

Sierra Ferrier
ARH212: Revolt, Reform, Critique
11/27/12

System of Chance: Lee Walton's Postmodern Answer to Meaning

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November 27th 2012
An E-book project for: ARH212-Revolt, Reform, Critique at
Elon University Elon, NC for Fall 2012 with Dr. Courtney Micots

All images used: Lakers vs. Celtics, NBA Championship Series (7 Games), Lee Walton, Greensboro, North Carolina, 2012, Mixed Media on Paper, Kraushaar Gallery, New York, NY.

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Abstract

Lee Walton, a video, screen printer, performance, and .net artist hails from California, where he received his MFA from the California College of the Arts. His work falls into the social practice realm, in which his art provides commentary and an examination of modern culture. Pulling inspiration from sports games and daily life occurrences happening on the streets of New York City and San Francisco, Walton casts his rendition of reality by producing works that react and represent specific events in time from his waking life. Whether it is the results of an Angry Birds game on his iPhone, to the scores of a Yankees v. Mets game, Walton reinterprets a ‘happening’ with various new media methods, using the exploration to deconstruct and expand on its formal qualities. He devises modifications and interventions of social and web media to investigate technology in relation to group identity of modern American society in the 21st century. For my research, I plan to explain and analyze Walton’s methods of abstraction, and how Walton efficiently presents modern American experience. Walton’s work is a vehicle and container of cultural identity and human connectedness, implemented using relevant media to assert his stance.

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Clusters of curvilinear and perpendicular lines weave through square rectangular panels on 17" by 21" inch sheets of paper, communicating some sort of foreign code to its viewers. Upon first glance, each cell looks like miniature basketball courts of scrawled notes, detailing the future game of the night. Created by Lee Walton, these hieroglyphs are detailed notes, systems of data describing the minute-by-minute gameplay of the 2010 Lakers versus Celtics seven-game playoff series. Walton, a trained screenprinter turned performance artist, uses paper as a forum for performance, in which he devises a system of rules where the action of the game corresponds to a resulting action, thought, or line marking by the artist. With the perspective that "art' [is] in the way of the artmaking",ⁱ Walton's postmodernist mode of work devises systems of chance to become created experiences for the artist, existing as both designer and participant of happenings in daily 21st century life. Through paper and new media, Walton exists as a body responding to current experience and reality, becoming a translator of the American conscious. In contrast to Jackson Pollock wielding his personal sub consciousness for his work, Lee Walton's end goal is the existence of an exploration and chronicle of himself as a member of current life in which something—or nothing—is created.

Growing up in California playing baseball and continuing at San Jose State University in California, baseball was Lee Walton's life. While growing up his parents took him to art museums, yet as a child he ranked sports as his primary interest. In college when he wasn't on the field, Walton was learning printmaking in the studio. He maintained his studies to receive an MFA degree with an emphasis in printmaking, drawing, and performance from California College of the Arts in 2000. ⁱⁱPersonal game play played a large role in Lee's

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future work of combining sports and art together as a postmodern, performative drawings and artworks. Using paper as a context of exploring the rules of a baseball game, Walton challenged and furthered the boundaries of those rules by applying them as rules for himself while drawing. When a player scored a point, Walton draws a curved line in the direction of the hit. A player makes a base hit; Walton calls his mom. Each cell in the sports drawing could correspond to a minute

of a game, a specific player's actions, or a part of an inning. ⁱⁱⁱThe purpose of these baseball drawings is that their creation (the exploration) is the most important part of the work, rather than its ending physical product. By creating systems of rules of chance for the artist to follow on and off of paper, Walton



learns more about his existence within daily life. ^{iv}“What would I be doing in this very moment if I *wasn't* following my own rules of acting and existing, something based off of total chance?” Walton says.

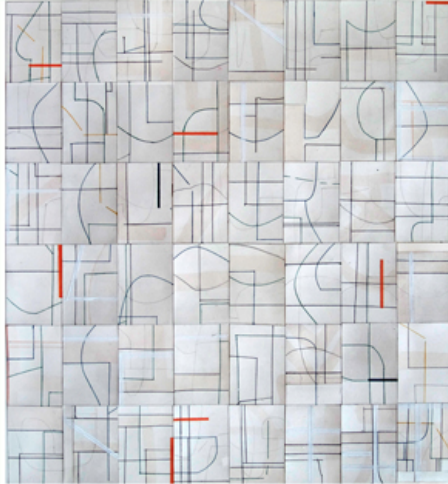
Instead of working in the studio on drawings like his college years, Walton took a walk around San Francisco, because a baseball player made a home run. Was there meaning or message created in the time it took for the game's drawing to take place? In “Architecture and Politics, in the Reagan Era: From Postmodernism to Deconstructivism”, Mary McLeod defines postmodernism as “the tendency [of art in this case] that rejects the

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formal and social constituents of the modern movement and embraces a broader formal language”, in search for “ideological justification, not in program, function, or structure, but in meaning.”^vUsing physical art as the context for self-exploration, Walton records himself as an agent acting within his own life. While making a sandwich, or drawing a curve on paper, Walton, the ‘experientialist’, creates his art: living life.

Not at all dissimilar to Lee Walton’s baseball drawings, Jackson Pollock cites his unconscious as inspiration for his artwork.^{vi} Using his painting as a space for wielding chance in automatism of the unconscious, the drip paintings, like Walton’s work, are the record of what exploration has transpired. In the creation of Walton and Pollock’s postmodernist works, both artists disregard the meaning derived in the ending piece of a work, but within the execution of it.

Pollock, experiencing and “reacting to his inner, psychic forces”^{vii} created *Number One* and *Autumn Rhythm*. It begs the question that Matthew Rampley mentions about Pollock’s authenticity of work in “Identity and Difference”; are these mental forces true “mediations in the abstract representation of theoretical subjects”?^{viii} An endeavor Lee Walton completed in 2001 titled “The Red Ball Project” details the creation of an artwork that found and exercised his viewers’ conscious for its creation, and reached Lee’s goal of himself as a participant and viewer of his work.



It was when Jim Hodges, notable New York based installation artist got to talking with Walton, and brought up the question, “Why do your performances, the baseball drawings, take place on paper?”^{ix} Within his breadth of work, Lee Walton places himself for exploration within a variety of contexts. Paper, web media, the streets of San Francisco’s Bay Area; Hodges’ question spurred Walton to complete his acted experiences without a paper record, in the form of chance-driven public

performances. It was during this time that Walton became less concerned about art he was making that could be eventually documented in a gallery space, and more on exploring systems of chance on a larger scale. Sayre discusses the similar movement of performance artists in the late sixties in *The Object of Performance*, when the move away from the physical gallery system became more and more appealing. Artists “stretch[ed] the limits of what can be done and to show others that art isn’t just making art to put in galleries”.

^xAlthough artists’ response negating the commodification of their work is commendable, it also heightens the risk of viewers experiencing an artwork solely based on their level of documentation, and may not receive a full experience of the art presented. ^{xi}Walton tackles

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this dilemma with The Red Ball Project” asking the residents of San Francisco where he can place a small red ball in the city. His gallery? A website.

Using a simple website with message comment boxes and Quicktime video clips, Walton created a fusion of contexts involving the South of Market district of San Francisco and the World Wide Web. At particular deadlines with corresponding video messages from Walton, website users could vote on specific areas of the city to place the ball. During each voting period, the locations narrowed down to eventually become the top acute angle of AT&T Park’s home plate in a stadium in downtown San Francisco. The end of the project features a short video of Walton placing the red ball at home plate.^{xii} Using social media before the term “social media” came about, Walton applied crowd-sourcing techniques to give his viewers authority over the project, making Walton himself become both a facilitator and observer of his own work. Cited as his ultimate goal, Walton created a system of chance in the web context, applied it to his current reality, and allowed the system to run through to complete the happening. This participatory performance transcended the creative mindset of something being “the work of the artist”, and into a lived experience created from the collective conscious of the art’s viewers.

Many still argue Jackson Pollock’s claim that his unconscious is an ‘unmediated’ source of the production of his paintings. ^{xiii}In comparison to Pollock, Walton excels in harnessing the collective conscious of his viewers, using their choice as the powerhouse for the execution of work. Walton is able to exist as both a creator and participant simultaneously, much akin to his baseball drawings. Both Lee Walton and Jackson Pollock’s use of self as an acting body and creator of his systems of chance calls to mind James

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Thornhill, a prominent figure in the history painting genre. Utilized as pictorial news in the 18th century, history paintings chronicled (and glorified) events and happening deemed “worthy” of recording.^{xiv} Thornhill rests in the small faction of history painters that chose to “render historical truth at the expense of heroic grandeur”,^{xv} yet had to compromise that mindset while completing “Landing of George I”. Within Thornhill’s notes and sketches for the piece, he mentions taking the liberty of changing the King’s dress and the night sky “as it should have been rather than what it was”.^{xvi} Like Walton and Pollock, Thornhill exercised his autonomy as the creator of painting, while acting as an individual within the historical context. As Thornhill frames what will be considered history, he participates as both a creator and participant in the documentation of the happening.

In the postmodern effort of finding meaning within the execution of their work, both Pollock and Walton admit themselves as performing bodies and translators of consciousnesses. “When I am *in* my painting, I’m not aware of what I am doing/I have no fears about making changes...because the painting has a life of its own”,^{xvii} Pollock stated in an interview. Through his baseball series and The Red Ball Project, Lee Walton’s crowd sourcing techniques work as a guide through systems of chance to create experience. The chief issue facing postmodernists on whether a culture can regain “coherence of substance and experience, not only form”^{xviii} is demonstrated and overcome with Walton’s artwork. As the facilitator and translator of consciousness, Walton’s art is a vehicle for cultural mediation and experience.

ⁱ Ferrier, Sierra N. Interview by author. Digital recording. Greensboro, NC. November 10, 2012.

- ii Ibid.
- iii Ibid.
- iv William Agee. "Lee Walton: Drawing and Baseball" (working paper, Evelyn Kranes Kossak Professor of Art History, Hunter College, New York, NY 2005).
- v McLeod, "Architecture and Politics," 24.
- vi Rampley, "Identity and Difference," 3.
- vii Agee, "Lee Walton," 4.
- viii Rampley, "Identity and Difference," 4.
- ix Ferrier, Sierra N. Interview by author. Digital recording. Greensboro, NC. November 10, 2012.
- x Sayre, *Object of Performance*, 215.
- xi Ibid.
- xii "Lee Walton: Red Ball Project," accessed November 23, 2012, <http://www.leewalton.com/work/projects/silentgallery/walton/redball/what.html>.
- xiii Rampley, "Identity and Difference," 4.
- xiv Wind, *Revolution of History Painting*, 236.
- xv Ibid.
- xvi Wind, *Revolution of History Painting*, 244.
- xvii Pollock, *Jackson Pollock*, 152.
- xviii McLeod, "Architecture and Politics," 30.

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Annotated Bibliography

Agee, William C. "Lee Walton: Drawing and Baseball" (working paper, Evelyn Kranes Kossak Professor of Art History, Hunter College, New York, NY 2005).

Agee (perhaps one of Walton's contemporaries) presents an overly-positive, glorified account of Walton's 'Baseball Series' screen print diagrams. Amidst the fawning over Walton's creative genius, Agee, an Art History professor at Hunter College, does manage to explain how Walton's prints, and the act of making them is performative itself.

Ferrier, Sierra N. Interview by author. Digital recording. Greensboro, NC. November 10, 2012.

A 1:08:00 interview recording with Lee Walton at the University of North Carolina Greensboro, conducted by the author.

Lakers vs. Celtics, NBA Championship Series (7 Games), Lee Walton, Greensboro, North Carolina, 2012, Mixed Media on Paper, Kraushaar Gallery, New York, NY.

The photo series used as example for Lee Walton's baseball series.

"Lee Walton: Red Ball Project," accessed November 23, 2012,
<http://www.leewalton.com/work/projects/silentgallery/walton/redball/what.html>.

The website used for The Red Ball Project in 2001. Since then, the original site is down, but the pages have been re-routed to Lee Walton's personal website.

McLeod, Mary. "Architecture and Politics in the Reagan Era: From Postmodernism to Deconstructivism." *Assemblage* 8(1989): 23-32.

A discussion regarding the current issues of architecture in the United States by postmodern designers. Provides multiple definitions of postmodernism in art and architectural contexts.

Morley, Simon. *The Sublime*. London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2010.

Taking note that today's art is created a globalized, pluralistic context, *The Sublime* features multiple essays for seven different themes in modern art. The "technology" theme section is especially useful for essays coming at the subject from multiple arenas, from viewing modern art in the context of Western Capitalism, to technology as a container for expression of community identity.

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Pollock, Jackson *Jackson Pollock: Key Interviews, Articles, and Reviews*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2002.

Written by Pollock himself, this book is a collection of interviews, articles, and other first and secondary sources bound together. Useful for quotes for argument.

Rampley, Matthew. "Identity and Difference: Jackson Pollock and the Ideology of the Drip." *Oxford Art Journal* 19(1996): 83-94.

Identity and Difference details the discussion and issues surrounding Jackson Pollock's use of his unconscious as the source of his inspiration and execution of paintings.

Read, Herbert. *Art and Alienation; the Role of the Artist in Society*. New York: Horizon, 1967.

Although dated, this source increases the amount of research on modern technology and the theme of group identity from a psychological field. This source is great for information on the modern masters (Matisse, Picasso, etc.) handling of rational/irrational society, and how Lee Walton addresses these themes from a vastly different medium.

Rutsky, R. L. *High Technē: Art and Technology from the Machine Aesthetic to the Posthuman*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1999.

Sayre's 1989 work outlines the context, "modern techno-culture" from a psychological perspective in which Lee Walton draws from for inspiration. Most helpful source for information on pertinent theme, "the techno-Cultural Unconscious. Walton enacts performances demonstrating society's fixation on the Internet and modern technology.

Sayre, Henry M. *The Object of Performance: the American Avant-Garde since 1970*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

Filled with dense performance art terms, *Object* outlines the formal tactics and meanings of modern performance art, with extra focus on made for feminism and performance art in the 1970s. Comes from the requirement to learn to critically analyze video performance specifically from theme of 'group identity'. Perhaps connections can be made from feminist category to "Generation Y", primary consumers of technology?

Wind, Edgar. "The Revolution of History Painting." In *Readings in Art History: Second Edition*, edited by Harold Spencer. 223-249. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1979.

Wind details the heavy hitters of the history painting genre, taking time to focus on Benjamin West's work during the Revolutionary War era. This source is useful for my connection of the artist's use of self within the context of their work.