

Pure Sugar

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By

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Pure Sugar

In the creative act, the artist goes from intention to realization through a chain of totally subjective reactions. His struggle toward the realization is a series of efforts, pains, satisfaction, refusals, decisions, which also cannot and must not be fully self-conscious, at least on the esthetic plane.

-Marcel Duchamp, speech, Houston Texas, 1957

During his speech at the Convention of the American Federation of Arts in 1957, Marcel Duchamp addressed the word “art” and the “subjective mechanism” by which it is produced as an “art coefficient.” Duchamp stated that regardless of the aesthetic quality of art “bad, good, or indifferent” the focus had to be *à l'état brut*, or the “raw state” of art production and the subjective mechanisms of the “struggle” involved. Duchamp’s conclusion, and the continuation of the opening quote, above, is that, “The result of this struggle is a difference between the intention and its realization, a difference which the artist is not aware of.” Duchamp concludes that the raw state of art “must be ‘refined’ as pure sugar from molasses by the spectator.”

(Duchamp qtd. in Popova. n.pag.)

The “art coefficient” of my Master of Fine Arts thesis exhibition, *Pure Sugar*, is one that follows Duchamp’s theory and attempts to focus on the subjective mechanism of production, while highlighting the raw state of these mechanisms and, in contradiction to Duchamp, become aware of the difference between intention and realization. The question of whether or not this is possible is to be tested in this paper and through the viewing of the work. In order for viewers to become aware of their involvement in the completion of the work, the objects of *Pure Sugar* are presented with a self-referential questioning of their own status as art objects. It is my intent then, that the viewer engages with my exhibition as a reflexive exercise, and interprets it as a premise rather than a conclusion. To support my intentions and to allow for a nuanced reading of the work, an examination of autobiographical and art historical references that have informed the

work are provided in this paper. In this manner, the “art coefficient” of *Pure Sugar* is explored here, while presenting possible mechanisms for Duchamp’s imperative of making “sugar out of molasses.”

The motivation for *Pure Sugar* comes from my attempt to integrate my previous training and experience as a mechanical engineering technologist with my role as an artist. These two contexts are often deeply opposed to each other. Rational planning, the default mind-set in engineering, often conflicts with my artistic mode of thought, which has become increasingly open to the operation of chance. In the preparation of this paper, I realized that the work in the exhibition aspires to two correspondingly different tones: one being quite dry, cynical and perhaps removed, as brought forward by the “(anti)paintings,” and the other, more symbolic, engaged and hopeful, as exemplified by the sculptural and installation works.

Duchamp is the central art historical reference for the work in *Pure Sugar*, and much of the work responds directly to his specific art works and ideas. Each of my pieces in *Pure Sugar* references these ideas, while being supported or contrasted by others. I am also interested in the healing impulse evident in the work of German artist, Joseph Beuys, and his attempt to move art work beyond the gallery. The negotiation between the worlds of craft and art also interests me and is evident in the work of American artist, Tom Sachs; I will develop this idea through the figure of the bricoleur, who is more interested in the political implications of making, not object fetishization. In addition, I will trace autobiographical supports for my current practice through an examination of both my family and personal histories of making, which have been both improvised and institutional.

Apparatus for the Treatment of a Broken Arm is an improvised splint made out of a used snow shovel that can be worn on the torso and which immobilizes the wearer's right arm.



Figure 1. David Dyck, *Apparatus for the Treatment of a Broken Arm*, 2013, snow shovel, fasteners.

My piece and its title are derivative of Marcel Duchamp's *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, a well-known example of one of his “ready-mades.” In this piece, Duchamp selected a common object, in this case a snow shovel from a store, inscribed it with the phrase, “In Advance of the Broken Arm,” and hung it on the wall in a similar fashion to a painting. In an attempt to privilege the conceptual nature of the work, Duchamp minimised the importance of craft and making in art.

The key idea contained in Duchamp's series of ready-mades is that the selection of an object by the artist is the only thing necessary for that object to be considered as art. According to Duchamp scholar, Francis M. Naumann, Duchamp found "that the selection of this particular object was not easy, for he wanted something that, in its design, exhibited no obvious aesthetic qualities (neither pleasing, nor displeasing) and, as he later emphasized, 'such items are not as common as we may assume'"(62). The larger project contained in this assertion is a thorough questioning of what art is. Ready-mades shifted the focus of art toward setting things up in ways meant to make viewers question what art is. In this way, ready-mades claim little importance via their own status as objects, but rather, find their place through the questioning of cultural conventions and institutions that have defined art.



Figure 2. Marcel Duchamp, *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, 1915, snow shovel.

Duchamp's creation of ready-mades set the tone for much of the avant-garde art production that was to follow. Describing Duchamp's mid-career move to the USA, Naumann further asserts that "[t]he only thing Duchamp did not like about America was the reverential attitude it harboured towards European art. 'If only America would realize that the art of Europe

is finished – dead,’ he exclaimed. ‘America is the country of the art of the future’”(Duchamp, qtd. in Naumann, 60). This statement, along with the rest of Duchamp’s oeuvre, seems to suggest that he felt an affinity for new cultural forms. His work effectively re-defined the field of play for the art world, creating a space in which to make work that did not necessarily need to be entirely reverent, serious, or slow-to-unfold.

In his 1969 essay, *Art After Philosophy*, American conceptual artist, Joseph Kosuth, claims that the “‘value’ of particular artists after Duchamp can be weighed according to how much they questioned the nature of art; which is another way of saying ‘what they added to the conception of art’ or what wasn’t there before they started. Artists question the nature of art by presenting new propositions as to art’s nature”(18). These “new propositions” describe the reflexive manner of working that became prevalent in much of the postmodern art that was to follow.

Duchamp’s work is often read as being the prototype for a postmodern art. Because postmodern theory tends to yield endless chains of interpretation, a comprehensive definition of it is beyond the scope of this essay. American art historian, Amelia Jones, in *Postmodernism and the En-Gendering of Marcel Duchamp*, argues that the relationship of American postmodern art to the mass produced object is based on the conceptual maneuver carried out by Duchamp’s ready-mades. Further, Jones notes that “the majority of articles on American postmodernism, whether pro or con, reference the ready-made gesture as *a*, or *the*, source of postmodernism’s introduction of mass into high culture, life into art”(37). In practice, contemporary art’s interpretation of postmodernism could be read broadly as a constant stream of interruptions of dominant cultural institutions. The postmodern theoretical framework might only be read as generous when it aims these interruptions at perceived injustices. Otherwise, this constant

disruption (as opposed to construction) in postmodern art can be read as cynical, as a nihilistic refusal of affirmative strategies.

The definition of art posited by Duchamp through his ready-mades is an art that requires no touch of the hand, no application of craft. This is a valid idea, and it helped to establish conceptual frameworks that moved the discourse of art forward. However, the removal of craft from art is something that may no longer be necessary or appropriate. The removal of craft from art in a contemporary setting is something that might be understood to have negative connotations when placed alongside late-capitalism's consumer culture where disposable consumer products are the norm. Thus, a new level of helplessness and cynicism potentially emerges.

Countering this trend of disposability and cynicism, the hand-crafted or DIY object of the 21st century can encourage an ethical value of longer use-life through repair. The DIY object encourages agency in its creators and users by advancing the idea that personal material culture can be made and re-made. In a sense, today's DIY object is the "new" ready-made. Where Duchamp minimised the importance of craft and making in art by selecting consumer objects as "ready-mades," the saturation of today's consumer objects has perhaps forced the "ready-made" into obsolescence. My work, *Apparatus for the Treatment of a Broken Arm* looks to exonerate the ready-made through Duchampian processes, through "customization," and the re-injection of craft into the art-object. *Apparatus for the Treatment of a Broken Arm* is then a "new" ready-made.

An authentic culture of individualisation through customization is available here, in contrast to the pre-defined categories of consumerism. The reinterpretation of consumer culture,

from a top-down paradigm of mass production and marketing towards a more conscious and self-engaged DIY mode is an increasingly visible indicator of the changing ideals of the larger culture. Like many young people of my generation, I find this to be an incredibly generous idea, and one that democratizes the role of the artist. This move to democratization and redemption was key to the life work of Joseph Beuys and remains relevant to my art practice and that of other artists in the early twenty-first century.

Besides my generational context that, in part, informs my approach to art making, I have inherited a tradition of making that is tied to previous generations of my family. My grandparents were first generation Canadians. They made their living from the land as farmers, and as such, they highly valued self-sufficiency. In terms of making, they often built their own buildings and tools. In my immediate family context, car culture was a constant presence for me while growing up. In his early career, my father worked as a mechanic in southern Ontario during the muscle car era. A move to Saskatchewan to teach high-school auto mechanics allowed for his continued engagement with this realm. In addition to making his living from cars, my father has also had a life-long personal obsession with cars. This finds expression through the fully custom and hand-built cars he has created. The most relevant example of this is the *Kookie Kar* clone that he constructed. The original *Kookie Kar* had a recurring role in the 1960s television program *77 Sunset Strip*. My father's obsession with this car began with his viewing of this program. Over the eighteen-years that I lived in my parent's house (a span of time two-years exceeded by the construction of this car) it came to feel like more of a mechanical sibling than just a car. It is reasonable to deduce that the conditions of my up-bringing and family history have directly affected my ideas about craft, production, and copying as a viable form of expression.



Figure 3. John Dyck, *Kookie Kar clone*, customized 1916 Ford Model T.

This engagement with car culture sometimes clashed with the religious landscape of my youth. The building of a custom car required a large and varied network of acquaintances who could help realize the details necessary for the desired creation. In the course of following my father around for a weekend, I would find myself in both the back room of a biker chrome shop (with its attendant pin-up porn and profane vocabulary) and at an hours-long evangelical church service. The sense of inconsistency that this instilled made the world seem wonderfully discordant and full of possibility and contradiction. Thus, these traditions of making were extended to me. Growing up, there was no television set in our house. This choice reflects my parent's upbringings, which they claimed had required them to make their own entertainment, and their attempt to exclude ostensibly undesirable popular cultural elements from our household (despite our repeated exposure to the pornographic and profane in the pursuit of authentic hot-rod culture). Instead, my parents allowed my brother and me to have a room in the basement to

use as a studio/workshop. What we lacked in access to popular culture was balanced by access to tools, materials, time and space in which to construct our own entertainment. I can remember making many things such as improvised toy cars, questionably powerful spear guns, and a collection of parts that assembled and reassembled into multiple iterations of bikes. The constant encouragement and the availability of tools and facilities for this kind of making prompted me to construct things of my own from an early age. Projects included many home built bicycles, a go-kart, and a variety of other improvised gizmos. As I gained skills, I progressed to helping my father restore old vehicles.

In the art world, these ways of constructing a desired object with the materials at hand is commonly referred to as bricolage. An economy of means is at play in my *Apparatus for the Treatment of a Broken Arm*. The narrative that develops between the title, with its reference to Duchamp, and the thing itself suggests that the shovel, an object complicit in the breaking of the arm, has been re-purposed as a solution to the problem of the broken arm. In this re-purposing, the only materials that have been added to the original object are several fasteners which are used to hold the assembly together.

A contemporary American artist whose practice interests me and who is rooted in bricolage is Tom Sachs. The bricoleur aesthetic is very evident throughout Sach's entire body of work, with his objects typically being constructed by very humble means using inexpensive and found materials. For Sachs, this approach functions as a common ground on which the work can vicariously interact with its audience: "[a]nalog technology is something that almost anyone can fix when it breaks. You can see it, feel it, touch it" (Sachs, 31).



Figure 4. Tom Sachs, *Hasselblad*, 2008, pyrography, thermal adhesive, ConEd barrier wood.

In making *Apparatus of the Treatment of a Broken Arm*, I began with a snow shovel that I had used for clearing winter sidewalks. I got this shovel stuck in ice near the end of winter, and it broke when I tried to pull it out. To me, this chance occurrence alluded to Duchamp's *In Advance of the Broken Arm*. In finishing *Apparatus for the Treatment of a Broken Arm*, I cut this used and broken shovel into pieces (referenced to the dimensions of my body). I reassembled these newly formed pieces into an apparatus that immobilizes my right arm against my body. Marks resulting from the slip of a file or grinder during construction are evident. Areas where I have ripped apart the original welded structure of the shovel are left in their bare, rusted state. It is my intention here that this evidence of the process of making can provide one entry point for

the reading of the work. Similar to Tom Sach's work, my piece and these surface marks allow for an imaginative interaction: a viewer can develop an idea of the process of making.

DIY culture embodies the democratic notion that everyone should be able to craft their own appropriate material culture. Art-historically, this can be seen as a reflection of 20th-century German artist Joseph Beuys' well-known proclamation that "everyone is an artist." As a teenager, Beuys was a member of the Hitler youth, and during WWII became a radio operator for the German Air Force. On May 16, 1944, his plane was shot down over the Crimean region of Russia. According to his story, he was rescued from this crash by members of the Tartar clan, who covered him in fat and felt to insulate him, and took him to a German hospital. The materials of fat and felt later became iconic for his work as emblems for healing and reconciliation. Beuys repeated this story constantly, but in various guises over the course of his career. The repetition of this story might be read as an attempt on Beuys' part to distance himself from the disastrous activities of the Third Reich. In this way, Beuys employs this story as a background for an art practice that is interested in healing the post-war wounds of his nation.



Figure 5. Joseph Beuys, *Homogenous Infiltration for Piano*, 1968, piano, felt.

In Beuys 1968 piece, *Homogenous Infiltration for Piano*, the generosity of the attempt at healing is evident. In his essay, *Joseph Beuys and the After-Auschwitz Sublime*, Berlin-based critic, Gene Ray, claims “[t]he silenced piano ... asserts the impossibility of conventional human art, even in that most abstract medium of music, to represent this catastrophe for mourning and remembrance” (68). The piano in this work can be read as a stand-in for the body. Metaphorically, there’s a damaged or broken music here, and the felt is a material aimed at healing and insulating this fracture.

Beuys’ later art practice expanded the idea of sculpture to include his notion of “social sculpture.” He recognized the need for art to transcend the boundaries of the gallery space, a space that is too often the sole domain of the *cognoscenti*. Rather, he tried to find strategies for taking art out into the world. “Everyone is an artist” is a description of Beuys’ view of the ideal society, where citizens can find engagement creatively in all aspects of life, particularly through political involvement.

In questioning the nature and function of art, Beuys engaged with similar questions to Duchamp. However, instead of self-referential riddles (as often produced by Duchamp), Beuys’ work was outward looking and generous to a non-art educated public. The narrative I have established with *Apparatus for the Treatment of a Broken Arm* can be read metaphorically to suggest a way out of the reflexive and cynical connotations embodied by Duchamp’s *In Advance of the Broken Arm*. I will return to this idea later after examining my earlier Duchamp-inflected paintings which grew out of my undergraduate degree in art, which I pursued in reaction to my initial training in engineering technologies.



Figure 6. David Dyck, *Poker Painting*, 2011, fabric, wood, sports jersey number, electrical and mechanical components.

A piece made early in my MFA program, *Poker Painting*, represents a transition from my undergraduate work which relied heavily on visual seduction, the machine aesthetic, and kinetic aspects. My development of a machine aesthetic has its roots in childhood tinkering, the influence of my family's participation in car culture, as well as my formal training in the field of engineering. Directly after completing high school, my interest in the mechanical led me to pursue a diploma in CAD/CAM Engineering Technology. This two-year program developed the skills to function in a support role to fully qualified engineers. I was trained in a variety of technical drawing programs, computer-assisted manufacturing processes, and engineering

calculations. Like many other naïve young people entering engineering-related fields, I was driven by dreams of designing and building rocket ships and race cars.

Upon graduating from this program, I found working life to be something more banal. I moved into a career in a small steel-fabricating business. My main responsibilities in this position were to prepare estimates for jobs and to program computer-controlled laser cutters and metal-forming machines. I was excited to learn how to use the new materials and processes available to me. This initial excitement eventually gave way to tedium. Additionally, the general atmosphere was always pressured by client's just-in-time production planning (this is a practice designed to maximise profits by keeping production capacity "fluid," ordering products on the shortest possible delivery schedule). After three-and-a-half years at this job, I quit and decided to pursue an education in art.

In the earlier years of my art education, I devoted myself to figure drawing. In figure drawing, I found something that was almost entirely removed from the structured world of engineering. Even a slight movement by the artist or model can alter the composition of the drawing in noticeable ways. Thus there is a constant element of chance that must be accommodated when drawing from life. I saw this contrasting mode of working as an essential way forward, a move away from a career that I intended to leave behind.

My graduating Bachelor of Fine Art show in the Gordon Snelgrove gallery in 2011, was predominantly comprised of kinetic/productive machines. The work leading up to my BFA show was focussed on combining my knowledge of engineering and mechanics with art. *E-Z Spray* (2011) was the centrepiece of this show. It was an elaborate printing machine constructed of found objects, wood, and mechanical components. This work had a performative aspect: during

the opening hours of the gallery I tended to the machine's often imperfect operations. It pushed out over 1100 unique prints over the course of a week. I observed each one, and repaired the machine multiple times so that production could continue. *E-Z Spray* references my past experiences of working in a steel fabrication production shop. The act of running this machine replicated the boredom that any worker involved in repetitive tasks feels. However, doing this in an art context allowed me to make a comparative study of the two disciplines. Further, the imperfections that surfaced in the construction and operation of *E-Z Spray* opened a line of questioning into the operations of chance that continues in the work in *Pure Sugar*.



Figure 7. David Dyck, *E-Z Spray*, 2011, wood, ink, paper, electrical and mechanical components, performance.

Poker Painting was created in a similar mode of making and thinking to *E-Z Spray* while also differing from it in some key aspects. Both are objects that rely on a certain level of mechanical complexity for their functioning. The visual payoff resulting from the display of these workings was an essential part of *E-Z Spray*. In contrast, the workings of *Poker Painting* are obscured by a fabric covering, thus reducing the importance of the visual appeal of the mechanical aspect of this work. This move allowed for the privileging of the ideas behind the creation of the piece. The idea behind *Poker Painting* arose when I was viewing the finalists for the RBC painting competition. This is an annual competition with the ostensible goal of finding Canada's best young painter. The prestige of nation-wide media attention that is bestowed on the winner of this contest attracted me to it; paintings by the finalists of the competition are taken on tour across Canada stopping to hang for a time in each province. Partly due to a regional inferiority complex (prairie painters are always minimally represented in this competition), and also due to the fact that I generally don't make paintings, it occurred to me that I would have great difficulty winning this competition. In a purposeful misapplication of engineering-style problem solving, I set out to make a painting that could win this competition through purely physical means. With there being no more than ten finalists, a painting that could physically incapacitate its competitors would win the competition (by the end of its tour schedule) not on any painterly merit, but through attrition.

In response to this painting competition, I built a four-foot-square painting stretcher with a series of gears and levers concealed within. When this system is activated, it causes pokers to protrude from the sides of the painting. These pokers reach out with the intention of knocking neighbouring paintings from their hanging hardware and onto the floor. Additionally, the extended reach of the pokers allows the painting to claim a total of twelve feet of wall space at

full extension. Since the painting's physically combative stance assures victory, it is unnecessary to actually paint anything on its surface. In lieu of painting, I have stretched spandex jersey material in the hue of "Drunk Tank Pink." This colour is purported to pacify overly aggressive prisoners, and it should do likewise for overly aggressive painters. In homage to deceased stock-car racer, Dale Earnhardt, an iron-on number three has been applied to the surface of the spandex. This number leaves no doubt about the seriousness of this painting's competitive intentions.

Despite the jest of this work, I would have a bad feeling if *Poker Painting* were to actually succeed in destroying other people's paintings. Rather than a critique of any specific painting, *Poker Painting* is a critique of the system that maintains the RBC painting competition. My reaction against the RBC competition is mainly against the tone of seriousness and status it represents. Through this competition the artist (producer of cultural capital) is placed in direct service of financial capital. In contrast, the creation of this work, and the full commitment to this depraved/reckless idea has brought me great joy. This is a gesture made in the vein of Socratic irony – of feigned naiveté intended to reveal the absurdity of the exercise that is competition in art. My reactionary stance towards this competition is adopted purely to justify my own continued existence as an artist, because if I wanted to join in unquestioning support of institutions such as RBC, there would be far easier ways to do it than by making speculative paintings for them. It is in this sense that the *Poker Painting* has a general connection to the Duchampian tradition of making humorously cynical comments about art.

A second of my painting pieces, *Airtight Painting*, is, like *Poker Painting*, based on a provocative bad joke. This diptych is a bodily reference focussed on nipples. These paintings are designed as pressure vessels, sealed from the inside with liquid latex, the nipples themselves

being valve-stems (French valves) taken from bicycle tires. This allows the painting structure to be pressured up internally, yielding a rounded contour to the painting's surface.



Figure 8. David Dyck, *Airtight Painting*, 2013, acrylic on canvas, bicycle tire valves, air.

The title, *Airtight Painting*, is a pun relating to the fact that these paintings yield immediately to criticism from multiple sources. They might be read as nude paintings done in a minimalist style, or as having an ironic stance towards historical nude genre painting in general. My hope is that it is a bad enough idea that it doesn't have a leg to stand on ... it is anything but airtight in that sense.

My own jokes about painting have some affinity with the work of American conceptual artist, John Baldessari. In response to Clement Greenberg's assertion that painting should purge itself of everything except for its own internally consistent form, Baldessari made the painting, *Everything is purged from this painting but art, no ideas have entered this work*, 1966-68. This is one painting in a series of work by Baldessari that uses hand lettered text on white canvasses to make jokes about the conventions of art. This work was produced at a time when modernist formalism was on its last legs as the dominant paradigm for the creation of art, set to be overtaken by an art rooted in conceptualism, as anticipated by the early work of Duchamp. In contrast to the serious outlook of the Greenbergian camp, this early postmodern art was an art that accepted and encouraged irreverence.

A third painting piece in *Pure Sugar, Micro-Adjust Painting*, uses engineering to solve a minor background problem with the display and conservation of paintings – they sometimes warp on their stretchers. This piece proposes a solution to the problem that is so overwrought that it necessitates cutting out a large portion of the surface of the image to allow access to the canvas' attitude adjustment apparatus. Any warp can be quickly adjusted out by spinning the threaded turnbuckles that attach to the painting's central mounting bracket. *Micro-Adjust Painting* is mounted to the wall with a single central screw to allow for the fastest and most efficient installation possible. Even the graphical treatment of the surface has been put into service here, directing the viewer (or technician) to the workings of the structural support of the canvas. This is a continuation of the themes of irreverence and absurdity found in my other painted works.



Figure 9. David Dyck, *Micro-Adjust Painting*, acrylic on canvas, wire, turnbuckles.

The final painting piece in *Pure Sugar, Accumulation (Wall Bulge)* is a transitional piece that references both painting and the gallery architecture used to support it. It is an exaggeration of the traces that a painting leaves behind when attached to and removed from a wall.

Accumulation (Wall Bulge) is inspired by looking at the bare walls of long-established galleries. Over time, all the hanging hardware that has been installed in, removed from, and repaired on these walls leaves a growth of patched screw and nail holes that almost imperceptibly bow the flat surface of the wall outward. This outward bulge disrupts the flatness of an ideal picture plane, making these exist as objects that speak about painting, not as paintings themselves. Like

the “paintings” it shares space with, *Accumulation (Wall Bulge)* has a form that alludes to bodily bulges.



Figure 10. David Dyck, *Accumulation (Wall Bulge)*, 2013, polystyrene foam, paper, paint (installation, left wall).

The remainder of the pieces in *Pure Sugar* are sculptural works. In the interactive sculptural piece, *Periscope*, I cut a doorway into one of the gallery’s movable walls, built a platform inside, and installed a periscope that let viewers look just above the level of the dropped ceiling. The periscope is a hand-built version of an improvised children’s toy, the cereal box periscope, or of a machine typically used for military surveillance. Upon opening the door to the periscope chamber, viewers are presented with a didactic illustration describing the operation of

the periscope. The door to the periscope's chamber is spring-loaded to close, leaving the viewer in a confined and dark space. Only the power switch to the periscope's light is illuminated. Participation with the piece requires viewers to grab the handles of the periscope, depress the button to turn on the lights, and peek into the viewing window. The periscope offers 360° of rotation and a moderate amount of vertical adjustment; however, these are both limited by the viewer's bodily interaction with the narrow space of the chamber. In this way, *Periscope* exemplifies the move away from a well-defined aesthetic payoff in my work. For a viewer, initial engagement with the piece relies on increasingly demanding physical and psychological tasks. This progression is subverted upon successful operation of the periscope apparatus, the point where the aesthetic payoff should logically reside. At this point I offer the viewer nothing in return for their efforts – I have left the above-ceiling space in its unaltered, dusty, banal state. Light, sound, optics, and free bodily movement are all compromised by this piece.

Periscope's relationship to viewers is akin to that of work by other installation artists. Installation art is radically different from traditional forms of painting or sculpture in its relation to viewers. In her 2005 book, *Installation Art*, Claire Bishop argues that the requirement for a viewer's physical participation in an installation artwork is “emancipatory, since it is analogous to the viewer's engagement in the world.” Further, a “transitive relationship therefore comes to be implied between 'activated spectatorship' and active engagement in the social-political arena” (11). She further claims that “Rather than heightening awareness of our perceiving body and its physical boundaries, these dark installations suggest our dissolution; they seem to dislodge or annihilate our sense of self - albeit only temporarily - by plunging us into darkness” (82). In the case of *Periscope*, there is near-complete darkness inside the chamber, and further discordance as the expectation of light from the ceiling is denied.



Figure 11. David Dyck, *Periscope*, (exterior view), 2012, gallery wall and ceiling, wood, mirrors, electrical and mechanical components; back wall: *Accumulation (Wall Bulge)*



Figure 12. David Dyck, *Periscope*, (interior view)

This kind of discordance is also evident in the work of Icelandic artist, Katrín Sigurðardóttir. Her 2005, *High Plane III*, consists of a “wooden platform, painted white, on which a number of small blue-coloured three dimensional landscapes have been set. The viewer climbs a 4m-high ladder and places his/her head through a hole in the surface of the platform.”



Figure 13. Katrín Sigurðardóttir, *High Plane III*, 2005, wood, foam, ladders, gallery architecture.

Because of this imposed viewing location, “[t]he place to which the viewer has been led distorts his sense of correct proportion” (Sigurðsson, 46). *High Plane III* was an inspiration for me in the creation of *Periscope*. It demonstrates how a relatively simple gesture can recontextualize the conditions of the entire gallery space. Examination of the physical architecture in the context of *Pure Sugar*, which considers ways of looking, conventions of display and institutions of art,

gives viewers an opportunity to reflect on the mediation of the “white cube” of the gallery space in their own experience of art.

A second sculptural piece in my show that aims to question the conventions of display in modern galleries is *Hover Plinth*. This piece is a questionably-engineered project aimed at solving a problem of modern sculpture: do you hang it from the ceiling or set it on the floor? In response to this dilemma, my plinth hovers 1mm above the floor. *Hover Plinth* carries *Superlight Object*, which is a small abstract form constructed of paper, masking tape, and latex rubber. *Superlight Object* was initially built in order to test techniques of construction; however, I chose to include it as the payload for *Hover Plinth* due to its small size. The difference in scale between the object and the plinth that supports it lends an additional air of absurdity to the work. In operation, this piece activates the space through movement and sound. Responding to a viewer’s proximity through a motion sensor, *Hover Plinth* switches on and floats aimlessly but noisily around the gallery space. This action is unsettling and suggests the degree of discomfort which exists for many viewers inside the gallery space, perhaps brought on by the gallery’s assumed status as a space that demands reverence, while often remaining cloaked in obscurity.

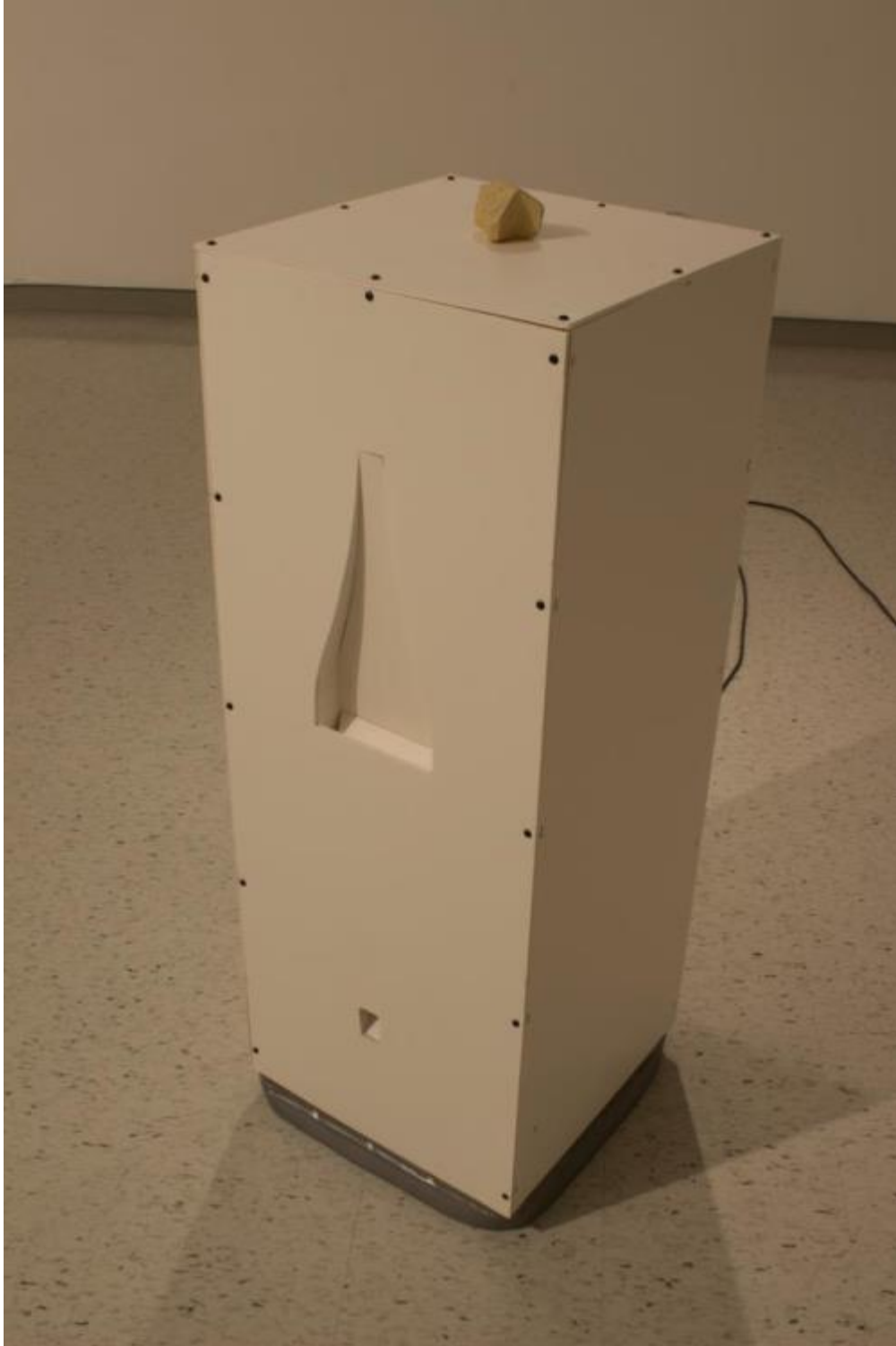


Figure 14. David Dyck, *Hover Plinth with Superlight Object*, 2013, wood, paper, foam-core, electrical and mechanical components.

Another sculptural piece, *Bicycle Wheel*, is a bicycle wheel constructed out of painting materials - canvas (tire), wooden stretcher (rim), hanging hooks and wire (spokes) - to the same outside dimensions as the front wheel of the bicycle that it is installed on. It is both an object and a video documentation of a performance. The piece was completed by riding this hand-built wheel through the Saskatchewan landscape until the tire punctured and the spokes began to break. This took approximately eight kilometers of riding over the course of two rides. This work is more of an artifact than an object: it is an object that implies use. It has a reluctant status as an object held within the confines of the gallery. This is reflected in the display strategy I employ here: the bicycle is locked to the gallery with a u-lock shackle that protrudes from the wall. The video documenting the travels of the wheel plays on a small screen alongside the bicycle wheel. The act of building this wheel was quite involved and lengthy. Art supplies are only very marginally suited to the challenges of building a structurally viable wheel. Extra care had to be taken in the planning and assembly of this piece. This way of working is informed by the several years I spent working as a bicycle mechanic. In this job, a huge variety of bicycles have to be repaired with a relatively small selection of standardized parts. Further, bicycles need to be fit to the bodies and preferences of individual customers. For this reason, accessories are often custom fitted, or adapted from what is available in the shop.



Figure 15. David Dyck, *Bicycle Wheel*, 2012, video still.

The title and subject of this piece refers to another of Duchamp's most famous works, *Bicycle Wheel*. His work consisted of a bicycle wheel and fork assembly inverted and attached to the top of a stool. Due to its hand-crafted status and its performance of actions outside the confines of the gallery, my work must be read as a reversal of Duchamp's ready-made. My *Bicycle Wheel* (2012), maintains irreverence, while suggesting some authentic (non-sarcastic) idea of what art can be: it is an object that carries meaning out into the world. Extending beyond purely formal concerns, this is an object that is made more interesting because it is marked from use. It owes much to conceptualism's privileging of idea over object and is an invitation to move beyond the confines of the gallery. *Bicycle Wheel* (2012) represents a collision of the chance/plan binary that I have defined as important to my work. The planning for this wheel needed to be quite precise in order for it to work. The use of the wheel represents a complete

surrender to chance. The construction of the wheel ended up in the space between planning and chance.

In art historical terms, this DIY/craft manner of working has been theorized through the figure of the bricoleur, as mentioned above in relation to Tom Sachs. American art critic, Arthur Danto, gives a succinct definition: “Bricolage is really a certain kind of thinking - thinking with one's hands by making use of whatever material happens to be available” (Danto qtd. in Sachs, 14). The use of found and ready-made materials has a long tradition in modern art and maintains its relevance in contemporary practices. We live in a material world still, but according to American philosopher Matthew Crawford, our relationship towards objects is shifting towards something “more passive and more dependent... [w]hat ordinary people once made, they buy...and what they once fixed for themselves, they replace entirely or hire an expert to repair”(n.p.) If this can be believed, it suggests that we have, on average, more things than our predecessors, but are less able to deal with them on any significant level. It is in this approach to art making that the real generosity towards the viewer exists. The idea that anyone could cobble together a world of their own making from the material that surrounds them is appealing and evident in the work of the artists considered here. These works both hold my interest because of their hand-made status, and inspire me to make things of my own.

The work included in *Pure Sugar* explores the main formal and conceptual concerns that I have engaged with over the course of my studies in the University of Saskatchewan’s MFA program. The central theme of the work in *Pure Sugar* is spectatorship within the context of the gallery. For me, this interest in ways of looking demonstrates a development of competence in my own critical thinking abilities. The constant questioning reflected in this practice is something that will stay with me in future work.

Part of this reflexive engagement has allowed me to examine my own inherited and intentionally sought-out ways of making. My experience in making things has occurred on a spectrum that moves from improvised, home-built objects to the output of industrial mass production to the idealized creation of art objects. Examining my own engagement at various points on this artistic/engineering spectrum reveals what may be the central conflict of my current working process: openness to chance versus adherence to a plan. Another important outcome of this considered exploration of the context in which I create my work is a greater awareness of the political implications of the handcrafted object as, perhaps, exemplified at this moment in time in the DIY movement.

Ultimately, the gap between intention and realization is one that can and should not be closed while producing art. If the work in *Pure Sugar* is judged based on its ability to close the gap between intention and realization, it must be seen to fail. Where this gap is closed, the result is works of craft, design or illustration. In my own personal histories of making I have engaged in similar processes, yielding similar products. Alternatively, I find the process of making art to be more engaging through its ambiguity. My changing relationship to the tension between plan and chance is also reflected in the conceptual aspects of the work. As an artist, I have come to understand that I am capable of only imperfect communication. I can take things only so far and the spectator has to finish the rest. I can provide the raw material, as in Duchamp's "molasses," but the process of viewing is what will yield the final product.

Pure Sugar is also informed broadly by art historical references, particularly the irreverent work of Duchamp. The contradictory aspects of my own personal history resonated with the intentions of artists like Duchamp and Sachs, among others. The spirit of the work of the artists referenced in this paper, and of my own work, describes a necessary duality of spirit,

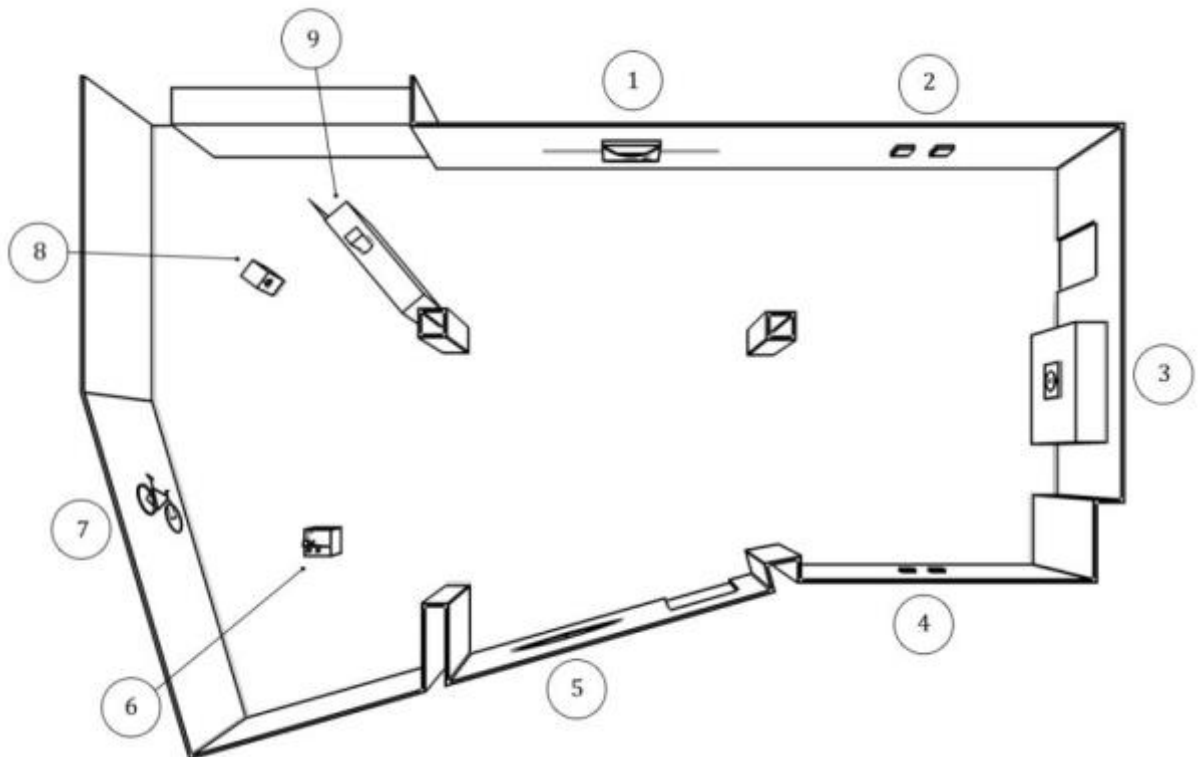
and suggests that a humorous or sarcastic tone may be necessary with one thing, a generous and hopeful one with another. I love that the art world makes room for this type of thing and that the work in *Pure Sugar* offers two paths forward. This amounts to my choosing a certain habit of mind that seems appropriate to carry my artistic practice forward.

Appendix A

Pure Sugar guide sheet: copies of the following two-page guide were stacked in a paper holder outside the gallery doors.

Pure Sugar

An MFA Exhibition by David Dyck



1. ***Poker Painting***, 2011, fabric, wood, sports jersey number, electrical and mechanical components.
-constructed with the intent to win the RBC painting competition through purely physical means.

2. **Untitled, 2011**, acrylic on canvas, plywood.
-an exploration of anatomical and mechanical form.
3. **Micro-Adjust Painting**, acrylic on canvas, wire, turnbuckles.
-engineered to solve a minor background problem with the display and conservation of paintings – they sometimes warp on their stretchers.
4. **Airtight Painting**, 2013, acrylic on canvas, bicycle tire valves, air.
-sealed from the inside, the pressure inside these canvases causes their surface to bow outward.
5. **Accumulation (Wall Bulge)**, 2013, polystyrene foam, paper, paint.
-an exaggeration of the traces that a painting leaves behind when attached to and removed from a wall.
6. **Apparatus for the Treatment of a Broken Arm**, 2013, snow shovel, fasteners.
- derivative of Marcel Duchamp's *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, a well-known example of one of his “ready-mades.” In this piece, Duchamp selected a common object, in this case a snow shovel from a store, inscribed it with the phrase, “In Advance of the Broken Arm,” and hung it on the wall as an art work for exhibition.
7. **Bicycle Wheel**, 2012, artifact: bicycle wheel (asphalt pigment on canvas, wood, hanging wire and hooks, inner tube), video documentation of performance: 45 second loop (filmed by Leana Dyck).
- completed by riding this hand-built wheel through the Saskatchewan landscape until the tire punctured and the spokes began to break.
8. **Hover Plinth with Superlight Object**, 2013, wood, paper, foam-core, electrical and mechanical components.
- a questionably-engineered project aimed at solving a problem of modern sculpture: do you hang it from the ceiling or set it on the floor?
9. **Periscope**, 2012, gallery wall and ceiling, wood, mirrors, electrical and mechanical components.
-inspired by an improvised children’s toy, or an instrument of military surveillance.

Appendix B

These images represent some other work completed during my MFA degree:



David Dyck, *Two-Stroke Printmaking*, 2013, modified chainsaw engine, wood, paper, painting supplies, performance.

A modified chainsaw engine's exhaust was used to propel paint through four-colour-process (CMYK) stencils representing a common prairie landscape scene.



David Dyck, *Drumbike*, 2012, bicycle, drums, mechanical components.

A bicycle was fitted with eight mechanically actuated drums to mimic the sound of an internal combustion engine.



David Dyck, *Fountain*, 2013, tool box, pump, water, acrylic painting supplies.

A tool box filled with painting supplies was converted into a recirculating water fountain. The idea for this piece was suggested by the form of the box.



David Dyck, *Free Bicycle Wheel Truing*, 2013, stool, bicycle wheel truing stand, signage, performance.

I offered free bicycle wheel truing for the duration of one eight-hour day. This piece was made in homage to Marcel Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel*.



David Dyck, *Self Portrait*, 2013, pewter, aluminum, wire, performance.

I cast a replica of my keys in pewter. None of the replica keys were precise enough to function. I carried this replica in the same pocket as the original for one month. At the beginning of the month, I could feel a difference between the rough texture of the cast keys and the smooth finish of the originals. As the month passed the replica keys developed a smooth surface through wear.

The two sets of keys became difficult enough to tell apart that the minor frustration of retrieving the non-functional replica became a common occurrence.



David Dyck, *Apparatus for Ascending a Brutalist Staircase*, 2012, custom climbing cams and shoes, performance.

I built an apparatus to engage with the dimensions of the mold plugs on the exposed concrete walls of a Brutalist staircase. I was able to ascend without using the stairs.

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