply from finally being free to make these choices.

But then I think of their immediate consequences: the chaotic cultural environment and the recalcitrant economic situation that await me and most artists working in the increasingly constrained lands of New York and the US. I think of the shockingly petty conflicts that embedded themselves into recent experience. I think of the time and funds invested in this thesis, and I think of its unexpected inflation into a purple elephant, waiting for me to deflate it, to lunge at it with something sharp. But I don't know if I can do it. I don't know if I can fix any of these problems; in some cases, I can't even tell if the choices I make—or don't make—cause the chaos and conflict.

These thoughts affect me much more than I expected. They affect me to the point where they seem to spill out of my body in eczema, insomnia, cold sores... and sometimes, even the *actual* sickness that hits stressed-out students. This is why I was so struck by the *Red Persimmons* film review: when faced with physical adversity, even when that adversary is myself, I'm like those farmers in that I use technology to try to gain the upper hand.

We all do it, and it's a testimony to technology's success that we take it for granted. The degrees vary, from technology used for convenience, like a

dishwasher, to technology used for survival, like a defibrillator (Cardiac Science).

*NeckFace* foregrounds a persistent but underlying current of this modern existence: the disillusionment of the flesh, seemingly mediated by the use of technology.

There are two kinds of technology in *NeckFace*: the ontological tool and the mitigating process. For me, the only real ontological tool is the contemporary computer. With all its capability, it is the only thing with which I can form ontologies (or theories of being) that are expansive enough to at least convince myself. Those theories are not always structurally sound enough to apply to the physical world, but that's part of the appeal: when the physics of the everyday proves to be unmanageable or impenetrable, the modern computer can provide a way to extensively address physicality—without strictly adhering to physics.

For example, a friend once said that she always hears 3D animators talk about their love of the form in terms of being able to create whole worlds. This could be interpreted as a kind of god-complex, but for me, it means a kind of fantastical relief for the itch of being. Picture a fantasy panopticon, but instead of a warden observing prisoners, there is a person observing—and finally beginning to understand—the elusive roots of his own anxiety, his own faltering confidence (Levin).

Of course, this kind of observation, something that's pretty fun at first, can spin into navel-gazing futility. This is a danger that is represented by the most “digital” aspect of *NeckFace*'s video content—the 3D-modeled bird. The bird is an idée fixe for the *NeckFace*'s performers, an artificial abstraction that is nevertheless viewed as desirable and perfect. This is not so much a comment on the computer's utopian associations as it is the use of the computer's ability to

idealize the visual. From the “desktop” to the “trashcan,” of the things seen on a computer screen do not physically exist, and this makes the computer an ideal tool to make things look more superlative—cleaner, bigger, slimmer, lighter. In *NeckFace*, the performers’ manic hunger to emulate the digital model in clay highlights another kind of dysmorphia—not issues of what the body can realistically be, but issues of the body can realistically *make*.

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The other technology in *NeckFace*, the mitigating process, is really a matter of engineering—a focus on “techne,” the making of things. The civil engineer Henry Petrowski distinguishes engineering from science in its concern with making things:

It is the process of design, in which the diverse parts of the ‘given-world’ of the scientist and the ‘made-world’ of the engineer are reformed and assembled into something the likes of which nature had not dreamed, that divorces engineering from science and marries it to art (Petrowski 8).

While *NeckFace* involves investigation, it is not a scientific project. It is a technological project where the logic or knowledge (-ology) of technai is formed from on repeated somatic discomfort, investigation, and failure. Disillusionment and failure of the flesh become useful in engineering, and both Petrowski and Lienhard write about engineering as numerously repeated tests to ultimately obviate failure (Petrowski viii, Lienhard 209). Lienhard also points out that only since the late 1800s has engineering been heavily based on science (or the systematic and ordered knowledge of something). Before that, engineering evolved through ritual training of the body in the form of apprenticeship

(Lienhard 7-10). Measuring instruments were of limited capability and calculations were of limited value, but through the ritual of repeated and precise passing of skill-based techniques, accomplishments like Japanese samurai swords and Stradivarius violins—two technologies that are still valued and used today—blossomed and progressed.

Vocational apprenticeships are far less common, ritualistic, and physical today, so like many installation artists using computer technology, I had to invent my own engineering rituals. But this process was a *relief* in so many ways: from the challenge of bringing worldview into physical being, to the release of disciplining somatic discomfort and failure into repeated routine and labor. All of *NeckFace*'s sculptures show signs of repetitive labor like weaving, poking, dripping, inflating, and cutting. Even the video and performance content of *NeckFace* involves repetitive labor. For a person bewildered by a new life, regularly sleepless and itchy, and unaccustomed to working with object-based materials, the promise of repetitive, mindless labor—something worth little in our information age—was one of the only constant sources of relief.

All of us presenting installation work have invented our own forms of engineering and have taught ourselves to become what today is called a hobby engineer. But it *is* real engineering that is legitimately tied the pre-Industrial Revolution sense of the word. It also ties us to the vocational school down the street, as Samuel Florman writes in *The Civilized Engineer*:

Nowadays engineering education is much more ‘scientific’ than it used to be... much of the so-called ‘shop-work’ has fallen by the wayside, relegated to students who take two-year technician courses... the growth of new disciplines has meant that there is simply

more material to learn and less time for knocking about in overalls or muddy boots. This has been inevitable, inappropriate, and a darned shame (Florman8).

But while we don't have science, we have perspective, much as earlier engineers did. While Thoreau wasn't working as civil engineer, he had the perspective to write *Walden*. Without science to aid our physical computing, we are freed to look for techne beyond (or maybe behind) modern technology. For me that technai is crafts and cooking, which along with using computers and trying to write a hit Broadway musical, were the activities that grounded my childhood. The materials used in these activities—clay, food, computers, electronic keyboards—were my toys. The sculptor Chris Burden said “toys are the indoctrinational box of what it is to be in society” (Freudenheim). In a time when national and local society unnerves me, it comforts me to turn to my toys to investigate why I'm so unnerved and perhaps even discover tenets of the kind of society I want.

The ontological tool and the mitigating process, while a source of escape and relief, are not necessarily Better Living Through Technology. Sometimes disillusionment is only deferred, not deterred: even “clean” technologies like computers, hydrogen gas, and pharmaceuticals are created only through excessive pollution and waste (Environmental Protection Agency). Leland Stanford, one of the early railroad “robber” barons and the founder of Stanford University, made his fortune with technology, but he was hardly prone to romanticizing it: “if you could limit man's wants it [machinery] might be called 'labor saving,' but as there are no limits to his wants, the machinery really increases the power of production” (Solnit 180). Before the inclusion of science in

engineering made it possible for machines to be as massive as a space shuttle or as minuscule as a fiber-optic wire, machines like the sword and the violin were based on human scale. Time, once predicated on the rotations and revolutions of the earth, has been similarly annihilated by inventions ranging from the telegraph to the internet. But while it's fun to use technology to rescale the world—either in our minds or in our physics—perhaps if we slow down that annihilation of space and time closer to the human and earthly scale in which they really exist (likewise, perhaps if *NeckFace*'s characters rescaled their goals to what their bodies can really make) our human reality and environment might not be warped beyond recognition, so extensively, so suddenly.

## Performance: Routine <-> Ritual <-> Regeneration

A recent *New York Times* essay pointed out that “altered humans,” organic beings who are physically changed by synthetic means, are more than a figment of popular culture; they are a real part of contemporary life (Gorman). Mechanical alteration occurs in some severely debilitated people, but it’s really biochemical alteration that is extremely common-- alteration through pills, inhalers, ointments, and patches. More and more well-educated, health-conscious, well-insured citizens are some kind of medication throughout their lives.

Add medication to computers on the list of technologies that I grew up with, technologies that separate my lifestyle from that of my parents when they

were my age. I was born with eczema on my face, and the ritual of my mother rubbing triamcinolone or some other kind of medicated ointment into my itchy spots dates back even earlier than using my first computer, which coincidentally was the first Macintosh. While I inherited skin allergies from my dad (the computer technologist in the family), I inherited nose allergies from my mom, and it worked well that she was the biochemical technologist in the family.

Like with computers, a reliance on biochemical technology is a little scary. But the ritual that plays a role in this reliance can be as comforting as the technology itself. I sought routine—a daily repetition—in the making of *NeckFace*'s objects, and I also sought ritual—a formalized repetition—to inspire the development of *NeckFace*'s performance.

Ritual is like other aspects of *NeckFace*'s background in that it was born from the feeling of dislocation and loneliness after I moved. One day last spring, I was taking an alternate route home to enjoy the beautiful day when I passed a Catholic church on 16<sup>th</sup> street. Its doors were open because it was the day before a major peace march, and President Bush was about to declare war on Iraq. A sign in front of the church said that its congregation planned on joining the march and that its doors would be open every day for the time being.

My mom raised my siblings and me in the Catholic faith, and while I no longer practice, I was compelled to walk into the church. The beauty of the church, its cave-like solemnity, and its morbid sculptures struck me, reminding me that beautiful old churches, so common in New York City, are few and far between where I grew up.

While I have no desire to practice Catholicism—its doctrines are far too conservative, and they meet too early in the morning—I had been musing for the

past several months over the possibility of regaining some kind of spiritual grounding by joining some kind of spiritual group. The question was, which one?—Judaism and Buddhism both interested me, but I didn't know how to get involved in a way that showed interest without seeming either too flaky or too devoted. My closest friend knows someone involved in an Ethical Society, and she made this suggestion to me. I went to a lecture series on Pagan religions at the New York Society for Ethical Culture. While it started promisingly—apparently the Society for Ethical Culture holds a lecture series every year that explores the tenets of a different faith—the speaker ultimately exhibited some of the characteristics that bother me about Catholic priests—too close-minded, too prescriptive, too crusty. He was wildly liberal—in fact, his lecture was more of an anti-war speech than it was a talk on Paganism—but he was just too political!

I've given up on formally pursuing a spiritual practice for the time being, but the secular study of religion continues to appeal to me—I admire the discipline, clarity, and humility of many who are more formally spiritual. I also know that if I had been born any earlier than one hundred years ago, I would have been a nun. There is a long line of clergyfolk in my family, and I have a feeling that the seminary, monastery, and nunnery were many of my ancestors' route to transcending poverty, political strife, and racial and gender oppression. Nuns and monks were the leading technologists and artists in the Middle Ages, and one of my heroes is the mystic/chemist/composer/abbess Hildegard von Bingen. I was taught to value vocation and scholarship over marriage and childbearing, which is why I was so tickled to read some of her letters that used

virginity and the resulting moral authority to defend the independent spirit of her abbey.

The word ‘mystic’ tends to be associated with a flaky, shallow, even fake New Ageism, but Hildegard was a mystic who was fiercely, intelligently spiritual. It is this kind of mysticism that draws me to the use of ritual in performance and animation. In the previous section, I wrote about the comforting ritual of making things. As for mysticism, there is a kind of security that stems from enacting a ritual that has been performed many times previously and will be performed many times consequently. It’s almost as if ritual can tie its participant to a line that extends beyond the horizon of any human lifetime, to forces that no human will ever see or know. And while there is no means to apply science to that which cannot be observed, I think there is a means to intelligently accept unobservable forces: “something older and more hopeful than progress” (LaFarge). If I ever come close to this means, I think I’ll sleep better.

I think ritual has something to do with this means. Nevertheless, I live in an age of scientific skepticism, and I come from a generation and vocation that is overwhelmingly skeptical of religion, though it sometimes embraces secular spirituality in the form of yoga, tai chi, etc. Ritual fascinates me, but I still have yet to engage in an organized ritual that helps me to come towards any acceptance of unobservable forces. But even with a lack of a meaningful modern ritual, there is a need for “access to a mode of being not subject to the destroying action of time”, as Eliade writes:

... any genuine human life implies profound crises, ordeals, suffering, loss and reconquest of self... whatever degree of fulfillment it [that life] may have brought him, at a

certain moment every man sees his life as a failure. This vision does not arise from a moral judgment made on his past, but from an obscure feeling that he has missed his vocation; that he has betrayed the best that was in him. In such moments of total crisis, only one hope ever seems to offer any issue—the hope of beginning over again... such a renewal is the result of every genuine religious conversion... the nostalgia for an initiatory renewal which sporadically arises from the inmost depths of modern nonreligious man... represents the modern formulation of man's eternal longing to find a positive meaning in death (Eliade 135-136).

Eliade writes of modern (or secular) man's tendency to seek regeneration in art, and from the way public art spaces are approached today, I very much agree. Perhaps it is my longing for renewal and my inability to find an appropriate ritual that leads me to bring rituals of death (and implied birth) to my own art-making. Perhaps it is the continually thwarted search for spirituality that leads me to seek inspiration from theatres of the absurd: Colette remarks on the good it does to laugh at wounds, and even though I still don't truly understand the cause or the cure for my wounds, I am starting to laugh at them in the same way that Didi and Gogo laugh in *Waiting for Godot*, the same way that the judge-penitent laughs in *The Fall*.

*NeckFace's* performance was previously conceived as more simplistically redemptive, an initiation enacted by an individual. I previously wanted to use one performer to emphasize the solitude of this entire endeavor. But if living in New York has taught me anything, it's that redemption is never simple, pure, or achieved in a vacuum. Redemptive transformation involves cooperation and communication with others. As it applies to this phase of my life, it is something that I am only beginning to comprehend.

Consequently, it became dishonest to base the performance on solitary initiation alone. It became a hybrid of initiation and commitment ceremony, or

initiation *through* commitment, and the tendency for the ritual to break when either of its communicants over-intellectualize or mistrust each other. I am still all too culpable for both of these failings, and again, the end of this degree program only signifies the beginning of comprehension in correcting these failings. I hope to continue developing this performance in the future, and perhaps the performance will change to reflect how I settle and what I learn.

## Center of the Cycle

I recently played a conversational game in which I had to describe who or what I was in my previous life. I said that I was some person who faced a wrenching ethical or moral decision—and who, in some way or for some reason, failed.

If past lives do exist (and I don't necessarily believe that they do), what I think of as my past life casts a shadow on my current life. That shadow makes me more susceptible to pains that my current life's experience doesn't warrant. Why am I so affected by the notion of betrayal when I can't even name a time that I've experienced or witnessed a stark, certifiable betrayal?

Eventually, I came to realize that while betrayals can be perpetuated by others—our parents, our partners, our government—they are most often perpetuated by ourselves and our unrealistic expectations of ourselves and others. A betrayal is the disintegration of an ideal we didn't know we had, perpetuated by someone who is oblivious to the ideal and its destruction. Rapid

change brings a heightened sensation of betrayal. In the past two years, this heightened sensation has pushed me from one coping phase to another: from the disillusionment of the flesh, to the relief of techne and technology, to attempted redemption through ritual.

In his description of a lesbian's cruelty to her recently deceased, carelessly repressive father, Proust declares what makes a perpetuator a true perpetrator:

Perhaps they would not have thought of wickedness as a state so rare, so abnormal, so exotic, one which it was so refreshing to visit, had they been able to distinguish in themselves, as in all their fellow men and women, that indifference to the sufferings which they cause which, whatever names else be given it, is the one true, terrible, and lasting form of cruelty (Proust 144-145).

Circumstances can be just as cruel as people. My closest friend was recently driven out of her house by an accidental electrical fire. The night of the fire, I called to make sure she was okay. She said she was quite fine. She noted that while she had been almost suicidal for the past few weeks in dealing with the ostensibly simple efforts of finishing her thesis and moving back to her hometown, she's far less fazed by the seemingly more dramatic situations of fire and of rape (which she dealt with some years ago).

This reminds me of how Ed Kulzer, one *NeckFace*'s performers, mentioned that he hates the phrase "a year has passed," saying that it implies a healing or resolution that is often unrealistic. To that, I added that I heard a radio article in September 2003 chronicling 9/11 victims and relatives who increasingly began to hide their lingering injuries and neuroses under the assumption (exaggerated by the media) that two years was enough to 'get better and get on with it.'

There are implied societal standards for what is right and what is wrong, but ideals, ethics, values, and the violation of them are so arbitrary and so varied from one individual to the next. In its absurdist way, *NeckFace* tries to observe the source and fallout of these subtle ethical betrayals, not by resolving them, but by training to remain in the center of that cycle of flesh, techne, and ritual.

But remaining in the center of that cycle too long implies the condoning of it, and I wonder if the cycle will ever break. Lienhard writes that the best engineers bring a "visceral and human dimension to the exacting, math-driven, science-based business of shaping the world" (Lienhard 9). I'm hoping that rearranging the nodes of that cycle—the intuitive use of the flesh, the contemplative use of technology, and incremental use of ritual—will ultimately be a way to evolve a destructive cycle into a constructive one of constant renewal, embraced ambiguity, and "mental hermaproditism" without true purity: "The word "pure" has never revealed an intelligible meaning to me. I can only use the word to quench an optical thirst for purity in the transparencies that evoke it—in bubbles, in a volume of water, and in the imaginary latitudes entrenched, beyond reach, at the very center of a dense crystal" (Colette 184).

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