Spring 2019

Neo_Fluxus & Dragons

Zachary A. Kelley

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/etd

Part of the Fine Arts Commons, Painting Commons, Printmaking Commons, and the Sculpture Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/etd/1892

This thesis (open access) is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Studies, Jack N. Averitt College of at Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu.
ABSTRACT

What is a viewer? Who can be a viewer? What is the purpose of a viewer? Is viewing an artwork a process? How does a viewer interact with an artwork? What is an artist? Are the formal elements or conceptual natures more important in art making? Why is that art? These questions and more direct me in how and why I make my art.

I will be discussing the relationship between the viewer and the artwork in an artwork experience. I will define an artwork experience using an analysis of Michael Fried’s notion of theatricality, relating the viewer to the artwork in an artwork setting, such as a gallery. In my opinion, the viewer is the ultimate decider of an artwork’s art-ness; how we define an artwork is solely based on if and how the viewer understands/interacts with the artwork. In this thesis, I will be discussing the artwork experience and come to an understanding of how a viewer may interact within that experience.

Using Dungeons and Dragons game mechanics, I create participatory experiences for viewers to explore. Using polyhedral dice to create a chance-based system, used in many roleplaying tabletop games like D&D, I create works centered on the notion of viewer interactions within the experience.
INDEX WORDS: Neo_Fluxus & Dragons, MFA, Art, Theatricality, Fluxus, D&D, Dungeons & Dragons, Participation
NEO_FLUXUS & DRAGONS

by

ZACHARY KELLEY

B.F.A., Georgia Southern University, 2016

M.F.A., Georgia Southern University, 2019

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

STATESBORO, GEORGIA
NEO_FLUXUS & DRAGONS

By

ZACHARY KELLEY

Major Professor:  Jason Hoelscher
Committee: Patricia Carter
               Robert Farber

Electronic Version Approved:
May 2019
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. THEORETICAL AND CONTEXTUAL BASIS</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. THESIS EXHIBITION</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. RESOURCES CITED</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I need to thank my committee for working with me and serving very specific roles:

**Jason:** Thanks for being my committee chair and expanding how I think about art. Through all of the reading and thinking and rethinking, my brain has expanded way beyond anything I could have ever imagined!

**Trish:** You have been my mentor since I took Print II all those years ago. You have pushed me in many different ways over the years. Thank you for all of the opportunities you gave me as I worked in the print studio as the assistant. I will miss our print studio antics!

**Robert:** I chose you specifically because you were the outsider at first. We had a few run ins here and there, but then I took your graduate studio class. I got to see first-hand the good things people said about your classes. For me, it is important to get fresh perspectives in my studio and you provided just that. Through you I was allowed to take fresh, new looks at my works and really examine what I was trying to accomplish.

Beyond my committee, I want to thank all of the Georgia Southern University BFSDoA faculty for the past eight years. I believe I have had everyone at least once as a professor at some time or another. Y’all have molded me into the artist I am now.

I want to, also, thank my fellow colleagues who are on the same MFA boat as I am. You guys have been good friends and really helped/ influenced my art in more ways than you’ll ever know. I, especially, want to thank Nik and Nicole… or should I say Brokk and Sculda! Seriously, between all of the D&D, drinks, and art, I couldn’t imagine life without you guys.

Last, but most certainly not least, I MUST thank my fiancé, Jessie. She had been through the hells of grad school right alongside me. The only difference between her and I is the paper that reads MFA. She is a real trooper and held me up at my lowest! Thanks babe!
LIST OF FIGURES

Page

Figure 1: Donald Judd, Untitled .........................................................................................11

Figure 2: Jackson Pollock, One: Number 31 .................................................................15

Figure 3: Vladimir Tatlin, Letatlin ornithopter ..............................................................20

Figure 4: Zak Kelley, Toad Zak .........................................................................................24

Figure 5: Zak Kelley, FU Toasters Attack ..........................................................................25

Figure 6: Zak Kelley, Doors ...............................................................................................26

Figure 7: Zak Kelley, Zax Kiggy Self-Portrait ...................................................................27

Figure 8: Zak Kelley, Zak Kelley Self-Portrait .................................................................27

Figure 9: Zak Kelley, Untitled (Blue) That’s Such A Lame Title .......................................28

Figure 10: Zak Kelley, I Told You I Wanted It to be Named Untitled (Red)! But This One is the Painting I Made, So You Can’t Name It .........................................................................................28

Figure 11: Zak Kelley, Sometimes, I Wonder if This is Nothing .......................................30

Figure 12: Zak Kelley, Irrelevant Method 1 ......................................................................31

Figure 13: Zak Kelley, Is This Bad Probz .........................................................................32

Figure 14: Zak Kelley, Painting 1A ...................................................................................33

Figure 15: Zak Kelley, Rules Experimentation Diptych (The Mainland is Too Much for Our Heroes) ..................................................................................................................................................34

Figure 16: Zak Kelley, Rules Experiment Canvas (They Voyage to Find Wealth & Riches in a New World) ........................................................................................................................................36

Figure 17: Zak Kelley, Grouping 1 ...................................................................................37

Figure 18: Zak Kelley, Grouping 2 ...................................................................................38
Figure 19: Zak Kelley, *Neo_Fluxus & Dragons View 1* ................................................................. 40
Figure 20: Yayoi Kusama, *Obliteration Room* ................................................................. 43
Figure 21: Zak Kelley, *Neo_Fluxus & Dragons View 2* ................................................................. 45
Figure 22: Zak Kelley, *Neo_Fluxus & Dragons View 3* ................................................................. 46
Figure 23: Zak Kelley, *Neo_Fluxus & Dragons View 4* ................................................................. 47
Figure 24: Zak Kelley, *Last Notebook* .................................................................................. 48
Figure 25: Zak Kelley, *Session 1: Scene 4* .................................................................................. 49
Figure 26: Zak Kelley, *Session 1: Scene 2* .................................................................................. 51
Figure 27: Zak Kelley, *Session 1: Scene 1* .................................................................................. 52
Figure 28: Zak Kelley, *Rules Experimentation Diptych (The Mainland is Too Much for Our Heroes)* ................................................................. 53
Figure 29: Zak Kelley, *Rondo Does a Sick Flip to Attack the Guard. It Looked Cool but Ultimately Did Nothing* .................................................................................. 54
Figure 30: Zak Kelley, *The King Commands the Prisoners Forward* ................................................................. 55
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

As a part of my process, both as an artist and human being, I am constantly questioning how things work and why. In art, I constantly go through questions that lead to more questions. I am puzzled by questions like: Why is that art? Are formal elements or concepts more important in art making? What is a viewer? Is viewing an artwork a process? Can an artist be a viewer of their own work? How does a viewer interact with an artwork? What is the purpose of a viewer? Who can be a viewer? These questions and more direct me in how and why I make my art.

The intent of the artwork is to create an active, participatory experience for my viewers using Dungeons and Dragons game mechanics. Fantasy roleplaying games have always been a huge influence in my life outside of art; actually it was the reason I got into art in the first place. From that starting point, I became interested in D&D as it was my logical next step into nerdom. It combined the RPG elements I had grown to love with the literal creation of my own stories I wanted to tell. So, for the past year and a half (and for a brief time in high school), it has been a hobby of mine.

While in grad school, I began to use Fluxus influences in my work to create participation via theatricality. With D&D fresh on my mind, I began to compare it with the Fluxus notions of participation. As an experiment, I dissected my previous paintings into different components that make it up, components such as: white shapes, color camo shapes, phrases, brush sizes, surface sizes, symbols, amounts of shapes, amounts of brushes, etc. After dissecting the components, I assigned them all numbers and rolled dice to organize the components. By the end, I had made an artwork that resembled my earlier works but it was organized by this strategic and organized use of chance.
As the work progressed, I began to use D&D as a metaphor for the interaction between the parts that make up an artwork experience. Michael Fried’s notion of theatricality is the starting point of how the viewer interacts with an artwork in physical space. I will describe this in greater detail shortly, but for now let if suffice to say that theatricality leads to a one-on-one relationship between the viewer and the artwork. This notion reminded me of the interaction between the players in D&D. They interact with the game, though it is more than a one-on-one relationship. So, I expanded Fried’s notion of theatricality to include the artist. Thus, the analogy became:

1. The Dungeon Master/ Artist
2. The D&D Player/ Viewer
3. The D&D Game/ Artwork

Using these roleplaying-game-to-art-part relationships, my artwork explores how each of the parts interact within the whole art experience. These parts are in a constant state of flux as each inform the other, which means that the art experience is, also, in a constant state of change.

As this analogy developed, new problems arose. The question became, what is considered participation? Participation, as defined by Merriam-Webster dictionary, is “to take part” or “to have a part and share in something.” In this lies a difference in types of participation; a split between active and passive participation.

To describe this split, I use the notion of influence when describing the two. For passive participation, the artwork influences the viewer as the artwork is fully autonomous. The artwork gives all of the information to the viewer; it is, basically, a one-way street. This is practically an ideal situation as it is not situationally obtainable; no matter what the artwork is about, a normal viewer is going to interject some sort of personal experience into the artwork. This leads to
active participation. With active participation, the viewer brings their experiences into the equation, allowing the artwork and viewer to influence each other. This creates a feedback loop of information as each informs the other. This is more akin to how artwork experiences actually function. Theatricality, in my terms, would be considered an active participation model as the viewer and artwork do that exact information exchange.

Transparency is crucial to the reading of my artworks. The artworks I make are process-based, meaning the way I make the artworks is important to how they are understood. I use painter’s tape on the surface of the works to highlight the fact that I use tape. I use wood that anyone can buy to highlight the fact that it is wood. I want the audience to be aware that they are looking at stuff they have seen before to highlight the fact that they are looking not only at the thing, but everything around the artwork; thus highlighting the artwork experience. With this, it becomes apparent that the viewer must participate in the experience as the experience actively creates itself.

Returning to the use of Dungeons and Dragons, my artwork also follows a similarly formulaic ruleset to D&D. In D&D, dice rolls are used to create a sense of chance as it pertains to a player’s actions. If the dice roll is a high enough number, then the action succeeds to varying degrees. In my artworks, I have examined this game mechanic and I have dissected my artwork components into a formula, using the roll of polyhedral dice to determine what parts of the artworks get to be used. This is in tune with artists such as John Cage who used chance to create his artworks and musical compositions.

How I show artworks also plays to the idea of theatricality. I begin my process by determining how many paintings go into what I call a grouping. Groupings are multiple artworks that go into an installation, with the amount of artworks in a grouping being determined by dice
The artworks are made individually based on the chance-induced, dice rolled rules. After all of the artworks are completed, they are installed together much like a constructivist sculpture; all of the pieces come together to create the whole installation.

Titles are also immensely important to how the art installation is read. Each individual artwork has a title that displays the rules that were used and, in parenthesis, a description of a narrative scene. The narrative in this small line of text is a continuous story from artwork to artwork, chronicling the adventures of my first Dungeons and Dragons campaign. The artworks can be read from start to finish but the installation is read as a whole, highlighting how Dungeons and Dragons is played: segments that come together to create a whole narrative.
CHAPTER 2
THEORETICAL AND CONTEXTUAL BASIS

Coming from the constant questioning of all things art, one must understand where these ideas come from. It all starts with a thought that is written for others to read and comprehend. From there, more thoughts are formed that lead to new ideas. Thus the vicious cycle of ideas continues to circulate, allowing for a plethora of information to be created. All “new” ideas emerge from the previous ideas, meaning there is no true origin on thought. However, one can isolate specific thought cycles, and a cycle of information is where I will begin.

Theatricality and Participation as Art Experiences

As a part of my research, I have been fascinated by the idea of theatricality as it pertains to viewer experience. Michael Fried coined the term theatricality in *Art and Objecthood* in 1967, but the idea had been revolving in the minds of other art people during the 1960s. Robert Morris began to pick at some of these ideas. In 1966, Morris wrote *Notes On Sculpture I and II*, where he begins to break down what makes sculpture different from other art forms. In *Notes on Sculpture I*, he talks about the gestalt, which is the idea that things come together to make things bigger than the original thing. There is not a single focus within; it is only about whatever was formed in the end. In *Notes on Sculpture II*, he talks about the physical scale of the artwork and how that relates to a viewer’s understanding of space. Michael Fried responds to Morris with *Art and Objecthood*. Fried writes about Literalism/Minimalism as an art-form that is so devoid of detail that it redirects the viewer’s attention to their surroundings, thus the artwork becomes much like an act in a theatre on the shared stage of the gallery floor.
Fried is against this notion as he believes art should be totally autonomous; it should be art no matter what. If the art reminds you of the space you are in, then you are not looking at art but the -everything else-. “... the literalist espousal of objecthood amounts to nothing other than a plea for a new genre of theatre; and theatre is now the negation of art.” (Fried).

Robert Smithson, in his text *Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects*, breaks down the limits of the mind and basically calls out Fried’s reliance on these limitations. “Michael Fried’s shock at Smith’s experiences shows that the critic’s sense of limit cannot risk the rhythm of dedifferentiation that swings between ‘oceanic’ fragmentation and strong determinants… [Allan Kaprow’s] thinking is a good example - ‘Most humans still put up fences around their acts and
thoughts’... Fried thinks he knows who has the finest fences around their art.” What Smithson is wanting to convey here is the idea of looking at the adjacent ideas that surround art, i.e. the experience of art.

Also responding to Fried, Robert Morris writes *Notes On Sculpture IV*. In this, he re-elaborates on I and II and addresses Fried’s ideas in *Art and Objecthood*. Morris writes “What was relevant to the 60’s was the necessity of reconstituting the object as art… Art of the 60’s was an art of depicting images… If there is no esthetic investment in the priority of total images then projection or depiction of form is not a necessary mode.” Morris is saying that the way we are thinking about art is changing and is more based in experience than it is traditional art-making. “What is revealed is that art itself is an activity of change, of disorientation and shift, of violent discontinuity and mutability, of the willingness for confusion even in the service of discovering new perceptual modes.”

Now that the historical context is defined, let’s define theatricality more fully. Fried says in *Art and Objecthood* “Whereas in previous art ‘what is to be had from the work is located strictly within [it],’ the experience of literalist art is of an object in a situation - one that, virtually by definition, includes the beholder.” Here, Fried is defining the difference between the notions of artworks that absorb and artworks that are theatrical. He is saying here that previous artworks were wholly art within their selves, meaning a work of art is always a work of art whether it be in the gallery or in a shipping crate. Minimalism/ Literalism changes this notion, allowing for the experience of the artwork to be outward, switching to the space the art and viewer inhabit. In this sense, theatricality defines the relationship of the viewer and artwork in the space they coexist within.
As Fried says: “Everything counts - not as part of the object, but as part of the situation in which its objecthood is established and on which that objecthood at least partly depends.” This means the entire situation of which the art shares its space with a viewer is part of the whole experience of the art. Obviously, Fried was not for the notion of theatricality as it disrupts the absorbing, inward experience of Modern Art, but theatricality opens up so much potential for understanding how art operates.

In an attempt to expand beyond Fried’s theatrical notion, I begin to ask more questions. If art has been opened up into the space it is within, how do we define that space? Where does that space start and end? How does the viewer relate to the space and, by extension, participate in the whole art experience? How do all of these pieces come together to create a whole, a gestalt?

This all leads to the idea of art being an experience. Predating the theatricality writings I mentioned previously was the Fluxus movement. While Fluxus artists did not have a unifying style as it were, they did want to generate a do-it-yourself mentality leading to artworks and performances based in experience. Anti-art was a term describing the Fluxus artists’ actions as they went against the norm of gallery art at the time. Their works were not in galleries at the time, but were in the moment using chance and accident to create collaborative experiences with audiences.

The Fluxus movement is an example of participation in an art experience. Participation is a broad term meaning “to take part” or “to have a part and share in something.” Within these two definitions actually lies a difference in participation that is worth exploring. By dissecting participation using these definitions, I have split it into two parts: passive and active. Passive participation is to simply take part in the experience. It does not take into effect the sharing portion of the definition in this case. What this translates to in an art experience is the viewer
sees an artwork in all of its glory and understands it at face value. This notion is what Fried was arguing for as he believed in an artwork’s total autonomy.

The notion of active participation adds in the understanding of shared communication between the artwork and viewer. The shared portion of this definition allows the viewer to interject their experiences into the artwork, allowing for a feedback loop of information to occur between artwork and viewer. The active in this sense is not physical, as the viewer is not adding visuals to the artwork. The active is a mental communication using the past experiences, emotions, and knowledge of the viewer in combination with the visual communication the artwork provides.

As it stands in our current day and age, passive participation is an ideal. Everyone has access to art and everyone interjects their experiences onto artworks. “This work makes me feel like this.” “This artwork reminds me of my cousin’s sister.” “The use of Greenberg’s Formalism in the 21st Century is an unwanted revival of a dead aesthetic.” All three of these use prior experiences and/or knowledge to add some sort of inherited meaning to the artworks that may or may not be there. Active participation is the norm in how a viewer, despite their experiences, understands an artwork. So, to say passive participation is an ideal is to say that it is not very likely to happen in a normal art experience situation.

As the art experience opens up, we can see how process is incorporated into the experience. On the one hand, installing artwork into a gallery setting is a process in and of itself. Everything is hung with intention to give a certain feeling to the exhibition as a whole. This attempts to allow the viewer with their prior experiences to get a specific read of the installation.

Going beyond the installation as process would be for the artist to actually show the process in their work. The artwork would be less about the end product and more about how it
got to that end point in the first place. This is explored in Robert Smithson’s *Sedimentation of the Mind* that I mentioned before. Stripping down the artwork into the process allows the viewer to get a glimpse into the making of an artwork. It’s not that we necessarily appreciate Jackson Pollock’s work for its end result; we, also, appreciate the time and effort of how he accomplished the works.

Jackson Pollock, *One: Number 31, 1950*

It is not about the final result of the drips, but it is about the way he applied the drips as he painted in the space above the painting’s surface. The process of an artwork leads to an appreciation of how thing are made and thus highlights the experience of making.

The Viewer

An examination of the art experience is heavily influenced by the viewer. It is my belief that the viewer gets to determine how an artwork is experienced, but the question remains as to how we understand an art viewer. To understand the viewer, we must understand the role of the viewer in terms of passive and active participation.
Simply put, a viewer could be constituted as anything who looks directly at an artwork. The communication aspect of the art experience becomes ignored with this current definition and relates the passive participation model, which leads me to call this type of viewer the Passive Participator. Since an artwork is a visual communication of some kind, the Passive Participator definition is limited. This would mean that literally anything could be a viewer of an artwork: animals, artificial intelligence, people, cameras, etc. In terms of influence, the Passive Participator is only being influenced by the artwork. This is not an appropriate definition as it leaves out the responses an active participatory experience generates.

To expand into an active participation model, the viewer definition must expand into a person who can look at an artwork and communicate with it. In other words, the viewer must be influenced by the artwork while simultaneously influencing the artwork: The Active Participator. This adds in the notion that the viewer’s experiences influence how they understand what the artwork is trying to communicate. Further still, the Active Participator adds the notion of communication back into the experience as the viewer and artwork talk to each other, creating an information feedback loop.

Applying the Passive and Active Participators to Artworld analogies shows a different side to how we understand the Artworld. In my studies, I have heard a lecture around three or four times describing different types of artworlds. Jason Hoelscher describes an artworld as an overarching term that encompasses certain types of art within it. In his Three Artworld Ontology, Hoelscher describes three different branching artworlds that come together to create the Artworld. While his Three Artworld Ontology is a quick summary-style lecture meant to sum up the Artworld quickly and not meant to be a strict definition, it is worth analyzing this notion with precision to understand a critical viewpoint of the Artworld.
The first is “cool art” where the art has some sort of wow factor that anyone can get. This can range from spray paint street artists, paint n’ sips, inktober, and the like. The second is “realistic art” where the more the thing looks like something else, the better. The last is “high art,” which is the art normally seen in galleries that deal with the conceptual nature of art in some way.

While I can see a division in how we make art, I do not characterize art in this way. As I have been stating, the Artworld is composed of all three of these artworlds. Within these smaller artworlds one can see the other artworlds popping up. This is to say that “cool art” is on par with both “realistic” and “high art” and to divide them is fairly pointless. Instead of dividing the plethora of ways artists can make art, we should examine how viewers understand the art output. Instead of a *Three Artworld Ontology*, the correct way of understanding the Artworld should be, what I call, the *Three Art-Viewer Ontology* as the viewer is the one who gets to decide what they deem as art.

The defining feature of the *Three Art-Viewer Ontology* is experience via knowledge. Basically, it has to do with the amount of knowledge about art the viewer has, which determines whether or not they see an object as art. The first level of knowledge is “the casual.” This viewer has little to no knowledge of art theory or criticism. Their response to artwork is based on personal experiences and individualistic aesthetics. Since we are in a world where anything could have the potential to be art, they will accept certain things as art without knowing why. At least, they will acknowledge something as not art, allowing this type of viewer to remain an active participant. To reject an artwork as an artwork is to have that conversation of whether it was art in the first place, meaning they are influenced and influencing all at once.
The second level would be the “generally knowledgeable”. This group encompasses students just getting into the arts, people who invest in artworks, and those who have a general knowledge about art. Personal experiences still dictate how the artwork is taken in but they are willing to go further into the understanding of why something is a piece of art. This level is where most viewers are as it is the most diverse in knowledge, especially with the rise of cell phones that give a viewer potentially unlimited access to information.

The third level is the “institutionally educated”. This group of people have been through art school, possibly have a higher degree, or have been in the Artworld long enough to understand how artworks come together. There is a more complete understanding of how artworks and art experiences work. While personal experiences still affect the “liking” of an artwork, the artwork can still be appreciated through an understanding of art history and theory. As a viewer in this category, I can come to an understanding of why I like an artwork, but I can also reflect on what had to happen in order for a specific artwork to exist in the first place.

While there are different levels of art viewers, this is not to say that one is more superior than the other. All forms of viewing artworks are important to how we understand art experiences collectively. Communication between these varying levels of art knowledge is crucial in the continuation of art making. This dialogue allows for a conversation to be had about what is perceived as normal and/or abnormal.

Installations and Preconceived Notions

How the audience understands an installation directly influences how they perceive the experience. As the Artworld developed, certain notions of how things should be have been challenged. As theatricality became a driving point in artworks, how the artwork was installed became a point of interest.
Predating theatricality are preconceived notions as to how artworks should be displayed. An example of this is the idea that a painting belongs on the wall at eye level as to allow for an ease of viewing. The wall should be painted white or light grey, acting as a canvas of sorts for the artwork to live on. The painting should be properly wired on the backside.

While there is nothing wrong with this installation, it is a basic, one-size-fits-all solution to the problem of experiencing artworks. The audience does not have to think about the installation as it pertains to the artwork; they only have to look at the artworks. This can be successful depending on the intent of the artist, however one could argue that we are so accustomed to this setup that it is taken for granted. With the introduction of theatrical installations, a normal installation begins to carry some creative weight.

A theatrical installation takes those preconceived notions and manipulates them in a way that changes how the viewer understands the work. For example, a Pollock painting would be understood differently if the work was lying flat on the floor instead of hung on a wall. Instead of looking at the Pollock on the wall, we would be looking at the work in a similar fashion to how it was painted. It also highlights the sides of the substrate and turns the artwork into more of an object with sculpture-like tendencies, as it is in the space typically reserved for sculpture. This different reading and defying of preconceived notions allows for a theatrical approach that leads to a head-on experience with the artwork and its setting.

A good example of this would be the Constructivist gestalt. The gestalt, as mentioned by Robert Morris in *Notes On Sculpture I*, is the concept of individual things coming together to make one significant thing, so much so that we do not necessarily notice the individual things. The preconceived notion of art is that it is, in and of itself, a whole entity. For Constructivists,
they used many different parts to create a whole theatrical artwork, creating an artwork that, while the viewer is aware of the parts, insists on the viewer viewing it as a whole.

![Vladimir Tatlin, Letatlin ornithopter, 1930-1932](image)

This allows the viewer to understand the relationship between the parts and the whole, meaning they have the ability to become aware of the experience they are having. In other words, the pieces come together and emerge as an art phenomenon; at the same time the gestalt is formed, the art experience phenomenon, also, emerges.

**Gestalt as Shared Experience in tRPGs and Art**

To understand the gestalt of the emerging art experience, we have to understand the parts that make it up. So far, the viewer has been covered to come to an understanding of how a viewer operates in the experience. However, the viewer is only one of the three parts of the experience, the others being the artist and the artwork. Comparing the viewer, artist, and artwork to tabletop roleplaying game participants, we can begin to draw parallels in how the experience is created between the three.
For my artwork, I compare Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) game mechanics to artwork experiences by examining the participants within the experience. The artwork is comparable to the actual game of D&D. It defines the ruleset as to how the other participants can interact within the experience. The artist is akin to the Dungeon Master (DM), as they create the world and scenarios for others to explore using the language of the game. The viewers are the players within the game; they act, react, and interact with how the game and DM portray the story they want to tell. At the same time, the players may change the story based on their actions, meaning the DM makes adjustments in order to proceed with the story if the players go in a totally different direction. The DM may tweak or add to the game as needed in order to create a whole experience.

The three different participants of art and D&D are in a constant state of flux as each inform the other. They are constantly interacting with each other, creating information feedback loops that change how the parts are reacting. In this sense, the overall experience is this flux of information as each experience within the participants are being created. In other words, this interaction between D&D parts are an active participation model that shows the flux of information as experience, and thus can be compared and translated into art jargon.

Fluxus art was about the gestalt of the moment as all of their actions came together to create an event. Comparing this to D&D, the gestalt of this experience all boils down to the “happening” of the chance induced dice roll. Much like John Cage’s use of coin flipping to decide on musical compositions, the dice roll creates a chance moment that has varying resolutions. In D&D, a dice roll is performed when an action is taken. The chance-induced dice roll is used to create the drama for that specific moment. Will the action succeed, or will that
action fail? If it does succeed or fail, how drastic was that attempt? This drama influences how
the game is played out, and the DM describes the world and the player reacts to the world.

Chance-Induced Rulesets

The use of chance brings up the idea of how we order the ruleset. Chance creates random
outcomes, but a satisfactory resolution must occur in order for there to be fulfilment within the
situation. Thus the biggest question in D&D arises: Do we completely follow the rules or do we
sometimes fudge the rules for the sake of the story? Fudging is the idea of not following the rules
of the game as to let something happen without chance influencing the results. In art, this can be
understood as how we understand the preconceived notions: do we follow these notions,
completely ignore them, or some combination of the two?

Within rulesets there is a hierarchy in place to determine how one may fudge the rules.
The top of this list are laws that are the basis to the ruleset. For D&D, the law of the game is to
tell a story with a DM and players using dice to randomize how actions occur. Laws are
absolutes, as they are needed in order to have an experience in the first place. In art, this is the
idea that an artist must make something for a viewer to experience.

Second to this are rules that dictate how the game is played. An example of this in D&D
would be that you roll a 20-sided dice to determine how an action plays out. This starts to
become more specific depending on the game you are playing. While laws are necessary to the
actual playing of the game, rules can be adjusted to fit the situation you are in and, in some
circumstances, can be completely ignored at the discretion of the DM. In art, this would be
equivalent to a Minimalist artist who completely ignores the ideas within abstract expressionism.
The rules for Abstract Expressionism still exist but the Minimalist chooses to ignore those rules
in favor for their specific ruleset. They are still playing the same type of game, just in a different ruleset.

The laws and rules can be used in conjunction with each other to create what I call formulas within the ruleset. A formula is simply one of potentially infinite combinations of laws and rules. In a way, a formula is the embodiment of the flux within the ruleset. These combinations, as they change, create a flux of information, thus the formulas are specific experiences of the rulesets they are set within.

The infinite combinations of laws and rules into formulas create this constant feedback loop as the laws and rules influence each other in the making of the formula. Within this feedback loop can be minor discrepancies that come in the form of fudging the rules. Fudging, in this sense, would be the deliberate NOT following of the rules during the game. Fudging, while not mentioned by name in the rulebooks, is an idea that the makers of D&D put into the system. Also known as “The Rule of Cool,” fudging is usually done for the sake of story that the participants are making. This hiccup in the ruleset, or lack thereof in this situation, creates an alternative way of playing the game, adding to the feedback loop that makes up the formula.

Foundation

To understand anyone’s artworks, one must understand where they came from. A lot can take place in a three-year MFA program, much more taking place before then! Knowing the background of the artist leads to an understanding of how they are tackling their current art series.

Coming from a background in printmaking and painting, I went into grad school wanting to experiment and play outside of my comfort zone. My undergraduate experience was fairly limited in how I approached artworks; I made paintings, prints, and paper stains of my face in
both artworks in antiquity and as geometric forms. This was all based in humor and critique of how I saw the Artworld at the time, but the punchline had run dry by the time I began my graduate studies.

Zak Kelley, *Toad Zak*, 2016

The summer before grad school started, I began to play with an idea: my fellow students would get frustrated with their professors because “I make art for no reason” was not a good enough reason to make art. I began to play with that idea as a concept for artworks, creating my artworks for purely “no reason.” This leads to, what I called, the “No Reason Theory” or NRT.

While this concept started off as a joke for me to poke fun at some frustrations of students, it resonated with me on a personal level as I progressed and refined the theory. It became less about poking fun and became more about trying to find the crazy things within the Artworld. I began to question what “no reason” meant; I constantly heard the phrase in many aspects of media.
The artworks became crazily intuitive, using paint straight from the tube onto found objects. I swirled, swished, and splattered paint all around my studio, while physically screwing together wood pieces I had collected to create sculptural forms to paint onto. Sticking to the random theme, I became obsessed with toasters for “no reason” and incorporated toaster monsters into the works. This can all be seen in the Toaster Monster series, like *FU the Toasters Attack*.

Alongside the work, I created a blog that explored the wackiness of the NRT. In this blog, I talked about how the theory evolved into an “UnTheory.” The concept developed into a “Redundant Phoenix,” basically saying that the Enlightenment caused an eternal feedback loop that has gone for so long that nothing is original anymore. Because of this, I wanted to reverse Enlightenment principles to make ideas and theories insane. I started with the scientific method and bastardized it into the *irrelevant method*, taking every single step of the scientific method and making it as out-there as I possibly could. Then, I went into specific scientific laws, like the laws of thermodynamics, and, using their definitions, changed how the law was read. I nit-picked the wording, came up with my own conclusions, and “corrected” the law to my No Reason jargon.

As the work and blog evolved and, admittedly, went haywire, I began to seek some solace in the art-making process. This began with *Doors*, two doors hinged together and painted on all sides. This was the largest piece I had worked on, which allowed me to play with it in a way I had not previously with the Toaster Monster series.
The intuitive marks began to mean something, despite the fact they were made with No Reason. I began to find images within the marks of paint I was making, and began to realize that I could not make art for No Reason, because reason just began to pop up as I made stuff.

To retcon this issue, I made an alter ego named Zaxkiggy. His backstory was that of a reincarnated artist living within a contemporary artist’s body. He had lived vicariously for so long that he went through all of the art historical periods and thus art lost its meaning. His story allowed me to make art for No Reason while allowing me to make art based on No Reason. The art became a conversation between Zaxkiggy and I. This can be seen in Zaxkiggy Self Portrait and Zak Kelley Self Portrait.
They are literally made with the same hand and colors, but with different intentions as Zax made art for No Reason and I made art to imitate No Reason. It was an artistic representation of a conversation between teacher and student.

A lot of the dialogue being generated came from the titles of the artworks. The title of an artwork gives some insight into the intentions of the artist… normally. Instead, the intent of the artworks was found in the titles as the titles were conversations between Zax and I.
This can be seen in *I Told You I Wanted It to be Named Untitled (Red)! But This One is the Painting I Made, So You Can’t Name It* and *Untitled (Blue) That’s Such a Lame Title*. There is a literal tension between the student’s point of view and the teacher’s adherence to what they know and understand.
This series allowed me to explore different relationships within the Artworld as I knew it then: between professor and student. It also allowed me to expand out of my comfort zone into fields of art I had no business being in. Welding, 3D printing, new painting mediums, illustration, written language: these were all explored using the NRT and Zaxkigy, meaning that my experimentation led to true exploration of my field of study. It let me explore these ideas in humorous ways, growing how I use humor in my works now.

Development

Along the way, the artworks I made became too busy. There was nowhere for the viewer to rest; it was all No Reason all the time, which led to a static of grossness on the surface of the paintings. As a leap of faith, I limited the all over-ness of the works and really worked on how to make a composition while still trying to make a something for No Reason. The questions started to become: What was the art? What was the point? Where was the art?

No Reason began to morph into chance; No Reason was the intuitive use of expression while chance was the intuitive use of a system. The found objects became too confusing as they had too much previous history associated with them that led to a reason for being. By limiting myself to bought wood, flat surfaces, and more specific imagery, I began to play with my own personal painting techniques, refining them into what I am doing now. I built upon the many concepts I explored, then narrowed them down into a painting series that highlighted the best of the NRT.

With Intuitive Chance, I painted intuitive scenes based on the chance of the wood grain. The first painting of this series was Sometimes, I Wonder if This is Nothing.
I found images within the paint I lathered onto the wood, and even found images within the wood grain itself, and used black gesso to highlight those images. Then, I put a semi-recognizable symbol onto the surface not found within the pre-existing surface treatments; it was an unresolved cylinder that could become whatever the viewer wanted it to be. The colors of the previous works came back by being shapes on the surface, what I call “color camo.” The use of vague text, also, ran off of viewer interpretation; the texts generate questions for the viewer that never quite resolve. After this painting, Zaxkiggy dropped off as the main point and became a reference for me to play upon when needed. The NRT did stay as this series continued, but mainly to create wonder and constant questions.

After *Sometimes, I Wonder if This is Nothing*, I made more paintings in the same vein, except with different colors and paint strokes. Once I had a few finished, I began to wonder how
to display them. So, at a full faculty critique, I hung them together in an installation, what I now call a Grouping. Originally, the paintings were hung randomly and the idea was that the viewer gets to fill in the spaces and create their own narrative.

Zak Kelley, *Irrelevant Method 1*, 2017

While the physical objects came off well, the idea of allowing the viewer to decide the artwork was not received as well. There is this notion in the Artworld that this statement of “the viewer is gonna see what they see” is kind of a no-brainer, so why explore it. It seems like a cop-out concept, but since I am a stubborn ass and all of my art up until this point had been about trying to prove art notions either wrong or not important, I had to figure out a way to make art that was based on how the viewer understands it.

As the work evolved, I added and enhanced parts of the works. I added a whole semiotic language with the use of my symbols. I added white shapes to go along side my color camo shapes. I began to layer the paint on top of other painted areas. I experimented with how many of these art-parts I used in a single painting. Then it happened: I applied a system to my madness.
Intuition was the chance I was using to create works. It is random and only based on how I wanted to place the paint. As an experiment for a class, however, I applied all of the art-parts based on the chance of a dice roll. At the time, I had just begun to get back into playing D&D, and dice were fresh on my mind. So, I figured I would try to apply the several polyhedral dice of D&D to a painting system. This dice roll experiment yielded a painting that was indistinguishable from my previous paintings, but the process was more controlled than the previous works. I narrowed down the paintings not just in terms of art-parts, but also tool variety and sizes. Everything was defined to a tee as to make the whole chance-induced process micromanaged.

The titles morphed alongside the paintings. While the alter ego works were conversations, the next iteration of the titles were vague sentences based on what I had written as the text on the paintings (Is This Bad Probz).

Zak Kelley, *Is This Bad Probz*, 2017

With later works in the same series, the titles were “Repeat Experiment #X,” that was then proceeded with the vague description. With the dice rolls controlling the works, however, the titles became more specific. Instead of generalized titles based on vague descriptions, the titles were the formulas of the rules that I used in the process of making the artwork. To shorten this
for bookkeeping purposes, I named them *Painting IA* then proceeded to list off the rules for the full title.

Zak Kelley, *Painting IA*, 2017

Now, all of this is being written in hindsight. A lot of what I am writing here is based in my current knowledge and now being able to articulate what I was trying to do. A lot of what happens next in the metamorphosis of the work is based in failure to articulate these ideas. Again, knowing what the artist goes through allows for a full analysis of what and why the artist makes.

With the failure of my 30 Hour Review, I had one semester to figure out what had gone wrong, or, at the very least, figure out how to improve without giving up the integrity of the project. In my studio, I acquired a dry erase board and on it had all of my ideas based in all of these different readings, interpretations of readings, ideas, thoughts, influences, etc. I recorded it all with a picture on my phone and erased it all to start fresh. I began with the phrase “FUCK ART!”
Post-Failure

During the semester of my first 30 Hour Review, I began to get back into playing D&D with my friends, creating a whole world from scratch. The idea that I could create another type of world for people besides artworks was intriguing, and allowing myself to explore a new realm of making was relieving. With D&D new and fresh on my mind, it began to creep into the artworks I was making, beginning with the use of dice rolls.

As the D&D influence grew, the realization of how D&D could relate to art swirled in my mind. Similarities between the Fluxus use of participation and chance ringed true in D&D. So, at the beginning of the new semester after failure, I dropped the dice rolling for two pieces to really think about the D&D influence and how I could evolve the series more.

*Rules Experimentation Diptych (The Mainland is Too Much for Our Heroes)* started as two 8’ x 4’ plywood boards that I had lying around the studio.

Zak Kelley, *Rules Experimentation Diptych (The Mainland is Too Much for Our Heroes)*, 2018

With “FUCK ART” fresh in my mind, I wanted to start a new chapter in the biggest way I possibly could and these two pieces of plywood would do the trick. I really wanted to play up
some new aspects I had been contemplating for a while, so I started with the use of painter’s tape.

Before, tape was used for masking areas off for a straight edge effect, but I wanted to push the tape more so it could become an element in a painting in its own right. I got this idea from my many critiques from Marc Moulton where he would focus on the tape in other student’s studios rather than the work that was being presented. So, if he wanted to focus on the tape, I would give him the tape! The tape, in this sense, reminds the viewer that the making of the artwork is a process, highlighting the notion of theatricality that leads to an artwork experience. In other words, it shows the evidence of the process. Also, it plays with the expectations of how an artwork should be made. Tape is a tool, normally, and not the subject of an artwork. The tape in this diptych became the subject, further highlighting the process. It initially elicited a “Wait, is that tape?!” response from everyone in its first critique; this became a verbal example of the realization of the art experience.

*Rules Experimentation Diptych (The Mainland is Too Much for Our Heroes)* played with a few other new elements. Paint dripping was added to the white shapes, allowing gravity to influence how the paint was applied. This gave the painting a more chance-like feel, not being restricted to my intuition but to true chance of nature. To represent the actual rules of the artworks, I decided to both screenprint and write in sharpie the rules onto the surface. This leads to the idea of transparency within the artwork experience; I want the viewer to know that I want them to experience something and the showcasing of the rules as an artwork element accomplishes this task. The symbols I had been using also changed, from being representations of not quite graspable objects to symbols based on the shapes of the polyhedral dice I roll for the
formulas. I wanted to maintain the vagueness of the symbol while, also, linking the symbol to my D&D inspiration.

This diptych leads to another experiment: *Rules Experiment Canvas (They Voyage to Find Wealth and Riches in a New World)*.

Zak Kelley, *Rules Experiment Canvas*  
(*They Voyage to Find Wealth & Riches in a New World*), 2018

The biggest change for this piece was the fact I had finally gone back to painting on a canvas, something I had not explored in several years. The wood highlighted the theatrical nature of the artwork experience, while the canvas did not work in the same way. The sides of the canvas were painted to suggest an art object, but the fact is that being on the wall made it too much like the preconceived notion of what a painting should be. It did not highlight theatricality as participation on its own, but, when it was included with the diptych, it highlighted the use of theatricality within the diptych’s space.

This heightened sense of theatricality via something less theatrical leads to the playing with notions of expected presentation. The canvas hung on the wall, the sculpture on the
pedestal, installations pre-made for the space: these are all preconceived notions of typical artwork experiences that have been seen all throughout art history. By enhancing the theatrical nature of all of these preconceived notions and comparing them with each other, I could enhance the overall experience the viewer would have. To accomplish this, I could lean a canvas against the wall, have a canvas physically supporting a piece of wood on top of it, and much more. This idea was explored in the second grouping of that semester: *Grouping 1.*

![Image of artworks](image_url)

**Zak Kelley, *Grouping 1*, 2018**

Not the most elegant of titles for the works I made, but, for me, it represented a new, cleaner style that had not been characterized as a thing yet. I did not want something long and/or fancy for the Grouping name at this point as it did not feel like the right time to do so.

From *Grouping 1* came gestalt notions that lead to *Grouping 2*. This is where I push the theatrical nature of the wood pieces to a new limit, allowing gravity to support two paintings leaned against each other. Essentially, I was creating gestalts of gestalts to form sculptures in physical space. The paintings act as gestalts of brushstrokes and shapes coming together to make
the painting, and several paintings came together in a gestalt installation that became the sum of its parts. To add a bit of chance into the mix, I (and anyone who installs the work) plays a game of odd and evens. After the installation is built, however the builder makes it, the die is cast. If the die is even, the installation stays as it. If odds, the installation is torn down and rebuilt again in a new way. This brings the gallery crew into the equation of creating the experience, much like a Sol Lewitt piece.

Zak Kelley, *Grouping 2*, 2018

Speaking of Sol Lewitt, his works where he sends the instructions for the gallery to make into a reality is more than an inspiration for getting the gallery to help build the installations. His influence in my formulas of the rules show up within the titles of each work. While my Groupings comprise of several different paintings that come together in a gestalt, each individual painting can be read alone. The titles act as a way to show the rules I used to create the individual compositions. The titles are put into frames and hung on the wall near the installations, framed like an artwork to signify the instructions of said artwork. Anyone could,
technically, come along, take the formula, and make an artwork with the same rules. This enhances the potentiality of participation, as the audience could physically add to the art experience by making their own version of the artwork.

The titles accomplish more than just giving the formulas to the viewers. They also create a linear narrative based on my first Dungeon Master experience, of my first group coming to a new world and interacting within it. The story is how I remember it, reflecting on the story in hindsight. As I reflected on these stories, I renamed the installations: Grouping 1 became Session 1: Scene 1 and Grouping 2 became Session 1: Scene 2. This better reflects the continuous narrative the titles offer.

This linear narrative combined with the all-over gestalt-ness of the installation creates another tension point that allows for viewer exploration of the works. The rules, artworks, texts, and titles create multiple feedback loops of information between the paintings and paratextual titles; the paintings and participating viewers; the gestalt and the individual pieces; and the preconceived artworks and abnormal installations. These constant exchanges of information meld into a flux of experiences, leading to what I call Neo_Fluxus. The Fluxus artists wanted everyone to be making art at all times. With the plethora of information my works give viewers, the Fluxus goal is achieved in a new and holistic way.
CHAPTER 3

THESIS EXHIBITION

Originally when I began to write this thesis, I was intending on the work to end up in the Contemporary Gallery in the Center for Art and Theater. It is a professional gallery made for artworks of the professional sort. And that is where I hit a problem: the gallery setting does not show off anything important in my art except to allow for good photo-taking for my website. So, what did this potentially-graduating artist do? He stuck a pedestal with a notebook and a bowl of dice in the gallery, posted more pedestals and notebooks around the Arts Building, and turned the whole building into an artwork experience that ends with his gestalt installations in his studio.

Zak Kelley, Neo_Fluxus & Dragons, 2019
“What are the benefits to this?” you dear reader may ask. “Didn’t your committee have a heart attack?” you may wonder. My committee did question the choice and it was discussed at length before making the decision.

One of the biggest notions of my work is FUCK ART. This idea was brought up with my confusion and frustration of how art functions within the Artworld. It makes me call into question all notions of art and really dive into how my art functions. I am forced to ask all of those questions I have been asking throughout this whole thesis, and it’s the reason why these thesis-show-artworks do not belong in a gallery setting.

The gallery setting is too regulated and thought through; whole essays are written on the subject of the gallery and how it operates. I want to break away from the preconceived notions of art and, instead, use them to create stronger experiences for viewers. This new installation within my studio space gets the artwork outside of the gallery while still using the gallery as a starting point for an experience. This highlights the gallery as a space where art should reside but, in this case, it does not. The studio represents a space where art is normally made but not shown to the public. There is a feedback loop of information here that allows for the discussion of how and where artworks should be displayed.

For Neo_Fluxus & Dragons, the viewer begins in the gallery space but is immediately denied seeing any artwork. In the middle of the gallery sits a pedestal with a notebook and a bowl of (200) twenty-sided dice. In the notebook are different labels for viewers to read through. The back section of the notebook are instructions on how to play D&D. The first section they will run across, however, is the “Viewer Instructions” section where the viewer will read something I have hand-written on loose-leaf paper. What I have written is a personal story about the gallery from my time at Georgia Southern. This section ends with the viewer rolling the dice
and reading the instructions: whatever the viewer rolled determines where they go and what they do next. These instructions end up leading the viewer into certain parts of the Arts Building and reading through more stories I have to tell about my eight years in the Betty Foy Sanders Department of Art program. I call this *The Journey*.

Now, *The Journey* was created to highlight a few points I felt were missing from the art. For one, I want storytelling aspects to be explored in the work. I want to tell a narrative through the experience, and this is my way of exploring that idea. The Journey gives you my personal experiences and allows you to play my game while discovering your own experience along the way.

This leads to a second notion: Just as my artworks explore theatricality as an activation of space within a space, this journey, too, activates the space within the whole building. As my stories lead the viewer through the Arts Building, the viewer has the opportunity to look around and potentially see what I am talking about. This allows the viewer to make their own choices within the space and come to their own conclusions, using my narrative as a looking glass of sorts. This, also, activates theatricality in a sense. Instead of theatricality being activated through an artwork experience, it is activated through a narrative experience. The experience makes the viewer want to see the space more and thus they will explore.

This leads to a third point: The Fluxus use of viewer participation. The viewer is essential in the completion of my artwork. Without the viewer, the space would never be active, my words would never be read, and there would be nothing to experience. An example of this would be Yayoi Kusama’s *Obliteration Room*. 
Yayoi Kusama, *Obliteration Room*, 2011

The stark whiteness of the original installation could be seen as an obliteration of the space itself, but the viewer’s act of placing the colorful stickers in the space truly obliterated the stark whiteness. Without the viewer interaction, the artwork does not complete itself.

At the end of *The Journey* is my studio space, with all of the artwork I have created for the thesis show. With the notion of looking around already in the viewer’s head via the narrative, the viewer should already have a sense of wanting to look around. Coupling this want with the Fluxus notion of viewer participation and theatricality, the gestalt installation results in an information overload for viewers, meaning the entire studio space is activated theatrically for viewer consumption.

The studio is how I left it before I put up the artworks. There are books, bottles, and other junk on my desk, my paint brushes are still out, tape is everywhere. Everything is left there to
showcase an artist’s studio: it is a lived-in space where the artist makes their art come alive. It is not the pristine gallery space viewers are used to seeing. It is gritty and real.

To arrange the space, I played a game of chance. I set up the painting installations in the space I wanted them to take over. After setting up the work, I played a simple game of odds and evens. If I rolled an even, the installation stayed as it was with no alterations. If I rolled an odd number, then I took the whole installation down and rebuilt it in a new way. Sometimes the differences were drastic, like rearranging all of the works completely. Sometimes, I barely changed the position of the work and slightly nudged it to the right. I know the space and my work. I know that this specific piece has to go in a certain area; I just have to find out the specifics through chance. There are times when the installation is complete the first time, and there are other times when I have to rebuild that gestalt upwards of ten times. By now, the installations have been rebuilt a number of times each and constantly change to fit the space they are in.

The studio space is divided into three separate studios. The first studio the viewer will walk into is the space I use to do computer stuff: browsing the internet, doing research, typing this thesis etc. This area serves as the introduction for the rest of the installation.
Zak Kelley, *Neo_Fluxus & Dragons*, 2019
Going forward into the room, there is a divider wall that opens up into an adjacent studio space. This space is normally used for storage.

Zak Kelley, *Neo_Fluxus & Dragons*, 2019

From first space there is a door that leads to my main studio workspace where I make all of my artworks.
Zak Kelley, *Neo_Fluxus & Dragons*, 2019

Walking into the computer-based studio, you are met by a gestalt installation set up on the door into the main studio space, named Session 1: Scene 3. It consists of five wood-panel paintings and one canvas painting. This installation was installed with the intent of bringing the viewer into the main studio space. It also brings attention to the door into the main studio space that is propped open using the paintings. The action of the paintings holding open the door activates the whole computer-based studio space as the paintings relate to the door which relates to the air vent, which relates to the walls, and so on.

In the computer-based space is, also, another painting that bridges the work desk and the divider wall. It showcases the painting’s backside and allows the viewer to analyze the parts that make up the painting: the frame, the canvas, and the staples. It allows the viewer to become aware of the painting’s mundane qualities, setting it apart from its art-ness. The viewer can crouch
beneath the painting to see the painted surface of the work. This creates a pseudo-space beneath the painting, further highlighting the use of space within the installation.

Within the computer-based studio is the last of the notebooks from The Journey. It congratulates the viewer for getting to the experience and asks of them two favors: 1. Take the dice they were given at the beginning of The Journey and place it anywhere within the space. This is in reference to the Fluxus notion of viewer participation in that the viewer gets to physically add to the installation, thus completing the artwork experience. 2. Write their name, a critique, a comment, or literally anything within the notebook. Again, this goes back to the physical addition to the experience and allows me to interact with viewers in a direct way. But it is more than an action of placing something; it is a leaving their own mark within the installation. I am not sure what I will do with any written responses but I know that it will be used in a future artwork installation.

Zak Kelley, Last Notebook, 2019
From the computer-based studio, the viewer has one of two choices to make: go into the next studio over or go into the main studio space. If they choose to go into the next studio over, they will be met with an artwork installation, called Session 1: Scene 4 specifically made to highlight that space. The installation consists of two wood panels and a canvas stretched onto a wood panel. They are arranged on the furniture within the room: a flammables cabinet and a flat file drawer. Within the compositions of the three paintings in that space are arrows that point outside of the objects themselves to highlight other things within the room.

Zak Kelley, *Session 1: Scene 4*, 2019

The painting that leans against the flat file is more legible than the rest of the paintings. While you could argue that this disrupts the theatrical components of the installation, I see this painting
specifically as a resting spot for a viewer. It can offer you some sort of resolution, but the language is still so broken up that there is not a definite solution to anything the viewer sees. In a sense, it is my way of creating a composition that gives you a possible answer to latch onto but pulls the answer away at the last moment.

This specific grouping highlights a feature I had not considered while writing the earlier parts of this thesis. I have talked about passive and active participation as how the viewer interacts with artworks to determine how the art and viewer communicate with each other, but I have not talked about how the space in an artwork experience can, also, communicate with the viewer passively and actively. With Michael Fried’s theatricality, the lack of detail reminds the viewer of the space they are in with an artwork. In a way, this is the equivalent of an artwork giving all of the answers in a passive participatory experience; the space just says “remember me!” in Fried’s theatricality, thus being a passive space. With Session 1: Scene 4, the placing of the artworks in the space leads the viewer throughout the whole room: ceiling, floor, walls, vents, etc. It is how the artwork interacts with the space (via location, movement, colors, etc.) that activates the space. Instead of “reminding the viewer” (as in Fried’s theatricality), this installation forces the viewer into the situation, actively creating itself as the viewer further explores the space.

If the viewer was to go into the main studio space, they would be met with a crazy amount of information thrown at them. In terms of artworks, the first installation they will see is called Session 1: Scene 2: three wood panels in a teepee-like installation.
Its inherent theatricality is activated by the propping of two the wood panels against each other. The viewer becomes aware of the paintings as pieces of wood and this notion reminds the viewer of the artwork experience they have with the piece.

The next grouping they see is Session 1: Scene 1: a canvas triumphant on top of a wood panel.
For this installation, I was thinking about how the works support each other. The wood carries the canvas, which could create a bunch of metaphors for viewers to ponder. In the end, however, the canvas that is being supported by both the wood panel and the wall relates the canvas to the space it is in. It is dependent on the space and thus reminds the viewer of the experience.
At the end of the room is *Rules Experimentation Diptych (The Mainland is Too Much for Our Heroes)* leaning against the wall. It leans heavily on the wall, activating the viewer’s senses of “will it fall?” This questioning leads to the viewer seeing the artwork as something with a possible flaw, highlighting the piece’s artful nature as something that is fleeting.

Zak Kelley, *Rules Experimentation Diptych (The Mainland is Too Much for Our Heroes)*, 2018

On the wall to the right of Rules Experimentation Diptych is canvas painting called *Rondo Does a Sick Flip to Attack the Guard. It Looked Cool but Ultimately Did Nothing.*
This painting hangs on the wall and gives a stark contrast to the installations. It is a typical painting using the rules of my art. It has a much longer title explaining the rolls that were made that determined its compositional elements. This painting was made to highlight its apparent art-ness to contrast with the installations. With this painting acting as the autonomous, look-at-me-in-all-of-my-greatness kind of art, the rest of the installations are strengthened in their roles of
theatrical performance. Also, there is this weird tension within the space as this painting exists within it. It is denied its autonomy as it rests upon excessive amounts of used tape. This relates the painting to the room and activates theatricality in its own way, despite the fact the painting was made to be autonomous. Instead of theatricality being activated through the artwork, it is activated through the materials linked to the artwork.

On the floor below Rondo Does a Sick Flip to Attack the Guard. It Looked Cool but Ultimately Did Nothing, is The King Commands the Prisoners Forward.

Zak Kelley, The King Commands the Prisoners Forward, 2019

The painting is canvas stretched over a wood panel lying on the floor. A painting does not normally belong on the floor and thus activates the space in a weird way. The painting, instead of
activating a wall space, activates a floor space like a sculpture. The rest of the installations do this as well, but this fact is not highlighted as strongly as this specific painting. This painting relates specifically to the floor, which stretches to the walls and ceiling, leading to a theatrical activation of the whole space.

This painting started a new illustrative mark-making technique for me. The marks are representations of one of my D&D concepts: a planarverse. In my D&D game, planes act as other planets for people to go to if they know how. The illustrations, while based in my game, are just marks on a piece that give the viewer something to latch on to, but gives no resolution to anything within the space. For me, it is a way to introduce some more D&D elements into the paintings without giving up the integrity of the project.

This installation expands outside of what I have written previously in this thesis and goes into why I make art. This installation makes the viewer ask “What is the art?” “Is this Snicker’s wrapper part of the art?” “Why is that art?” In other words, the information-overload that leads to an activation of theatricality ultimately leads to the questioning of what art exactly is.

Normally, if an artwork is being shown in a studio space, it is a more personal and intimate experience. The artist has let you into the space for a critique, a showing-off, a discussion, or a visit. The gallery is, normally, where we see the artist’s work in a more public setting. The artwork, while personal in an I-see-it-this-way kind of experience, is shared amongst many people all at once. In my installation, the role of intimacy is reversed. The studio becomes public as people will end up there to see the work at the end of the experience.
CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

By combining D&D participators with Michael Fried’s theatricality, we get a model for active participation within artwork experiences. The artist/DM acts as the creator of the art/world for the viewer/player to interact within. As one participant reacts to another participant, they all adapt the experience accordingly. This constant state of flux between participants allows for an experience that is fully theatrical and, as a result, answers a few of my questions about art and the Artworld:

1. What is a viewer? Who can be a viewer? In an active participatory experience, a viewer is a person who can actively experience an artwork; one who influences and is influenced all at once. They bring past experiences to the works, thus changing the artwork’s concept to benefit the viewer’s understanding. This means the artist must drive the conversation enough so that the viewer can get the concept the artist wants to tell while also being flexible enough to allow for multiple interpretations of the work.

2. Can an artist be a viewer of their own work? Within the confines of this thesis, yes and no. The artist has a very specific way of looking at their own work in an active, participatory experience. They know the ins and outs of the work and so their experience is driven by what they made. The longer the artwork physically exists, the more the artwork can influence the artist, meaning that the artist, at first, is only a passive viewer of their own work.

3. How does a viewer interact with an artwork? Within the active experience, a viewer interacts with the artworks both conceptually and physically. Conceptually, the viewer’s prior knowledge of art and personal experiences dictate how the art is received.
Physically, the viewer, within the space of the artwork, interacts directly with the artwork. Their location relative to the artwork changes the potential experiences the viewer can have.

4. Is viewing an artwork a process? The act of viewing an artwork is a process between the artwork, viewer, and artist. The process is the constant state of flux between the three participants as they interact with each other. This means that, while viewing is a simple process on a surface level, as a literal act of looking at something, viewing becomes a complicated process as an understanding of the participants takes effect.

Taking all of this into account, my artworks lead to viewers having their own experiences within an installation space. By having obvious notions of how art should be, like a canvas hanging on a wall, and having gestalts of painting installation, my artworks create a theatrical experience as the viewer becomes aware of their surroundings within the experience. They influence the artworks as the artworks influence them, which creates a state of flux as they inform each other. This notion becomes heightened as the viewer goes into my information-overloaded studio space. As the viewer looks around the space and tries to determine what the art “is,” they arrive at an active, theatrical space.

Each part of the art installation brings more information to the table. The gestalt reminds the viewers of the space they are in, while the hanging paintings enhance the theatrical nature of the gestalt. The titles give the specific rules of the artworks and a linear story for the viewer to follow, while the whole installation jumbles the narrative into a holistic story. The tape, symbols, text, and shapes of the compositions give viewers information to grasp onto, while not allowing for a direct resolution, therefore leading to the exploration of new information within the forms. All of these installation features become more important as they relate to the space they are in.
For example, tape on one of the artworks relates to the walls with tape scattered in my studio, which relates to the wall, which relates to the ceiling, which relates to my desk, which relates to my paint brushes, etc. All of these things within the space become activated, allowing for the definition of art to undergo expansion.

All in all, the installations give an overall experience for the viewer to partake in. It is a journey the viewer can take outside of the gallery space, while also using the gallery space as a jumping-off point. The viewer has the power to change the experience, allowing for an infinite solution to an unquantifiable problem.

“And that is how we will end this session.” Christopher Zito
RESOURCES CITED


