Graduation Thesis
by Dániel Szöllősi

Abstract

My thesis presents a report, insight and analysis of the journey I have gone through preparing my graduation project.

The aim of writing my thesis was to gain a deeper, better and conscious knowledge about my present and previous practise by analysing and describing it with my own words and juxtaposing, comparing them with other artists' works who had been influential.

As an unexpected (but unquestionable fortunate) result my practice shaped and became more defined, and shifted from working previously driven by intuition to a self-conscious method.

Living through the graduation year and looking back on my pre-graduation practice I certainly believe that my mind as an artist matured and has stepped a level higher. I feel superior to my prior state.
My thesis will guide you through this process of maturing.

Graduation Thesis

by Dániel Szöllősi

<div align="right">

1. *'Ideas do not necessarily proceed in logical order.*
They may set one off in unexpected directions,
but an idea must necessarily be completed
in the mind before the next one is formed.'
Sol Lewitt
('Sentences on Conceptual Art', 1969
Osborne, 2002, p.222)

</div>

Introduction

My thesis presents a report, insight and analysis of the journey I have gone through preparing my graduation project.
This journey's starting point was my previous project 'Leisure Factory'.

Leisure Factory

'You deserve a minute off'
was the title of the simple task I offered on Amazon's 'Mechanical Turk' platform.

Mechanical Turk is an online marketplace for work. Any US resident can commission a small task for a small fee to digital workers from all around the world. A task can be digitalization, transcribing visual or audio data, translating, writing reviews or comments or solving 'captchas'.
My job offer was as follows: 'Stand up. Do 1 minute of exercise. Make a snapshot of yourself using your webcam. Upload the image to any image sharing service. Paste the URL of your uploaded image below and get paid 0.50$'

The visual result of Leisure Factory project is a series of webcam portraits taken by Amazon's Mechanical Turk workers of themselves in their own working environment. The current series consists almost a hundred photos.

Leisure Factory hacked / reversed a truly exploiting system: instead of exploiting further, the project liberated the workers on tiny – but in the same time – enormous scale.
The project paid workers to take a break instead of asking them to work.

I have turned an inhuman system upside-down and squeezed something human out of it. For me the human aspect was a fortunate result of the project but the core goal was the act of 'hacking-reversing' the system's nature.

Since this project was exploring an enormous field that I found highly fascinating I had the intuition it worth to address another project on this basis. I started researching this infinite, vast and broad field:
Exploiting aspects of (Online/Digital) Global Capitalism.

I was hoping to find another 'handle bar' I can grab like I grasped Mechanical Turk and used it as motor. This research taught me a broad overall knowledge about the society we live in – which is very valuable for me – but have not manifested in my art practise: the handle was missing.

Chapter: Fourth Trimester: Ideas (as work), Sparks, Propositions

'When I began to re-think my ideas of art,
I had to re-think that thinking process,
and it begins with the making process...
"Art as idea" was obvious; ideas or concepts as the work itself. ...'
Joseph Kosuth
(1991, quoted in Osborne, p.117)

'...The idea itself, even if not made visual, is as much a work of art as any finished product.
All intervening steps – scribbles, sketches, drawings, flailed work, models, studies,
thought, conversations – are of interest. Those that show the thought process
of the artist are sometimes more interesting than the final product.'
Sol Lewitt
(1967, Alberro-Stimson, p.14.: Paragraphs on conceptual art)

By the end of the fourth trimester this journey changed direction due to a discovery of a coherent line through my practice. Prior to this moment I have been working more intuitively and have not looked back and analyse my completed projects myself.
I have analysed thorough my method, the language I was using in my previous practise: even if the subject of these projects are diverse and may vary methodically they are consistent. I had a yet unconscious fascination to use 'twist', 'paradox', 'reversed logic', create 'loophole' and subtraction – a similar toolset that the founders of conceptual art were employing.
Instead of focusing on the *method* that the project was working with, I was focusing more on the *context* of my latest project. The recent discovery is a shift in understanding from content to method. Insisting to this method allows me to deal with a diverse range of topics – which is liberating – by reading this chapter you will see the diversity in range of topics and as a conclusion the coherency in method.
This chapter brings the descriptions together of my previous projects, ideas, sparks and annotate them taking this new discovery into account: I look at my own projects from a different angle: from a position where these projects stand in a line. Altogether they reached a new level of interpretation.

Conspiracy-theory against the Internet – first initial proposal for the Final Project

Moving towards from 'Leisure Factory' I observed capitalism from a wider angle and I came to the realization that the picture is more demoralizing: I do not necessarily have to look at the 'developing world' from the comfort of the wealthy 'western society' to find the motor of capitalism: exploitation.

I was fascinated by a user who wrote a pretty academic and very pleasant review of a movie which I believe satisfied the criteria of a 'professional review.' This review was way too good it felt like reading an 'official' article in a movie review magazine. But it can not be, right, that this user is a professional film critic who goes home and continues his duties in his leisure time just as he does in his labour time? – I was asking myself. So I assumed he must an amateur then. But if he is so talented how could he still be an amateur?!

My theory is that his dream was to become a film critic but due to the pressure of capitalism per say he could not afford to follow his path of his dream. His parent could not afford to pay the tuition fees for prestigious high school so following that he was unable to attend university and by the way his family's financial situation urged him to start to work as soon as possible. So he might have become a per say: a baker. – no offence for the bakers: it can be a wonderful profession. The point is the mislead driven by the aim of earning money, of surviving in the capitalist race.

> 'My initial proposal was to create a conspiracy-theory which would present the idea that 'internet' as a new tool is an invention of 'them' – the invisible authorities – and its purpose to keep the masses minds stimulated, to give them the opportunity, the right for self-expression so they remain pushing forward the capitalist mechanism efficiently so they can bare their exploiting jobs that have no relevance outside of capitalism.' – quote from self.

Every conspiracy theory is an approach from a complete opposite direction to a certain topic that is generally believed to be good without questioning: it reverses every *known-solid* fact to its opposite. It flips over the established facts, it turns the 'facts' inside-out and gives a wider lens into the hand of the viewer and opens up its mind: *every coin has two sides* and further more *grey has plenty of shades.* By providing the opposite extremity on a subject to the viewer it might lightens up its mind: if there is no singular 'truth' but there is an opposite for it – then in between there are plenty of alternative aspect as well.

From this I understood my attraction to conspiracy-theories: it has a reversing nature. The method is similar to mine: its aspect of 'turning the world upside-down' what triggers me. That is why I was repeating that I do not necessarily *believe* in conspiracy theories but I still find them fascinating.

Another important aspect is the human element: the curiosity towards the *citizens', the simple men's* everyday life.

Fairtrade

> 'FAIRTRADE logo looks down on me from the top-shelves of the most common Dutch store chain Albert Heijn. I look back on it and I start wonder: Fairtrade. I do understand both part of the mosaic word but somehow it stinks. Something is not right. In time I figured for myself: the word fair does not fit within the system of capitalism. Capitalism does not meant to be fair by default – on the contrary: it is the system of exploitation. Then how dare someone name a product that literally can not be true. It can be more fair, more equal, it can be more generous: but never can be fair in the purest meaning of the term.' – quote from self.

For some time I was struggling to drive this observation in any direction that could produce a project prior the the methodical discovery. The discovery lighted up my mind: My interest towards 'Fairtrade' is fed by its paradoxic nature: a concept that goes against the nature of capitalism but still functions under the rules of capitalism. The concept is trying to hack the exploiting aspect of capitalism: but how could it be true if Fairtrade is such a wide-spread and mainstream company? *'Iron wheel made out of wood'* – as a Hungarian expression says.

'Fairtrade' by itself is a paradox: How could I apply my method and turn a paradox into a paradox? It seems to be impossible so far. – Finally I conclude for myself and moved forward.

In this 'one-liner' below I applied the concept of Fairtrade on a field where it is not yet present to emphasise and raise awareness of its absurdity.

In Stock

Free shipping

€ 1199,00
assembled in China

In Stock

Free shipping

€ 5799,00*
assembled in Sweden

*calculated provided by the values of Chinese and Swedes GDP of 2011

Anti-consumer bracelet
'Are you tired of consuming? Choose our Anti-consumer bracelet! Consume for the one last time!'
This gag of mine is pretty straight forward. It encourages the consumer to protest against consuming with the act itself: consuming – paradox.

ARE YOU FED UP WITH CONSUMING?
CHOOSE OUR PRODUCT!
BUY IT NOW, CONSUME FOR THE ONE LAST TIME!

ANTI-CONSUMER

One Night in Paris

One Night in Paris pretends to be an amateur photo series taken on a one night long journey in Paris – but an unfortunate setting of the flash ruins all the pictures: everything in the background fades to black leaving only the smiling main character in the foreground exposed.

The spectator visually confronts a series of photos with one man appearing every photo seemingly as a tourist. He wears a fluffy, traditionally russian 'usunka' hat and a winter coat with a scarf around his neck. He stands close by the camera and stares right into the lens and smiles under his ragged moustache. He holds up his arm and frames a little measure with two of his fingers. In the lower right bottom of the photo the date, *2009.11.21* is written with rough pixely font and saturated yellow – a mark of the apparat. The second photo shows a tiny bit of the ground he stands on: green grass with brown leaves all over – this corresponds with the Parisian weather of the date, November. This is a full 'body shot' of him posing: his legs are wide apart and his hands are pointing towards the sky: he imitates the shape of the Eiffel tower. The same yellow date stamp appears on the same spot: this date signature is situated in the same place throughout the whole series.
Every image brings a new pose but the artificial smile and the stare into lens remains the same.
We can find no evidence what is faded into complete darkness in the backgrounds of the photos.

The visual language
This series uses exaggeration as a core effect: by adjusting the flash light on the the top of the photo apparatus to extreme it reveals how amateurism can subtract and eventually destroy one of the two subjects by adding an enormous amount of the essential element of photography: light.
This extra amount of light subtracts the purpose of the photo and with the background fading into darkness the photos are hard to understand and junk. The other essential part of the project is the project's title itself and the separate of each photo.
The titles are naming something what is completely missing from the photos.
The titles (La tour Eiffel, Trocadéro, Le Pont d'Alma etc.) gives the verbal aid, a key for the solution of this weird photo series to the viewer and invites it to contribute by projecting these symbolic-iconic-wellknown clichés on the plain black background. The verbal aid of the labels that brings concreteness to the project – without this key the series is almost impossible to read. The titles reveals the fact that these photos are not what they are meant to be – they are a result of an unfortunate artefact. The core of the series is the tension that the void creates: the absence of what is named. The 'showdown' or revealing brings tension to the project – the titles and the clumsy photos invites the spectator's imagination to fill the void resulting in a playful, witty and humorous experience.

Artist statement
This project is fed by the fascination towards the relation between the tourist (or the men of the street, the citizen) and the (tourist)photography.

My personal position against tourist photography is fed by two reasons. First, vanity: when I have to face my face staring back on me in the form of a photo. Many people dislike to hear their own voice through speakers since it sounds so different from what used to hear and same goes with photography since photography provides a different angle that they are used to see usually – 'the angle zero' of a mirror. And additionally I have a physical disability: one of my eye is suffered from an accident hence my pair of eyes most of the time does not stand parallelly and so appears on photos that often embarrasses me. By performing the tourist myself I rather embarrass myself and enhancing the effect rather than pleasuring exhibitionism.
The second reason is how distracting is the acting of taking photos from just being the present.
The notion of One night in paris project is to raise awareness in the heads of the spectators how ridiculous is to make these tourist photos.

The project visually illustrates the loss of subtracting oneself from the present of the moment by the act of taking photographs. The notion is to spread the idea: be there – do not take photographs.

Empty spots
[[TO BE EXPAND, FURTHER EXPLAINED]]

'Empty spots' 'steals' back what has been stolen: it revalues a great value-loss. A value that is actually completely fictitious – because clearly the painting were not for sale – but has been multiplied by this real event.
The project creates artistic value out of pure loss.

The technique it uses – commissioned Chinese artists to transpose the photos to handmade oil paintings – creates the loophole effect: several original modern oil painting has been stolen when they were exhibited feeding my final project creating new oil painting and exhibited again.

Further than that it also applies a paradoxical – controversial technique: the fact that an art student (since the 'Ready-mades') can exhibit and claim as his own work a series of handmade oil paintings without ever touching a brush or canvas.

SUBSCTRACTION

'Duchamp showed the usefulness of addition (moustache).
Rauschenberg showed the function of subtraction (De Kooning).'
John Cage ('26 statements re. Duchamp', 1963)

At this point I came to the realization how closely my working method is related to the early works of the founders of conceptual art. I had a general knowledge about the history of conceptual art in the back of my head that now have been deepened by analysing the language they have established in their works. I think that the artists of my generation take it granted to speak this language, to use their toolset without being conciseness about it – at least this my personal case. Evidently the legacy of the origins of conceptual art is tangible in the works of mine. Even though conceptual art's main aim was to change the concept of traditional art and leave it completely behind, many artists directly referenced today's most celebrated traditional painting and art object:Da Vinci's Mona Lisa (Duchamp, Dalí, Warhol).
Certainly I mean something that goes beyond *'All art (after Duchamp) is conceptual (in nature) because art only exists conceptually.' (Joseph Kosuth: Art after Philosophy)* The toolset of my projects and some particular works from this era shows direct relation and resemblance. This chapter will be examining this relation though juxtaposing descriptions of my own and works from that era.

Both of my above described projects are dealing with something similar: the subjects of absence are in both case cultic, well-known phenomena.
John Baldessari previously was working as a fine art painter and he was producing more traditional paintings until he came to the realization 'that "high art" had little relevance to most citizens everyday lives. He gave up traditional painting and began to work with photography and text.' (quoted in Osborne, 2002, p.125) I share this opinion and this thought was a motivation when I created the project 'One Night in Paris' some years ago. I stumbled upon the photographic activities of tourists or *travelling citizens.*

Everything is purged from This Painting but Art: No Ideas have Entered This Work (1966-1968) is an acryl painting: nothing but the title is painted by a 'sign painter' (not by Baldessari himself) in two lines with capitals in the middle of the plain white canvas – simple and clean as it can be alike credit labels next to the art pieces in an exhibition environment. *Everything is purged* or one could say *everything is subtracted* but Art: this painting enhances the claim of conceptual art: art is way beyond what is painting on the surface of the canvas. *Art* is already there if the idea is perceivable. The canvas served to claim the direct relation to traditional paintings or to art in general. He did not purge the materiality of the piece even though he was already a step further in his concept: 'That is a notebook entry about painting could replace the painting. … The only art signal I wanted was the canvas.' (quoted in Osborne, 2002, p.125) Followed the example of many other conceptual artists he took away himself from the manufacturing process which again serves the concept 'not even my labour is there but the idea'.
He diminished every traditional aesthetic aspect from this painting and replaced it with a verbal message. 'Empty spots' does not carry a verbal message in this sense: it uses as a source the act against traditional art (art heist) that diminished physically the traditional art piece from the world and what is left behind is its aura related to exhibition label – which indeed is a written, verbal message. It is a visual document, part of the investigation.

Allen McCollum's *Plaster surrogates* is a series of painting-alike objects in frames whereas 'each of

these works is a plaster mould in the shape of a painting, including the frame, but with blackness where the image should be. Produced and installed in numbers of several hundred, they suggest the absence of the aura of the artwork in the age of mechanical reproduction. At the same time paradoxically, through their variations and as an aesthetically pleasing spectacle in their own right they are endowed with a presence which contrasts with the negation they imply.' (Osborne, 2002, p.180) McCollum subtracts the painting and the canvas as well (and replaces with a different material but this is not necessarily noticeable for the spectator without the inside info). Inside the frames there is nothing but pure bleakness without detail. He uses the frame and the gallery space as a last direct indications: no matter how black, how nothing is in the frames it is art anyways. Then he creates the complete piece by multiplying these pieces and placing them densely next to each other (likely as pixels next to each other) adjusting their placement according to the gallery space – the piece only exist in a gallery context. Interestingly John Cage wrote some years before 'Duchamp showed the usefulness of addition (moustache). Rauschenberg showed the function of subtraction (De Kooning). Well, we look forward to multiplication and division. It is safe to assume that someone will learn trigonometry. Johns' (quoted in Osborne, 2002, p.196)

John Hillard's *Across the park*, (1972) is representing the opportunities of how subtraction can alter meaning. By subtracting different segments from the whole original image he creates four different, stand on their own images. By juxtaposing them he establishes the relation between them. The complete work does not include the the full size original uncropped photo: it contains the four differently cropped blow ups. Without seeing the original full size image the spectator's mind can solve the puzzle and render the 'fifth' original full size image.
By presenting these four photo prints on paper-cardboards that are slightly bigger than the cropped photos he makes me suspicious: the spectator renders the full image out of the four but the full size image does not reach the edges of the paper-cardboard – is the full size photo what the spectator believes the full size photo?
In my reading it claims something universal about photography: no matter how objective we believe photography is, it will always be a segment, a 'crop' from the whole 'world'. It can never step over this boundary.
John Hillary legacy effects recent debates on media representations: on facebook I am confronted with friend's posts about how cropping photos effect the meaning of the images that are published in news.
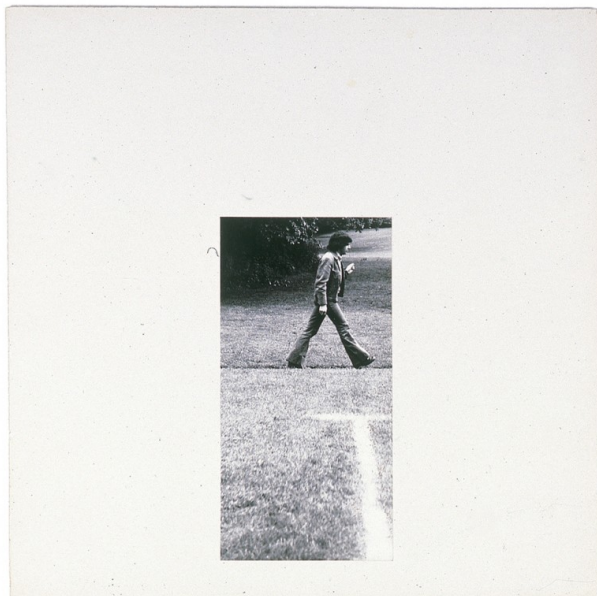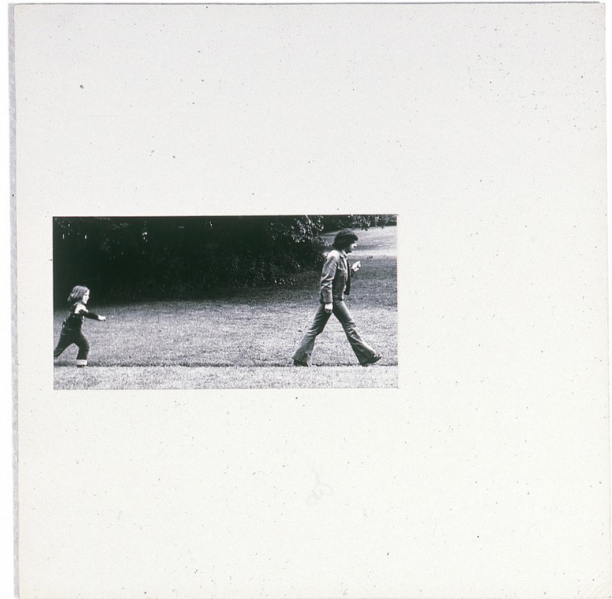
The subtraction in my projects is different.
The equivalent version of *Across the park* if the title of the single photo featuring the man only with the ball above his head would have been titled: 'A Girl throws a ball'. The author gives an aid in the title and invite the viewer to solve the photo puzzle and to project its own girl throwing a ball. Hilliard chooses a different tool: he visually aims to help the spectator with one another cropped segment of the whole photo to solve the photos puzzle in their heads. The assistance is not embedded in the visual part of the One night in Paris and the Empty spots: the labels of the exhibition context are the guides. The nature of subjects are very different from Hilliard's: the solved puzzle shows a small but complete segment of the universe: a three membered family crosses the park. They are composed equally, symmetrically. The final picture brings calmness – it is complete. Contrarily in my projects completeness visually is not achievable: the absent visual piece has to be made in the mind of the viewer

'A Girl throws a ball'.

Paris.

La Tour Eiffel.

Pablo Picasso.

Claude Monet.

We immediately feel the difference: a girl and throwing a ball is not more than what it is however the names listed below are granted with several layers of cultic, iconic meaning.
Once the spectator reads the title 'La tour Eiffel' is not only the materiality of the metal tower that is geographically positioned in Paris but a whole avalanche of connotations launch and start to twirl in its mind. The knowledge that everybody has in the back of his head when they skim over the letters that all together gives a name like
Paris, Pablo Picasso, Paul Gauguin.
Their influence on today's society is enormous: Even people who never been to Paris they are surrounded with its aura. The Aura of Paris is today globally present – just like the impact of such great artists. It has a mysterious disease that can infect the minds of the travellers, tourists: The Paris Syndrome. Even if there is no scientific proof yet of its existence – the fact that it had been invented as a hoax establishes its relevancy.
Everyone has a unconscious passive knowledge about such names, starts, celebrities, clichés, modern cultural places. But how do they *picture* such complex concepts? Picturing, imagine something is a great creative task. Hilliard invites his viewer the *play an easy visual game.* My projects count on the viewer almost as a equivalent participant in the finishing of the piece.

'MY METHODOLOGY
A project launches by finding a fascination – or the fascination finds me. This fascination engages me, makes me passionate about the field, the topic or the phenomena.

Following that the research period comes when I just let all the available inputs in relation to the topic to overwhelm me. During this process I stumble upon smaller, more precise fragments which creates one certain thought – which could be and idea. I collect these ideas without selection: I make a note of them or a visual sketch.

The final struggle comes when I take one step back – but the notion is the make the final step by taking a wider look on all the ideas, tools and tiny thoughts I have collected during my research. I try to come up with a solution for the puzzle game I have established for

myself that in the end would give a nicely layered, complex enough and conceptually meaningful art piece.

Usually the realization part is always less 'painful': perhaps I 'know' my limits so by nature I do not come up with an idea of a project that goes beyond my skills. (When I do I am so passionate about the idea that I dare to ask some help from the right people.)

No matter what form my idea takes (could be video, a series of photographs, network crowd sourced project, etc) my initial desire is to create a project that is *simple and complex simultaneously*.

There are no numbers or values to measure the complexity of a project – it is nothing but a very subjective instinct.
Usually it is a marriage of content and different tiny ideas with a unique form or style – a form that has a relation to the content itself.

Another important spice or tool of mine is: creating a 'loophole' or 'feedback' between the content and the form. I always try to create a resonance, a vibe, an intercourse between the topic of the project and its form of realisation – an added layer of meaning the piece also tells something about the media it is carried on or *art* itself.

Another important tool of mine is humour. In the sense of complexity I also desire to make my audience smile and (if it is a time-based piece) by a later part of the piece give it a twist which takes the meaning to a different level – a level where the smile fades away and something universal touches the the viewer.'

Bibliography

Alberro, Alexander and Stimson, Blake (editors): <u>Conceptual art: a critical anthology,</u> 1999, The MIT Press, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge

Lewitt, Sol: <u>Sentences on Conceptual Art.</u>, First published in 0-9 (New York), 1969, and Art-Language (England), May 1969.

Osborne, Peter: <u>Conceptual Art</u>, 2002 Phaidon Press

Roberts, John (edited by): <u>The impossible Document: Photography and Conceptual Art in Britain 1966-1976</u>, 1997 Camerawords

Egri, Péter: <u>Playing games with renaissance Art: Leonardo, Duchamp, Dalí, Rauchenberg and Warhol,</u> 1995 Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS), Vol. 1, No. 1 (1995), pp. 59-87 Published by: Centre for Arts, Humanities and Sciences (CAHS), acting on behalf of the University of Debrecen Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/41273881

Walter, Benjamin – <u>The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction</u>, 1936

Mull the work of art in the age of digital recombination

Menick, John: <u>Paris Syndrome,</u> 2012, documentary, 27mins, video 16:9, released on Vimeo in April 2012 under URL: http://vimeo.com/38610414

Klein, Naomi: <u>No Logo,</u>

Zizek, Slavoj: <u>RSA Animate – First as Tragedy, Then as Farce,</u>
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hpAMbpQ8J7g