Sculpting the Rhetorician: A Transformation

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Abstract & Acknowledgements

The following study is the result of a naïve scholar infiltrating and analyzing a culture that she was unaware of before this experience. The participants in the study demonstrated numerous consistent patterns in their communicative interactions with each other, including: invitational community, marking space, the metaphor of “life as a journey,” non-materialistic collectors, concrete positionality, producers and consumers of visual culture, and “the joke is on all of us.”

I would like to thank Dr. Tracy Stephenson Shaffer, Professor of Performance Studies at Louisiana State University, for her contribution to this project as well as the sculptors: Adam Tourek, Ezra Kellerman, Lance Malley, Jonathan Pelliteri, Holly Streekstra, and Michael Williams for welcoming me into their culture and allowing me to analyze them. This project remains a collaborative, on-going process, and the full range of its impact is yet to be fully explored.

Keywords: Autoethnography, Experimental Text, Outsider, Sculpture, Transformation, Visual Culture

Introduction

Sculpting the Rhetorician: A Transformation

I began this project thinking that I would simply observe a culture that I was interested in, record information about the members of the culture, and write a paper. I gained access into a group of Master of Fine Arts sculptors at Louisiana State University, and I had the privilege of interacting with six magnificent people. My only regret is that my representation of my subjects is bound to fall short. I am a better person for this interaction, and this positive change in my life is what I am referring to when I (aptly) call this project a transformation.

The purpose of this paper began as an inquiry into the “Other,” grew into a selfish desire to be accepted, and ended as a transformative experience. The desire and need to share this text with my communication colleagues stems from my appreciation of this subculture, as well as to advance a call for more self-reflexive and honest scholarship in our field, as has been expressed and demonstrated by many performance scholars before me. As an effort to extend my own experience to the readers of this paper, I have constructed an experimental text. Denzin (1997) explained “the experimental text privileges emotion and emotionality, arguing that a main goal is to evoke emotional responses for the reader, thereby producing verisimilitude and a shared experience” (p. 209). An experimental text seemed the only way to present this project because of the emotional reaction it evoked in me. Throughout this project, I felt as if I were attempting to view subjects through a thick glass wall, clad in a white lab-coat. As I did this, I continually heard the sculptors asking me why I didn’t simply enter via the door. The tentative conclusion I have come to at this point is that I, as a trained rheto-
rician, leaning toward social scientist, possess an underlying assumption that culture is a tangible, observable thing, though I know that isn’t true. Additionally, I am simply uncomfortable being engaged by and engaging the Other on his or her terms. I know that any culture or society is filled with complexity that I could not possibly fully understand. Hence, this paper is only my interpretation of these sculptors, and only a slice of my interpretation at that. This paper begins with a review of literature followed by methodology and interpretation, and concludes with impacts. Throughout the paper there are sections of bracketed text in italics, which illustrate the author’s personal journey throughout the research process.

**Review of Literature**

[To what end this will reach, neither of us yet knows. Perhaps there will be conversation followed by artistry. Perhaps words will not suffice at all. All I am certain of is that I am suffering from a personally unprecedented longing. The ambiguity within our talk so far leads me to believe that we are simultaneously experiencing similar levels of curiosity and caution. I will try not to be the first to explicitly address this, though. I am not ready to be disappointed again quite yet. This is the stuff that poetry is made of. Dreams occupy my already overloaded mind. Curiosity may get the best of me yet. When reality hits, this wonder may unfortunately expire.]

**Performative [Auto]Ethnography**

This paper defies convention. Rather than labeling this project as strictly an ethnography, an autoethnography, or as a “performance piece,” I have chosen to label it a “transformation.” This is primarily because—on many levels—this paper dares to reach into all of the aforementioned methodologies. It is an archive of a splice of history of this culture. “Thus there is in the life of a collector a dialectical tension between the poles of disorder and order” (Benjamin, 1968, p. 60). While I deem it a “transformation,” to those outside of the experience itself, it may be described as autoethnography, or critical ethnography. As Gingrich-Phillbrook (2005) described: “The term ‘autoethnography’ designates a wide array of textual practice, leaving many to suggest the undesirability, let alone the impossibility, of arriving at a single definition” (p. 298). As Madison (2005) described, critical ethnography: “. . . gives evidence not only that ‘I am here in the world among you’, but more importantly that ‘I am in the world under particular conditions that are constructed and thereby open to greater possibility’” (p.173).

This study focuses on the relationship betwixt and between researcher and subjects, rather than forcing a separation. While communication scholars largely utilize the written or spoken word to communicate, visual artists, especially those specializing in sculpture use physical form in order to visually communicate. The MFA sculpture students at Louisiana State University (LSU) comprised the culture with which I observed and interacted in order to conduct this study.
Visual Literacy

As a rhetorician, I am deeply interested in the persuasiveness of various forms of communication. Because the sculptors communicate about and through visual means, I became more visually literate throughout this experience. Visual communication involves many things to consider. For instance, Schamber (1991) set forth three criteria for visually literacy: the ability to read, write, and evaluate visual messages. Sculptors observe the world around them, particularly symbols, as visually literate people. Sayre (1993) stated that “[s]ymbols are especially important for grasping the changing and multicultural nature of the global community” (p. 13). Sculptors utilize physical, material symbols (or things) in order to communicate their identity and their perspectives in the global community. There is clearly a visual element to communication. Even communication scholars, long focused on the spoken and written word, now study visual communication to an extent, but the value of visual artifacts is not always stressed.

Matusitz (2005) pointed out that there is currently a dearth of communication programs that emphasize visual communication, and because of this, most Western students of communication have difficulty understanding and expressing concepts of visual communication. A study of visual artists—the visually literate—may help to alleviate the aforementioned problem. "Visual communication is important in the college classroom because it exists in the lives of the students, and to some extent, always will" (Matusitz, 2005, p. 102). This type of communication is vital in the general sense, but far more important in our discipline because we specifically seek to learn and inform our students about communication. “We also remould the past to our expectations by embellishing its relics” (Lowenthall, 1985, p. 278). The visual representation in art serves as relics of our time. Bowman (1998) pointed out that protection of the past usually entails preservation of relics as tangible markers of events in our archive. Along this vein, Jackson (1998) aptly pointed out that the combination of archival and ephemeral texts are what enable her to achieve the goal of telling a historiography instead of a history. In our technological age, scholars and students alike are bombarded with visual messages, and continued encounters with primarily visual disciplines can inform communication studies.

[All over again, without warning, trail lined with cornhusks and Pacific sand, this merging of materials sparks the possibility of depth. Whether intended or not, a promise has been made. Perhaps this promise will one day be explicit, symbolized by a washer, piece of twine, or silver ring. Social norms go by the wayside, as we permutate our lives. Before we meet, it has begun. Nothing is beyond us. I greatly anticipate this weaving together of art, connected by choice words, (rhetoric) yet to be experienced. I’ve slept beside him already, though be it in dreams solely thus far. He may just be my missing piece.]

Method and Procedure

Participants consisted of six Master of Fine Art sculpture students at Louisiana State University. They ranged in age from 23 to 34. Five were male, one was female, and all appeared to be of European descent. I lived with one of the
sculptors for the entirety of the project. I had not met him, in person, prior to moving in with him, and began observation one week after we began sharing a residence. Every day during the project, I wrote in my field journal about the interaction I had with Adam [the sculptor with whom I lived]. When applicable, I also wrote of my interaction with the other five sculptors. After three weeks of observation, I compiled my notes and identified various emergent themes from my journal. These themes became the starting point for my interview protocol.

The reason I allowed the emergent themes to guide my interviews is that I wanted to be able to situate myself socially within the culture and understand the way in which narratives and dramas played out naturally. Langellier (1989) argued that narratives provided by participants should become the foundation of research. When personal narratives are viewed from a performance perspective, they then can be placed in a social situation and more accurately analyzed. Hence, the sculptors’ personal narratives are central to this project.

Once I identified themes from observation that also had both theoretical and interview data support, then I compiled those themes into a preliminary draft and asked the sculptors to rank the nine preliminary themes from most to least true. This is how I narrowed my research themes. I was fortunate to be able to interact with a culture that was willing to collaborate on this paper. The sculptors’ real names appear in this paper with their permission. Goodall (2000) encouraged ethnographers to write as a “conversational partner” with the reader of the text (p. 67). This project is an effort to engage the reader and the members of the culture with which I interacted.

[While getting to know him, I watch him dance, and then I watch him dance again. Quickly I learn to trust him, not because I need a method, but because I have no personal precedent on which to model my actions. I finally simply extend my hand. Go forth, you artist who fashions magic about me night and day, until my dreams of floating above the clouds are effortlessly granted. Soon, I dance with him. He holds me so that I am stronger with him and without him.]

Ethics

When trying to decide when to reveal myself as a researcher to the sculptors, I took my time. My primary interest in the culture originated with my interaction with my sculptor roommate. We spent day and night together, so I was quickly invited to spend time with his friends. I gained entry easily into the culture, and got to know the sculptors as people before considering when to tell them that I was studying them as research subjects. Adam looked over my shoulder as I was typing up some field notes one evening and asked me what I was doing.

Adam: Writing a paper about the sculpture kids?
CLS: Yes, you all are the focus of my ethnography project.
Adam: I kind of felt like I was being observed. I guess I just thought you were observant.
CLS: I hope it’s okay.
Adam: Oh, yeah. It’s cool. What you writin’?
CLS: I can’t tell you everything I think, yet.
Adam: I see, you can’t tell the lab rats about the wheel, huh?
CLS: As far as you are concerned, assume that there is no wheel.

I was nervous about how the other sculptors would react, particularly Michael and Ezra. Michael is a private person in general, and I thought that this project might hurt Ezra’s feelings. Adam suggested that I simply approach them one-on-one and be as kind and honest as possible. This suggestion sounded like good advice, so I did. In the spirit of complete honesty with the sculptors, I composed an informed consent form. I explained to each sculptor one-on-one what the project was and then asked each to read the form. They all agreed individually and signed the releases. The only request they made was to read the final paper, which I had hoped they would do anyhow. As Madison (2005) pointed out, it is essential that the Other is addressed on his or her own terms. This is why the release forms were necessary and all of our meetings occurred in the sculpture building or in the homes of the sculptors.

[He saves the little cards that he wrote the names of his artwork on. He shows them to me as if they are shiny trophies or a prize game buck. I smile, faintly, blushing from the embarrassment of a lack of understanding the first thing about that which he is so proud. This man rejects the very notion of a label. How can I study him my way? I may report: Due to the visual nature of his past and present behavior, it is clear that this man is, in fact, an artist. I’m glad you’re interested in what I do enough to write a paper about it. He experiments with video, lights, wood, clay, and metal. This beautiful man sees no limits to his art, while I continually impose and perpetuate limitations in my own work.]

**Interpretation**

While viewing the fall graduate showcase, I first came upon Adam’s work, and then I turned to my left and had an experience. The object was taller than me, made of cut slate, wood, and tiny red clay bricks. It was more than six feet tall. The cut slate was black and cylindrical. There were three evenly spaced windows at the top, coated in a gold hue. The bricks were neatly arranged in a half-circle that occupied the length of the slate, with an empty space slit into the back of them. A spiral staircase departed from the bottom of the bricks and led the eye toward the sturdy, finished, wooden support.

I nearly toppled over trying to take it all in. It took me a moment to rebalance. Though unaware at the moment, in retrospect, the sculpture drew me in to a parallel world: a world that simultaneously had been, is, and will be. There was a window before me, and I took a brief journey. I was sixteen or seventeen, I was an adult, and I was an infant. I was in a meadow of little purple flowers, cloaked in a layer of stratocumulus clouds, begging the raindrops to coat my skin. I began soaring through the field, with outstretched wings, just above the
grass. Suddenly, a red brick wall with thick layers of contrasting bright white grout obscured my view and a silver spiral staircase appeared, welcoming me to venture down to the abyss below. I was filled concurrently with warmth and fear. I took a step down, promptly tripped, and began falling, in slow motion to a place that was defining itself as I got closer to it. Before I could clearly make out the image below, I was interrupted.

Jon: So, what do you think?
CLS: I love it. It reminds me of my dreams.
Jon: This piece nearly drove me insane.
CLS: I can see why.

I had the pleasure of many encounters with this culture, including the aforementioned.

[Adam invites me to a show in the art gallery, made up of clay tiles both hung on the wall and sitting on tables, in a variety of colors and styles. He has a great reverence and respect for the art we see in the gallery. He is more silent and contemplative than I have ever seen him, and when he does speak, it is only in a strained, hushed whisper. As we leave, I catch him write in the guest book, I felt peaceful while viewing your work.]

I found that within the culture of these MFA sculptors, several consistent themes arose. These themes are invitational community, marking space, the metaphor of “life as a journey,” non-materialistic collectors, concrete positionality, producers and consumers of visual culture, and “the joke is on all of us.” The first of these themes that I noticed is that of an invitational community.

**Invitational Community**

This group of sculptors has a solid sense of community, and the community reaches out to its members as well as outsiders. The sculptors constantly engage in sharing, encouragement, and togetherness as a culture. As Foss and Griffin (1995) explained, “[i]nvitational rhetoric is an invitation to the audience as a means to create a relationship rooted in equality, immanent value, and self-determination” (p. 5). In this group of sculptors, I am the audience, and they are the performers. However, from the first day Adam introduced them to me, I saw that they treated those outside of their group as if they were already a part of their group. In fact, when I asked Adam how the other sculptors felt about me, he said that if I wasn’t with him, they would ask about me with no prompting from him.

Additionally, there is no apparent hierarchy in this culture. Hall, De Jong, and Steehouder (2004) explained that “collectivism pertains to societies in which people are integrated into strong, cohesive groups [...] protecting them in exchange for unquestioned loyalty” (p. 490). This small group may appear to be so inviting because it is communal in nature. The sculptors are not competitive with one another, always looking out for one another. As Lance put it: “We’re a close family around here. I really feel you get a real family sense.
We’re always there for each other. I want to see everybody happy, while they are creating. If you aren’t having fun in life, what’s the point of livin’?”

Adam also described this group as a “happy family,” and said that he immediately felt welcome when he entered the community for the first time. In terms of community, Michael said that the group, “spends a lot of time together and are immersed in each others’ work. [The grads] get along professionally and as friends and seem open to talk about everything.” Jon agreed, explaining that he thinks that the grads are very professional but simultaneously are able to enjoy a close friendship. I observed the following exchange occur at the sculpture studio one night. Ezra was working on a piece of sculpture, and Adam was talking to him. A problem arose while Ezra was working and was quickly fixed:

Adam: The mold is leaking, dude. (Put clay on leak to stop it.)
Ezra: Thanks, bro.
Adam: No problem, dude.

Another night, Lance hosted a party. Reminiscent of the way the sculptors communicate in the studio, the party served as a catalyst for seamless transition betwixt “shop talk” and social interaction. Adam asked Ezra about the piece he had been working on the day before, and Lance asked about John’s love life. Lance’s house is filled with his roommate’s artwork, displayed equally with his own. This is like our house where my paintings, without apology, are hung next to Adam’s.

Through this display, the sculptors demonstrate their acceptance and support of others and others’ artwork. Michael welcomed me and mentioned that the members of the department spend a lot of time together. Holly was equally inviting, and had deemed me “lady” by the end of the night. Holly stated that at times she feels motherly because she is the only female, but also “very much” an insider and a part of the community. The sculptors seem to genuinely want to know about other people. While I asked questions about their art and thoughts, they asked just as many questions of me and acted genuinely interested when I told them that I study rhetoric and public address. Their invitation is further demonstrated by their eagerness to include me, by [nick] name in their future social events along with Adam. Through this experience, I learned that the sculptors talk frequently and in-depth about their social lives as well as their professional lives. When we left, I felt quite welcome and excited that I was invited back.

“Invitational rhetoric is characterized, then, by the openness with which rhetors are able to approach their audiences” (Foss and Griffin, 1995, p. 6). The openness and acceptance with which I have been afforded by this culture encouraged me to openly approach them as well. Ezra noted that, “I’ve only known them for a few weeks, but I get along with them and they are nice to work around. They seem to like me that way back.” Just as Foss and Griffin (1995) put it, while change is not the explicit goal of invitational rhetoric, it certainly can be a result. While the sculptors clearly make up an invitational community, open to each other and outsiders, they also maintain a level of separa-
tion by marking space. It is expected that those they encounter who want to join their group are always invited to do so.

[We live by candlelight. I become even further aware of how much my housemate of a mere few weeks seems to perceive the world around him as his canvas. Art is his religion. The artist, the man of objects, says some pretty words. I’m going to do something I have never done before. I made you something. It’s made of wood, so it’s durable, but easy to break on purpose. After a year, it could be replaced by a metal one, or simply destroyed. I feel desired, wanted as I never have been wanted before, but I don’t deserve him. We didn’t earn this; we didn’t earn this; we didn’t earn this. This is no more real than any fantasy on page or film.]

Marking Space

Possibly due to the physical nature of their work, the sculptors physically mark the space they occupy as their own. As Osborne (2001) highlighted, “People live in places and identify with them, or are alienated by them. . . . It is the actions of humans at specific locations that turn objective space into subjective places constructed by human behavior” (p. 44). The behaviors within the space that these sculptors occupy help to define them as individuals as well as define them as a community. While they get along well, there is a definite expression of individuality between them as well as a collective separation (but not exclusion) from outsiders. This separation is signified by their physical manifestations of art and the way in which they organize the space they work and live in. “Monuments, streets, neighborhoods, buildings, churches, and parks are all material things and are associated with specific kinds of activities. They are linked to society through repetitive prosaic practices, ritualized performance, and institutionalized commemoration. That is, there is an ongoing reciprocal relationship between people and the places they inhabit” (Osborne, p. 44).

The way each sculptor organizes his or her studio and displays work is unique, and it makes the most sense to the individual who works and makes art in that space. Individually, each sculptor mentioned how things define his or her own space. Ezra stated his studio is his own because, “It is a nice contained space, and I have a lot of my tools and my things that inspire me here.” Michael said his studio is not his own because there are other people’s things in it, and it would be his own if just his stuff was in the space. Holly explained her studio is her own because it is “full of my things,” and she spends more time in the space than at home. Adam said his studio is his own because “It is a space that only I get to put stuff in, like my tools, tables, shelves, and pictures that are mine.”

Marking space was also exemplified at the fall graduate showcase. Adam’s pieces were displayed next to each other in the front room. He was the only artist who displayed an artist’s statement with his work. The artist’s statement was a poem hanging on the wall next to his work. Lance and Jon chose spaces within the gallery independent of Adam’s. Instead of outside definitions, these people prefer their identity to come from within before this identity is (literally) outwardly expressed. “The continuity of peoples’ connections with their lived-in worlds reinforces their identification with time and place and each other” (Os-
borne, 2001, p. 45). The sculptors’ surroundings and physical pieces of art allow them a vocalized resistance to outside definition. These graduate students prefer no boxes. Their work is unpredictable and crosses genres of subject and medium. Lance explained that his relationship with the art he makes is: “. . . Definitely a physical relationship where you actually touch and view materials, and every material kind of relates to you in some sense. You can see a material and it can spark ideas of moments in your life.”

In terms of marking a space as separate from another space, Jon explained that his apartment has no art in it, and very little things in general so that he can have a place to escape from the studio. The presence or absence objects seem to be the primary means of marking space for this community. “Self-knowledge and personal identity cannot be reconstructed without place-worlds. . . . Places are defined by tangible material realities that can be seen, touched, mapped, and located” (Osborne, 2001, p. 46). By being invited into and involved in this community’s space, I feel that not only have I learned more about their individual and collective identities, but I have also learned about my own identity. Marking space is only one part of these sculptors’ lives that they view as a journey.

[All I really wanted was to be able to describe you accurately and theorize about the way in which you perceive and encounter your world. It occurred to me quite quickly, however, that I have insufficient tools to do so. I become unraveled. As I continue to insist upon this lab coat and my position outside this thick, unforgiving glass, I hear your invitation. The windowpane serves as a retainer to bar me from entrance, and you keep asking, Why don't you just use the door? I have no answer I can articulate. I just reinforce those gold-hue-painted, slate bars, and quickly run for the staircase.]

The Metaphor of “Life as a Journey”

This group is quite process-oriented, and they view art as dynamic. Michael explained: “The act of making this one of a kind thing with all of its pitfalls and nuances and all these problem-solving activities you go through is enjoyable, especially working through to end. It is enjoyable to see at the end because of what you have invested.” Michael values the process he goes through in order to produce a sculpture. Wood (2003) explained that symbolic interaction is a way in which persons can find and express their identity. The physical symbols that the sculptors produce hold more meaningful than aesthetic beauty. Ezra mentioned, “When I am working on a piece it is more than just an object.” He said that he feels intimately involved with his art as he is making it. He puts his emotions and experiences into his art.

Additionally, these sculptors seem to see everything as art, just as I see everything as communication. They express themselves through art, no matter where they are or who they are with. It appears that no matter what the subject matter, every conversation is easily tied into past or present projects. For example:

CLS: You going to dig that fire pit in the back yard today?
Adam: I think so. You know, I could always make the fire pit in the back yard double as a kiln.
CLS: A what?
Adam: You know, so that we could fire pots in it. It wouldn’t be hard to do.
CLS: We? I don’t know how to fire pots.
Adam: It would be work, but you could learn. In fact, I am considering using the subject of work as a starting point for my pieces this year.

Adam weaves his art into his everyday tasks to the point that he wants to focus on everyday tasks (work) as an explicit subject. He said, “Art is an occupation and more than that because as an artist working with your own ideas you’re doing your own work. There is a connection more than any other job. Art is a way to communicate an idea and use materials in new and different ways.” In this way, Adam defines art primarily as a process.

Holly said that art is a “self-investigation and a mystery.” While she is in the process of making her art she claimed she is most intimate with her art, and she self-identified as “process-oriented.” She feels most understood in the process of making art, trying to figure out what to do next, especially when discussing it with her colleagues. Lance further clarified the concept of art as a process:

When artists are with each other, we’re always giving each other ideas and learning from each other. We might have a good time doing it, but we are also learning. When I feel most understood is when I’m sitting down with my colleagues having a one-on-one conversation. I think my art comes from my inner self in a sense unless you have time to sit down and explain that to somebody, I don’t think you can truly be understood. I am always looking for feedback from my colleagues. Within the realm of sculpture, you are conveying messages with materials, so you need someone who works with materials to give you feedback.

Jon echoed Lance’s sentiment by explaining: “During the process [of making art] is a time where I am trying to get to know what I am trying to make. My work starts as small parts that need to come together in a composition. I don’t know where I am going; I am in the process of figuring it out.” The sculptors’ lives consist primarily of making art, and they seem to value the process of making the art more highly than the end product. However, end products find their way into the lives of the sculptors in the form of collections.

[The closer I am to you, the further I am from that cushy pillow I had designed so that I may rest in the midst of my long-felt suffering. I am learning. I am learning about you I am learning about me. I just feel better if I can categorize these themes, orated through rhetorical constructs. I see an end, a product, a result. You are process, journey, love I am not nearly as good as I thought I was. I must play. I must let go. I must work on my grammar.]
Non-Materialistic Collectors

There is an obvious love of materials in this community. “Things” constantly surround these sculptors, and they particularly value the materials they work with. Love and Kohn (2001) explained that “whether found, captured, produced, or imagined, the Other still somehow seems necessary, with souvenirs becoming material, portable, touchable pieces of that Other” (p. 53). Souvenirs serve as the beginnings of collections for many people. For these sculptors, however, the materials that they work with are somewhat like souvenirs. The “material, touchable pieces” that these sculptors value seem to be primarily the materials they work with to build their artwork. Lance said that he values material objects because of “the idea of permanence.” He explained that art has only in recent history become something “permanent,” and sculptures are particularly permanent in comparison to other forms of art.

They all seem to have lots of objects in their studios. For instance, Ezra keeps a statuette of Mother Mary in his studio because it was his grandmother’s. He also mentioned there are many other things in his studio that inspire him. Michael said he “values material objects for utility and sentimental value.” Jon said, “I value materials because they all have individual ways of presenting themselves. I do not manipulate the materials. That is why my work uses so many different materials compiled together.” The objects that these sculptors collect are materials they use to make their own objects, or objects they use for inspiration.

While they value both the utility and symbolism of objects, they also self-identify as non-materialistic. For instance, Adam explained “there are some objects I really like. I want to touch them, and I save scraps of everything. I find use for everything or pass it off.” Holly further recognized the paradox of this theme when she said “I have this conflict between being non-materialistic and a maker of things.” While these sculptors do value the materials that they work with and their artwork (particularly during the process), they self-identify as being non-materialistic. In fact, all of these artists agreed the there comes a time when it is important to part with their artwork. Michael stated: “I would much rather see my finished product go away than keep it, because artwork is like the exhaust out of a car. I have no attachment to pieces in the end and no super attachment to materials. I could start with nothing and be okay.”

Jon further explained that he is “not attached to my work when it is finished because I have moved on.” Adam concurred, “After a while, I move on to the next thing and feel attached to it instead of the last thing. I have parted with nearly everything I have made.” Along with their rejection of materialism, these sculptors value their collections. They demonstrate a further grounding in the physical, material world in the theme of concrete positionality.

[When I first began sharing a residence with this artist, I used to sit across the table, gazing through the candlelight into his blue eyes with excitement at the windows to a possible future I saw with him. This exhilaration is shifting, for rather than windows, I see mirrors now. Perhaps this shift is spurred in part by the smoke and flames, but I am realizing that things are shifting from I and me...]
to us and we. He tastes like exotic fruits that I have never tasted before, yet feel like I am somehow remembering. Aromatic is the air just lapping at his edges—sucking me into him before he may realize it himself; he smells like sweat; his muscles raw and practically exposed just below the surface of his inviting skin.]

Concrete Positionality

While my own inspiration for poetry, art, and research projects stems primarily from theory or other abstract concepts, I quickly noticed that something these artists all have in common, at least at this point in their careers, is that their inspiration is coming from the concrete, or their own physical surroundings. These artists’ surroundings tend to change from time to time, but they continually represent the world around them through their work. “The artistic world has tended to view the world as dynamic and to discuss its occurrence under the general category of drama” (Theal, 1975, p. 274). This group of sculptors seems to recognize the drama they are surrounded by, and produce work that exemplifies, enlightens, or explains these concrete, dramatic elements. Michael said that his work is influenced by “nature, outdoors, primitiveness, and simpler way of life.” Holly stated that her art is based on “my life, my experiences.” Ezra agreed that his influence comes from “anything that affects me on a personal level.” Lance said that “farm instruments” influence some of his work because he “grew up on a farm in Mississippi, and that was just everyday life. There are aspects in my life that influence the objects I produce.”

Monahan (2004) wrote that art—in particular sculpture—comes from that which is physically around us, especially nature. Jon produces art that represents the physical world around him. He clarified that his art is influenced by “Everything I see when I am not in the studio, it represents the type of life I live outside of the studio. I have worked construction since high school, so I bring time working with my hands into my work.” Adam said that all of his work is “down to earth in a far-out way.” None of these sculptors appear to begin with an abstract idea or concept and bring it closer to the concrete. Instead, they seem to work from the ground up. This further supports their love of the materials that they incorporate into their work. They value a concrete, physical relationship with the materials they work with as well as the physical objects that they produce. This physical relationship is complimented by the visual aspect of their culture.

Producers and Consumers of Visual Culture

Within this community, it seems natural that individuals would be visually oriented. Jon stated that his artwork is “a way for me to say something and then leave it behind for others to see my message.” He continued that “Art for me is a way that I can express what I am thinking. I don't feel comfortable writing or addressing people, so my art is my voice to address the public.” Because these artists are simultaneously graduate assistants at a major university, there is a prevalent conflict in this area. Michael said “I don't communicate well using words. I communicate through my artwork.” He also noted that in academia
there is a push for explaining and justifying art through words, which he finds frustrating.

While they must prove themselves as artists in order to earn their MFA degrees, they must simultaneously prove to the university (primarily through words) that they are scholars. Adam explained this expectation:

I like to tell stories by just leaving [visual] clues about what happened. I enjoy writing, but when I write it is about things that are tangential to my artwork, not necessarily justifying the work itself. [It is] brainstorming [and] throwing around words, playing, the same way I work with materials, more for myself than a justification. When I make something, I hope it would get my idea across [and] I wouldn’t need to further explain.

Adam would like his art to suffice as his form of communication in the realm of sculpture. “The tension between aesthetic negation and discourse [. . .] precludes the identification of art with political praxis. Art cannot represent real forces of change, but can only invoke their possibility in another medium—in aesthetic ‘form’” (Cox, 1988, p. 23). Essentially, these artists are charged with justifying their visual art through words. For the sculptors, however, the visual justifies itself and communicates more effectively than words. For instance, Ezra said his art helps him to communicate because art is therapy, and his art represents his own personal narratives. He stated that his art allows him to be more candid than he would be with only words. Lance commented that art is the “expression of an idea.” He continued:

The viewer can teach the creator a lot of times. You don’t know [if you have communicated your message] until you find out somehow. In an ideal situation, it would be better to be right one hundred percent with what you are trying to say, but it’s all right to miss every once in a while.

The sculptors clearly understand the visual world better than I can imagine. For instance, one evening, Holly was talking to Jon while grading student papers in the woodshop.

Holly: This is not a twirl; it’s a swirl.
Jon: Same thing.
Holly: Are you an artist?
Jon: Yeah.
Holly: Then you know the difference.
Jon: Close enough.

Then, Holly looked to me for support. I told her I did not think that I had the level of expertise necessary to offer an opinion. She told me to just agree with her. Holly stated that her hope is for people who view her art to experience an “inquisitive, visual pleasure.” She said, “I am a visual person. I like looking at
visual things.” This love of the visual may be part of the reason that the sculptors feel driven to create.

Something that each of these sculptors noted was that they are driven or compelled (to some degree) to create art. For instance, while telling a story about his belt buckle, Lance said that he bought it from a prisoner who was selling it at the prison rodeo because:

I was amazed at the craftsmanship that went into this belt buckle. It makes you relate in a sense to their want to build and their want to create. They may not have a lot of resources, put there is a deep-down drive of an artistic ability, so I could not pass up the little bit of support I could show by buying this belt buckle.

While Lance found connection with a human being based on this drive to create, Holly also addressed this connection. “Other artists drive me most. When I see art, I want to make art.” Adam explained his drive to make art this way “I don’t know what else I would do. I see things around me, and I have something to say about them or with them. I cannot remember the last time I didn’t feel the need to make art.” The drive to make art for Adam seems innate, while for Ezra it seems more socially constructed or habitual. He said he has a drive to work with certain materials because he has developed a love for and comfort with those materials. There is a certain repetition developed in the relationship of working with materials and creating art. Michael furthered this discussion of drive to create by commenting that art is “a by-product of one’s compulsion to produce, what happens when someone wants to create or the act of creating. [It is also a] form of communication I feel compelled to speak through that is larger than language.” For a culture focused on the visual, these sculptors do tell an awful lot of jokes.

The Joke is on All of Us

Within this community of sculptors, there is a constant joke running. It is not always the same joke, but it is always either a self-deprecating or Other-deprecating joke, myself included as an Other at times. Michael likes to poke fun at me because Adam comes home for dinner every night. If Adam is out later than usual, Michael might pose, “So you let him out, did you?” Sharkey,
Park, and Kim (2004) concluded that “goals of self-embarrassment] included: to get, maintain, or check others’ attention; to comply with another’s request, demand, or dare; to win a competition; to manage one’s face in the presence of others; or to manage another person’s face” (p. 392). Humor in this community is intended to embarrass, but embarrass everyone (including the self) equally. Hence, the joke truly is on all of us. Jon stated that, “We make fun of each other a lot. For instance, I have learned that Lance has no sense of time, and I give him hell for that a lot, but we all know we are joking.” This may take some getting used to. Hauser (1999) argued that personal and professional narratives shared within a culture leave a mark on the individual’s body, because certain narratives are tied to certain places and people.

Adam said, “At first, I didn’t understand the jokes, but I quickly started to understand [after a short amount of time].” Everything is situated. Narratives as representation of culture become problematic when it is assumed that the narrative is mutually exclusive from surrounding elements or context (Langellier, 1989). Understanding the jokes is closely tied to the way in which they are told as well as the place in which they are told. Michael noted further that shop talk and personal talk meet in settings outside of the studio.

Holly put the humorous nature of this culture like this, “It’s like a TV show; each person has their own nick name. There are all these on-going jokes. Jon with his glasses, ‘how’s the blind man?’ Now, Lance with his dog—everything’s dog, dog, dog.” She finds this phenomenon in her culture compelling enough to document it. “The loss of dignity, face, poise, control, and so on may be a small price to pay if one’s ultimate goal is solidarity, attention, winning, protecting another’s face, protecting one’s self against more devastating embarrassments, and so on” (Sharkey, Park, and Kim, 2004, 394). Humor is a part of the way this community maintains cohesion.

[He stays up all night working on his sculptures, trying to get things done for the show. He says that others have been told to take a break from sculpting for a while because their work looks too much like art for art’s sake. We go to the opening. I dress in my fabulous black dress, looking the part of artist’s muse. Am I art for art’s sake? If I pose as art, will I, in fact, be art? Paint me. Paint me with your gaze . . . strike that gaze upon a canvas, a panel of drywall, a pile of dirt . . . please, just notice me as I notice you.]

Sculptors’ Impacts and Implications on this Rhetorician

Disciplinary

My study demonstrates that sculptors as a culture could inform communication as a discipline. Messaris (1994) called for more study and attention to visual communication and pointed out the need for more visual literacy. There is more to becoming visually literate than simply viewing images. “Reading visual messages requires an understanding of visual grammar and syntax. In the system of analysis derived from art and design, the visual elements include dot, line, shape, tone, texture, and so forth” (Schamber, 1991, p. 18). Sculptors have the occasion to use these concepts explicitly daily. This particular group informs the way that we can understand visual communication as an object within the self,
created by the self, to become an object outside of the self. The concrete results of this group’s art is a starting and ending point for communicative transactions.

Rhetorically, this concept is useful for producing and consuming messages. Matusitz (2005) furthered that visual literacy is necessary to become a more critical consumer of rhetoric. Rhetoric is central to communication as a discipline. Schamber (1991) supported that visual literacy is essential for understanding the world. Visual objects are produced by the sculptors as concepts and as imitation of ordinary life. “The notion of imitation carries with it a suggestion of reflection or condensation of the social reality, or perhaps more accurately, the construction of a model of some social reality with, at least, the potentiality of a possible future” (Theal, 1975, p. 274). Sculptures produced by this group work upon and against this group’s socially and artfully constructed reality.

[The wax room is a dungeon. Everything is dirty and hot; the air-conditioning doesn’t work. Everything is unfinished, or if once finished, unfinished. The next track sounds like the beginning of Postal Service’s “This Place is a Prison,” but isn’t. It is TV on the radio—unconventional music for unconventional people. Nothing is too much work; nothing takes too long. The video camera does not distract. I do not distract. This man, this man that I love, doing what he loves: art. If I ever was art, I am not art now. He turns to me for a brief moment, a moment of reassurance, I am certain, to remind me that he cares.]

Professional

Ravetz (2002) explained the relationship between her “ethnographer self” and “fine art self” this way: “If shared reality and immersion in other lives is the bedrock of anthropological [in particular, ethnographic] assumption, then at the heart of fine art is an assumption about the unreality of the external world—an elevation of and belief in the power of imagination and untruth” (Ravetz, 2002, 23-24). This project has helped to develop my fine arts self and ethnographic self simultaneously. Or, as Madison (2005) explained:

Whether one (her audience) likes or not the performance, one cannot completely undo or un-know the image and imprint of that voice—inside history—upon their own consciousness once they have been expose to it through performance. Performing subversive and subaltern voices proclaim existence, within particular locales and discourses, that are being witnessed—entered into one’s own experience— and this witnessing cannot be denied. (p.172)

I am simultaneously a more informed viewer and critic of art and I am also more culture-savvy. I have also been able to integrate the artistic self with the researcher self in ways I was unable to before this project. I have been and continue to be significantly immersed in a culture of which I was previously unaware. I think of this integration akin to sampling. “Sampling is a method of artistic appropriation and entails an active physical encounter with history and a poetic of recreation” (Simpson, 1999, p. 323). In sampling, musicians collect exist-
ing pieces of music to create new music from this combination. I have taken patches of words, images, and physical artwork and attempted to fashion a quilt to represent these people who are now so dear to me.

This transformed from a project on paper to a project in the mind, then settled into the body. Similarly to the way Holman Jones (2005) put it:

Setting a scene, telling a story, carefully constructing the connections between life and art, experience and theory, evocation and explanation . . . and then letting go, hoping for readers who will bring the same careful attention to your words in the context of their own lives. (p. 765)

I have crafted a text that attempts to express a portion of my lived experience of art in this culture, and the world this experience has brought to me. I am beginning to place importance on things that I once thought of as obsolete, such as breakfast every morning, visual pleasure, and truly connecting with a group. I am beginning to live.

[I live a cliché subjectivity. The pain cumulates in the scene encompassing two clothed bodies/backs turned. One pen drawing; one pen writing. A knot deeply embedded under one’s shoulder. The realization of memories not lost but simply not made. The void caused by years unlived, the abyss following a broken heart. What does she know of love? How long will this go unnoticed? He says I am impressed. Do you think that if I came down here by myself, I would have a house that looks like that? I am impressed by a woman who has her [stuff] together, teaches 50 kids each day about [stuff] they don’t know about, and still has time to gaze into my eyes at night. I am impressed.]

Personal

[I am documenting my transformation; art is not simply a product. It is a process. We dance in the living room to the pump-up sounds of a variety of musical artists. Glass candlesticks fall from the shelf on the wall, shatter, and prick our feet. We keep dancing. I think people might be pretty mad if they knew how much fun we have. We shoot Scotch and Vodka. We keep dancing. We eat leftover homemade ice cream. We keep dancing. At midnight, we fall asleep in a heap of exhaustion.]

While this culture has profoundly impacted me (as it continues to), I believe that I have also impacted this culture. I asked Adam what he thought my effect on this culture is and he answered:

Everyone is excited about this project. All these interviews and things make us feel like we’re pretty sweet because someone’s studying us, and that is cool. You are one of the gang, though. When they invite me they expect that you will be there, too, and they ask where you are when you are not there. You are like the rest of us, a personality in the group and a friend.

I now self-identify as being a part of this culture. My experience supports the notion of Gergen and Gergen, (2002) who argued “scholarship is not chained by
the imperative of cerebral order, but is given full latitude of revelation in action” (p. 19). This revelation is still in action for me. I also asked Adam what effect he thought the nature of our relationship would have on my project. His first response was “Isn’t that a question you should answer?” Then he continued that I might have a “bias,” because while I spend a lot of time with the entire group of sculptors, I spend a considerably more sustained amount of time with him, and can speak about him “with more expertise.”

“Glow from tea light licks pinch pots long-ago fired and glazed. Your gaze meets mine, revealing flickering flecks in your eyes. While looking into your eyes, either this morning or last night I realized ... for the first time, I truly cannot go back to how I lived before I met you. We are no longer two separate beings, you and I. You coat me in your words like the chocolate milk we purchased this morning. Outsiders recognize that we are linked, and for the first time today, you explicitly marked it as such. I am overcome, yet simultaneously at ease. Thank you. I hope you can still tell by feel. You are so sensible. I think you are starting to rub off on me. You are the first person to call me a man.”

Somewhere along the line, I have begun to sense an intertwining of myself and the Other. After all, “writing creates the worlds we inhabit” (Denzin, 2003, p. xii). In this way, I know that this project may never end. I have always valued a defined, structured, linear result, but this notion is constantly questioned by my new friends (whether they realize it or not). I now understand why Adam wrote that the biggest disappointment to him as an artist is “a tale with only one ending.” Process is paramount, and I am in the midst of the “experience-of-becoming” (Conquergood, 1991, p. 6). This journey is as close as to an end result as I will get. This tale has no end yet, and I now hope it never does. I wonder if what I have found holds true in other communities of artists. I am curious whether I can now consider myself an artist of sorts. Ultimately, I wonder how long this journey of newfound love will last.

“Thick, green tea, blank sketch pads, old pens, two supple bodies and clean sheets, a heavy heart, and a worn-out, silence-filled phone call combine to create a weighty hand, as your pen abuses the virgin leaves chained to the binding of your sketch pad. My feet cross near your current victim (page). You take a moment’s rest, just long enough to brush your lips against the crook of my left calf, before attending once again to your drawing. Your foot appears so natural on the pillow, though possibly a disturbing contrast. Your toes fill notches in one another with their iris-bulb contours. Each vein is elevated and each bone is apparent. There are teeny patches of dark brown hairs and your toenails are ragged. You’ve hoisted your torso’s weight on to your left side, supporting your head with your left hand. Perhaps you think I do not notice—but I feel your eyes caressing and studying my body, as you stroke a new page with shadows and silhouettes from your pen. Delight combines with sorrow to feed pen, which fills paper, causing you to ask, Whatcha writin’ about? Reaching out for your familiar touch, so comfortable, rich, safe, and I still get these butterflies. Met by the outer barrier of an unexpected cocoon, I become flustered. When my eyes meet yours in the morning ... everything is perfection again. I am a woman who is embarrassed by her uncensored behaviors and unmaskable flaws. I am a
woman who will love you with all that she is and all that she hopes to be. For a minute I was afraid that I may be losing myself in you. I took yet another glance and realized that I am actually finding myself in you. My memories are mostly non-existent, not because they have been erased, but because I never made any to spare. Most of the time, I have felt like a crude interpretation of Roger’s explanation of a body without organs. I know that I can bleed, so the physical organs must be there, but each time I take another inward turn, all I see, all I feel is emptiness. The self that you have pulled from this cave (Plato’s, perhaps) is so full, however. You fill this self, this woman that I am getting to know, as you are getting to know her. For dinner, we make the most splendid fried jumbo shrimp and okra, finished off by a bottle of blackberry wine, as thick as syrup. I remember the flush of my skin, the butterflies within, right before that final round of debate with Dylan. I have decided that my oh-so-open self may be offensive to some. Hence, I am taking yet another inward turn. I like telling stories. A sculpture is a character. The beginning of the story has already occurred and the ending is not revealed. I have a fascination with objects; I enjoy finding places for scavenging what others throw away. I collect my treasure and selectively use it through reproduction and modification. I am bedazzled by the delicious colors of fashion and industry. A good story lends itself to varied interpretation; ambiguity is exciting. My greatest fear as an artist is a tale with only one ending.

Endnotes
1. I call this study a “transformation” rather than an ethnography, autoethnography, or some other pre-defined scholarly label, because, as this journal called for in this issue, it is truly an experimental text. Within the field of communication, the definition of autoethnography and ethnography are not stable (e. g. Gingrich-Philbrook, Goodall, Osborn, Pink, Stephenson-Schaffer, Turner, Van Maanen).
2. I use the term “Other” in this text in the truly Levinasian sense. “The primacy of ontology among the branches of knowledge would appear to rest on the clearest evidence, for all knowledge of relations connecting or opposing being to one an Other implies an understanding of the fact that these beings and relations exist” (Levinas, 1998, p. 1).
3. The rest of this explanation was added at the suggestion of Adam. When he read this portion, his reaction was “The experience you had when viewing this piece is very poetic. The description of Jon’s piece immediately preceding your experience however is rather dry. I mean, I couldn’t imagine what Jon’s piece looked like based on your description.” This comment made an impact on me. How can I claim to be representing a culture in the least if my analysis is more self than Other-centered?
4. Direct quotation from Gingrich-Philbrook (p. 297, 2005). In his article, he argues that ethnographers are dually and equally charged with fulfilling appeals to the aesthetic and the epidictic. My paper is an attempt to answer both, in the separate spaces of which Gingrich-Philbrook perhaps would approve.
References


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