2018

This Light Is Not My Own: Détournement, Authorial Intent, and Activated Spectatorship in Visual Art

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This Light Is Not My Own:
Détournement, Authorial Intent, and Activated Spectatorship in
Visual Art

A Thesis Presented

by

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Submitted to the College of Graduate Studies
Bridgewater State University
Bridgewater, Massachusetts

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of

Master of Teaching
In Visual Art

MAY 2018

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INTRODUCTION

I live in a visual culture. It is a culture that actively defines reality through images. This process of definition has grown greatly from the day of the printing press, through the proliferation of the television and video, and onward to the computer, the smartphone, and internet.

I also live in a period or time that holds many titles. Amongst them is the digital age, the information age, and the computer age. This age marks the time period in which the use of computers and computing technology has become ubiquitous in our daily lives.

In this digital age, face to face human activity has been supplanted by digital interactions, which have come to define the day. Social media platforms have opened the floodgates for people to both define a personal identity and form “relationships” with others by way of clicks, likes, photos, and animated gifs. These selective snippets and fragments of existence are easily collected and shared with others. In turn, any individual has the ability to define what they deem to be reality through the selective assembly of visual fragments and shards of content. They also hold the ability to project that vision and share that idea outwards to the world with the click of a button. It is from this jumping point that I enter into my thesis. In this project, I try to address the proliferation of images within American culture, its visual fragmentation, and to reflect the process that shapes people’s perceptions of reality in the digital age.
BRIEF ARTIST STATEMENT

This Light Is Not My Own represents an investigation into détournement, authorial intent, and activated spectatorship. The body of work presented for my thesis is composed through the détournement of visual fragments that cross my path, from magazines, newspapers, and mail order catalogs, to television, video, and the vastness of the internet. The disparity of content ranges from historic WWII photos, family photos, pop culture icons, 1980’s video games, Islamic protesters, social media memes, and beyond. Such diverse sources create provocative and obscure compositions caught in limbo between conflict and resolution. The intent of thesis is to reduce my authorial voice, and to play the role of choreographer of the viewer’s experience. This has impacted my art drastically, especially its “language”, as I have moved away from the declarative position of “I am saying to you” to an interrogative art asking “what are you hearing?” Placing the emphasis on the question, I have left space for the viewer to actively take part in the installation art by writing answers on whiteboards, that could help answer and resolve the work, or add further to its questioning.

The thesis work utilizes détournement as the primary technique within the compositions. Guy Debord (1931) defined détournement as “the integration of present or past artistic productions into a superior construction of a milieu” (Knabb 2006a). Debord noted two categories of détournement, “Minor détournement; the détournement of an element which has no importance in itself and which thus draws all its meaning from the new context in which it has been placed” and “Deceptive détournement...the détournement of an intrinsically significant element, which derives a different scope from the new context” (Knabb 2006b). My thesis work extensively uses both forms of détournement throughout resulting in an equivocal strangeness.
Debord said that the use of diversion\(^1\) of existing content and combining disparate elements from diverse sources has the “inability to enshrine any inherent and definitive certainty” (Debord, 1995, 146).

French theorist Nicolas Bourriaud elaborates and defines more broadly détournement in his book, Postproduction\(^2\) (2002), in which he aligns the technique with all forms of reuse and recycling of existing content. He draws a parallel of visual artists to current music deejay using the technique of sampling to occupy social, cultural, and historic forms (Bourriaud 2002a). Such social, cultural, and historic forms are the foundation of the images that make up the composition of my work.

The reuse of existing materials in my work may be considered détournement, however, I do not always relinquish a particular image from some of its original meaning or symbolic value, as Debord’s writing suggest détournement does (Knabb 2006b). This example is easily spotted in my thesis title, *This Light Is Not My Own*. This phrase is a song lyric clipped from the song Reflection by the progressive rock band Tool (Kennan 2001). I use this phrase as a metaphor to the act of détournement and appropriation that I am using. The content presented in my thesis is not my own, but is a collection and arrangement of text and images that have crossed my path.

Through détournement, the resulting compositions and installation provide ambiguity bolstered by a physical space for the viewer to add content to the work. This space is in the form

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1 *Diverion is the direct translation of the French word détournement*

2 *The term postproduction is used widely in audio and video production, as the phase when recording has finished, and the recorded material has been passed on for editing and after effects. Nicholas Bourriaud uses the term in his book Postproduction to reference artists who use pre-existing content to create their work via recontextualization, alteration, repurposing, and replication. This term umbrellas different media, and emphasizes the different point of view that artist have taken with regards to ownership, citation, recycling, and detournement, in which artist are using these techniques as the driving force for their artistic production.*
of blank speech bubbles and protest signs, where the viewer can construct their own meaning and effectively change, altering the physical and symbolic characteristics of the piece. The activation of the viewer as a participant in the art serves as parallel to the practices of social media users who use the platform to shape their own reality, and who add content constantly to it by speaking or sharing other visual material. To further build upon the idea of sharing, a small zine supporting the art is available for the viewer to take home, serving as an extension of the art that can be further shared by the viewer to others.

Through my thesis, I tried to find the balance of work and play consistent with the structure of my classroom teaching. I sought to focus on both technique and the craft of collage, and to playfully investigate the usage of such media in completed compositions. I also broadened my understanding of collage and installation art in the context of art history, from the writing of Claire Bishop, Nicolas Bourriaud, and Guy Debord, to the contemporary approaches of Liam Gillick, Judith Supine and Jakob Kolding. The resulting body of work demonstrates the exploration and discoveries made through collage, as I shift my authorial intent and place focus on activating the viewer as participant.

In the pages that follow, I provide a detailed account of the process that led to the creation of *This Light is Not My Own*. Then, I provide a theoretical and art historical background to my praxis. I conclude with an analysis of how the work for this thesis has affected my career, both as an artist and as an educator, and offer possible avenues for further investigation in the future.
CHAPTER ONE: THIS LIGHT IS NOT MY OWN

EXTENSIVE ARTIST STATEMENT

From the collection of visual artifacts that cross my daily path, The art of This Light Is Not My Own intertwines socio-political subject matter, historic photography, and fine art with the light hearted content of entertainment, sports, internet memes, and shopping catalogs by way of collage. The mixed media work utilizes diverse sources, juxtaposing the familiar and the unusual, culminating in formal compositions that are mysterious and open ended. That balance extends a comfortable invitation to the viewer to engage with the work, yet enough strangeness for viewers to ask questions and contemplate answers.

Space is left within the work, in the form of whiteboard surfaces, to activate the viewer to insert their own content into the piece. The welcome participation from the viewer encourages their further consideration of the role they play in shaping narratives, and their position as audience, or receivers, of other narratives shaped by mass media and social media platforms. Turning the viewer into a participant, my work connects them to the practice of forging together fragments of content to create accounts of obscure realities, and the selective acceptance and sharing of content via social networks that shape our contemporary culture.

The two dimensional mixed media studies serve as sketches for future installation art, playing out various compositions and possible juxtapositions of images. This investigation considers what happens when the intention of my personal voice is reduced and the more disparate elements combine to produce ambiguity. Within the studies, cryptic note taking addresses the content that forms the composition, but it is done in a way that remains ambivalent
to the viewer, as to avoid providing answers. In effort to reduce personal voice, the notes are often snippets of texts from a variety of sources, from video games, internet posts, and rap music, to political quotes and art history texts.

The background surfaces are treated with loosely applied fluorescent colors to represent colored lights in a gallery setting. Gestural mark-making, with influences of graffiti and street art, capture an uninhibited approach to art making, as well as connects to the street artist’s rejection of ownership, in which both physical space and imagery exist as material to be claimed and manipulated.

Through the scale and scope of the compositions that both hang on a gallery wall and the installation that transforms the gallery space, the gestural writing and mark-making upon the individual pieces provides a lively energy that is integral to the content and subject itself. The immediacy of the expression is not bound by a single medium, but can be viewed in the splatters and loose marks, the rough edges of paper and wood, and the expressive paint strokes, capturing an innate rawness that can be seen and felt.

My work contains expressive marks layered together into textures, combining a multitude of letterforms, free writing, text, and expressive splatters and splashes. The text highlights ambiguity with cryptic and, at times, indecipherable content. However, it is the post-production practice of détournement, through selection and juxtaposition of images both familiar and obscure, that dominates the composition.

As an art installation, the work offers a space where the viewer not only stands still with a passive gaze, but also exists as an active participant in the visual story unfolding in front of
them. The art contains enough familiarity to invite the viewer in without hesitation, yet enough unexpected and odd juxtapositions to call the viewer to ask questions and seek answers. In this resulting world, the viewer has to consider how the story may play out and ask where they personally fit within the composition. This, in turn, will prompt the viewer to rethink how they process, select, and accept, the fragmented material that bombards them in their everyday life.

**RELATIONSHIP TO TEACHING:**

Within my classroom and curriculum, I am constantly seeking the balance between work and play. In order to have students broaden their understanding and influence of artists throughout the history of art, and to build their repertoire of skills and knowledge of materials, I design lessons that focus on techniques and crafting processes from various art periods and movements. Those lessons often are introductions into projects that offer extensive space for students to explore other avenues as their personal art project progresses. The goal is that students will gain a specific set of skills and exposure to the potential of a given medium (work), and then explore with their new found knowledge and influence (play).

Working with middle school students, the focus of many lessons is about identity. At these ages, students are constantly asking themselves “Who am I”? Through this thesis work, my experimentation with collage and mixed media have led me to craft lessons that resonate with my students and that ask “What is my voice, what am I saying?”, tying to their specific personal interests. I even encourage them to think critically about their position in the world, how their identity is constructed in relation to the outside world, and ask them to consider questions such as “What am I being told by the world around me?” I found collage to be a very comfortable
way for students to integrate images and narratives into work, where they may have hesitated previously in a drawing or painting. It has also been a successful vehicle for students to let their artwork become strange, where a more rigid student may otherwise hesitate.

**DESIGN APPROACH AND TECHNIQUE**

My thesis work has three components. The main body of work is the series of two dimensional mixed media works that are studies for future installations. The supporting works are new components for art installations that build upon my 2016 Wallace Anderson Gallery piece. Last, a paper “zine” is made as an extension of the work that can be taken home by viewers. The design approach and technique to follow focuses on the main series of two dimensional work with occasional references to the other components where appropriate.

**The Archive:**

For years I have been collecting and cutting out images, patterns and textures, and text. With a large number of images being placed into various envelopes and bags, I began sorting images into different containers. The labeling of the containers has been an ever evolving process. With my initial installation (2016 Wallace Anderson Gallery) I was using good, bad, and weird as three categories into which I was sorting images, loosely aligned with the composition and concept of the installation.

As I began venturing into collage-based work, I started to constantly save images that I would come across. This was done whether reading an online article, venturing down a random google rabbit hole, or taking screenshots of images and memes running in my facebook, twitter, and instagram feeds. The more images I captured, the more I developed a more specified archive.
of folders and subfolders. For example: **Root Folder** Nature > **Sub folders** Birds, Insects, Landscapes, - and - **Root folder** People **Subfolder:** athletes, politicians, celebrities. This sorting of images made selections for my thesis studies and installations components much easier, and simultaneously increased the challenge. While it allowed me to more easily create juxtapositions of images from disparate sources by simply selecting pieces from a diversity of source folders, I also had to go through the overwhelming process of sifting through hundreds upon hundreds of images. In the end, I would trust my gut and simply move images into a “yes” folder, putting the only conscious stock into images that were of protestors.

Example of digital image archive.
With print media, I have containers of images cut from magazines and newspapers that I have been collecting for years. I first sorted the collection of source material by genre, such as news, sports, home repair/makeover, male fashion, female fashion, clothing catalogs, architecture, home furnishing catalogs, etc. Over the course of making my thesis work, I would quickly tear out content and keep folders of clippings and pages. Then I would filter through and cut images and sort into categories of text, males, females, children, animals, and architecture and structures. I then would keep a few containers fluid to help with composition, moving various images in and out, looking through images for content that I felt was strong amongst the vast number of cutouts. That strength may simply have to do with the content of image itself in isolation, or the size, position, or posture of the figure or object in relation to the composition taking place.

**Processing:**

After digital images were sorted, I sifted through hundreds of images and selected images I thought were stronger and more interesting for further processing. This was done to replicate the printing process that images coming from print media (newspaper/magazine) reveal when they are enlarged on a photocopier. The objective is twofold. One is to create the formality of a rough texture that characterizes printed media, a feature lost as images progressively move to the screen. I am interested in the texture, and its revelation and transformation as images are enlarged, and subtle patterns are revealed.

The second goal is the desire to represent the mass media process of the printing press. John Maeda, notes the artists“renewed curiosity about...materiality, and all things physical” as
the world loses sight of such things (Maeda 2013, 7). The application of a faux halftone dot
texture to a digital image is my attempt at bring that back to light. Even if the image source is a
popular internet meme, bringing it into the aesthetic realm of the printing press asks the viewer
to consider past, permanence, and reconsider the image’s value from that a passing meme, to that
of a printed news story with greater value.

To create a halftone effect in Adobe Photoshop, an image was duplicated onto a second
layer. One layer was desaturated, and the contrast and sharpness adjusted to either strengthen or
mute the image. The second layer was run through a color halftone filter, breaking the images
into four solid color channels and pixelating the image. The resulting pixelation was then
desaturated, and merged over the original image as a screen or overlay.
Selection:

After selecting and printing images, I then spent time at a photocopier printings various sizes and mirror reversals of the different images. With a stack of hundreds of photocopies, I began cutting.

As hundred of images were cut, I kept a box of cutouts and box lid. When making the images, I again sorted cutouts into piles of various genres, and sorted by height. When making the compositions, I attempted to reduce my own personal voice within the imagery, and tried to not fret about or consider the meaning of the artwork taking shape. However, I found this
objective nearly impossible unless I used a sense of blind selection in creating the composition, which I attempted on the work *They Always Say It’s Fake*.

The compositions paid great attention to formal principles of design; the balance, movement, rhythm, emphasis, proportion, and unity created through the placement of forms and use of space. Focus on this formality alters which images work in the composition, often due to size, or pose. This helped in aiding me to let a preconceived idea vanish, and allow whatever obscure juxtaposition come to the fore.

When images were laid out, the content and meaning that I associate with them were unavoidably considered as juxtapositions with other images were planned. I tried to not let my associations and judgement get in the way, to allow compositions to stand even if I didn’t find or control the immediate meaning. However, I often saw one or two images in a potential composition and then sought a particular image to accompany them. Sometimes that decision was based on a particular pose that made sense or a natural association (In *You’re Killing Me, Smalls*, the protester throwing a stone was balanced by two figures holding baseball bats.) At other times, I found a clear thematic connection, or a jarring juxtaposition often created by the distance between the sources of detourned elements. (In *High Resolution Graphic*, a 1980’s video game character, the children’s show character Big Bird, an internet meme, photography of destruction from Hurricane Katrina, and news images of African Migrants in an overcrowded boat.)

Themes that appear in the work cover racial inequality, fine art, Hollywood entertainment, politics, gun violence, social inequality, morality (with personal references to my role as a father raising two children), and gender stereotypes. However, no one theme is focused
on throughout the work, and often they are intermixed within a single composition. The freedom
to select images and reconstruct esoteric relationships within the work is the focus of the artistic
process.

Ryan Mehigan - *They Always Say That It’s Fake* - 2017
Ryan Mehigan - *You’re Killing Me, Smalls* - 2017

Ryan Mehigan - *High Resolution Graphics* - 2018
**Backgrounds:**

With a composition determined, I would use a pencil to mark registrations for images, as well as marks to show directions of figures actions. I would then place a horizontal baseline to function as a sense of horizon line. This horizontal definition helps expand the space of the work off the page, giving the viewer the chance to envision that more may be taking place outside of the margins of the paper. This encourages a sense of open-endedness crucial to the work. I would also give the images cryptic names, and begin jotting notes about the specific components within it, as well as the thoughts I was having about the relationships they were forming. While sometimes clear, I kept much of the writing stylized with a graffiti-esque embellishment to the handwriting, making the notes unclear and at times illegible. Other initial markings on the page depict the direction that the color should burst out, and registration marks and titles for particular images.

Using colored ink, ink droppers, and tempera paint, I would then lay color over the background with splatters. First, I would use purple to define a sense of baseline or horizon. The horizontal definition helped the sense of landscape, and actual space. This is vital to providing the images room to breath, to give the viewer room to imagine a continuation of the composition, and to consider how the void may be filled. Fluorescent colors were applied using angular masks to represent colored LED lighting that I used previously in the 2016 Wallace Gallery installation.
Atop the splatters, I used ink droppers and paint markers to make graffiti like gestures such as handstyles, cloud forms, arrows, droplets and drips. The loose application of marks helped create movement around the composition and emphasis on desired areas. I also used colored paint markers and black illustration pens to continue to draft cryptic notes and words about the content of the composition that had taken form. The layering of text, and graffiti like markings, are akin to contemporary artist Rene Gagnon’s (b. 1971) textural work, though applied with a much greater sense of restriction and sparsity. However, it is the loose, fluid, and free application of mark making coupled with graffiti’s influence that I make the comparison.
This same set of techniques was used as layers of images were glued onto the composition, helping to incorporate them into the background. Tinted acrylic glazes were used to add color to the images, to capture the essence of the colored splatter as a light shining on the image. Illustration pens were used to draw on top of images to increase their contrast and draw images forward, as well as to claim a more overt sense of ownership of the image. Lastly, black and white ink droppers and fluorescent paint markers accented images and floated across the composition to unite the works.

Within the composition, I left literal space representing a place for viewers to input content. This was done by way of blank speech bubbles and thought clouds, as well as through images of protesters with empty protest signs. With the goal of activating the viewer as a participant, the insertion of whiteboards in the installation allow the viewer to integrate content, stimulating Art historian Claire Bishop’s notion that “we are all equally capable of inventing our own translations” (Bishop 2006, 16). This puts the viewer on equal footing to the artist, allowing them to have an open relationship with a work that has not been premeditatively resolved (Bourriaud 2002b, 59). This resonates with Marcel Duchamp’s 1954 claim that “the beholder is the joint creator of the work” (Bourriaud 2002b, 99).

Within the context of the two-dimensional work, the void provided for viewers to fill welcomes the viewer to consider potential answers to the interrogative compositions. This version of the work offers a mental space for the viewer to write answers within the framework provided by the artist. The accompanied zine allows the viewers the same thought clouds and
speech bubbles viewed in the two dimensional work to be literally filled in and shared with others.

The space provided in the works are the essential element of the pieces to activate the viewer as a participant in the work. Coupled with the resulting vagueness of the compositions and titles from the use of détournement, the work reduces my personal voice while successfully choreographing the actions of the viewer as a participant in the art.

Titles:

All the works in the series continue with the emphasis of détournement through their title selections, staying true to the message of my thesis title “This Light Is Not My Own”. With the objective of reducing personal voice, I used quotes, sayings, and content derived from particular images in each composition. For example, the work with Sarah Palin is titled “Refudiate, Misunderestimate”, two made up words that Palin tweeted in the past. In the work showing former Boston Celtic, Dee Brown from his final dunk in the 1991 NBA Slam Dunk Contest, the title of the work is “That’s the Cherry on the Sundae”, the first quote from the announcer when Brown makes the memorable dunk. “And Like That, He’s Gone” is a famous quote from Kevin Spacey in his role as Verbal Kent /Keyser Soze in the 1995 film The Usual Suspects (Singer, 2008). So too is it an incredibly fitting title. In most cases, the title adds to the uncertainty and provokes more questions than provides answers. However, sometimes (as in the case of Kevin Spacey) the quote and composition all harmonize to a narrower reading of the work, through a recontextualization of the subject and title.
Ryan Mehigan - *Refudiate/Misunderestimate* - 2017
Ryan Mehigan - *That’s the Cherry on the Sundae* - 2017

Ryan Mehigan - *And Like That, He’s Gone* - 2017
Some pieces are named after the initial background pencil markings that are the backbone of the work, both directly and indirectly. In “Horse and Carriage”, you can see the words “Nothing is so sacred” in the lower left corner, while other quotes read “He’s Sooo Dreamy” and “You can’t have one without the other”. The latter phrase reminded me of Frank Sinatra’s “Love and Marriage”, thus the title Horse and Carriage.

Ryan Mehigan - *Horse and Carriage* - 2017 (initial pencil markings)
Ryan Mehigan - *Horse and Carriage* - 2017
CHAPTER TWO: THEORETIC FOUNDATIONS AND CONTEMPORARY INFLUENCES

THEORETIC FOUNDATIONS

I make collages. While they may appear in the form of many things; mixed media, painting, sculptures, installations, they are all a form collage. Very large collages. Sometimes so large that they begin to create a world for the viewer to exist within, not just to look at. This immersive nature places the work in the realm of installation art, but at the core, I make collages. Clement Greenberg offers an account of collage as having a “reverse depth”; that a collage builds out from the surface rather than creating an illusionist depth (Joselit 2000, 104). This is exactly the world of collage that I am building: a world with space for the viewer to enter.

In the 1950’s, Guy Debord wrote about “détournement” as a present tendency of the avant-garde, and Nicolas Bourriaud doubled down on détournement as he aligns the prevailing trends of contemporary art with postproduction practice sixty years later. I can identify myself as a postproduction artist and I use détournement throughout my work. However, how I got to being a collagist wasn’t through Greenberg, Debord, or Bourriaud as much as it was through hip hop producer DJ Shadow and street art aficionados Wooster Collective.

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3 DJ Shadow’s pivotal album Endtroducing was composed entirely of samples. And important inspiration to me as an artist was a quote at the end of the first track on that album; “and I would like to be able to continuing to let what is inside of me, which is, which comes from all the music that I hear, I would like for that to come out. And it’s like, it’s not really my that’s coming. The music’s coming through me.” - George Marsh

4 Wooster Collective’s blog shared with me the diversity of the global street art world, broaden my scope (I was much more of a graffiti writer) of style and techniques, and mediums. Wooster Collective curated the 11 Spring Street show that had a lasting impact on my artistic practice.
My gravitation to the physical practice of collage came from witnessing Shepard Fairey’s incessant détournement and appropriation of visual media into his street art. Street artists such as Judith Supine, Wk Interact, Elbow Toe, and Swoon’s use of paste-up techniques also slowly got me experimenting with techniques and mediums not based in aerosol. As I grew as an artist, I saw Fairey and Supine’s work mature from solely street art into collage based fine art.
Ultimately, it was the seminal 2006 event, “11 Spring Street”, curated by Wooster Collective, coupled with a career in teaching, that marked the beginning of my investigation into the technique and the medium (wheat paste/collage) in the context of my own street art. A decade later, my street has dwindled, however, collage has become the primary focus of my art, as well as a vital technique to offer my students in my classroom.

Unknowingly, the culture of street art and graffiti set a solid theoretic foundation for my work that aligns me to contemporary art theories. The ideas of Nicolas Bourriaud in his books *Postproduction* and *Relational Aesthetic* possess the same ideas that are inherent to the the “rules” and practice of graffiti and street art. The ‘lowbrow’ art culture of graffiti and street art taught me that “Images and ideas are there to be co-opted, manipulated” and furthered my understanding of the democratization that is ingrained in work that exists in the public domain (Seno, McCormick, Schiller 2010, 10). Street art furthered my theoretical foundation to the decommodification of the art object. The ephemeral nature of street art set ground for my path into installation art and experiential art. The political challenge to hegemonic control of public space, and the challenge to social control and social structures are embedded in the act of creating street art (Seno, McCormick, Schiller 2010). I see this connection to my interest in the influence and behavior in social media, and the use of social media platforms as an agent of social control.

All of these themes from the oft considered “low-brow” folk art of graffiti and street art cultures exist within Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics* and *Postproduction*. Bourriaud’s writing connects contemporary art to the pre- & post production processes of DJ’s, the “copy and paste” activity, and the comfortable inhabiting of social, cultural, and historic forms. He sheds light on
how new media and technology influence artistic practices, and fragmentation and reappropriation in the digital age redefines the role of the artist, and dissolves the line between high and low art (Bourriaud 2002a). As I situate myself in the context of art history and contemporary theory, it is from the lens of street art that I have inherited these qualities of my theoretical approach.

My work freely navigates existing visual culture, from tabloids to social media, clipping and collecting fragments to later assemble and reassemble into ephemeral compositions. Bourriaud states that this process “enable(s) us to recognize the world as a collection of disparate elements” (Bourriaud 2002b, 20). Bourriaud describes this artistic process; “the sampling of pictures and data and recycling of socialised and historicized forms...as the most widespread artistic production methods today,” a process stemming from the “hyper-inflational system of imagery” (Bourriaud 2002b, 100).

Yet, there is a tradition of this practice that has existed long before the serial graffiti and subsequent street art movements that inspired me, or Bourriaud published his texts. Jacques Ranciere stated that the boundary has dissolved between forms of pop culture and “high art”, claiming that “the blurring of boundaries is as old as Modernity itself” and is indebted to surrealist collage (Ranciere 2004, 85). In 1956, Guy Debord contributed to the Situationist text A User's guide to détournement, stating that “détournement is a powerful cultural weapon in the service of real class struggle” and saw the practice of détournement as a means of proletarian artistic education (Knabb 2006b). Debord anticipated the use of détournement that would later infiltrate street artists throughout the world as a weapon of choice in the rebellious act and political struggle.
Thus détournement, by way of collage, has a political edge. It blurs the boundaries between high and low art, and activates historical content. This is no different in visual art as it is in writing and music. Of the latter, Bourriaud parallels the DJ culture of electronic music and hip hop to the postproduction practice of visual artists.

This gives me a different perspective to consider collage, and the role of image selection, to the DJ/music producer’s practice known as “digging;” the searching through an archive of music to find snippets of songs that can be reassembled into new compositions (Pray 2001). Whether it’s a visual artist looking through newspapers and magazines, or a DJ previewing music, postproduction moves a leisure activity of reception into the chain of production, blurring the line between what is work and what is play (Bourriaud 2002a). The relationship of work and play is ever present in my art and in my approach to curriculum design in my classroom.

The recycling of content also means that artists move from the leisure practice of reading/looking or listening, to the active work of navigating through cultural history. The collagist, like the DJ, activates history through a vital act of selection, copying and pasting together samples and fragments of visual artifacts, each in relation to another, actively inhabiting cultural space and time (Bourriaud 2002a, 17-19). This act of selection has come to the forefront of my work, giving great consideration to what images are chosen, where they are selected from, and how the source of chosen content may inform the viewer’s experience. These questions have augmented and at times supplanted the concern of how the arrangement of images in context to one another share a specific message or solution.
My thesis work pursues the more obscure and open composition of heterogeneous images. In turn, it attempts to create antagonism through the fusion and tension created when disparate elements are combined. The suppression of my intentionality and authorial voice coincides within this process. The relatability of collage based images provokes the viewer to complete the artwork through the associations with the content that they enter the work with. I cannot control those associations (though I can guess at them.) It is this lack of control that further persuades me to forfeit my authorial voice in the pursuit of a more collaborative practice.

However, abandoning authorial voice to choreograph an open experience for the viewer teeters on a line in which the complex premonitions that viewers hold coupled with a complete artistic freedom in an open work, may take the work too far. What if the work is pushed to a point of complete equivocality, of complete “nonsense” as vacuous composition? Can the viewer use their own personal connections to bridge the gaps, constructing the fragments into a meaningful experience, or is the chasm of too large? Guy Debord suggests that obscurity won’t push the work too far. He asserts that “the most distant detourned elements contribute most sharply to the overall impression of the work” (Knabb 2006b).

The idea of an overwhelming fragmentation of heterogeneous images is fitting to the world we live in. Paul D. Miller (aka DJ Spooky) asserts, “Fragmentation is usually a means of absorbing a very dense narrative” (Becker, Crawford 2002, 86). Miller creates understanding of the over saturation of information in the digital age in relation to America as a land of ‘self-defined culture’. “In America, everybody had to collage together their identity…this is the land of the blank slate, so it’s a cut and paste culture” (Becker, Crawford 2002, 85). His work gives commentary to the notion of fragmentation and the role of art in contemporary culture, not
only by concept, but also by the actual techniques he applies to creating. It also highlights the trends of social media platforms to piece together and project perceptions of reality, at the dismissal of other’s views.

Miller poses his philosophical stance on this issue in his essay *In Through the Out Door*. He states that within the culture of digital music and sampling, “any sound can be you” (Miller 2008, 5). The modern practitioner of digital music, just as a postproduction artist, works with a level of social interconnectedness. Miller uses the phrase “collective ownership” to describe the DJ process of sampling (Miller 2008). This term could be applied to my own disregard for ownership of images, and how I navigate feely through visual artifacts, whether in printed media or on a stranger’s social media page.

Bombarded with an overload of visual stimuli with embedded meanings for us to complacently accept or discerningly challenge, collage (along with other postproduction art techniques such as sampling) allows content to be recontextualized, generating new narratives and alternative experiences with lasting impact. The practice of collage, as sampling in hip-hop, paste-up street art, or more traditional “high-brow” work, demonstrates clear parallels in a theoretic foundation to which my work adheres.
CONTEMPORARY INFLUENCES:

My work shares many characteristics with the practice of contemporary German artist Jakob Kolding (b.1971). His installation work *Balance Act (2013)* at the Galleri Nicolai Wallner placed life size silhouette figures collaged on a birch veneer into the gallery room. Like my work, Kolding’s installation is simultaneously flat and three dimensional, literally creating the “reverse depth” that Greenberg wrote of (Joselit 2000, 104). Kolding’s work clearly exemplifies what Bourriaud called “a collection of disparate elements” that can be “reactivated by the beholder/manipulator” (Bourriaud 2002b, 20). However, the “reactivation” in Kolding’s work is not literal, whereas my thesis is investigating a physical activation of the viewer as a participant.
Through use of détournement, both myself and Jakob Kolding create work fitting what Jacques Ranciere coined a “collision of heterogeneous elements” (Ranciere 2006, 86). In contrast, Kolding’s work yields a shadow-like vagueness with a literal void of identity (the figures faces are distorted, masked, or cut out), which both encourages and prevents the viewer from finding a complete sense of identity. While I don’t feel I am so ambivalent through my work, the obscurity of images that are juxtaposed together and the relations they form, create a strange yet intriguing lack of clarity.

As Ranciere states, “The politics of collage finds its balancing point where it can combine the two relations and play on the line of indiscernibility between the force of readability of sense and the force of strangeness of nonsense” (Ranciere 2004, 84). My use of a seemingly trivial giraffe as a centerpiece amongst both banal and serious images, and German artist Jakob Kolding’s use of a larger than life owl (World with Difficulties, 2015), immediately presents the challenge of an equivocal work. Through scale alone, the viewer’s perspective change and the image becomes much more intimidating. However, the peculiar owl amongst faceless figures of different cultures creates a very open work, dependent on the associations the viewer brings to the table, just as the giraffe does in my work.
The scale of the images and the negative space between each element produces an interplay between the flat image and the three dimensional space, creating a tension for the viewer. The engagement with a flat surface is very literal in the practice of collage. The tension that unfolds when flat images produce a literal three dimensional space is paramount to both my installation work and Kolding’s.

Art historian David Joselit offers an interesting perspective on the notion of flatness. He argues that the physical flatness brought to painting by abstraction exists simultaneously with a psychological deflation or flatness (Joselit 2000). He contends that this psychological flatness is something we experience in a globalized world, and is a powerful metaphor for “the price we
pay in transforming ourselves into images” (Joselit 2000, 103). When I use slapstick images of pop entertainment and pro-wrestling, I am selecting content that illustrates the mundane and shallow nature, the “psychological flatness,” of American culture. It is important for the trivial to be a target of recontextualization, juxtaposed against more serious substance, to decenter the viewer in the experience of discerning what content matters, and what does not.

The dichotomy between trivial and serious was further emphasized in the material choice in my installation. In designing and building the speech bubble whiteboard, I used the construction materials of rebar and cinder block. My intention was to first call attention to ideas of construction and building, the same way in which social media users may construct their own narratives of reality. However, in painting the cinder block white, the heaviness of the material was stripped away. While unintended, I found the painted cinder block to become a perfect allegory to the impression of the resulting thesis work at large. Serious content of war, death, destruction, politics, and protests made light through juxtaposition with sports, popstars, and cartoons.

As I developed my thesis work further, the practice of collage offered an invitation to investigate what happens if the work becomes more obscure. Kolding’s work contains more ambiguity, and in his installations, a greater void within his use of space than my installation work had at the onset of the thesis. Allowing for greater void in space and increasing disparity in the fragments detourned became central to the development of my thesis work as it progressed. Allowing room for the viewer to walk through the work is paramount to an experiential work, and vital to the notion of authorial choreography, as the space in the installation directs a
viewer’s movement. Allowing room for the viewer to postulate potential solutions, or add further questions fortifies the choreography.

While Jakob Kolding’s two dimensional work is collage based, it stands as a contrast to my work as he works from both color and black and white images, and lets the original state of the image remain intact. My work introduces color through paint and ink, both in the background, and in the manipulation of the images. Kolding also uses cryptic text within the work which adds to its vague and indeterminate nature. However he does so using fonts cut from print media sources, where as, my work includes a greater amount of text that is handwritten.

One last similarity is the repetitive use of particular images from one work to the next. For example, he uses the same image of graffiti in *Melodies in Vertical Theory*, and again in *Space invaders*. I too repeated the use of images throughout my body of work. I found this as important, as the installation pieces that I have made are fluid. Their composition and arrangement may change in each iteration. Thus, the repetition of the images in the studies allow me to see how the contextualization of the image amongst others affects the antagonism and provocative nature of the work, revealing when a certain juxtaposition may open or close the conceptual space of the work.

Jakob Kolding - The Our-Dimensional Nightmare. 2008
In a similar sense to Kolding’s installations, Wang Du (b.1956) makes large-scale collage pieces. However, he transforms his work from 2D images to 3D plaster and resin sculptures. This can be seen in works like Défilé (2000), and Disposable Reality (1999-2000). Du tackles topics of politics in his work, as well as the notion of the artist being a journalist. He often uses press media, and photocopies in his work, and calls to question the manner in which mass media shapes public consciousness. Similarly, my work hopes to lead viewers into questioning how they perceive media, with a particular interest in the use of social media within that process.

Vital to my work is the use of a photocopier. I felt it was necessary to digitally process images in a form of retro filter, to bring their textural characteristic closer to the that of a printing press. Further, all images were then photocopied. In making art with commentary about mass media and social media, and the manner in which people share ideas, the photocopy is both
literal and symbolic. Within my work, the viewer may see the copies that are being selected and “shared” and then “shared” again, as a representation to the selective act and sharing that takes place within the social media realm.

Wang Du also uses photocopies. Lots of copies. In many works, such as Defile (2000), Du covers space in the gallery with photocopies to call attention to mass media. He is challenging the viewers perception of media, while simultaneously acting as a form of media. In his words, “I am media. I am reality. I am image.” (Tang 2018) This concept is parallel to my work’s conceptual endeavor of shaping realities by way of media.

Ultimately Wang Du’s work calls the viewer to question the images they encounter in a new light. Du’s “collage” based installations are very similar to my work, differing only in what images are selected, and the dimensionality in which he recreates the image. However, his intention of shadowing media, and recreating the narrative is quite similar to what I have created.

Wang Du - Défilé. 2000 - Resin, photocopies
Geoffrey Farmers (b.1967) work has some clear parallels to my current installation. For many of his pieces, Farmer creates collage-based installation work. However, his images are notably smaller than those in the installations I create. In pieces such as Boneyard, 2013, and Leaves of Grass, 2012, Farmer uses large amounts of small-scale pictures to create his installations. In Leaves of Grass, his work spans over 124 feet, double sided, with over 16,000 images from Life Magazine from 1935-1985. Like many of his works, the title Leaves of Grass is a reference to Walt Whitman’s collection of poems with the same title. Similarly, my thesis is named using a clipping of a song lyric.

Walt Whitman’s work is often viewed as a reflection of America life, and Geoffrey Farmers use of Life magazine images laid out chronologically, creating what he considered an unintended “strange kind of history lesson.” (Heather 2012) His work balances the play of
historical documentation, and cultural iconography; it challenges how we perceive history based on how history itself is presented to us via mass media. I similarly address how both history and present day are re-presented to us in mass media and social media channels.

It is also worth noting that Farmer often recreates his work for various exhibitions, and each showing of a work is different than the last. The gallery space provided alters how the work comes together. Farmer has a loose framework and idea for the piece, but the composition is not scripted. Rather, the assembly and composition is subject to the time and space at which it is created. This act is very similar to my installation work. By having modular components, each art show can rework and reassemble the pieces into different compositions, and create very different experiences or convey different meanings. However, I do find myself using certain images together often, perhaps due a thematic connection (the Paul Bearer, the skeleton, and the nuclear explosion), or due to a formal aesthetic (the symmetrical balance created by the two sets of the hands holding pills).
Geoffrey Farmer - *Boneyard* – 2013 – Paper Cutouts, wood, glue

Geoffrey Farmer - *Boneyard* – 2013 Detail
From the movement of street art, one of my larger influences is Judith Supine (b.1978). Supine’s art career began as street artist, and as such the gallery work still reveals the street aesthetic that is little rough-around-the-edges (figuratively, and literally, even as it tidies up into a frame for a gallery.) This is very similar to the rough surfaces and decay that is left within my installation work, and the haphazard mark making that is loosely thrown onto my small scale works. The colors of my thesis work also parallel Supine’s use of fluorescent hues, though Supine’s use of color is often far more overpowering. I find that the vibrant intensity of color serves a purpose to garner attention when the work is placed on the street, but may be a little over the top in the gallery.

Similar to my work, Supine’s work is based in collage and mixed media. However, he focuses on the creation of new characters by assembling different fragments of images together.
Supine’s work does occasionally incorporate pop culture, though his transformation and manipulation of the characters tends to distort their identity entirely. In turn, Supine’s work depicts very strange characters that carry a greater sense of personal voice. My work, and its intent, sits in opposition to this notion.

Judith Supine - *Eyes Without A Face* – 2010
Judith Supine - *Outdoor piece, untitled*

Judith Supine - *Outdoor install, Ed Koch Queensboro Bridge, New York*
One final way that I notice a comparison to Supine’s work is in how viewers perceive it, and who the intended audience may be. Viewers interact with Supine’s work (at least in the particular show at English Kills Gallery,) that I can’t imagine taking place at a more formal museum or gallery. With light hearted interaction and viewing, something is gained in the enjoyment of the moment, but perhaps ultimately lost in the lasting impact and thoughtful depth the work may have.

![Image from Judith Supine's show at English Kills Gallery - 2008](image)

Such interaction between the work and the viewer is something that excites me about installation work. In turn, the activated spectator became a focus of my thesis work. Liam Gillick’s work *Pinboard Project (1992)*, provides similarities and differences to the implementation of whiteboards within my installation work. Gillick work is simply a bulletin board with push pins and various content that users can add, subtract, and move around. It epitomizes an open work. However, with limited content provided, and the ability for a viewer
to completely eliminate or add new content, Gillick’s work is far less structured than my work. As such, the work lacks context to direct the viewer's experience.

Claire Bishop is quick to criticize Liam Gillick’s work because of the lack of clear context and perpetual open-endedness (Bishop 2004, 52). Bishop states that “the gesture of ceding some or all authorial control” is premise for some artist (Bishop 2006, 12). Gillick’s *Pinboard Project (1992)* serves as an example. The shared production entails the aesthetic benefits of greater risk and unpredictability (Bishop 2006, 12).
Umberto Eco, in his essay *The Poetics of the Open Work*, cites work that requires participants to take part in the organizing, acting as collaborators in structuring the composition (Eco 2006, 30). Gillick, by inviting viewers to add, subtract, and move content on a physical bulletin board, provides a “scaled down model of communicational situations” in which the viewer is the collaborator (Bourriaud 2002b, 47). This work diminishes the traditions of executive authorship, and also opens up a door to Bishop’s concern of participatory and open work. When work exists in flux (with no set composition), Bishop suggests that what is to be gained from the viewer needs clarity. She asserts that such a work trends more towards leisure and entertainment than what is traditionally viewed as art (Bishop 2004).

Umberto Eco suggests that the goals of open ended art create a new association between the beholder’s contemplation and the utilization of a work of art (Eco 2006, 39). Further, in creating an open work, the aesthetic object assumes a position of autonomy, allowing the possibility to “foster new fields of reference” (Bourriaud, 2002b, 100). But such open ends must maintain some boundary or criteria (defined by the artist) to remain a work of art. Making work that is open, but not completely open to the point that the work lacks any sense of what Eco called “structural vitality”, is essential for the piece to be considered art (Eco 2006, 37). The viewer is not to be seen as the creator but as a collaborator. Here again I am brought to the notion of being a choreographer for the viewer, rather than the performer for the audience.

I agree with Gillicks succinct acknowledgement: “Things get truly interesting when art … attempts to address the actual processes that shape our contemporary culture” (Gillick 2006, 489). In relation to my work, I am interested in transforming the “reality” narrative that is put forward by popular culture and by social media. I find the way in which people latch onto and
“share” artifacts via social media, or use the platform as digital soap box, backing their opinion with a snippet of very incomplete information astounding. This investigation of the “sharing” process and user inputs of social media intertwined with the shards and fragments of mass media and social media posts inform the content of my work.
FUTURE STUDIO INVESTIGATIONS

The development of this thesis work has me think in many ways about future work. The most closely related path is to develop large scale two dimensional works similar to the small scale thesis pieces. The focus of this would be to consider what changes when the empty white background gains layers of paint and texture, and how the images work with such a surface. Further, with larger scale work, I am interested in the transition of mark making tools such as pencil and fine tip illustration pens, to wider nib markers and brushes, paint rollers, and spray paint. My thesis work shows the influence and styling of graffiti art, however, it does not incorporate the most notable of the traditional tools of the graffiti writer.

I am also greatly interested in how my work is changing as the gallery becomes environment for showing (as opposed to an outdoor festival environment, or street art). This has me thinking about how can I drastically transform a gallery space to alter the viewers perception. Within my thesis work (and because I am sharing a gallery space with another artist), I had to rethink the notion of transformation, eliminating the implementation of lighting, and keeping the presentation rather traditional. In the future, I am interested in creating installation work that reduces the perception of the gallery space as a ‘white box’, allowing the transformation of the room to heighten the perception of the viewer, and alter the lens in which they experience the work.

Because détournement can come in the form a different media, I wonder what happens if the installation has a soundtrack of audio samples, or clips of videos that are projected. What if
the goal becomes a complete over saturation of content in various mediums. Wouldn’t this be the most akin to reality? And if so, could I provide space in the form of triggers for the viewer/participant to have some control over the content? For example, a viewer passing by a cutout triggers a particular sound to create an amorphous soundtrack to the experiential viewing of the work based on the people in the space. This sense of mimetic engulfment is very intriguing. It also connects me to a portion of my graduate education as a sound designer that is vacant from the current thesis work.

If the installation work is to remain outside, what would happen if it was vastly bigger? What if the cutouts are bigger, and the scale and scope of the entire composition becomes massive? Considering Geoffrey Farmer’s work has made me both think of a variety of ways in which my work could change as it reduces in size, as well as ponder what it would be like if the installations were of a grandiose scale. I can imagine walking through a football field scale of his work *Boneyard*, with some of the cutouts occasionally standing a few feet taller than I am, feeling overwhelmed in a vast crowd of images. I can imagine it so big viewers could get lost or disoriented within it. The lost and overwhelming feeling may best sum the vast world of imagery we live in, and the navigation a person must constantly practice in contemporary culture. Again, the heightened perception and emotional response to the experience of encountering fragmentation and ambiguity to the point of disorientation is an interest for future studio work.

Another possible path to follow would be to add smaller scale “moments” within the larger installation. The change in size would allow me to hone in a scene within the scene. Small moments could create different level of tension and produce antagonism, while the bigger
pictures, by overwhelming size, and scale, an insertion of sound, fosters immersion and heighten perception. The combination would decentere the sense of identity of the viewer, altering the context by which they view a particular scene amongst the whole, while also provoking questions of how we interpret visual content at large.

In a very different direction, making a zine was new to me. In contrast to my view of social media and its use, I immediately saw the zine is a way to communicate a message and share my voice, as opposed to reducing it. Here my thesis has been critical of the practice of people using social media to share ideas informed by fragments of information. Yet, in the context of a zine, I see the potential to share a voice, just a magazine or newspaper does. The object of the zine is a way to deliver information, poems, or make succinct political statements. I used one page layout of my zine to begin the later with some intentionality, while inserting
divergent content to maintain the uncertainty of declaration.

My thesis work did for me what I feel any valid art should. It created more questions than answers. Eva Sutton, Photography Department head at RISD claims, “Creativity is a long process. It requires the maker to make something again and again, learning each time from the previous iteration.”(Sutton 2013, 221). She further addresses the value of critique and the conversations and questions that come from the work. While ideas for future investigation are developed in short here, I am excited that the work I have produced is generate lots of questions, from myself, my cohorts, and my professors that reveal many potential doors to move through.

INFLUENCE WITHIN THE CLASSROOM
With consideration to how my studio practice has influenced my approach in the classroom, I have broadened my scope of collage in the curriculum with focus on the tools and techniques I have used. As I have moved further and further into collage based artwork, a broader understanding of both collage and installation art have expanded my curriculum. Exploring collage based projects such as designing “zines”, collage dioramas, mixed media work with influence from Judith Supine, Jakob Kolding, and Shepard Fairey have all entered into my curriculum. Being surrounded by print media, has led me to use of the magazine for color and value investigations, as well as, the collection of patterns and textures to help teach students how to distinguish between the two, while simultaneously providing material for collage based work.

The photocopier has become my friend (and occasional adversary). I have developed my templates in my class to help me created quickly enlargements and reductions of images for students to use. I’ve honed tricks to help students create symmetrical content in their piece. I also have begun to see the shortcomings of copies, as students express a reliance on the copy, without the belief nor attempt to create content from their own hands by way of drawing or painting.

My personal growth as a collagist has me constantly cutting out images, as well as, collecting source material. Sometimes cut crudely, sometimes with precision, but I am always collecting and saving things in which I find aesthetic or conceptual value. In turn, I have developed structures in my studio to aid me in my archival endeavours, constantly sorting this collection of images into personalized categories and genres. I found that this sorting became pivotal in encouraging the combination of disparate elements, helping produce the compositions that would limit personal voice and express ambiguity.
As the practices of collecting, sorting, and archiving material grew in my personal practice, they also entered the structure of my classroom. I collect all the various magazines I supply or receive via donations, and sort them by genre. This has allowed me to lead students to the use of diverse sources, by simply directing students to use one magazine from each box. A student then has a Sports Illustrated, a National Geographic, A Science World, An Economist, and a Better Homes & Gardens to find images to synthesize together into a composition.

Students have taught me how challenging collage can be for them. The most common thing I hear from a student is the desire for intention. A student has a particular picture in mind, and will struggle to look through the available material, only accepting that image. They express their frustration and desire to print that image via the web, rather than attempting to draw the content on their own. Sometimes this is appropriate and acceptable, while at sometimes, I have to push students to try, and teach them, the drawing skills they may require to translate their idea into fruition.

At other times, collage is a great tool to convey an idea. This is particularly important when the art lessons have a very short time frame (after all, some of my classes are only last for thirty days of the school year). In turn, I have been able to share my craft, such as drawing on top of the image to give it a more handmade feel, or tinting and coloring images similarly to Judith Supine. I also find that teaching elements of art and principles of design through collage to be incredibly effective. Teaching students color, value, texture and pattern have easily worked into lessons. Also, using rhythm to create movement lends itself to collage, by way of the photocopier. Providing students multiples of images they select helped students see how rhythm within their composition could lead the viewer’s eye around their page. However what has been
the most beneficial is teaching the idea of composition. Collage gives students the freedom to
arrange the placement of their cutouts without the fear of error, allowing students to playout
various compositions. This then fosters discussions amongst students about what is working
best. It also encourages students to edit ideas by subtracting images that they think are not
working, and adding things in areas that they feel could use more visual weight.

On a more conceptual level, lessons that emphasize collage have led to classroom
discussions about ownership, touching upon Bourriaud’s parallel to music culture. I connect to
sampling, as students have much greater familiarity to that practice, though often surprised when
they learn that a beat or hook of a favorite song was actually from someone else. I often
approach this topic without a personal slant, just stating how collage, in its various forms, may
exist, and have students discuss and share their opinions on it.

I also have opened discussions and attempted projects that purposely address the
construction of narratives. This involved designing transformed magazine covers or adds.
Students take a base magazine cover or advertisement idea but add and delete text and images to
recreate the stories being told or the product being sold. Student response has been great, as they
love the idea of “fake news”. Their art is paired with an introductory discussion about how we
receive information, and a summative critique and discussion about the narrative they have
created to share with their classmates.

Overall, offering my students the various concepts and techniques that I have put into
practice in my thesis work has lead to a more enriched curriculum. The thesis work and learning
gained has added to my classroom in many ways. In turn my practice and classroom studio
continues to diversify and grow.
In the age of the endless digital archive, the practice of collage is very exciting, yet overwhelming. There is a massive pile of debris to sift through. However, collage and détournement extends an invitation to investigate the most obscure juxtapositions and to re-contextualize the most familiar of veneers. Having entered my thesis work with more authorial voice in mind, the consideration of using more bizarre and unexpected content and juxtapositions is incredibly emancipatory, and the results equally as powerful.

In creating work inspired by the modern practices of social media communication and the ever present act of users defining their own reality, it is particularly important to consider the literal space provided to the viewer as I am attempting to replace the traditional act of contemplation with a contemporary pursuit of active participation. There is an obvious necessity for negative space for viewers to move around and through the work. While this is paramount to the installation work, void in space also led to success in the two-dimensional studies. The studies have taught me to consider more restraint, and allow room for the proverbial breath in a composition. The space to move around the installation leads to a much stronger installation that breaks the positional limitation of centered gaze. The space within the two dimensional frame allows for the viewer to insert their own imagination of where the composition may lead to, and fulfill the voids provided.

Ultimately, my time on social media is often spent reading opinions and shaking my head. I am always in awe at how sure people are that they have all the answers. Interestingly enough, I don’t often chime in to a comment thread or call out bullshit. I am what is called a
‘lurker’. I just read and think. This raised my awareness that I don’t necessarily have the answers, but that others don’t either. Yet, the social media platform, with it’s ease in sharing content, and projecting a voice, has created ideological echo chambers. People too easily can construct their own sense of reality. I found it most appropriate that my work doesn’t attempt to share answers, but rather force more questions to the viewer, and challenge their certainty through ambiguity.

In investigating greater obscurity, the movement away from an authorial voice to the task of authorial choreography presents new challenges. First, the dynamics of the audience and the impact of the audience and environment must be addressed. I must continue to consider who is viewing the work, and what characteristic and assumptions may they enter the work with. Also, I must analyze where the work will be placed, what does the work say about that space, and conversely, what that space says about the work. These questions which arose through the thesis work will persist long into my future art making.

I am excited about the future direction of my work. The transformation of a literal environment is inspiring. The implementation of elements such as lighting, projections, and sound to bolster the environment become future goals of learning that will broaden my skill set as an artist, and my knowledge base as an educator. It is very comforting to know that, despite the completion of a thesis, more questions remain unanswered, and the excitement to seek solutions.

CONCLUSION
Naming my thesis, *This Light Is Not My Own*, is precise. The content of my work comes from the détournement of visual fragments from very diverse sources. From sports magazines, old newspapers, and Pottery barn catalogs, to 1990’s movie stills, government archives, and social media posts, the content is truly not my own. Even the thesis title, “*This Light Is Not My Own*” is clipped from another source. The thesis work encouraged an adventure into very different places for content, and yielded a forging together of images into esoteric ends.

The juxtaposition of disparate elements provides a provocative vitality in the form of collage based compositions. The ambiguity provides a didactic void, while a literal void for the viewer to add content to the art encourages the viewer to participate. The viewer then offers their own construction of meaning, in turn altering the way in which the art may be read by others. The activation of the viewer as a participant in the art serves as parallel to the contemporary act of social media users who use the platform to shape their own reality by selecting and sharing fragments of content. This idea of an activated spectator is vital to the fulfillment of the work, and opens up many doors for my future investigations.

As I began this investigation into détournement, authorial intent, and activated spectatorship, I was unsure what I would find. I knew that I wanted to create studies for installation ideas while simultaneously making those studies able to hold their own as individual art pieces. The thesis work I produced has done just that. The small works succeed in a gallery setting, yet more importantly, they are studies and investigations. They allow me to discover what works well and what doesn’t work both in composition and in content. They also broaden the scope of resources that I collect images from, and widen the disparity from which I combine images in composition. Importantly, the work challenged me to separate my own voice, and
allowed obscurity to become a dominant force of the composition. The installation work advanced my thinking into how the viewer becomes an integral component to a successful work.

This thesis represents the development of my collage-based artwork within the context of the contemporary art theories of postproduction, antagonism, and activated spectatorship. My focus on détournement through small scale collage-based work and art installations addressed historical and contemporary influences for such practice. My personal transition of authorial intent, from projecting authorial voice to a role as an authorial choreography has been invigorating. In such a transition, the reduction of authorial intent made me more comfortable with indeterminate juxtapositions, and opened the door for antagonism and decentering within the viewer’s experience. The thesis analyzed the design and technique of the artwork created, the findings within the transition of authorial intent, and also addresses the changes in my studio practice and their influence on my approach as a teacher. The influence of this study will be long felt in all facets of my life as an artist and educator.
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