

HAVE YOU EVER WANTED TO CHANGE?

by

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## ABSTRACT

This paper is the support material for a series of durational performances undertaken between 2003 and 2006. These projects are addressed in terms of self-development as a construct that has both oppressive and transcendent potentials for the individual. Beginning with Zygmunt Bauman's notion of individualization, the paper discusses Foucault's technologies of the self and Charles Taylor's social imaginaries as means of exploring an oppressive hypothesis of self-development. A transcendent hypothesis is developed through reference to asceticism, self-mastery and finally, cultural self-realisation as described by Ryle and Soper. Maintaining the ambiguities and conflicts of these two perspectives, the four performance projects are explained in relation to the work of several artists, films and literary texts.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Approval ..... ii  
Abstract.....iii  
Acknowledgements.....iv  
Table of Contents .....v  
1 Introduction ..... 1  
2 An Oppressive Hypothesis..... 10  
3 A Transcendent Hypothesis..... 13  
4 By Way of Introduction ..... 16  
5 Education as a Technology of the Self ..... 18  
6 The Technology of Self-Discipline ..... 27  
7 Conclusion ..... 35  
Appendix..... 36  
Bibliography..... 40

## INTRODUCTION

Andrew: I don't understand what this work is about.

Megan: Its about wanting to be something you're not.

This conversation took place in the summer of 2004 while installing the exhibition *Pretty Mutt* at Simon Fraser University's Alexander Studios. Three of the four works discussed in this paper were among those exhibited: *(I am) Myth Today* by Roland Barthes, *Educating Reece Terris and Megan Wilson* and *The Abstinence Project*.<sup>1</sup> The explanation is perhaps as simple as it can be: these projects are about wanting to be something that you are not. It would be easy to leave it at that. However, I am compelled to indicate the specific manner in which each project develops and thus complicates the explanation. This paper attempts such an expansion.

In asking what it might mean to want to be something that you're not, a question is being formulated about self-development.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, what is

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<sup>1</sup> Another project *Grey Sweater* was also exhibited. This project involved wearing the same sweater for an entire semester. The displayed documentation consisted of comments from other students at the end of the term. A fifth project, *Looking for Faith*, in which I spied on the studio window of Faith Moosang for one month, occurred within the same timeframe but has not been exhibited.

<sup>2</sup> A note on terminology: I am using 'self-development' rather than Foucault's 'self-constitution' (see Michel Foucault, 'The Ethics of the Care of the Self as a Practice of Freedom' in *The Essential Foucault*. Eds. Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (London: The New Press, 2003) or the more popular term 'self-improvement'. 'Development' implies a progress discourse (that I think Foucault intentionally avoids) that is pertinent to this discussion, while 'improvement' evokes value judgments more directly than I would like (as well as feeding uncomfortably into a model of self-help and pop-psychology). Self-actualization, a term of Maslow's, refers to the highest need on his hierarchy (see Alan Alderidge, *Consumption* (USA: Polity Press, 2003), 5). It relates to achieving one's goals, which is problematic in this discussion because the setting of those goals is assumed as a 'natural' human attribute rather than as a social construction that serves particular ends. Self-realization, used by Ryle and Soper in their discussion of the sublime (see



behind the notion of self-development? What is at stake? In these questions, 'behind' is an operative word: it belies the idea that there is something hidden, but also that this hidden thing is a driving or motivating force that props up and reinforces. A second operative word is 'stake' which presents the idea that there is something to be lost if this 'behind' is not fleshed out. As such, the task in addressing these questions is to extract self-development from its apparent naturalization in order to explore its social context, that is, to analyze it as a social construction rather than as a phenomenon of 'humanness'.<sup>3</sup>

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Kate Ryle and Martin Soper, *To Relish the Sublime? Culture and Self-Realisation in Postmodern Times* (London: Verso, 2002)) is difficult here because of its association with existentialism which presupposes that the self is an absolute only accessible once the corruption of society is stripped off.

<sup>3</sup> Here 'humanness' refers to the idea that humans are born into a set of inherent qualities and behaviors that are beyond the social – meaning that they form the base 'human' that the social is built upon. This is at heart a nature versus nurture discussion, in which one might argue that either experience (culture) or evolutionary genetics are the determinants of certain aspects of being human. 'Nature' is a cultural concept. It stands for that irremovable component of human experience which defies human will and sets un-encroachable limits to human action. Nature is, therefore, a byproduct of the thrust for freedom. Only when men set out self-consciously to make their condition different from what they experience, do they need a name to connote the resistance they encounter.' (Bauman, Zygmunt, *Towards a Critical Sociology: An Essay on Commonsense and Emancipation* (Routledge: London, 1976), 1).

'The cataclysm has happened, we are among the ruins, we start to build up new little habitats, to have new little hopes. It is rather hard work: there is now no smooth road into the future: but we go round, or scramble over the obstacles. We've got to live, no matter how many skies have fallen.'<sup>4</sup>

These words, written in a different time under a different set of disappointments,<sup>5</sup> might preface any discussion of human action in this moment. This is not to say that *this* moment, unlike any other, is singularly 'ruined'. The ordinariness (even the truthfulness) of this sentiment suggests that many a historical moment has experienced itself as possessing an array of failed expectations from which it must gather itself and move on to an uncertain (and somewhat dismal) future. This may be particular to post-war moments – when loss and destruction are coupled with incomprehension of the acts humans are capable of committing against one another. Take, for instance, our current moment in which Western governments are enacting violence against the Middle East regardless of the mass number of people in the West who are deeply pessimistic and distressed over these events. The perception that these acts serve the economic interests of a small number (while utilizing a tax base meant to serve the people at the same time that public programs are curtailed) and the disillusion around media sources of 'news' resulting in a general sense of being intentionally deceived on every front – enables disenchantment and hopelessness to permeate any notion of agency and

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<sup>4</sup> D.H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterly's Lover* (UK: Penguin, 1968.), 5.

<sup>5</sup> The first half of the Twentieth Century saw radical changes in all fields of Western culture and society as values were transformed in an attempt to deal with the perceived collapse in traditional values. Europe entered a stage of crisis following the industrial revolution and the rise of economic strength and power of the United States; a crisis which intensified following World War 1 (see Patrick Fuery and Nick Mansfield, *Cultural Studies and the New Humanities: Concepts and Controversies* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1997), 223).

human will. It is difficult to conceive a future unlike the nightmares of science fiction – either the desolated anarchy of *The Road Warrior*<sup>6</sup> or the sterile, disembodied technocracy of *THX 1138*.<sup>7</sup>

In William Blake's terms, this is a moment of 'experience', in which the world we've created weighs heavily upon the earth and its inhabitants.<sup>8</sup> Times of revolution, like Enlightenment, are moments of 'innocence' – when the world is light and hopeful and soars (or roars) into the future. That innocence, increasingly tainted (like Reason sows the seeds for technocracy and oligarchy) leads back to experience and the cycle begins again.<sup>9</sup> These are the cycles that separate eras and generations.

If we look at another time, one close to us, we begin to perceive our difference (even as it remains unnamable in this moment). In many ways, our time is invested in a reworking of the recent past. This may be as a means of investigating where it is that we went wrong and how we failed to

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<sup>6</sup> George Miller, *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior*, 1981.

<sup>7</sup> George Lukas, *THX 1138*, 1971.

<sup>8</sup> William Blake, *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (USA: The Trianon Press, 1967 (1789)).

<sup>9</sup> My understanding of the Enlightenment is that it responded to relations of power and domination that were rooted in religious superstition. To overthrow this power, a system of reason and rationality needed to be established that would produce fair rule and heighten the potential of human agency. This was founded on the basic principle of progress – that if humankind wanted to develop, order must be established over chaos. Scientific discourse, information, was the means by which this could be accomplished as it allowed prediction (by means of data analysis based on known variables). What resulted, however, was that commitment to scientific discourse led to the subjectification of individuals. Humans were made subject to norms defined by statistical analysis and by which they could be forced to conform. Thus, the 'innocence' of the Enlightenment became the 'experience' of later eras (see 'Enlightenment' Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy (London: Routledge, 2000).

produce the social utopias we had hoped to attain. Perhaps the 'innocence' of the late 1960's and 70's has given way to today's 'experience'. As an example: the institutional critique underlying performance art responded to a time of disillusion (the Vietnam war, increased discrepancies between social reality and the presentation of 'truth', the pull of Socialism in light of a growing dissatisfaction with Capitalism and so on). That art sought to confront the social issues of its time.<sup>10</sup> Yet it was not without an almost inconceivable optimism because the potential for social reform was a very real source of this work, particularly in relation to the student revolt of 1968, the hard-won right to birth-control and the leap towards equality enacted by the Civil Rights Movement. This was a time of anger – but the anger was grounded by a conviction that social change on a massive scale was not only possible but that once evoked, would be positive.

Many, particularly those invested in a world-view enabled by the discourse of post-modernism, have argued that this optimism has waned in our time. The hope of modernism to create a civilized society capable of transcending social problems has fallen to the side as an almost hopeless impossibility. Modern conditions do not uphold the concept that society and human experience are rationally moving towards perfection.<sup>11</sup>

'Progress' has come to mean unlimited economic expansion rather than

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<sup>10</sup> See Robyn Brentano, 'Outside the Frame: Performance, Art and Life' in *Outside the Frame - Performance and The Object: A Survey History of Performance Art in the USA from 1950 to the Present*. Catalogue Coordinated by Gary Sangster (USA: Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, 1994) 31-62.

<sup>11</sup> Much of this sentiment is in response to Theodore Adorno's 'Trying to Understand Endgame' in *The Adorno Reader* (USA: Blackwell Publishers, 2000): 'After the Second War, everything is destroyed, even resurrected culture, without knowing it; humanity vegetates along, crawling, after events which even the survivors cannot really survive, on a pile of ruins which even renders futile self-reflection of one's own battered state', 323.

the move towards a higher state of collective human existence. As such, the reworking of the 60's and 70's in our time is more than a nostalgia that seeks to empty the past of its historical significance. In some ways, it is worse – because if we rework that time but without hope, the possibility exists that we're blocking off all access to that hope.<sup>12</sup> ('Are we unhappy about the state of the world? Yes. Can we do anything about it? No.')

What does this have to do with self-development? (Perhaps everything, perhaps nothing). If we take the stance that we are in a moment of 'experience', that this is a time when hopelessness and disenchantment prevails, then self-development might be the 'new little habitat' by which we attempt to pick up the pieces and move on. The important question is whether this habitat is safe or not. If we are choosing self-development in response to a failed utopia, are we choosing something that has the potential to relieve us or are we closing our fate in a self-fulfilling prophecy? And are we *choosing* it or is it imposed on us? Do we have a choice *but* to self-develop?

To begin, I think it is useful to understand self-development in terms of the social contract as described by Charles Taylor.<sup>13</sup> For Taylor, this contract exists to provide the potential for prosperity and to protect the security of the individuals within its precinct. It came into play as people moved into cities and began to have social lives. A code of conduct became necessary in order for people to cohabit in a manner demanded by an urban environment – this code was the social contract. The contract was such

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<sup>12</sup> I am indebted to Mary Zournazi's *Hope: New Philosophies for Change* (London; New York: Routledge, 2002) for affording me a renewed interest in hope as viable and necessary to our time.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (USA: Duke University, 2004), 33.

that so long as the rules were abided, society would be able to provide. Therefore, individuals had to conform to the rules and expectations of that society in order to benefit from it. This required a kind of discipline. On the one hand, this discipline was exercised from without through policing and other regimes that were brought to bear on those who betrayed the contract. On the other hand, this discipline was internalized by individuals who found adherence to the contract abundant in certain kinds of rewards.<sup>14</sup>

In terms of self-development, the proper presentation of the self became essential to a person's well-being because it allowed greater participation in a society that had begun to value conversation and sociability. It began to be advantageous for people to develop themselves – to refine their intellect, speech and social skills. Great emphasis was placed on 'being civilized', which meant having the skills to behave properly through culture and learning. Eventually, the development of individual capabilities through a civilizing process became legislated as a common good that would allow everyone to participate in society equally (although 'equal' here refers to access rather than 'without hierarchy'). This was accomplished through the onset of mandatory public education.<sup>15</sup> In Taylor's analysis, discipline, the thing that made the social contract possible and profitable for all, was imposed by a number of means, the self among them.

In light of a failed utopia, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman presents the idea that in our historical moment, self-development has replaced social forms of development as the primary site of potential change or progress. What individualism has come to mean is that each person is entirely on their

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 34-35.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 36.

own. Hyper-individualization has resulted in a lack of responsibility on the part of the social so that experiences of failure and disability belong to the individual rather than to society.<sup>16</sup> The social safety net no longer provides the promised security and prosperity without increased demands on the individual to conform. This conformity is achieved by positioning the individual rather than the social as the source of failure. A similar sentiment can be found in Barbara Cruikshank's condemnation of the 'self-esteem movement' which sites social problems as the fault of individuals rather than of the social structure. In this way, issues like poverty, unemployment and alcoholism are the result of a low self-esteem in the individual that can only be fixed by fixing the individual. The responsibility of society is to provide tools for self-esteem development rather than to make structural changes that might alleviate the issues.<sup>17</sup>

What I am attempting to describe is the means by which self-development as an ideal was constructed in relation to the social. (By 'the social', I mean the whole network of complex relations and structures that a group of individuals has formed as a result of history.<sup>18</sup>) Taylor describes the

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<sup>16</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *The Individualized Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 89-91)

<sup>17</sup> Barbara Cruikshank, *The Will to Empower: Democratic Citizens and Other Subjects* (USA: Cornell, 1999), 72-74.

<sup>18</sup> This network is comprised of an archive of possible thoughts, actions and behaviors available to each individual within that group and is such that an individual cannot think or act outside of it – it has a set of parameters that confines possibilities within its limits. This view of the social is akin to Foucault's idea of biopower, which began with the premise that power is not exercised in the name of the state or of global corporations (as Hardt and Negri would contend), but 'in the name of the existence of everyone'. Alongside the concept that self-development resulted from adherence to the social contract, which was aimed at providing prosperity and security for everyone who adhered to it, biopower can be seen as the means by which adherence is made possible through the mobilization of the set of rules and regulations that a social embeds within its individuals

social contract as a means of providing for individuals. Adherence, through self-development, had a set of rewards which made it worthwhile for individuals. Bauman suggests that those rewards aren't as accessible (or fulfilling) – yet the individual is still expected to adhere to the contract. In fact, through developing the self, the individual is expected to make good the wrongs of the social. If this is true, it seems pertinent to ask whether self-development is a worthwhile pursuit.

At this point, it might be helpful to understand self-development in terms of two perspectives: oppression and transcendence. These perspectives refer to what is 'behind', or what could be considered the determinants or motivating forces of self-development. The oppressive hypothesis posits that individuals, as subjects of power, are forced to develop the self in order to withstand conditions imposed by a failed and oppressive social. The transcendent hypothesis is that self-development permits the individual to rise above these conditions and gain access to certain kinds of freedom. (These are not mutually exclusive, in fact their co-existence in some ways produces a third perspective that resists this binary by limiting the opposition of the self and the social.) At their extremes, the two hypothesis expose radically different views of the self, the relation of the self to the social, and the individual's potential for agency and autonomy.

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through the processes of education, disciplinary regimes and other forms of behavioral conditioning (see Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose, "Thoughts on the Concept of Biopower Today" (2003), 4-7).



## AN OPPRESSIVE HYPOTHESIS

'Permanent self-denial is the price the individual pays for the tiniest bit of social status'.<sup>19</sup>

This quote of Guy Debord's reflects a general cynicism towards the position of the individual in relation to society. For Debord, society is an oppressor. This quote can be read in two ways; self-denial refers to either the individual who has to deceive oneself to be able to accept the conditions of the social and believe that its rewards are meaningful, or to the individual who must deny needs and desires through constant oppression of the self in order to gain those rewards. The two readings are not antagonistic to one another.

Brian Massumi, in an interview with the author of *Hope: New Philosophies for Change*<sup>20</sup>, offers a similar view: self-development is a means of pursuing a success determined by a social that oppresses its subjects. Massumi, like Hardt and Negri<sup>21</sup>, targets corporate capitalism as the source of this oppression. The current global market is such that corporations no longer have to be responsible to the people who serve them. A nation, in order to draw corporations into their economy, must offer these entities an almost

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<sup>19</sup> Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Verso, 1997), XII.

<sup>20</sup> Mary Zournazi, 212–216.

<sup>21</sup> For Hardt and Negri bio-political power is exercised in the name of multi-national and trans-national corporations who, since the second half of the twentieth century have chosen "to structure global territories bio-politically." Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (USA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 31.

unlimited freedom<sup>22</sup> because when the corporation finds a better offer, it will simply move its operations to another nation. This freedom means a labor market with limited security and benefits for the worker which creates a sense of fear in the individual about their status in the market. In order to succeed, the individual must devote larger and larger portions of their leisure time to self-development aimed at increasing marketability.<sup>23</sup>

This requires that the individual take a stance in relation to the self that is managerial in character. The individual is split – one aspect of the self must be subject to another aspect of the self. As such, the self is both the *actor* and the *acted upon*.<sup>24</sup> What develops is a discourse of confession<sup>25</sup> – in which the individual seeks out any weakness or potential failure in the self and eradicates it. This involves methods of self-surveillance and record-keeping.<sup>26</sup> It requires a norm against which to measure itself<sup>27</sup> and

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<sup>22</sup> This freedom is the underlying concept of neo-liberalism, in which the market must be free from the constraints of governing bodies, whether the human impact of this freedom is destructive or not. The unlimited growth of the market into every aspect of human existence is the ultimate measure of all things, so that anything standing in the way of that growth is necessarily destroyed (take for example the current trend of limiting the power of unions). Paul Treanor, *Neoliberalism: Origins, Theory, Definition* (2005).

<sup>23</sup> This could be described as a relationship with that self that follows an instrumental rationality – in which the self is a tool or instrument that can be manipulated at will to produce desired outcomes. This relationship could equally be said to follow an economic rationality – in which economic gains are the justification for all action.

<sup>24</sup> Ellie Harrison creates a strong example of this in a video in which she plays both the obsessive record-keeping automaton and the passive subject of investigation. [www.ellieharrison.com](http://www.ellieharrison.com)

<sup>25</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

<sup>26</sup> An example of this record-keeping is Eleanor Antin's *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (1972) in which she photographs herself daily from the four anatomical perspectives to record her attempt to lose ten pounds in six weeks. I have been

a series of punishments, interdictions and regimes directed at bringing about conformity to that norm. This entire process is defined by Foucault as 'technologies of the self: which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves ...'<sup>28</sup> These technologies (and the idea that they are necessary) are embedded deep within the individual through a long process of education and conditioning.

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interested in this work its depiction of physical perfection as the result of labour, not nature. This is an element inherent in much of durational performance: there is a recognizable aspect of striving or of intentionally working to achieve a goal or a consistent pattern of action in daily life. This is in part due to the way these performances are carried out – a task is chosen and a process planned by which to carry it out, reflecting in its very methodology the means by which an individual accomplishes change in their daily lives. It is for this reason that durational performance speaks so well to issues of self-development.

<sup>27</sup> Martha Rosler entered a particularly strong example into this discussion with her 1977 work *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* in which a woman's body is measured in a clinical setting and compared to standard measurements.

<sup>28</sup> Michel Foucault, 'Technologies of the Self' in *The Essential Foucault*. Eds. Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (New York; London: The New Press, 2003).

## A TRANSCENDENT HYPOTHESIS

Like oppression, transcendence as a concept is not one-dimensional. Absolute transcendence is the existence attempted by the ascetic – who cuts him/herself off from the social in an attempt to rise above its miseries and constraints. A more limited transcendence would involve working within the constraints of the social to make choices that offer greater potential for freedom than for enslavement.

Asceticism involves a process of turning away from the world and society in order to perfect the self. It originates from a conception of society as a corrupting influence that disavows the individual's potential for authentic existence. It is the life of the hermit and the voluntary exile as well as of social groups that attempt to build utopian worlds apart from the rest of society.<sup>29</sup> Asceticism involves an almost extreme conformity to ideals of self-control and disciplinary regimes – being in essence a series of practices enacted upon the self. These practices range from abstinences to self-imposed suffering such as the wearing of a hair-shirt or sleeping on a bed of nails.<sup>30</sup> While appealing, asceticism is problematic for several reasons. One is that a turning away from the world denies that individuals exist within a social and are defined by that social at the same time that it refuses to take responsibility for its own being-in-the-world. It is the choice

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<sup>29</sup> Auroville, a commune outside of Pondicherry, Tamil Nadu (India) is one such utopia. Founded in 1966 as a Universal township by the country of India and Unesco, the opening ceremonies of 1968 were witnessed by delegates from 124 countries. Auroville is intended as an experiment in creating human unity (and more recently sustainable living as well). I lived there as a child between 1975 and 1980.

<sup>30</sup> 'Asceticism' *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2000).

of the apolitical.<sup>31</sup> Another, advanced by Nietzsche, is that asceticism is an act of weakness. The strong individual does not run away from the complications of its own desires and disappointments, but rather seeks ways to limit the power of these while remaining embedded in the social.<sup>32</sup>

Self-mastery, an idea advocated by ancient Greek culture,<sup>33</sup> rests on the idea that freedom means not being a slave to anyone or anything. To be a master of oneself is to be free from the rule of another but also from one's own desires and weaknesses. This mastery is not subject to the same criticism of solipsism as asceticism can be, because the person who is master of themselves is able to conduct themselves properly in relation to others.<sup>34</sup> The mastered self is able to resist the desire to dominate and exercise power over the other. This has links to our modern concept of personal responsibility – that if everyone did their part to be the best person they can be and to take responsibility for their actions – all of society would benefit (I'm not sure how this is different than blaming the individual for things that are wrong in society – this is a conflict for me).

Self-realisation, achieved through a difficult and hard-won engagement with culture, is presented by Ryle and Soper<sup>35</sup> as an awakening force that creates a subject 'who is able in some relatively autonomous sense to

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Frederic Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality and Other Writings* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 72-77.

<sup>33</sup> Michel Foucault, 'The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom' in *The Essential Foucault*. Eds. Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (New York; London: The New Press, 2003), 88.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>35</sup> Martin Ryle and Kate Soper, *To Relish the Sublime? Culture and Self-Realisation in Postmodern Times* (London: Verso, 2002).

reflect on its possible delusions about the extent of its own autonomy; who feels called upon to act as a rational and morally responsible agent of self-change from a position of unfreedom (sic) and uncontrolled formation' (84). This is a sense in which an individual seeks the freedom possible within the limits of possible freedom. 'To recognize oneself as a cog in the 'system' is at the same time to be something other than its creature, even if it is no very comforting form of intellectual transcendence.' (67) Self-development does not have to bow to the oppressive hypothesis – it can allow a transcendence by limiting the instrumental rationality with which a person interprets themselves. Without an experience of the sublime achieved through culture, self-development is at the service of 'making something' of the self rather than of living a meaningful life. Engagement with the values of self-realisation can be the means of transcending an overly narrow commitment to economic rationality.

## BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION

I must admit that I am of several minds. I have not been able to resolve the conflicts of these perspectives. The idea that self-development is an imperative imposed by society as a means of controlling its individuals and the perspective that self-development is a means by which individuals can transcend those controls are both somewhat over-determined. Each relies on opposition – the individual opposed to the social (even as the social exists for, is made up of and is the result of individuals), the oppressed versus the oppressors, and so on. I am more likely to agree that ‘no doctrine of action can be undertaken for man without also being undertaken against men’.<sup>36</sup> When power is sited at a particular source, that source becomes an enemy that arms can be taken up against. When power is sited on the level of human existence – as the result of history – there is no enemy because everything is implicated in the structure that exists.

I find that the view of oppression that posits particular aspects of society as the oppressor, while untenable, allows a certain degree of agency. An enemy can be overthrown. For me, there is a great deal of possibility in the option to ‘stand with a raised fist’ (it is not difficult to love the idea of revolution). The view that oppression has no source but is thoroughly embedded in every aspect of the social is a concept that I find annihilating. Every action or thought that I could have, even that of revolution, is necessarily part of the whole and as such reinforces and reiterates it. Somehow there is joy in this as well – if I can make peace with it. But that

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<sup>36</sup> Simon de Beauvoir quoted in Colin Davis, ‘Didacticism and the Ethics of Failure’ in *Ethical Issues in Twentieth Century French Literature: Killing the Other* (UK: MacMillan Press, 2000), 94.

confronts the other desire which will not allow a conviction that 'there is no alternative'.<sup>37</sup>

These conflicts are important. Resolution, even if possible, is not desirable. 'Everything is dangerous'.<sup>38</sup> There is no idea that cannot become dangerous – that cannot become a tool in relations of power and work for its opposition in the end. With this in mind, I introduce the four projects that this paper has been written to supplement. These projects do not form resolutions but grapple with self-development in a manner that does not restrict the ambiguity and potential conflict of their subject matter. The four projects address two specific technologies of the self: education and self-discipline. *(I am) Myth Today* by Roland Barthes and *Educating Reece Terris and Megan Wilson* fall within the category of education, specifically, self-education. *The Abstinence Project* and *I'm Sorry* are discussed in terms of self-discipline.

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<sup>37</sup> the acronym TINA refers to a slogan attributed to Margaret Thatcher, former Prime Minister of Britain, i.e., that "There Is No Alternative" to global free-market capitalism. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/TINA>).

<sup>38</sup> Michel Foucault, 'On the Genealogy of Ethics' in *Michael Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. Ed. Hubert I. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 231.



## EDUCATION AS A TECHNOLOGY OF THE SELF

*(I am) Myth Today* by Roland Barthes<sup>39</sup>

For this project, Roland Barthes' text *Myth Today*<sup>40</sup> was committed to memory. The title came about in response to Francois Truffaut's 1966 film, *Fahrenheit 451*<sup>41</sup>. Set in a futuristic society in which reading is punishable by death, the film follows the intellectual evolution of a governing officer through an encounter with literature. In this society, books are considered dangerous because they cause people to be unhappy – making them examine their lives and desire something else.

The book is an apple<sup>42</sup> – once Montag begins reading, he becomes increasingly unable to tolerate what he now considers a ruthless and irrational society. Because his desire to change that society is thwarted before beginning, he flees to the 'book people' who live in small cloisters of abandoned railway-cars in the country. Each person commits their entire life to the preservation of one book through memorization, thus *becoming the book*.<sup>43</sup> When Montag first arrives in the community, the others

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<sup>39</sup> See Appendix

<sup>40</sup> Barthes, Roland. 'Myth Today' in *Art & Theory: 1900-1991*. Eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (USA: Blackwell, 1993).

<sup>41</sup> Francois Truffaut, *Fahrenheit 451* (1966).

<sup>42</sup> In the story of The Fall (Genesis 3), the apple gives the power of knowledge to humanity. This knowledge allows a self-consciousness of which shame is an integral part.

<sup>43</sup> 'Then you go on and you go on until you get to where the book people live. - The good people? - No, *book*. The *book* people. You've not heard of them? People who vanished. Some were arrested and managed to escape. Others were released. Some didn't wait to be arrested. They just hid themselves away. Up in the farm

introduce themselves as the book they have become: "Hello, I am Jane Austin's *Pride and Prejudice* Volume 1'. Thus the title of this project.

Knowledge, through reading, is the messianic force in this narrative. It is through his initial coming-to-know and a desire for further knowing that Montag is led to abandon his society in search of a new way of living. Escape from a blind and empty existence is situated in a close communion with a form of knowledge, a way of life within nature, and a sustaining life-task that culminates in a contribution to future generations. It is a framework not unlike the notion of cultural self-realisation put forward by Martin Ryle and Kate Soper. Self-realisation, achieved through an arduous engagement with culture, is presented as an awakening force that brings the dream of liberation to minds previously denied the idea of revolutionary need.<sup>44</sup> Without knowing the need, there is no potential for freedom.<sup>45</sup>

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country; the woods and the hills. They live there in little groups. The law can't touch them. They live quite peaceably and do nothing that's forbidden. Though, if they came into the city, they might not last long. - But how can you call them book people... if they don't do anything against the law? -They *are* books. Each one, men and women. Everyone, commits a book they've chosen to memory, and they *become the books*. Of course, every now and then, someone gets stopped, arrested. Which is why they live so cautiously. Because the secret they carry is the most precious secret in the world. With them, all human knowledge would pass away' (Truffaut, 1966).

<sup>44</sup> Martin Ryle and Kate Soper, 51.

<sup>45</sup> Charles Taylor writes that the notion of freedom is embedded in individualistic ideology. The social contract relies upon the consent of individuals that must be *freely given* so as to ensure conformity. The freedom to choose and to act (agency) is considered an important right of modern individuals. This is the social imaginary of democracy as an inherent good. A society of free-thinking individuals is seen as more civilized - a higher order of human existence - than that of tribal or tyrannical rule. The dichotomy is such that while society exists for and is made up of individuals, these individuals view freedom as an escape from its confines. There is a constant push and pull between the structures of society and the apparent liberation from that society. Yet the desire to be free is not separate from the individualistic self-interest that forms the basis of and reinforces the social order one seeks to escape. Nevertheless, in contemporary Western society,

In the context of *Fahrenheit 451*, the project *(I am) Myth Today* by Roland Barthes expresses a fear that contemporary society has produced a mass population unable to desire, let alone enact, their emancipation. It recognizes in the self a kind of blindness and a complicity that it finds unacceptable. Like Montag, it seeks salvation in the book.

But this is not the world of *Fahrenheit 451*. This is a world in which the freedom offered by education (the book) is complicit with other forms of control. Education is one part of a social that seeks to optimize the forces within it.<sup>46</sup> It is one element in many that functions to deposit a network of rules and codes of conduct into the individual. If it is true that a person cannot think beyond the parameters of thought of their particular social, then the book, as part of what creates those parameters, is in effect what limits freedom. At the same time, the book (knowledge) expands the possibilities for freedom within the social. The social creates a freedom only attainable through obedience. In order to reach higher levels of freedom (involving both autonomy and agency),<sup>47</sup> the individual must heighten their level of conformity to the social. Thus learning (and knowledge) is not uncomplicated by the relations of power. As much as it offers access to experiences of the sublime and the emancipation that 'the

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freedom is desired. There is a yearning for revolution - for alternatives. Capitalism co-exists with the sentiment to critique it - and while this critique may do nothing but make it bearable - the possibility for actual change lies within it (See Charles Taylor, Chapter 3.)

<sup>46</sup> Nicolas Rose and Paul Rabinow, 4-7.

<sup>47</sup> I am using 'autonomy' to mean the ability to make decisions for oneself, while 'agency' is the ability to take action on those decisions.

life of the mind'<sup>48</sup> can offer, it also recreates limits and determinate knowledge within the individual.

For this project, the text *Myth Today* was chosen because of its extremely common use in art school undergraduate studies (a Bible of sorts), but also because the content of the text describes processes in which certain forms of knowledge are imposed on individuals.<sup>49</sup> As well, it appealed to me that Barthes had said that as soon as a text was canonized, it had ceased to be relevant. A relevant idea creates a kind of awkwardness in the mind because it hasn't been subsumed (and thus simplified) into culture yet. This awkwardness allows greater freedom in thought as the individual struggles for meaning.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> See Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (USA; Harcourt, 1977). I cannot hear this phrase without thinking of Joel Coen's film *Barton Fink* (1991) in which an upper-class intellectual playwright (Fink) moves to the Hotel Earle to slum with the working class. Fink believes this will enable him to truly understand the psyche of the working class, but in his interactions with Charlie (a traveling salesman), Fink does nothing but postulate on the wonders of the 'life of the mind'. At the climax of the film, Charlie (having killed Fink's lover) runs down halls lit with fire yelling 'I'll show you the life of the mind, I'll show you the life of the mind!'.

<sup>49</sup> '... myth has in fact a double function: it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes it on us' Roland Barthes, 688.

<sup>50</sup> An earlier version of this paper attempted to embody this concept through a non-linear structure that avoided drawing conclusions or leading the reader. This paper was unsuccessful for a number of reasons, the main one being that to function properly, full-text articles were necessary as well as actual art objects (publications, video and sound). As it was, these were merely made reference to, which resulted in a kind of annotated bibliography rather than a collection of material that would allow the mind to create free associations.

At the beginning, I was thinking about Lars von Trier and the Dogme 95 film makers.<sup>51</sup> I had always been drawn to the notion of the assignment – particularly ones in which a set of rules were placed on carrying out the process.<sup>52</sup> I decided that the text could only be memorized for one hour a day, five days a week, for four months. Recitation of the text outside of that hour was not permitted. This extra discipline meant that the final recitation could only be what was possible within the limits placed on its process. The only way I could improve the final recitation would be to work harder within the one hour. This spoke to the notion of striving in a way that I found very useful. All four of these projects have an element of failure in them, but failure was not the goal, nor was it meant to be emphasized as a topic (except inasmuch as it addresses ‘wanting to be something you’re not’ as not being what you want to be). The failure that exists is the result of a struggle, and it is this struggle, or striving, that I find most evocative.

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<sup>51</sup> Dogme 95 is a collection of film directors founded in Copenhagen in 1995. Their manifesto outlines a number of rules and limitations placed on the process of filming. Von Trier has only made one Dogme film (*The Idiots*, 1998), however, in the film *The Five Obstructions* (2003), von Trier asks Jorgen Seth to remake his 1967 film *The Perfect Human* five times while adhering to a different set of rules for each.

<sup>52</sup> In reference to this idea, I like these words of Linda Montano: ‘In the beginning it was about discipline. I had to do this, this, this and this for numbers of hours and days and weeks and months. Then I found that the overall intentionality worked to incorporate my needs, and the disciplines were really my own ego struggling, pushing. So when I lightened up and stopped pushing so much and creating boundaries and formulas, the permission to live in the state of art loosened me up. I started making more things that looked like traditional art because I was free. Before, it was always this sort of guilt of not being in the studio, not producing enough, not working -- which comes out of an art school training or a Western model of abundance and consumerism’. Paul Coulliard, ‘I Slept with Linda Montano: A Conversation between Linda Montano and Paul Coulliard’ (Toronto: Fado, 1999).

As a means of research for this project, I interviewed two artists: Mina Totino and Peter Conlin.<sup>53</sup> Totino had transcribed Kant's *Analytic of the Sublime*<sup>54</sup> with white chalk on black paper, while Conlin had copied Arthur Hailey's popular novel *Hotel*<sup>55</sup> while keeping annotations of his thoughts on another stack of papers. Totino's project was the most like my own – it indicated a conflicted relationship with the authority of the text and with education as a means of development that could be conceived in capitalist terms of career advancement or productivity as much as with a personal coming-to-know. For Totino, the process of learning was bound up with disciplinary procedures as much as with the potential for focused, intuitive thinking that might encounter the sublime. Conlin was also going for the sublime but in a different manner. His project was less compliant to the authority of text and had an element of anarchy. He copied a novel to which he was indifferent so as to ignore it with the hopes that this would activity would free his mind for 'deeper thoughts'. I chose these artists for the way they complimented and contradicted each other – for the way Conlin upsets the 'good girl' in Totino while her work makes his appear overly cynical and that both engage with a process of coming-to-know on their own terms.

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<sup>53</sup> These interviews can be found at [www.durationalperformance.com](http://www.durationalperformance.com). Peter Conlin was interviewed on his project *My Novel Hotel* (2001) in which he 'novel-copied' in a rented room of the Dominion Building in Vancouver. Mina Totino and I discussed her 1997 project *Detention* in which she transcribed text through an arduous process of white chalk on black paper.

<sup>54</sup> Immanuel Kant, 'Analytic of the Sublime' in *The Critique of Judgment* (USA: Oxford University Press, 1952), 90-103.

<sup>55</sup> Arthur Hailey, *Hotel* (USA: Doubleday, 1965).

*Educating Reece Terris and Megan Wilson*<sup>56</sup>

This second project addresses the rewards that the social doles out to those who conform to the expectation of self-development. Its title is taken from the movie *Educating Rita*,<sup>57</sup> which was a film adaptation of the novel *Pygmalion*,<sup>58</sup> which also inspired the musical *My Fair Lady*.<sup>59</sup> These are narratives in which a person whose level of compliance to the social is extremely high endeavors to recreate their own image in a person whose level of compliance is low. High levels of compliance are marked by wealth, but also by position and power. Low levels are associated with vagrancy and helplessness. The lowly, however, have a way out – through education (compliance), they can move from the realm of the powerless to that of the powerful.

In *My Fair Lady*, a professor of linguistics wagers that he can take a vagrant street woman and through the acquisition of proper English present her as an equal to the highest social strata. Her renovation doesn't stop at language, however, she is re-trained in hygiene, dress, posture and manner. Every aspect of her self-presentation is modified. In turn, her attitude changes from stubborn belligerence to mindful compliance as the 'rightness' of the social is instilled in her through education.

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<sup>56</sup> See Appendix

<sup>57</sup> Gilbert Lewis, *Educating Rita*, 1983.

<sup>58</sup> Bernard Shaw, *Pygmalion* (New York: Brentano, 1916).

<sup>59</sup> George Cukor, *My Fair Lady*, 1964.

Reece and I undertook this project in response to a discussion we'd had about class differences in language use, particularly in terms of swearing and the use of slang. This was related to an article in the book *Class and Feminism*,<sup>60</sup> in which a lower-class woman accuses upper-class women of never saying what they really mean, whereas upper-class women complain that their lower-class counterparts are not capable of controlling their tongues. We related stories in which we'd offended others or been unable to keep from speaking our minds when it was inappropriate and decided that we needed to modify our behavior. Thus, Eliza Doolittle. We watched *My Fair Lady* continuously until we could recite her elocution lessons along with her by heart.

This was intended to be humorous, however, in a very real sense, education does offer the opportunity for class mobility in Western society, particularly in North America. As the Spelling Master in the documentary *Spellbound* points out – 'In America back in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, people had this sense of opportunity – you could leap out of one social class into another, you could move up – and I think they understood that education was a basic part of that'.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Charlotte Bunch and Nancy Myron (Eds.), *Class and Feminism: A Collection of Essays from the Furies* (Baltimore: Diana Press, 1974), 42.

<sup>61</sup> Jeffrey Blitz, *Spellbound*, 2002.



Class mobility is one reward of compliance to the social contract. It is a real reward, particularly in light of the history of oppression by class difference.<sup>62</sup> But it is a reward with a hook – it can result in a constant striving to reach higher levels of wealth accumulation which is potentially without a ceiling. This is the problem of the American Dream – if everyone *can* be wealthier, everyone *should* be. This creates a society of burned out overachievers at the same time that it creates excessive displays of wealth and unlimited consumption that is damaging to the environment and to other ways of living. A conflict with this is at the base of certain forms of asceticism, especially what could be considered the soft asceticism of people like Rousseau<sup>63</sup> and later Thoreau<sup>64</sup> who desired to escape mass consumerism in an attempt to understand what the world would be like if everyone accumulated only as much as they had to in order to provide for their basic needs.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> See Chuck Barone, 'Political Economy of Classism: Towards a More Integrated Multilevel View' in *Review of Radical Political Economic* (Spring 1998, v. 30, iss. 2), 1-30.

<sup>63</sup> 'These fresh beginnings led me by a new path into a different intellectual world, possessing a simple and dignified economy which I could not look upon without enthusiasm. Soon, as I continued to explore it, I could see only foolishness and error in the doctrines of our sages, nothing but oppression and misery in our social order'. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions* (USA: Penguin, 1954 (1781), 381..

<sup>64</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (USA: Harper, 1965).

<sup>65</sup> Masanobu Fukuoka, author of *The One-Straw Revolution* describes a process of farming that he calls 'do nothing' agriculture. It is a means by which each individual can provide for their basic needs while creating a minimum impact on the environment and at the same time, working only as much as is necessary (USA: Bantam, 1985), 5-7.

## THE TECHNOLOGY OF SELF-DISCIPLINE

### *The Abstinence Project*<sup>66</sup>

Abstinence, an element of ascetic practice, is one in which an individual denies oneself something that is desired. It is a mode of discipline that often serves two purposes – to achieve a benefit such as better health or reduced shame and to exercise on the self a form of control intended to produce self-mastery. It is a means of not being a slave to desire.<sup>67</sup> In a sense, it has an instrumental end (health) and an intrinsic one (self-control).

Part of self-control is accountability – it requires a record or other documentation as proof that promises are being held. This is also the crux of durational performance – when an artist makes a commitment to carry out a specific task over a set period of time, they need some means of communicating that they've made the promise and to show if they have managed to carry it through. This is typically done through a method of record-keeping or photographic documentation.<sup>68</sup> The contract, record or camera becomes a witness to the individual's accountability.

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<sup>66</sup> See Appendix

<sup>67</sup> In the sense of self-mastery as described by Michel Foucault, *The Ethics of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom*, 91.

<sup>68</sup> The issue of documentation in relation to performance art is laden with conflict. There are many who feel that performance art is meant to be 'in the now', that to use video or photography is to rob it of its ephemeral nature and strip away the audience interaction that makes it what it is. This notion would mean that durational performance, which often happens over a long period of time and without an audience, would not even qualify as performance art. Others argue that performance art was successful in sublimating the object and making an art free from the marketplace – the introduction of documents as objects for the market are contradictory to this principle. Durational performance relies heavily on documentation and so holds an awkward role in this conflict as well. See Craig

This record-keeping is a process of self-surveillance,<sup>69</sup> in which an individual keeps watch over the self to seek out any deviation, flaw or mistake in order to bring it into line. As a technology of the self it is the absolute nexus of a social that teaches the individual to internalize processes of control and discipline. 'Know thyself' was a portion of caring for the self developed by the Greeks that through Christianity's confessional practices morphed into the primary means by which an individual is meant to relate to the self. Foucault describes the genealogy by which knowing thyself in combination with scientific discourse, has produced a culture of disclosure in which everything is put into discourse.<sup>70</sup> Every aspect of life is made available for constant surveillance and judgment.

In *The Abstinence Project*, I endeavored to quit drinking alcohol and coffee for one year. Nicolas Bourriaud's introduction to *Relational Aesthetics* initially led me to this decision. He writes that contemporary social activity is plagued by consumerism – that essentially, we don't know how to interact with others if we aren't in a location designed for that purpose

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Krull, 'Curatorial Introduction' in *Action/Performance and the Photograph*. (Craig Krull Gallery, Santa Monica, California. July 10 – September 25, 1993); Robert C. Morgan, 'Half-Truth: Performance and the Photograph' in *Action/Performance and the Photograph* (Craig Krull Gallery, Santa Monica, California. July 10 – September 25, 1993); David S. Rubin, 'Outside the Frame: Performance, Art and Life', in *Outside the Frame - Performance and The Object: A Survey History of Performance Art in the USA from 1950 to the Present*. Catalogue Coordinated by Gary Sangster (USA: Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, 1994).

<sup>69</sup> Foucault describes self-surveillance as an outcome of that imposed by the social (in this case, prison) 'He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection'. Michel Foucault, 'Panopticism' in *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (NY: Vintage Books 1995), 198.

<sup>70</sup> Michel Foucault, 'On the Genealogy of Ethics' in *Michael Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. Ed. Hubert I. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 231-232.

alongside a 'duly priced drink'.<sup>71</sup> This seemed quite true to my experience. There was also the idea that while Debord called drugs and madness a necessary escape from the realities of oppression,<sup>72</sup> there was another sense in which alcohol 'kept the people down' – that it kept people from making real changes in their lives and from mobilizing themselves towards higher goals. Alcohol, which was in some ways a means of not conforming to production values, was in another sense the means by which I was being kept a 'cog in the machinery'. If I was going to conform in order to reap the rewards of productivity (and sociability), then alcohol was in the way. If I wasn't going to conform, alcohol was still in the way because it kept me from being able to actualize my transcendence.

In some ways, *The Abstinence Project* was a failure in that I failed to abstain. I kept the record, but did not keep the promise. Again, what is interesting is not the failure as much as the striving. The final record is a document of that striving – of trying to be something I'm not.

*The Abstinence Project* came out of a desire for a one year project that I could impose on my daily life. I was deeply affected by the work of Tehching Hsieh, an artist who had accomplished five one year performances between 1978 and 1986. Hsieh's performances were ascetic in character – for a year each, he locked himself in a cage with nothing to read or write, stayed entirely outdoors, and tied himself with an eight foot rope to Linda Montano. Hsieh explains these projects in terms of taking on

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<sup>71</sup> Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (France: Les Pres de Reel, 1998), 7.

<sup>72</sup> 'Drugs help one to conform to this organization of things; madness allows one to flee it'. Debord, XII.

his worst fears.<sup>73</sup> For example, the Cage Piece was a response to the isolation he felt as an illegal alien in New York – he was afraid of being alone so he magnified that fear in order to better understand his relationship with it.<sup>74</sup>

Around the same time, I became acquainted with the work of Ellie Harrison,<sup>75</sup> a young British artist who has undergone many durational performances that involve keeping a strict record of her daily activities. These activities involve the minutiae of her existence – recording everything from the number of people she speaks to, her temperature, steps walked, distance traveled, swear words uttered, bodily functioning and so on. In my interview with her, Ellie said that she is unable to distinguish the recording of her life from the living of it and that this constant self-surveillance sets up a tension with any sense of autonomy she may have. An example is her Eat 22 project in which she photographed everything she ate for a year. If she found herself without a camera, she was unable to eat regardless of how hungry she may have been. The obligation she has to carry out her ‘promise’ overrides every other desire and she is a slave to her process of documentation.

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<sup>73</sup> In the Old Testament, the Book of Job is the story of a righteous man whom God allows Satan to test. The book takes the form of an apologetic – addressing the fact of evil and loss in light of an individual’s best attempts at ethical living. Faced with the loss of everything but his life, Job cries out; ‘that which I have feared the most has come upon me’ (Job 3:25).

<sup>74</sup> In an interview with Delia Bajo and Brainard Carey: ‘In conversation with Tehching Hsieh’ at twobodies.com (New York, 2003).

<sup>75</sup> A recorded audio interview and transcript with Ellie Harrison can be found at [www.durationalperformance.com](http://www.durationalperformance.com). Much of her work has been published on her web-site at [www.ellieharrison.com](http://www.ellieharrison.com).

*I'm Sorry*<sup>76</sup>

'Life is merely the epitome of everything about which one must be ashamed'.<sup>77</sup>

This project, in which a public photo-booth is used as a confessional for a week, follows the last quite effectively since it relates to how an individual responds to struggle that ends in failure. The idea behind confession is fairly straight-forward – a sinner admits that s/he has committed a wrongful act. Typically, this also involves asking for forgiveness. On one hand, confession is the result of shame which can be interpreted as an agent of social control. The system of morality behind shame is socially dictated. As is the shame that is experienced when those rules are trespassed. The feeling of shame is the result of internalized policing and punishment.<sup>78</sup>

On the other hand, the appeal of confession is its redemptive quality that allows the sinner not to bear the weight of sin (socially imposed or not – the knowledge of one's own transgression can be a heavy weight to bear). This sense of confession seems lost in our time (the Catholic church reports a dramatic decrease in confession numbers over the last forty years).<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> See Appendix

<sup>77</sup> Theodore Adorno, 334.

<sup>78</sup> Richard P. Bagozzi, Willen Verbeke and Jacinto Gavino, 'Culture Moderates the Self-Regulation of Shame and Its Effects on Performance: The Case of Salespersons in the Netherlands and the Philippines' (*Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 88(2), April 2003), 219-233.

<sup>79</sup> Jerry Filteau, 'Theologians, historian explore decline in confessions'. *Catholic News Service*, March 24, 2004.

It is however, an important element of 12 step programs as a means of mending torn relationships and helping the sinner to forgive themselves and move on from their past.<sup>80</sup> This is confession as apology – which is relational.

Another sense of relational confession is when it is used to connect people through trust – the generosity of showing weakness and giving the other power to harm you. This is what was behind Vito Acconci's durational performance *Pier 17*, in which he stood at the end of a pier every night at midnight for twenty three days.<sup>81</sup> He invited others to meet him so that he could tell them something about himself that he was ashamed of and that they could use against him. In this sense, confession is a powerful means of enacting trust and connection to others. It implies a letting go of the need to always present the 'best self',<sup>82</sup> which is alienating and in many ways a means of intimidation, in order to interact on a deeper level.

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<sup>80</sup> Steps 8 and 9 of Alcoholics Anonymous: 'Make a list of all persons we have harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all. Make direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.' Alcoholics Anonymous, *The Big Book* (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services Inc., 2006), 59.

<sup>81</sup> '(Untitled) Project for Pier 17' (1971) – 29 days, 1 hour each night. Every night, I'm at the pier at 1 am.; I'm alone – I'm waiting at the far end of the pier, for one hour. If someone comes out to the pier to meet me, I confess to that person something about me that hasn't been revealed before, something that I'm ashamed of and that under normal circumstances I wouldn't tell a soul, something that – if it were made public – could be used against me. In exchange for keeping the secret, the visitor can demand something from me; the visitor can blackmail me.' Fraser Ward, *Vito Acconci* (USA: Phaidon, 2002), 67).

<sup>82</sup> Matthew Arnold, '*Culture and Anarchy*' and *Other Writings* (USA: Cambridge University Press, 1993 (1861-1878), 110-114.

The potential for such interaction is not always available or appropriate. As well, confession can be about marking one's existence as much as about relieving sin or revealing oneself to another. This is the sense that I take from the work of Jonathan Keller,<sup>83</sup> an artist who has been taking a photograph of himself every morning and posting it on the web for over eight years. More than a narcissistic gesture, this is an act of 'being there', of showing up at the plate every day without fail. I think of it in terms of the last few lines of Beckett's novel *The Unnamable*: 'I can't go on, I can't go on, I'll go on'.<sup>84</sup> It's a record, a confession, of making the choice to continue regardless of 'how many skies have fallen'.<sup>85</sup>

Keller's use of the photograph can be interpreted as a surrogate for human contact. Despite the lack of a human companion, the camera can testify to his existence. Taken to an extreme, Lucas's inaugural film *THX 1138*<sup>86</sup> depicts a society that uses small white rooms with light-box images of Jesus as confession booths. In that society, humans are cut off from their emotions, even their drives to interact or empathize with other humans, through the use of medication and mediated representations of desire. The need to confess in this environment is troubling, since codes of morality are confined to productivity and efficiency. *THX 1138* confesses when he has committed the sin of connecting emotionally with another human.

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<sup>83</sup> Interview with Keller can be found at [www.durationalperformance.com](http://www.durationalperformance.com). Keller's work can be seen at his site: [http://www.c71123.com/daily\\_photo/](http://www.c71123.com/daily_photo/).

<sup>84</sup> Samuel Beckett, 'The Unnamable' in *Three Novels by Samuel Beckett* (UK: Grove Weidenfeld, 1995), 215.

<sup>85</sup> D.H. Lawrence, 5.

<sup>86</sup> George Lucas (1971).



It is with this combination of ideas in mind that I undertook the *I'm Sorry* project. During the week of confessions, I was thinking that if the camera, acting as a confidant, judge or priest, had the potential to absolve sins with the flash of its light, one sin could be relieved per photograph – four a day. The photo-booth, like a confessional, acted as a metaphorical shield around the sinner – both protecting the sinner as well as the outside public. The confessions, silent to all but the camera, were devoid of human contact – an anti-social act tied to technology's role as a mediator.

## CONCLUSION

This paper is the support material for a series of durational performances that involved imposing a regime on daily life. I have used it as an opportunity to link this kind of performance with the notion of self-development, particularly, what such development means in the context of individualization and the social. These works were about wanting to be something you're not and as such they embodied the striving and disappointments inherent in the task of changing oneself.

## APPENDIX



*(I am) Myth Today* by Roland Barthes, 2004.

Memorized text recited to an examiner. Video 55 minutes.

Presented at *Pretty Mutt* MFA Exhibition, Alexander Studios, 2004.

For this project, the excerpt of Roland Barthes' *Myth Today* published in *Art and Theory: 1900-1991* was memorized over a four month period. A limit of one hour a day, five days a week was imposed on the memory process. To document this project, the text was recited to an examiner (Graham Kaye) and videotaped in an unedited single take.



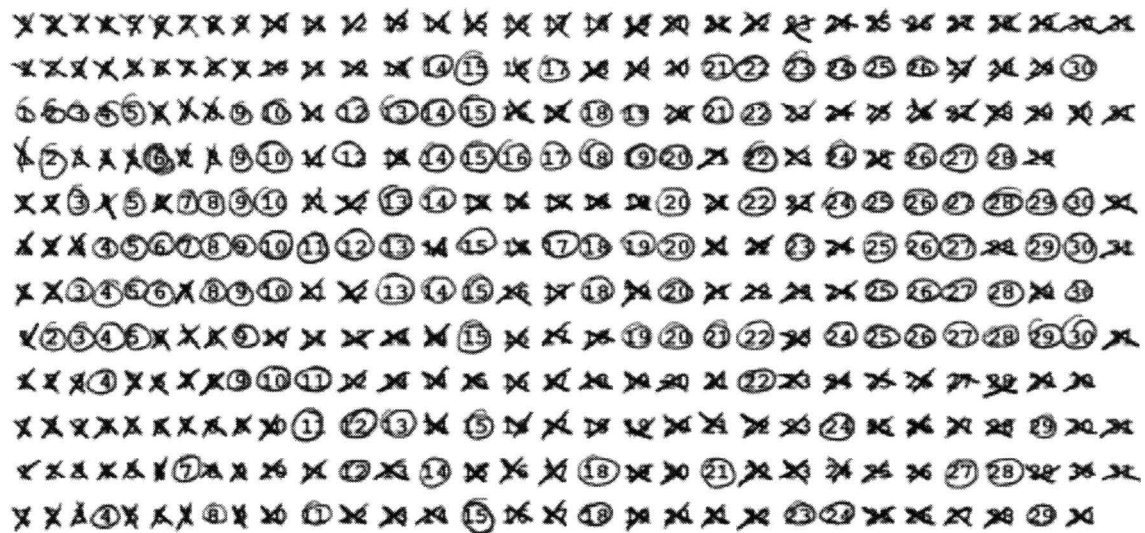
*Educating Reece Terris and Megan Wilson, 2004.*

Elocution lessons with Eliza Doolittle. 11 minute video.

Presented at *Pretty Mutt* MFA Exhibition at Alexander Studios, 2004.

In this project George Cukor's *My Fair Lady* is watched continuously until Eliza Doolittle's elocution lessons can be recited from memory.

Documentation of this process involved an edited video of Reece and Megan speaking along with the film (as pictured above).

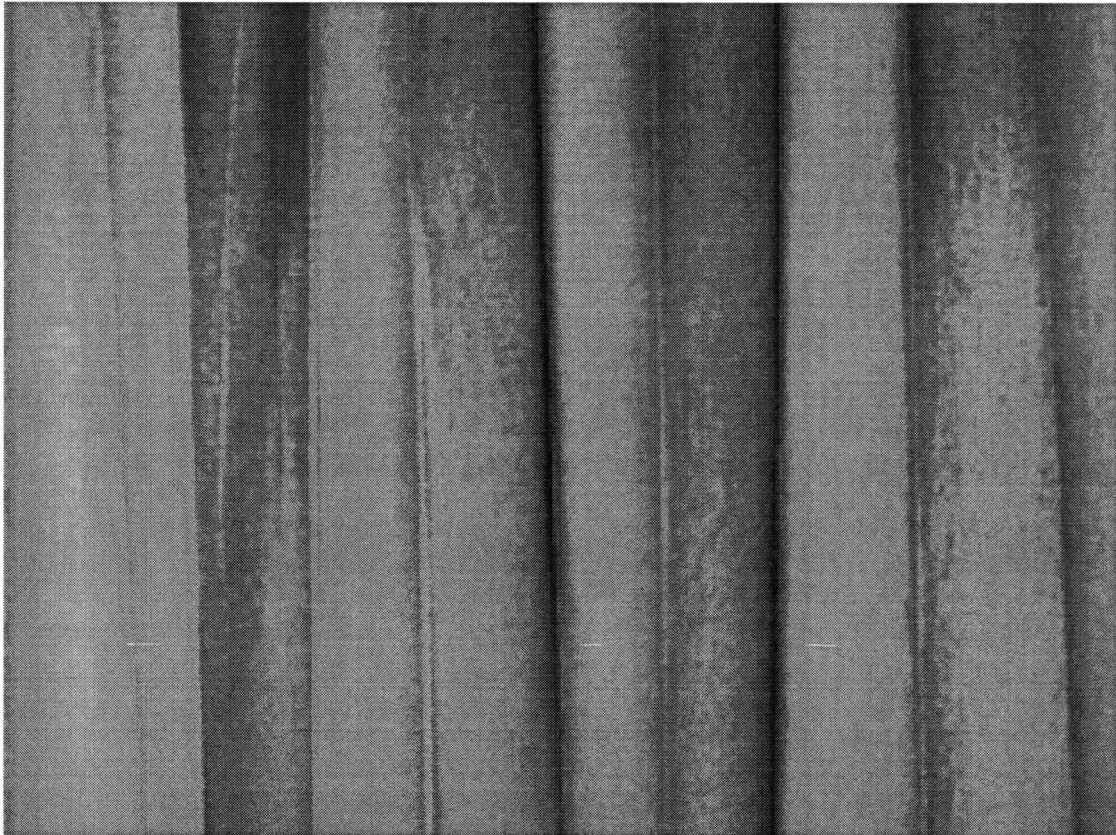


*The Abstinence Project*, 2003-2004.

A contract is signed to quit drinking coffee and alcohol for one year. Gyclee print on watercolour paper.

Presented in progress at *Pretty Mutt* MFA Exhibition, 2004.

From October 1, 2003 to September 30, 2004, a daily record was kept as to whether or not alcohol or coffee was consumed in accordance with a signed contract.



*I'm Sorry, 2006.*

Public photo-booth at Vancouver's VIA Rail station is used as a confessional for one week. July, 2006.

In this public performance project, one confession is given for each flash of the camera – four flashes per day for seven days. This project is documented on video and an excerpt was launched on the Internet during the third week of September 2006.

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