

LigoranoReese

Talking with Howard Besser at New York University

Culture Jamming & Appropriation Art

October 30, 2019



Howard Besser (HB): I'm very pleased today to have **Marshall Reese** here talking to the class. I first met Marshall 20 years ago or more at a conference in North Carolina about words, text and technology.

He and his partner **Nora Ligorano**, who work together in collaboration as *LigoranoReese*, were showing a really interesting piece that looked at the history of print and how it was morphing through video and digital technology. It was called the *Corona Palimpsest*.

Marshall, you had actually created a palimpsest codex book with a floor of books that combined pre-printing era books with videos, and it's just really a fascinating piece. Just

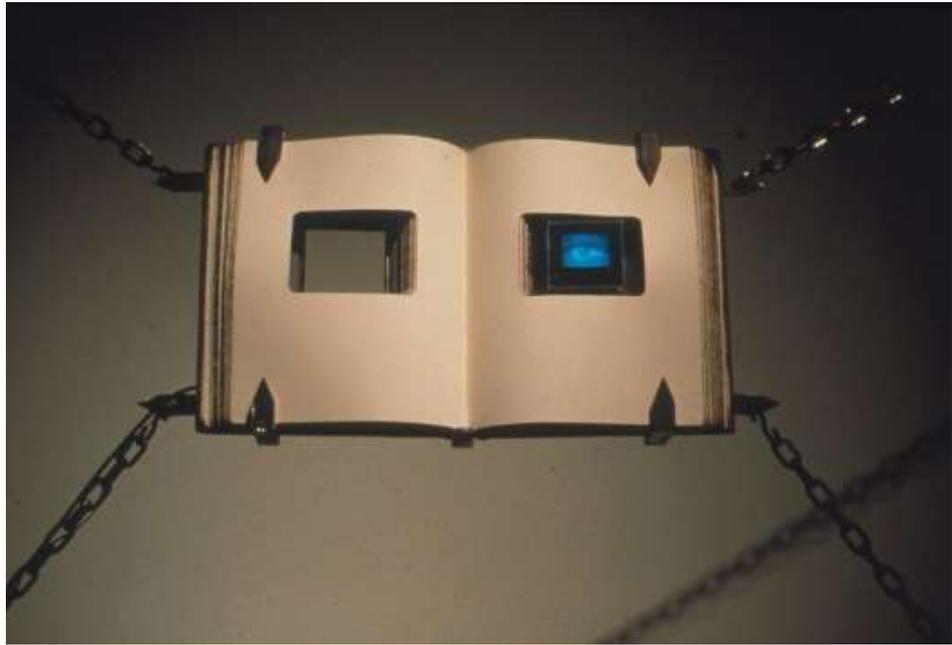
seeing that one piece led me to discover their whole body of work, which is really very interesting, so we're going to go through some highlights of their years of work here.



Marshall Reese (MR): This is *The Corona Palimpsest* that Howard was talking about. Nora and I made it in the mid-90's, 1994-1995. That was at the moment when information networks and the internet were just starting to become a part of our lives. We were concerned with the physical manifestation of knowledge and literature and its materiality.

There is a floor of books that you walked on. The viewer couldn't really navigate the space without walking on the books, and if you walked on the books, you would go to this library table in the center of the space where there was a palimpsest of media images. The written text was in the middle of the book displayed on a small LCD screen in the center of the page, a collage of my poetry and that from various writers.

As you sat at the library table, a book suspended by chains with eyes looked at you. It was very much about the circuitousness of reading and being read, where we were headed in the digital age.

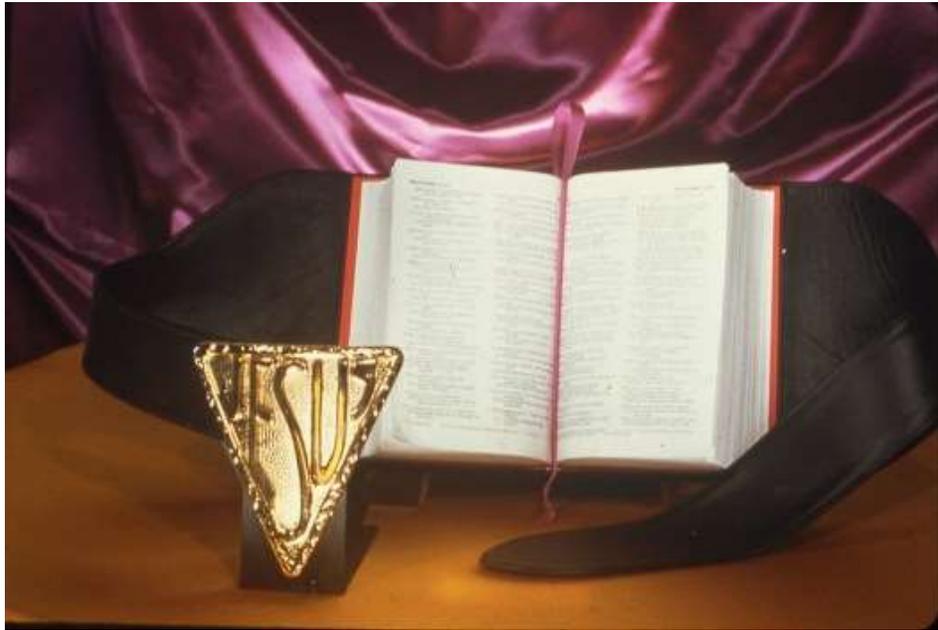


HB: We're going to go through a number of their pieces, not necessarily in a particular order, but since we started talking about this one that combines text and video, maybe we should go to some of the other video works.

The Pure Products of America

HB: How about *The Bible Belt*?

MR: Nora and I started out making sculptures that combined books with video. One of our very first installations was called *The Bible Belt*. In the history of antiquarian books there are ledger books that accountants in the Middle Ages wore attached to their belts.



MR: Though *The Bible Belt* has a historical reference, we decided that we would make a Jesus belt buckle and instead of attaching it to an accounting ledger, we would attach it to the *New Testament Bible*.

We made two editions, the video *Bible Belt*, and I'll show you a video from that in a minute, and a limited edition of signed and numbered Bible Belts.

The *Bible* we used was given to the enlisted men in the Army when they went to Iraq during the first war, Desert Storm. The sculpture is made from an actual military *Bible* with camouflaged covers that's part of the belt.



When we made *The Bible Belt*, the evangelical Christians were just starting their rise to power taking over control in the government. Dan Quayle, George Herbert Walker Bush's Vice President, is sort of a stand-in for George W. Bush, (Bush Senior's son) and the precursor to Mike Pence (also from Indiana) the last Vice President. Quayle and his wife Marilyn were the first wave of conservative religious politicians to dominate our political and social life. Today evangelicals are even much more prevalent than they were in the late 80's sitting front and center at almost all levels of government.

HB: Well, first of all, did you have any blow-back on this? Did you get negative reactions? Particularly from the religious community?

MR: No, no, I don't think it ever rose to that level where they could take offense, if they saw it...

HB: You didn't even hesitate about using clips from religious programming and things like that? You didn't hesitate that they might come after you?

MR: Well, at that time, Jimmy Swaggart had his own problems. Jimmy Swaggart is the preacher in the beginning of the video, telling you that he doesn't want you to sell your car, doesn't want you to get mortgages on your home to support him. At that time, he was having extramarital affairs with scandals around his personal life. The evangelical footage came from Spanish artist Muntadas, who gave us permission to use the material he had collected for his own video installation *The Board Room*.

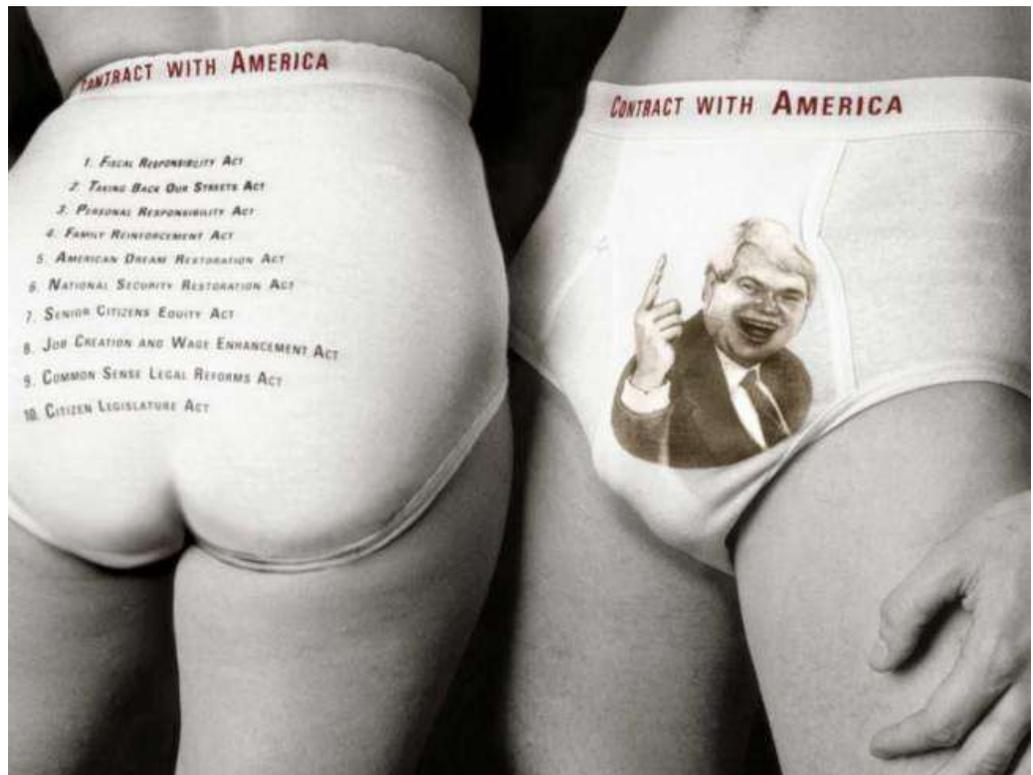
HB: Okay, and the phone number that people were supposed to call, was that a live number?

MR: It's live. 214 is a Dallas area code. And we chose that because there seemed to be a lot of religious conservatives in that part of Texas. I did call the phone number once, I don't remember what it was, I think it was a library or something.

HB: Since we're dealing with that time period, do you want to go into *Contract with America underwear*?

MR: Let me set that up, because *The Bible Belt* in 1992 was the first of a series of edition works about marketing and politics called the *Pure Products of America*.

We produced these mass market point-of-purchase videos a kind of like a point of purchase video to accompany the artwork. In 1995, we launched *Contract with America underwear*.



The Contract with America was an electoral campaign that the Republican National Party organized in 1994. It's the first time a political party devised a national campaign for what is generally a more local campaign cycle between presidential general elections.

In 1994, Newt Gingrich and Tom DeLay came up with the idea of a Contract with America. Even though it was successful, establishing a Republican majority in the House, it only had one paid print advertisement in *TV Guide*. The Contract consisted of 10 points. The effect of this campaign on the American psyche was and continues to be very traumatic.

For example, there's The American Dream Restoration Act. When I first heard that I thought to myself like, who would be against that? I'd buy into that. Who doesn't want to restore the American Dream? I certainly do, wouldn't you? The Contract with America underpinned a lot of legislation that Bill Clinton ended up passing.

We screen printed Newt on the crotch, and we put the 10 points of the contract on the seat. Throughout the process of making this, we learned that it's very hard to get underwear without anything printed on the waist band. But it was essential that we had to do that. And at the time, as we were sourcing this out, there was an embargo on China, some kind of trade dispute going on and all the underwear coming to the United States from China was adrift on freighters in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

We ended up finding the source for the underwear at some mill in the South.

Because this was a pure product, we did something which we had never done before, we sent it, mailed the underwear, in some cases even shipped it by FedEx, to elected officials in Washington.

I don't remember how many we sent. Certainly, several dozen pairs of underwear. One happened to arrive on the desk of Congressman Jim McDermott, the representative from Seattle, and a journalist from Associated Press came to his office saw it on his desk and decided to write an article about it.

And then it went into the mainstream. It was kind of a spoof, predating The Yes Men, before their famous Barbie doll intervention as graduate students at UCSD.

Like the other Pure Products we produced an ad for it with footage from Ronald Reagan's 1984 *Morning in America* campaign superimposing a young Rush Limbaugh and other conservatives like Senator Bob Dole and Ralph Reed, a very powerful evangelical lobbyist over the footage.

It was a parody of Calvin Klein ads.

HB: Were you expecting the kind of level of publicity that you got?

MR: Oh no, absolutely not. I don't know what Nora and I were expecting.

When the AP reporter called us, asking for a copy because Representative McDermott didn't want to hand over his pair, he said, "I'm going to write something up and something could happen or not."

After his article was published, the phone didn't stop ringing for two weeks. Faxes and messages poured in. And then it died down.

Then the Republican National Committee sent us a cease and desist letter and stoked the flames further.

HB: You weren't fearful from the cease and desist letter?

MR: No, we talked to Marjorie Heins, who was at the ACLU where she ran the arts and censorship program. She put us in touch with a lawyer, Nora always likes to say, we paid them in underwear and they represented us.

The lawyer said, we'll just send the RNC a response back, generally nothing will happen, and nothing did.

We had written press releases when we published the underwear framing it as political satire. There was nothing the RNC could do to us based on free speech grounds to deny us this form of expression.

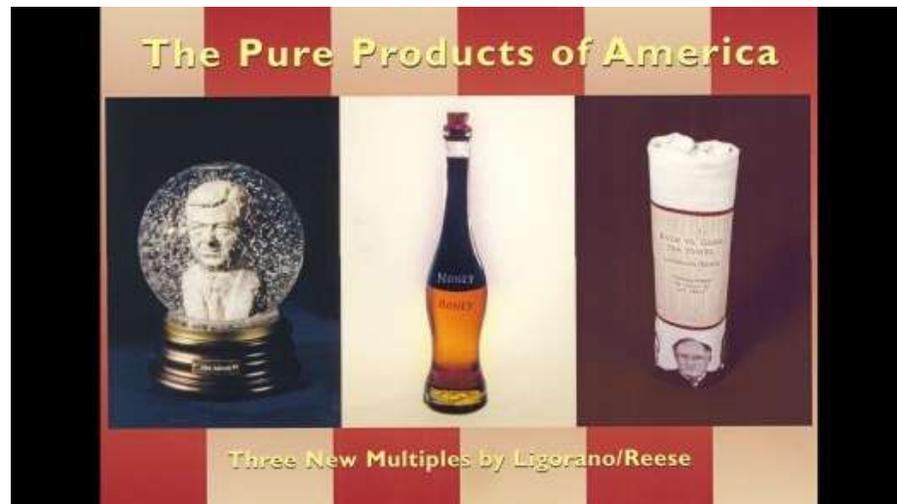
And so that was all. All quite unexpected.

HB: Do you think that this is probably the most publicity you got around a particular work?

MR: No, actually, there's another art work, *The John Ashcroft snow globe*.



MR: The John Ashcroft Snow Globe was part of the *W Collection* Nora and I made in 2001 on the anniversary when the Supreme Court stopped the Florida recount of the 2000 election.



It consisted of the *Bush versus Gore* dish towel which cleaned up any mess.

Money Honey, which is motor oil suspended in honey in a Coke bottle, alluding to Al Queda and how they shipped arms around the world.

And it also includes *The John Ashcroft snow globe*. (Nora and I are known for making snow globes.)

MR: This is the very first snow globe we made. It was 6 inches in diameter, kind of big for a snow globe. With a bust of John Ashcroft that Nora made out of modeling clay.

At that time, there were no portraits of him. I ended up downloading all these images of Ashcroft, when he became attorney general, since there was no official portrait of him. It was very hard to see what he looked like, yet Nora's bust is really good.

The snow globe has a musical movement that plays *White Christmas*, because when you go into his record, when Ashcroft was Missouri Attorney General and when he was Governor, he was kind of a, umm, against integration, basically a segregationist. As Senator, he put a hold on Ronnie White one of Clinton's judicial appointees who happened to be African-American.

Strangely enough, we sold the first one at Spoonbill and Sugartown a bookstore in Brooklyn. The owners put it in their shop window and a woman came by and bought it for her boyfriend, because she later told us he was very conservative politically and she wanted to piss him off.

She brought it home and said, "Hey look, honey, what I brought you," and sure enough he goes, "I don't want it. This is a piece of crap."

And he kept it at home. Then one day he took it to his office. He was a federal prosecutor in New Jersey. And it turned out that his boss liked it so much, they bought one for their boss, who happened to be John Ashcroft.

And the person who gave it to the Attorney General was none other than Chris Christie.



John Ashcroft

Then another person happened to walk by the store window, a kind of down and out wannabe cartoonist.

He called us up and said, "I really want to meet you to show you my political cartoons. I want to write an article about you and pitch it to *The New Yorker*."

He went to Washington, his friend was Ashcroft's assistant and found out that Ashcroft loved it, that everyone at DOJ thought it was an incredible likeness.

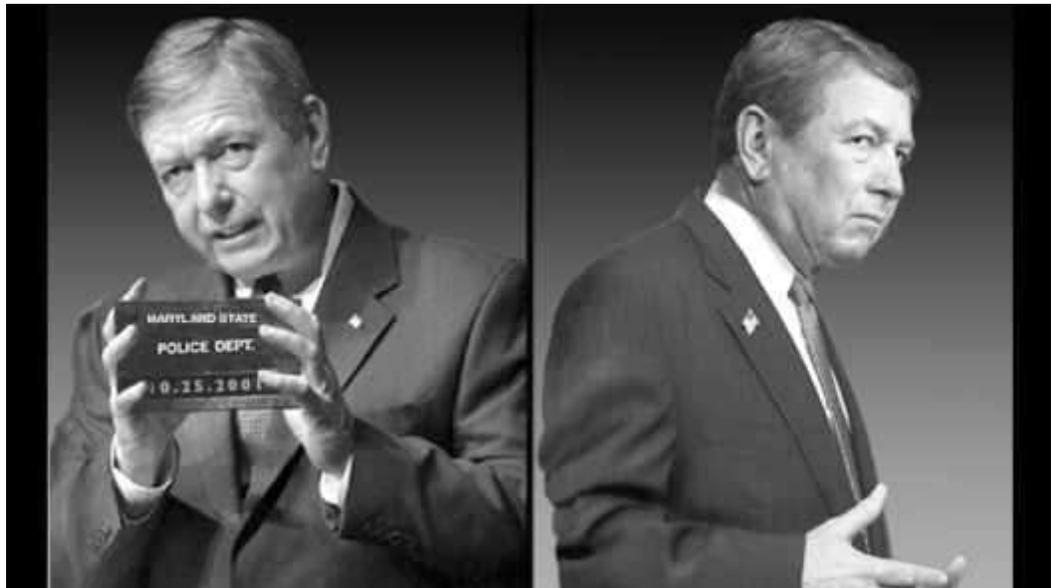
That wannabe cartoonist turned out to be Jake Tapper, now a CNN anchor, though at the time was couch surfing around Brooklyn.

Jake told us Ashcroft and his associates loved it. But when Tapper told the assistant that not only were we Brooklyn artists in our 40s but we were Naderites and thought Ashcroft was racist and his policies stunk, David Israelite Ashcroft's assistant's reaction was, "Gee that's too bad they feel that way because we're looking for somebody to do his official portrait."

So we missed out on that one!

We were a little bummed when we got the news that we could have done the official portrait. But we decided, what the heck, let's do his portrait anyway, though as a mug shot.

Which leads to *Line Up*.



The first edition of *Line Up* is an accordion postcard book. John Ashcroft was one of Bush's administration people, and most of the cabinet are holding placards with the dates when they misled the public.



.This came out in 2004 when the Republican Convention was here in New York. Nora and I took it to the streets. We were demonstrating and sold *Line Up* at Union Square.

We had found a printer on Varick Street near the Holland Tunnel where printers used to be, and we said, "Look, we want to do this."

And they said, "Fine," but were a little worried about it. (They were the printers who did the 9/11 calendar.) They thought if they printed something critical of the Bush administration then something could happen to them, but they did it anyway.

We sold the postcard book on the streets at Union Square on 14 Street. *Line Up* was very popular and sold out almost immediately. We eventually did three editions.

In just one year, the guys at the printing plant who didn't know anybody in *Line Up* at first, except maybe the president and Cheney, started to know some of the characters. By the third time we went, not only did they recognize everybody, but they gave us all the extra copies over the print run for free.

What I find remarkable about this is that within less than two and one half years, public opinion had shifted so drastically and that's what *Line Up* for me means.



We eventually published a digital fine art print. The very first edition was acquired by the New York Public Library. Roberta Waddell, the curator of the print collection, mounted her final exhibit before she retired of all the recent acquisitions she had acquired for the NYPL in a show called Multiple Interpretations and she exhibited *Line Up*.

And then what should happen?

But some conservative media guy walked by and got upset that artists like us would portray the nation's leaders as criminals, and so this became yet another thing to happen, let me just show you a few of the clips.

MR: To the library's credit, they didn't censor it.

They kept it up on exhibit. It's completely within the history of what they collect. In fact, one of the library's spokespeople referred to political satire dating from the 1800's in their collection. Honore Daumier was probably even more vicious in his satires than we were.

But Fox News kept calling, insisting that Nora and me appear on *Fox and Friends*, but we never took them up on it. They got really upset at us and started making jokes about us on air.

HB: So this is more of a technical question. You have clips from *Fox and Friends* you've shown. For some of these other pieces, you've got clips. How do you get those clips? Do you just sit there watching and wait for the right moment to start recording?

MR: No. They come off the internet. At this point, I use Snapz, screen capture software, and I use Videodownloadhelper, which I like a lot. I think its quality is better. Yeah, so that's how I do it.

But for older things like *Contract with America* that you saw from *Exposed and Debriefed*, I contacted the television stations and got VHS tapes or Betacams, and then I edited them together, but more recently, I just get digital files.

Installations 1990-2000

HB: Yeah, so speaking of all digital, let's kind of leap forward to some of your more technologically advanced projects.

MR: Sure. The book pieces *The Bible Belt* and *The Corona Palimpsest* among the many things that Nora's done and has done, are based in some ways on her practice as a book and paper conservator

Through that her work and research, she's shared with me ideas and theories about conservation, preservation, and the effects of digital media on older forms of art. The science fiction writer Bruce Sterling has a term *Dead Media* for obsolete formats like VHS tapes, 8 tracks, floppy disks, SCSI drives and those kind of things. Obsolescence happens so fast now. We were thinking very much in the 90s about the impact this has on culture with the way media are changing.



Our very first installation is *Breakfast of Champions*, 1991. It's a breakfast table with a plate of toast, a cup of coffee, hanging over the table is a huge, yellow victory ribbon.

A newspaper is beside the place setting with a video screen cut out of the front page which reveals a small video monitor displaying a video montage of journalists and politicians throughout the reportage of the first Gulf War, Desert Storm.

The New York Times on the table is an actual collage of *The Times'* front pages over the period of the Iraq war, and then in the center of the paper is a screen with these talking

heads zooming up like President Bush saying, “There’s a new world order.” I edited this kind of mad with very fast cutting behind him of news footage,

Nora and I grew up with television. We are very mindful of TV in our lives and how the plethora of media is shaping and changing society.

Mon Cheri Sentimentaux 1992 was our next sculpture. It’s a box of sentimental chocolates, like Whitman samplers, these horribly sweet candies. We made sculptures out of wax that look like chocolate bonbons, and we cut out holes through them for black and white monitors from which soap operas spin revolving hypnotically round and round.



One video channel goes counter-clockwise, the other video channel – its negative – goes clockwise in an opposite direction. The chocolates in the sampler have names like *Not His Baby Butter Cream*. And the soundtrack is the theme from the soap opera *Days of Our Lives*.

In the 90's we were really interested about making sculptures on the effects of mass media on culture, about combining video with books and newspapers at a transitional moment, stitching and splicing different media together. We still are.

That became even more intense, more psychologically driven with the rise of the internet and the dawning of Y2K in the next series of sculptures we made. We made 3 sculptures from clocks with video screens as their clockfaces, thinking about portraiture and the effects of time.





This was at the beginning of the 21st century at the moment when everybody thought that the internet and all electronic society would glitch and collapse, There was a sense both of hysteria *and* euphoria — the Dotcom bubble hadn't burst yet.

Happy Hour 2000 consisted of two neon bar clocks. A man and a woman laugh continuously until they cry, which kind of summed up the moment. The sculptures had bright neon with anodized frames. They face each other or are side by side In exhibition. There's this sense of something spinning out of control.

We followed that with *The Last Minute*, also very much continuing with this sense of impending anxiety. *Last Minute* is a video alarm clock. We filmed two dancers in close up. They twitch and shutter with nervous ticks. They're intercut between scenes of the alarm clock's hands speeding up or slowing down as they cycle through the hours, sort of like that unsettling space between sleep and wakefulness.



Last Minute is the really first piece we did that had a mechanical movement in it. The alarm clock rang at two moments in the cycle. It was mounted on a night stand that rumbled.

Van Eyck's Mirror is the crossover from that kind of work, the video sculptures, to the more interactive art work we do now. In the 1600's, the high-tech innovation were lenses and mirrors. In the painting *The Marriage of Arnolfini* there's a couple in the foreground, behind them is the reflection in a mirror revealing the painter painting them.

For this installation, we made a replica of the mirror, which is an interactive video screen. As the viewer walks toward it, an actor dressed like Van Eyck gazes at them and as they get closer he turns away and vanishes. There is the sound of breathing, the installation

is very sumptuous with red velour drapes and an Near Eastern carpet with pressure sensors. *Van Eyck's Mirror* is about the divorce of time moving towards someone, or something, the past and not being able to ever grasp it.



The Fiber Optic Data Tapestries

Moving from books and clocks, Nora and I were searching in our next work for a cultural form that connected the continuity of humanity with the present. It didn't take long for us to choose the woven textile as the rich ground and source to work from.

We decided that we wanted to draw on this long tradition to weave communication materials as fabrics as tapestries using fiber optic thread. Since the sense of the hand is so important for us, equally necessary was to weave the fabric of the artwork on a hand loom. Eventually we designed software to illuminate and animate the fabric with LED lights that responded to information and data. The tapestries were to be dynamic and ever changing artworks.



The first of these pieces was *50 Different Minds*, and then we followed that with *IAMI*, a data portrait that uses Fitbit data to make the patterning, and the most recent one, *Certainty of Ambiguity* uses a person's secret PIN numbers to randomize and animate woven patterns. Both public and private data is of interest to us and each dataset gives the tapestry a different sense and feeling.

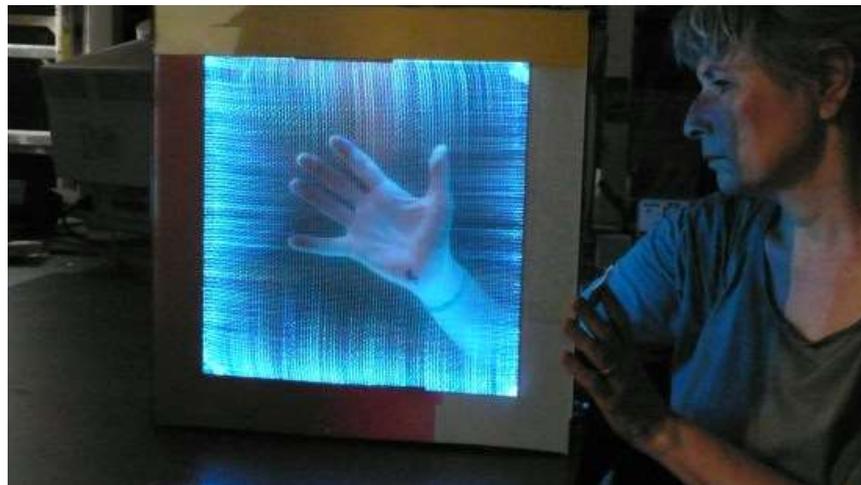


The fiber optic tapestries are woven on a Dobby hand loom using a shuttle. In the weave, there are two directions the warp and the weft. And what's interesting about this is that living in the age of high definition with 2K, 4K video images that are extremely detailed,

what Nora and I are doing is working with a much coarser screen, thread counts, the number of threads.

The weaver uses the shuttle to join the warp, which is the vertical lines with the weft horizontal lines. The shuttle actually scratches the surface, allowing the light to come out from it. Fiber optic thread is designed so the light doesn't leak. That the light that you show from one end will be exactly the same intensity at the other end, but by Nora and me using this process, we've destroyed the thread, allowing the light to leak on it through its sides.

And this is a shot of us making the first one in our studio, we work with Luke Loeffler the software designer who Skype's in and we do the patterning over the internet. Luke has worked with us on all three tapestries. I'll show you a video, so you get a moving sense that the patterns always change.



HB: So let me kind of go over the kind of multiple, multiple levels that you're dealing with here. On one level, you're dealing with trying to make a technology work differently than it's intended to. Fiber optics, right? You're also referencing the history of fiber as a textile with it as a form of communication.

On another level, you're dealing with color and Albers obviously, and that on another level, you're dealing with today's communication and a form of visualization of that data.

So this is highly complex, the kind of different levels you bring together. One piece is really incorporating so many different kinds of underlying backgrounds that you are either commenting upon or moving forward with.

How do you and Nora come up with this?

MR: I don't know, frankly. Nora likes to say that we're two headed artists.

But in fact, there's a certain serendipity and casualness to our art making process where it's informed by what you eat for breakfast, what you see on TV, or listen on the radio. And in the case of the fiber optic data tapestries, we had a studio visit when we were making the clock pieces I showed you. David McFadden, then the Chief Curator of the American Craft Museum as he left the studio said, "Do you and Nora do anything with fiber?"

And at first, it seemed like a non-sequitur to me, maybe to Nora, too, but later, we went home. She took a nap and when she woke up said, "Why don't we make a fiber optic tapestry?"

And I remember replying, "Oh, that sounds interesting. How do we do that?"

And then that's how we started working on it. Nora was doing surface design, doing designs for various types of weaving then. Mostly Jacquard weaves. And then when you start investigating the history, Joseph Marie Jacquard invented the process. His is the first automated machine in the industrial age. He made a mechanized loom that used punch cards to control the movement.

Many people see the Jacquard loom among the first computers. So we were thinking along those lines, and then we're also thinking, well, you know, there's a certain social activity around weaving, it's common to so many cultures, so why don't we try to experiment with using woven forms and somehow incorporating the internet and social media? And then we started working on it.

We were able to get some initial funding, which allowed us to experiment, we just started.

We were just at the MIT Media Lab where we did *Van Eyck's Mirror*. That experience opened Nora and me up to collaborating with more people besides ourselves... And it just sort of happened naturally.

There were a lot of bumps on the road. It took us five to six years even to get this to work, but we were persistent. In the very beginning, Nora was trying to scratch the fiber optic thread using acetone. The only problem is that by using such a strong solvent, the fiber optics just melted and disappeared. So that wasn't a good working process.

And then there's just a happy accident that the shuttle actually scratched the fiber optic thread enough that we didn't really have to do much ourselves, but you had to learn about a whole new technology and how it works. Not just figuring out how to use it, but how it actually functions to actually see what your scratches do.

Yeah, we were very lucky. I think that's the main thing. There's always been a lot of hand in our work, Nora's very skilled, and we both want things to look very well made, we're not hackers in that sense.

We're not the kind of artist that if you go see their installation there's wires hanging all over the place. Sometimes I think we should have a little bit more of that in what we do, but I, both of us, want things to look very, very finished.

The main thing with the tapestries is that we were lucky. Though if we had had a different bent, we probably would have just done these things as an electronic screen display and they would have been much different. But the fact that we wanted to connect it to older traditions and emphasize the hand, pushed it in a different direction.

What is really significant is the connection with the hand. It comes through even with our team of hardware designers. We started working first with Eric Singer, who makes robots and robotic instruments, like the guitarbot, and instruments for Pat Metheny. Our next hardware designer, Levy Lorenzo, was also a percussionist. They make musical instruments, that's underlying the philosophy in the tapestries.

Beside that, there is very much a musical component to these works, it may not be immediately apparent, but certainly in the conceptualizing, we're thinking of music and musical structure. There's a strong connection with Morton Feldman, a New York school composer and friend of John Cage. Feldman is a precursor to minimal music and Feldman collected and studied tapestries their woven forms, particularly Turkish and Middle Eastern rugs. The rugs were very important for him thinking of duration and repetition in his compositions, also scale, and so that's a deeper layer to this.

We also had to learn about hardware and microchips and all that kind of stuff, but generally I follow the hardware and software designers.

I have enough skill that I can direct them, and I know that things should have certain, should be used in certain ways and that we should have backup programming so that if it doesn't connect to the internet, the tapestry will display something anyway, and things like that, and then as we've developed it, I'm much more savvy about hardware connections and things like that.



The tapestries are performative, their performance work in the sense that they rely on the internet on the transmission of data, and they're really playing over different servers all over the place, all over the world, all the time.

Like *I•AM•I*, which is the data portrait is a person... the subject sets up their Fitbit account (Fitbit is an open source type of system) so that you are able to exchange data between your accounts and the tapestry. *I•AM•I* pings the Fitbit side multiple times a day to get the most current data, at other times, the textile's program actually texts or emails the user to find out how they feel. We built an HTML5 interface, an interactive interface so that you could control and input data.

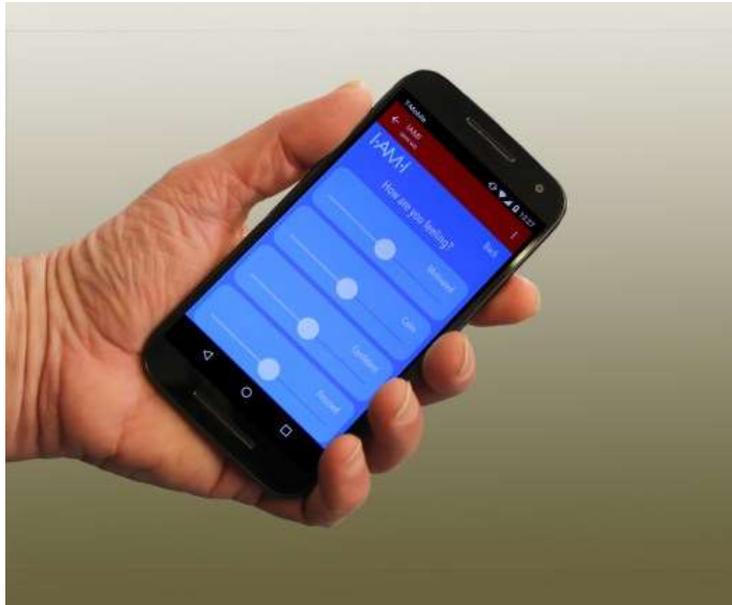
And they're like 11 questions with a graphic slider to input how you feel, whether you're motivated. Energetic. Joyful. And then that varies what the tapestry displays.

Howard mentioned something about colors, and so with this piece there's two color systems. In Thailand, there are colors of the day, for example, blue is Friday, purple as Saturday, red is Sunday. In Thailand, the posters on the street use those colors for specific events to remind people of the date. The subject of *I•AM•I* is able to read that information, so that's one of the color systems that's part of this.

And there's a psychologist named Robert Plutchik who created a color wheel for psychological states, and in this part or this section of the software, that's what we're referring to in the patterning.

You can act as this is an abstract portrait, but you can also read it, it's a visualization of your steps and activities like that. There's also the question of what it means to track and record your activities, who sees it? Portraiture as surveillance.





All the threads are bundled, they're attached to the lights.

Nora devised this coupling system to connect the fiber optics. to the lights without glue. She uses shrink wrap tubing that usually fastens or protects electrical joints and cables that are soldered.

You can see through the textile, it's not opaque. And at some point, we'll put video displays behind them. We want people to interact with them.

Here's the *I AM I* interface, we chose warm button sounds for the sliders like a marimba, again a sound created by striking a piece of wood with a mallet in your hand. When you commit your data, a statement randomly pops on the screen about portraiture quoted from an artist.

HB: So the fiber optic data tapestries are very elaborate on a base level, these can be taking generic data, right. You said airplane schedules, airplane arrivals, things like that.

HB: And you're really working now with making it highly personalized, so it's really about a particular person and about some of the most intimate details about their lives, their weight gain there, the Fitbit kind of information... Their mood swings, things like that. The piece you didn't show, has people's pin numbers, those are very intimate kinds of

things and very personalized, takes it away from being a generic piece to being my piece or related to me, so... Can you talk a little bit about that?

MR: We'll probably make two more of these tapestries. We haven't decided the datasets yet.

With *I•AM•I* that was the moment when people were self-quantifying themselves, so self-quantification became an interesting idea to explore. We wanted to use that kind of information as a way to make a portrait of somebody. We wondered about what it would be like to portray someone just using their personal data. And then we thought about ways to capture it and collect it. Like a traditional portraitist, there would be a sketch period, which is sort of...

HB: Is the data collection period?

MR: Yes, there's a period of two or four weeks of data capture and then the user commits their data and the software shuffles it in various ways so that each portrait is slightly different... they're personalized, but they're standard personalized, they're five shuffling routines

With the newer piece, the one that uses PIN numbers, we wanted to make it not really random, but to devise a series of rules to make it more individual, so with that... like a suite of variations it goes back to music.

With *I•AM•I*, we were thinking of ragas as these extended forms. Ragas really are about a person's emotions as well as their... their movement. *I•AM•I* is a visual raga.



With *Certainty of Ambiguity*, we started using pin numbers, but we were really interested in basing that number sequencing on North Indian Talas. The talas are rhythms, different beat patterns, depending on somebody's birthday, we assign them a tala that changes the way that the piece animates. We didn't want to make something that's completely abstract, so we devised 18 or 19 different animations with two to three different variations and the various number sets determine which variation gets shown, to make each data portrait more individualized.

Like much of our earlier works, there's also a sense of scale. This is a small piece compared to the other data tapestries. It's about 12 by 12 inches, and it suggests a mirror, a coat of arms, a shield, which were all things that express individuality, and the way that you communicate with it is through SMS for cell phones, already an intimate relationship for interaction and communicating.

You have a more personal relationship with it, even more than *I•AM•I*, like there is an interactive dialogue for entering your data. The piece has its own cell number, so that when it's plugged in for the first time, it's programmed to text the owner and ask for their input.

And it's playing with the idea of what we accept as public and private information now and what we're willing to share publicly with it.

When we first showed *Certainty of Ambiguity* in San Francisco, the gallery owner Catharine Clark, who's 10 years younger than me, hesitated for a minute or so because we had asked her to put her private data into the piece through her cel phone. Her gallery director, on the other hand, who's maybe 30 years younger than I am, a generation younger than Katie, had no problem at all with it.

Our acceptance of what is public and what is private has changed in a generation, from my generation to Katie's, to her gallery director's generation. And that's more and more become an accepted part and protocol of our lives.

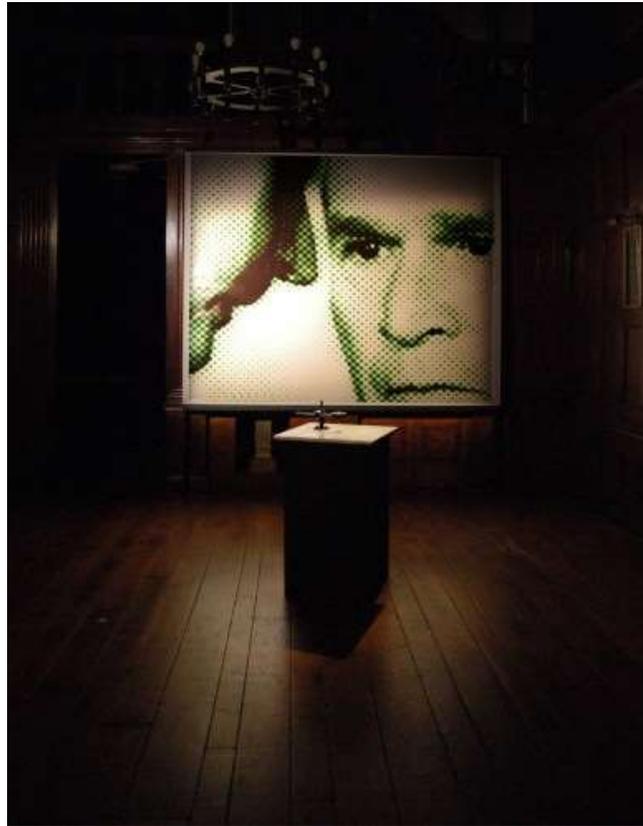
I was reading Shoshana Zuboff's book, *Surveillance Capitalism*, which I strongly recommend, and it's just astounding how the data companies or the internet, you know, Facebook, Google, and Amazon are using our data which we're freely giving them. Jaron Lanier, another internet and computer pioneer wrote in *The New York Times* we should be selling them our data, because then they use it as their data...

HB To sell things to us.

MR: It's a very closed loop. So now I think when we began these pieces, Nora and I had perhaps more of a utopian idea of what it meant to share information on the internet, but maybe not so much any more. *Certainty of Ambiguity* is a dare, it's really a dare, how much do you want your private data to be visualized, to be seen in public? That's the same premise as the other one, *I•AM•I*, but I think that our feelings about data and the whole use of digital devices and these big data networks has changed a lot. Certainly, reading Zuboff's book really changed my thinking on it.

MicroProjections

HB: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Okay, so let's make a big leap backwards with the theme still being technological. Can you talk a little bit about *In Memory of Truth*?



MR: Yeah, that's right in between the fiber optic tapestries and... well actually we had begun the tapestries already.

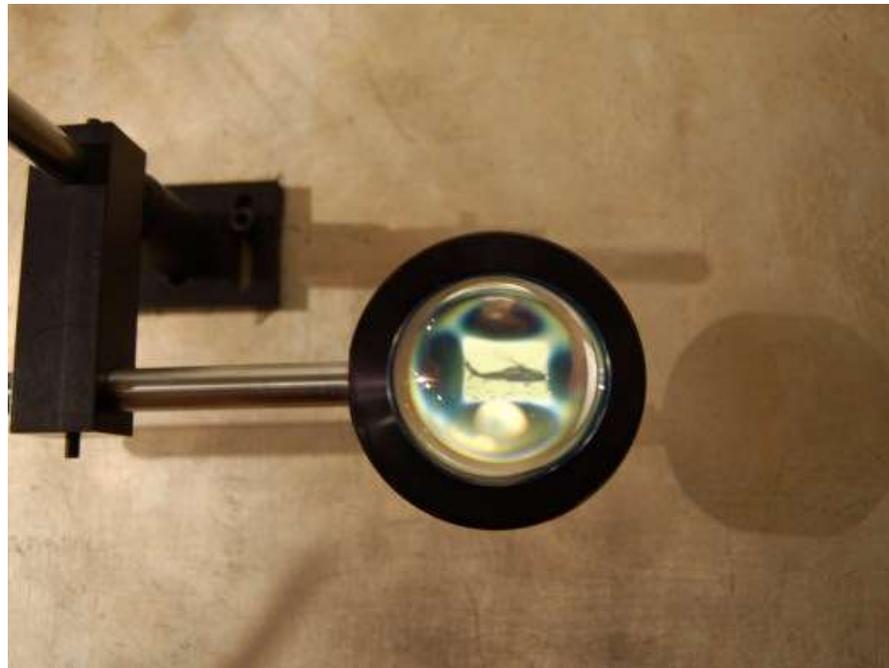
First there were the books, then the clocks. And then we started working on the tapestries but before that, or in between there's this work, which is still... I think we're going to return to which we call microprojections. They're sculptures with primary lenses in them that reduce the image substantially almost to the point that the images can't be seen with the naked eye.

The aide said that guys like me were "in what we call the reality-based community... That's not the way the world really works anymore... We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality... We're history's actors... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do."

— Ron Suskind, *The New York Times*, October 17, 2014

In Memory of Truth, which Howard mentioned, centers around a very large portrait the moment when Andrew Card, who was George W. Bush's Chief of Staff informed the president of the attacks on the World Trade Towers. And in front of it is this pedestal with a loop, a magnifying glass, that you look through and you see Hollywood war films projected on the head of a pin,

But these images are not visible to the naked eye. They can only be seen through the magnifying glass. *In Memory of Truth* is really about how we look at things, at what is seen and unseen. 2003 was the moment when the country was being prepared for the second Iraq invasion. If you paid any attention, all of a sudden, all these war films like *Saving Private Ryan*, *Black Hawk Down*, *Pearl Harbor* started to be shown, like drum beats preparing for war.



In Memory of Truth was very much about that. In fact, Howard called me up or sent me an email when he saw it – it was very funny – saying, “I think it’s really great what you did, shrinking that documentary footage, it’s so much about individuated media.”

And I replied, “Howard, those aren’t documentaries they’re Hollywood war films. I made them all black and white, so they look like documentaries.”

HB: You showed this at the Park Avenue Armory.

MR: Yes.



This next microprojection sculpture is called *History's Garden*. It's a metronome with videos of refugees from World War II and of the Middle East.

The images are projected onto a miniature prism mounted on a moving mechanical arm that swings back and forth. The video is treated with an amber hue and with grain generated to enhance the archival look. It's about shared pasts and the inescapability of history.

My hope is that one day there will be a quartet of metronomes.

Melted Away

HB: Okay, so why don't we go to the ice sculptures? Since we haven't talked about those at all. And then we'll open it up for questions or comments.

MR: Yeah, so as I said, it's... It's hasn't been a direct path, but it's been a path nonetheless,

If you remember back when we did *Line Up* and somebody was interested in acquiring an edition work, I was going around getting advice, about what kind of ways to print it. I went to Jim Kempner Fine Art, who specializes in print editions. When I showed Jim the maquette right on the spot agreed to publish the *Line Up* prints.

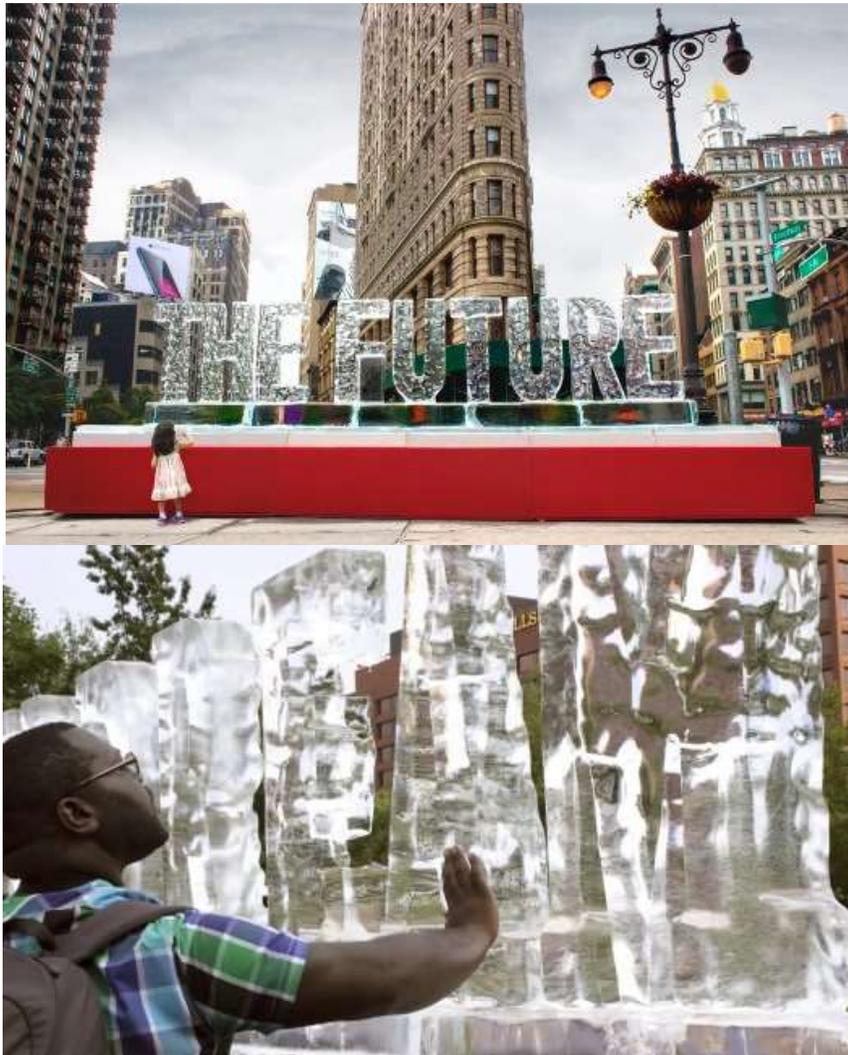
As I was leaving, the gallery director Dru Arstark came after me and asked, "Do you and Nora make garden sculptures?" And that was at the time of fiber optic tapestries. And I'm thinking to myself, like when David McFadden visited our studio, what are you talking about?

When I went home I said to Nora over dinner, "Dru asked if we do we do garden sculptures." And she said right away, "Oh yeah, let's do an ice sculpture," so that's how they started.

In 2006, we installed *Democracy* in the garden of Jim Kempner's gallery on the third anniversary of the Iraq war, and two years later, we were invited to be part of a series of public art interventions called BrushFire in the Midwest.







In our initial conversation with Don Russell, I said, “Well, aren’t there two political conventions in the Midwest? We’ll do both of them.” Little did I know that there was only funding for one installation. We had to figure out a way to pay for both installations. This is the Democratic Convention 2008 in front of the MCADenver, very close to where the Convention was taking place in the arena.

And this is the Republican Convention in St. Paul, 2008, on the grounds of the state capitol in the middle of a demonstration, there were thousands of people.

HB: So just to make clear to everyone, these are ice, so they melt slowly. And the words disappear.

MR: Yes, they're very ephemeral. Let's see, in 2008, we followed Democracy with the word Economy in front of the New York State Supreme Court building and Foley Square on the 79th anniversary of The Great Depression, two weeks after Lehman Brothers declared bankruptcy. Everybody was concerned about what was happening. This was really the first time that we had such public feedback, interviewing the people who came to see it.

And then in 2012 in Charlotte and Tampa, we melted down the words Middle Class, and in 2014, during the People's Climate March, we melted down The Future

So with each of these things, these are really in a way, film sets. They are sculptures, they're performances, they are interactive with the public, but they're also film sets, because we're filming time-lapse videos streaming them and shooting still photography. Then in 2016, we melted The American Dream in Cleveland and Independence Mall in Philadelphia.

Most recently, last fall, we installed the word Truth on the National Mall in front of the Capitol.

HB: So just a kind of overall question, lots of your work is ephemeral, and all that really remains is documentation of the work. Is that documentation the work? Does that become the work? And how important is documenting these things, because so many of them are ephemeral, be they installations that are only up for a certain amount of time, or be they essentially a performance?

MR: Well, Nora and I started early on, thinking of the ice sculptures taking Gene Youngblood's term "expanded cinema" that the documentation being an expanded documentary where the videos of the sculptures are embedded on websites, along with photographic images, there's text. And since we're streaming the sculptures live as they disappear, the streaming is another element on the website. So I see all of that as part of the piece.

The way we see the material connections and processes between all these different works that we've talked about is that they're about light, luminosity, transformation and built on systems, in the sense that the ice sculptures are being streamed, they have an internet component just like the fiber optic tapestries with their internet component.

There's a unity in those senses of them, but I think in the end, it really is all about documentation.

If you look at conceptual art, or any of the art that Lucy Lippard was describing in her book *The Dematerialization of the Art Object*, the only thing that remains of those art works are the images or films and videos. If you go to Hans Haacke's exhibition at the New Museum now, you're going to be reading a lot of wall text. Certainly with his earlier works, you'll be reading a lot, it's just part of... It's how we make things now.

HB: That's even true with things like your tapestries will only have a certain lifetime, right? The kind of interface that they have to connect with the internet... is going to break at some point, right? So even with things that seem very... seem somewhat more tangible, there are issues with their preservation.

MR: Well, yeah, absolutely. I think that given Nora's background in conservation, we try to be mindful of the preservation issues. But it's kind of like the mechanic's car with the work we have in the studio. The auto mechanic's car is probably the least well maintained vehicle that they work on. We're definitely aware of it. Yes, things will break down and yes, we've done upgrades too on the tapestries and microprojections.

We do back up data, but at some point, the components, I don't know what will happen to our chip sets if they get obsolete. LEDs get brighter. Domed lens LEDs are less and less. They're flat now. We made some new circuits earlier this year, and it took a lot of research to find the manufacturers for the proper LEDs.

Political Art Now

HB: A significant portion of your work deals with political climate, social political kind of events, attitudes, changes... what does it mean to really be reacting to a social political climate in general? Is that too broad of a question?

More specifically with the political climate as it is today, how is that different in an age of untruth, fake news. Obviously, you can continue the ice sculpture with Truth melting and play off of Trump's untrue statements. But other than that, things in a way, reacting against the Bush administration and the war in Iraq or the Contract with America, that was a different time period and a different approach. The things that were outrageous, that were being done by politicians were not well-known as being outrageous to the general public.

Today, every day there's a new outrage.

How can you continue to try to expose and undercut and react to things in an age when outrageousness, massive outrageousness and recognition of that outrageousness is the norm?

MR: That's a very loaded question. But it's something that Nora and I think about it. I think that my first impulse is that... and I just finished reading Bill McKibbin's the founder of 350.org book *Falter* on the way in to your class.

We need creative solutions. I think that in terms of the rhetoric that we see, we really need... there needs to be ways to create conversations that are different than the rhetoric we hear and the way that people speak about the issues that affect our lives. It's going to take a lot. It's going to take a concerted effort to come up with a way to counter that.

I think that looking at the Truth time lapse and in just the span of three or four months, things have changed so much. When we did the video tape, I finished the video tape in March or April, and we were searching for a soundtrack. I was originally using a poem by Mark McMorris who wrote and read it on site at the National Mall with the Truth sculpture behind him. Even though I really like Mark's poem, we needed to make the video stronger. At first we thought about using Trump's words but I resisted it.

Having to listen to Trump was hard, but then when I started editing Trump's audio, it became very interesting the way he talked, and I think that James Comey, the FBI director he fired, said that Trump constantly talks. He makes you complicit in his schemes, because you can't, there's no way to converse with him. There's no conversation possible.

And so when I was editing this, the soundtrack here, I really felt that this is constant talking, that this flow of incoherent speech would wear down any semblance of Truth.

But I think to answer your question things are very serious, and unfortunately, I don't think there's a sense of irony anymore, nor can there be.

Like in 1994, during the Contract with America, there was. I think under even George W. Bush, there was a sense of irony, so I wonder, in terms of political art that's based on irony or humor, I don't know how much it works anymore.

So I'm surprised, but not really surprised. I don't know what The Yes Men are doing right now, but I imagine they must be in a conundrum themselves because I assume that they must feel some of this. I mean, in fact, to be able to spoof, if you want to use those words

or if you masquerade as somebody else presenting a political viewpoint that's outrageous, it's just not... it may not have the effect that it once did.

That's not to say it's not necessary to do that. It is even more so now.

I think it was in Britain recently, when throwing a cream pie in a politician's face just came back in fashion. You know, it used to be very effective to throw a cream pie in a powerful person's face.

We need more of that!

<https://ligoranoreese.net/interview/>