

Eli Kessler

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Statement of Purpose

I build environments in which the audience has the opportunity to become immersed in polyphonic experience. By integrating mechanical sculptures and complex assemblages each environment becomes an organism, a system of orchestrated noises and movement. A forgotten nineteen sixties scrub brush slides through a pile of straw, mechanical instruments continuously resonate, and automatons sway side to side, this is a world far from cultural conventions. My objective is to uncover the extraordinary. But it's not only about uncovering in the way anthropologists work, although their work inspires me. Instead, I create forums for interaction, —from the fantastic and carnivalesque to the rural and distant—which concentrate on the psychology of a particular place.

My research has recently led me to Gujarat, India, where I spent this past summer. The trip was made possible by entering a competitive essay competition that focused on international relations. While in India I met with the Chief Minister, Narendra Modi. Chief Minister Modi granted access to a restricted border between Pakistan and India in order to film my video piece entitled, *No Man's Land*. The video piece documents two Indian guards on their daily border patrol. The patrolmen stand between uncompleted barbed wire fences. The space between the fences belongs neither to Pakistan nor India. I placed two cameras between the two the guards. The cameras simultaneously recorded the conversation of the two guards, as they looked towards Pakistan. When the project is presented, the two cameras recordings are placed side-by-side- creating a diptych. The projections enable the viewer to perceive both viewpoints at once. Although the viewer does not actually stand in between the guards, optically, the viewer is transported between the guards and into no man's land. As the guards look towards Pakistan they seemingly face each other and when they face each other, they seem to talk to the viewer. This altered perception disorients the viewer in the windy desert landscape and raises questions about boundaries and borders. The video is currently on view at The University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School of Communication in a group show entitled *Crises*.

The experience of traveling half way around the world currently informs my newest works which are destined to become part of a new interactive installation. My interest in the audience's physical interaction with art stems from the concept of the happening and the work of Allan Kaprow. Prior to graduate school I exhibited an interactive symphony at the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia. The installation was entitled, *Automaton Symphony* and was composed of a bunny rabbit-painting machine, a pedal powered gypsy harp, and a little girl automaton that delicately hit a drum and cowbell. With this piece I became aware of the audience's potential to become characters within an orchestrated happening. I was interested in how the idea of stage could become inverted, such that the audience became the central performers.

The environments I construct are vignettes that engage the senses. The world and all of its curiosities, which challenge the accepted, are rarely remembered. Allowing the world to interact with its discarded identities provokes the audience to question the very conventions that decide what is accepted and what is discarded.

-Eli Kessler