

Michelle Bert

March 13th, 2014

Interview with Russell Hall

MB: I have a few questions prepared, but I thought maybe you could start by describing the work you are currently making. I'm particularly interested in how your work has changed or been effected by grad school.

RH: Coming into grad school and for a long time before that, my work relied heavily on viewer participation, the viewer would activate the piece in some way to create some sort of action or performance but it was meant for [the viewer] to instigate it. It was meant for [the viewer] to have the experience and realization of whatever the focus of the piece was. Usually the focus was centered around playful actions.

Coming into grad school I started getting some push-back about the tactics I was using, mainly about the viewer participation aspect, I was getting some criticism that it wasn't necessarily working. I was also realizing that I was wasting a lot of time on the fabrication side, and maybe this has to do with grad school and how work has to be completed really quickly, in a condensed time period, but also in terms of just being an artist if you can't get the ideas out and prototype them and crash test them quickly then your whole momentum is slowed and you don't get anywhere, or you can get stuck. You just can't move through ideas quickly.

I came to this realization that this emphasis on the viewer was adding problems and was stalling out the work. I ultimately made the decision to make the work for one viewer only, I'll call them "the intended viewer" and they're going to be the perfect viewer who knows exactly how to interact with the work, they're always open to participation and they get it. And ultimately, I had to ask who is that perfect viewer? Well, it's me. This is how I got into doing video works. You'll see the intended viewer as being your stereotypical upper middle class white dude. That is who I imagine the intended viewer is. I put that guy into all these situations and actions

and he participates in them. They happen only once or twice and ultimately exist as these videos.

So that's one half of where my practice is at now, in these videos or vignettes or performances. The other half of the practice now looks at how the object doesn't always need the perfect viewer interacting with it or activating it, it can sometimes just activate itself. In that way it references time or that an object can just have an action by it's own design. Essentially my work has become these kinetic objects. For example there's a fan piece and a bell piece. Those are cyclical and have a long duration. And I guess the viewer is participating by witnessing it, it implicates the viewer by testing their patience or focus or ability to pay attention to details about the work. These pieces are also trying to push people to recognize the expectations for those objects and how those expectations might be wrong. That ends up being the crux of all the different pieces.

I did a piece called Setting and Clearing a Table which was me trying to set and clear a table from the back of a moving vehicle. With that piece it shows a simple, boring or monotonous action, but if you just add one little twist, like doing it from a moving vehicle, all of a sudden the most it becomes impossible absurd and entertaining. It has this whole new redefined action. You didn't change the action you just tweaked it, that absurdity was in there the whole time.

My intention is not necessarily to alter it or redefine something, just to tweak it in such a way that makes it different or new. Exposes some obscure element of the act... and allows for a whole new association to accompany it. That piece is in the video, performance side of my practice.

Then the thesis.

The thesis is about something called functional fixedness, a term made up by a psychologist named Karl Duncker. He wrote a paper in 1938 on problem solving and

basically he created these experiments that proved that this thing, functional fixedness existed within people. Functional fixedness is the inability to see function within an object outside of its intended function. One example of an experiment he did is called the candle problem. He gives people candles in boxes and the task of mounting the candles to the wall using thumb tacks or whatever else is on the table. The solution is to use the box the candles come in and tack that to the wall but people tend to struggle to understand that that box that the candles came in could also be used as a shelf. This is functional fixedness.

So my thesis takes functional fixedness as a start and defines what I call functional dynamism and then walks through the process of going from fixed to dynamic thought. Showing how one would do that. And basically the first and most important step in doing that is creative thought or action.

MB: So you aren't running tests on people, you're showing examples of objects which people have certain expectations for and you're giving them another way to see the object.

RH: Right and I'm showing them how those narrow expectations are limiting. I guess that's the difference between what I was doing before and my current work. Before, when I was requiring that the viewer actually activate it, those were more like tests and often people just didn't get what was expected of them. But now the work is functioning more as an example, and I think it's easier for people to understand and place themselves within the work because it's easier to digest.

MB: How hard was it for you to take the viewer out of the work?

RH: It was really hard because that was my own personal challenge for myself. I thought, why does art suck? It sucks because it's boring. Because you walk through the museum and you can't touch anything. I wanted to change that association with

sculpture and with art. But then when weighing that against this other stuff I'm trying to talk about....which is more important?

MB: Perhaps what your work was missing before was the understanding that what makes art interesting is that it actually does require some work from the viewer -to think. A piece can never exist on it's own, it requires viewer participation in order for it to have any meaning.

RH: Right, and it doesn't literally need to have the viewer's physical interaction to engage the viewer. Is that what you mean?

MB: Yeah, when watching your videos, the viewer still has to put some effort into deciphering what is going on and into coming to some conclusions.

RH: Right, and I've learned to value those kinds of interactions. In my older works, if someone didn't perform the task correctly, they wouldn't get the proper physical interaction or mental interaction that you're talking about.

MB: So that's a good lead in to my next question. How do you respond to failure?

RH: I think that the typical, cliché saying that there's no such thing as failing is pretty spot on. I think that you can't be worried about something succeeding and have that desire for some level of success stop you from trying it. Failure just ends up being subjective to who and what you're talking about and even the time and space that it happens. You could at one point deem something a failure and later on look back and say, no actually that was brilliant.

MB: So now that you are participating in your own "actions" or performances, who is in fact your target audience?

RH: I think that's something I'm now starting to put more thought into. I'd still say that first and foremost it's that sort of person I'm emulating: that upper middle class stuffy white guy. I think that audience can relate more to my work.

MB: Is that because that is the "prescribed" target audience, if you're going to show in galleries and such?

RH: I think that's part of it, and mocking that. Also because that's the most generic audience, if you look at the objects that I use, they're always the most iconic and generic objects. If I'm going to use a bucket, it's going to be the most generic and iconic brand and color of bucket I can get.

(Russell Hall later explained this in more detail, saying that he believes that the upper-middle class white male is generally, in life, the least likely to need to come up with creative solutions to problems because the world caters to them more than any other group of people. His target audience, more than anything, is anyone who's going to benefit from being exposed to his work.)

MB: What do you plan to do after you graduate in May?

RH: There are these two guys named Harrison and Wood, they're a British duo, and their videos have been super influential in helping me figure out how I want to portray my work. I emailed them recently and was like "I want to work for you" and they emailed me back saying they don't have work right now. But I'm hoping that maybe they'll email me back eventually and say they have some work doing fabrication, maybe building sets or whatever they need behind the scenes. Ideally I'll go to work for an artist of that caliber whom I'm really interested in.

Or you know, apply to some residencies, make some more work and/or potentially move to LA and try to see what kind of connections I can make down there.

MB: Do you consider LA to have a scene more aligned with what you do?

RH: I think there's more of an industry around art down there. Even just getting some work around shipping and crating or moving art... and having the opportunity to see more art would be great.

I'd also love to work for Roman Signer but he's getting pretty old now and he's mostly making videos. They're intricate but they don't necessarily have the same level of production, set building and that kind of stuff.

MB: Well, good luck with that and your thesis. Thank you for taking the time to answer my questions.

You can see examples of the work mentioned at: www.russellhallstudio.com