KILL YR IDOLS

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for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

by

Benjamin John Funke

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Austin Collins, Director
Graduate Program of Art, Art History and Design
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For My Parents
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SCRABBLING AT THE LOCK

I attempt to uncover genuine individuals, events and experiences that exist outside the influence of mass media and corporate sponsorships. It is impossible to ignore that our experience of the world is increasingly comprised of simulations. Thanks to the digital media platforms that saturate our lives, the ability to copy, remix and reuse a file has become de-skilled and instantaneous. In a world of instantaneous memes, blog-house reproductions and resourced materials, I find it necessary to peel back the digital layers in search of the authentic. Authentic experience gets revealed in undecidable moments suspended in limbo between two outcomes: transitional moments where individual autonomy is maximized precisely because no decision has yet been taken and no outcome has emerged. Undecidable moments like these become the instigating moments for my investigations. In each of the artworks described in the sections below, I represent such decisive moments through a series of aesthetic decisions shaped by my punk ideology.
PLAYING THE MARKET

Growing up in rural Iowa I was fond of hobby stock level dirt track car racing. There was something about the local idols that I could relate to, even in my young age. Looking back, I imagine that it was because the races took place in my small town’s fairgrounds, or in the surrounding farming communities. The drivers were members of the community, and often friends of the family. I remember fondly having my photograph taken with Paul Massey and his Late Model Stock Car at the Farley\(^1\) Speedway in 1987. I recall being in awe of the size of his racecar and its construction. I keenly remember noticing the car’s construction, the welds and rivets holding it together. As the tamed beast sat silently I combed the car visually, amazed at its presence. Ron Ament, whose wife was close friends with my mother, would enter his International IR1066 NTPA\(^2\) tractor into competitions. These suped up machines were participating in what is the automotive equivalent of a strong man competition. Victory goes to

\(^1\) My father, William Funke was born and raised in the small farming community of Farley, IA.

\(^2\) National Tractor Pulling Association.
the one who can pull the most weight the farthest. We would often attend the events, cheering wildly for our friends. I idolized these guys, and my admiration had a lot to do with the fact that they were absolutely real to me, not mediated through the television.

I soon began to identify professional athletes as inspiring leaders or heroes (even though Charles Barkley told me in the 1993 NIKE commercial that he “was not a role model”). I began to associate greatness with the significance of winning. I also became an eager and determined collector of sports ephemera. Endless hours went by while I analyzed both the photograph and the statistics on the sports playing card. I would desperately try to complete the sets, sorting and making notes of things to keep on my radar. Every morning I watched ESPN Sportscenter, taking note of every player that had excelled or slumped on the previous evening\(^3\). Additionally, this gave me plenty to talk about while at school. The highlight reels at the end showcasing the top ten plays of the day would always indicate a potential rising star whose card I would have to locate. Ultimately, what this did was influence which player trading cards to keep an eye out for when I was tearing open the packs of cards. I understood at an early age that success on the playing field translated to a higher grossing player card. It functions very much like the stock market. Beckett, a monthly price guide for sports cards, would list the individual A-list players’ cards financial growth or decline from the previous month, indicating this by a small up or down arrow. Non-stars and common players would often go unlisted, indicating their value

\(^3\) I certainly couldn’t keep up with all the sporting events of the previous day as they happened, because homework and playing outdoors got in the way.
was at a set price-point. In 1992 card companies such as Donruss® and Topps®
Began doing runs of much smaller pressings, with edition numbers stamped on
the card, ultimately commanding a higher price tag. I was fascinated by the
implied value of this object and its correspondence with how well that same
player performed on the field. It was easy for me to understand that, if a player
does well, the value of his sports cards goes up.

As I grew older though, I began to lose interest in not only the sports
collectable market, but also sports in general. I began to transition hard and fast
to an interest in music. At that time it seemed way cooler to be adopting a
Ministry tee shirt and listening to Megadeth albums than it was to be collecting
sports cards and memorabilia. I still was interested in sports, but just not at that
same level of collectable fetishizing. It was easy to transform that fetish into the
collecting of vinyl record LPs. This had less to do with financial gains, but more
to do with identifying on a 1:1 level with these hybrid artworks. The vinyl LP had
it all. The artwork was much larger than that of a compact disc and the sonic
component with its spiraled groove was purely fascinating. The artwork had me
convinced that the LP record was how music should be heard. Since I lived in a
small town in Iowa, I would be forced to go on archeological digs in old shops in
Madison, Wisconsin or Iowa City in attempts to find obscure pressings of
psychedelic or punk music varying in condition and quality. The radio offered
little assistance; only when driving in a certain direction could I manage to pull
WSUP 91FM, a college station out of Platteville, Wisconsin that introduced me to
Jon Spencer Blues Explosion, Shellac and Amphetamine Reptile Records.
During my hiatus as a ravenous sports and sports collectable fan, the whole industry experienced a significant lull. NBA great Michael Jordan had retired, epically returned, and retired again. Baseball stars and recent hall of famers like ace pitcher Nolan Ryan, infielders George Brett and Ryne Sandberg had all retired in the first part of the 1990s. The stars of the ‘70s and ‘80s were leaving the game, and the new heroes of the game hadn’t yet been established, or had yet to come of age. The games were all changing. The large arenas and stadiums began to adopt corporate sponsorships; the once great Comisky Park in Chicago’s Bridgeport neighborhood was torn down, and a new state of the art building was constructed. Only a few years later it became US Cellular Field. There was the opportunity to make lots of money, and people were making moves in order to do so.

My sports story resumes in 1998 — the year that supposedly saved Major League Baseball, causing a rebirth of excitement in America’s pastime. This was the year of the celebrated homerun race that caused baseball fans everywhere to take notice. That year, Roger Maris’ 37-year home run record was surpassed by two of the biggest players in baseball, Sammy Sosa and Mark McGwire. Three years later, Barry Bonds of the San Francisco Giants crushed his way into the record books by hitting a record that remains unbroken: 73 homeruns in a single season. All of a sudden baseball was back. The slumping attendances at major league parks experienced a huge rebound. The excitement returned to the diamond.
In the years since, these players and the game itself have come under extreme scrutiny for illegal steroid and hormone use. Bonds, Sosa and McGwire share in common the fact that they broke home run records, were immediately hailed as heroes, and then were discredited due to their alleged (in some cases, admitted) steroid use. I was among many who rejoiced when these stars of the game came up swinging, saving the national pastime from its uncertain future. Under the bright lights of the stadiums, it seemed like the spirit of the game had returned. However, after the cheating allegations emerged, everything changed.

After the discovery that these superstars had stolen this historic crown from baseball legends, words alone couldn’t evoke the disappointment, anger and disgust felt by many fans of Major League Baseball. Although I was experiencing disappointment, I understood why the hitters were doing it. Training could only get them so far, and they needed to achieve the next level. I imagine that they thought they wouldn’t get caught. With all of the allegations about steroid usage, Sosa was caught in again in 2003. However, this time for using a corked bat, a modified baseball bat that is filled with compressed cork or sawdust, allowing for quicker bat speed with a compromised core. When the bat shattered on impact from it left the evidence in plain sight, broadcast for the world to see.4

4 The Major League Baseball rule 6.06(d)
A batter is out for illegal action when: (d) He uses or attempts to use a bat that, in the umpire’s judgment, has been altered or tampered with in such a way to improve the distance factor or cause an unusual reaction on the baseball. This includes, bats that are filled, flat surfaced, nailed, hollowed, grooved or covered with a substance such as paraffin, wax, etc. No advancement on the bases will be allowed and any out or outs made during a play shall stand. In addition to being called out, the player shall be ejected from the game and may be subject to additional penalties as determined by his League Punishment advisor.
Cheating was running rampant in the game. In December of 2007 the Mitchell Report, an independent investigation into the illegal use of steroids and other performance enhancing substances in Major League Baseball, was given to the MLB commissioner. This report tracked the performance of 128 major league players as more allegations of steroid use began to surface.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Implicated Players</th>
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<th>Mitchell Report</th>
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**Figure 1.** List of athletes in Major League Baseball implicated in the Mitchell Report
It was around this same time when I began to make my own investigations into professional sports. I had become fascinated with the collectively experienced waves of successive elation, disappointment and frustration that surrounded these superstars and their fans. I began analyzing these pivotal moments in sports that teeter in between love and hate, sympathy and disgust. These sensations are experienced in every game, when one team wins and the other loses. The game provides a rush of adrenaline, and losing can induce “sports depression.” A strikeout with runners in scoring position, a penalty during a play or a missed free throw at a crucial moment of the game can potentially induce a fit of rage. These sensations are all too familiar to the sports fan. But I needed to scratch beneath the surface, understand these sensations and expand further upon them. In my work I have to dissect these moments in order to pinpoint that mysterious apex, the elusive transitory space right in between love and hate. These moments are plentiful in sports, but they can occur in other circumstances as well.

In 2007, I created a work entitled $1,013,678,504.00 (TOTAL SALARIES), which presents ten replica jerseys of NBA basketball players encased inside a custom glass display. The title of the work refers to the combined annual income of the players represented by their jerseys inside the case. Six milk crates stacked into two columns support the display. Milk crates with the bottoms cut out are often nailed to telephone poles and used as basketball hoops in lower income neighborhoods. This juxtaposition metaphorically figures how the heroes of the NBA are literally supported by the dreams of the lower class. The glass
display case suggests that these players’ salaries have made them literally untouchable.

By depicting this financial separation, I call viewers’ attention to a class structure divide. However, that large figure cannot be comprehended by the average person. I had to give that number material existence in order to establish the unfathomable amounts of money these athletes are raking in. In order to do so, I began calculating super star athletes’ astronomical salaries based on individual seconds of playing time. For example, 2012 NFL super bowl MVP and champion quarterback Eli Manning made $179.73 per second of each game, around $10,783.73 per minute, and a total of $647,023.75 per game.\textsuperscript{5, 6} Breaking down the figures in this way humanizes the salaries, which are particularly striking when compared to the median annual income (in 2009) of $35,000.00. Eli Manning made more money in one game than the combined annual salaries of 25 workers. In making these inequities visible, I establish this “fanspace”\textsuperscript{7} I have described. This is the place where realization of class difference can be created.

Using icons from professional sports and popular music in my art allows me to address the subject of fan cultures. Ultimately, I want viewers of the work to question their own political positions as well as the political positions of the works’ subjects. My work often situates viewers in a grey area that I identify as

\textsuperscript{5} Based on his 2011 Income of $16,000,000 USD.


\textsuperscript{7} Artists own term.
“fanspace:” a zone situated in between black and white absolutes such as life vs. death, good vs. evil, and chaos vs. peace. I often create work that addresses aspects of contemporary culture where there is an identifiable change of state. Such moments, as documented and presented by global media sources, are often a starting point for my interventions. I intend for the viewer to experience a sensation of uncertainty that becomes charged with meaning when these lines of intersection are drawn.

I take inspiration from multiple sources in my work, drawing upon a highly distilled collection of my lifetime’s experiences and interests, including: my experiences with professional, collegiate, amateur athletics and competitions; my diverse catalogue of musical recordings; and a variety of contemporary art practices. I focused specifically on 3 contemporary artists Raymond Pettibon, Urs Fischer and Christian Marclay as spirit guides in my most recent observations.

California-based artist Raymond Pettibon has had a significant influence on my practice. Pettibon is best known for his iconic black and white ink on paper drawings, which were used on many bands’ show bills and posters. Pettibon’s work pinpoints the culture’s power, greed and corruption, using fear, envy and failure to create insensitive humor and a sensation of hopelessness. Pettibon is known for working closely with SST records, which was started in 1978 by Pettibon’s brother and Black Flag guitarist, Greg Ginn. Black Flag is also a major influence of mine. Their music was imbued with an anti-authoritarian and non-conformist message, which embraced their fans at the
same time it isolated them from the outside world. During the 1980s, Ginn’s low-budget record company was home to many seminal artists of the first wave of American punk rock, including Black Flag, Minutemen and Sonic Youth. Pettibon created much of the cover art for the bands’ recordings. His posters and show bills were created as cheaply as possible on non-archival Xerox copy machines. Pettibon’s drawings created a visual aesthetic that matched the intensity of the bands live shows. In a 2011 sculpture, *My War*, I created a memorial to Black Flag and their message. Black flags also serve as a counterpart to the white flags, which also appear in my work. The white flag is the emblem for the last lap in stock car racing, but it also symbolizes peace and surrender.

Recently while working in Venice, Italy I visited the Francois Pinault Foundation art collection at the Palazzo Grassi, where I viewed an entire room of Pettibon’s ink on paper drawings. The drawings were hung salon style, framed in black under glass. They appeared beautiful and elegant, much different from the tattered and creased photocopied show bills and album covers I have in my personal collection. After I had viewed the work covering three of the four walls, I began to question what I was seeing. As I looked across the surface plane of the wall, I noticed that these works were not actual drawings; they were printed facsimiles illustrated directly onto the painted drywall. I was simply amazed and fascinated by the technical ability of the artist. The “shadows” under the frame and the trompe l’oeil reflections on the glass appeared absolutely realistic. The wall text was depicted in this same manner. However, I noticed upon leaving the room that there was an additional text that was actually affixed to the wall—a
material object as opposed to a facsimile. I was shocked to realize that the entire installation was not in fact a creation by Raymond Pettibon, but rather the work of the Swiss artist, Urs Fischer. Fischer’s work, entitled *Verbal Asceticism*, was a photographically reproduced wallpaper installation which replicated every inch of the room that had housed Pettibon’s work in a previous Palazzo Gritti exhibition, “Mapping the Studio,” that Pettibon had been included in months earlier.

Through the appropriation of Pettibon’s work, Fischer called attention to the act of attentive seeing while taking note of the museum’s recent past and tapping into the aesthetics of punk rock. Fischer’s act of homage references Pettibon; through Pettibon, it references punk bands like Black Flag and Sonic Youth that launched a blistering critique of traditional forms of authorship and ownership.

Less than 2 kilometers away, at the 54th installment of the Venice Biennale, Urs Fischer had a second installation that appropriated another iconic work of art. His piece *Untitled* is a monumentally scaled 1:1 wax casting of Giovanni Bologna’s 16th century sculpture *The Rape of the Sabine Woman*. Giovanni’s original sculpture is located at the perimeter of the Academia in Florence. In addition to the Giambologna copy, Fischer’s installation includes two 1:1 casts of Eames office chairs and a cast of a Biennale visitor, positioned so that he appears to be viewing the Bologna copy. All of these sculptures were executed in wax. Lit at the opening of the Biennale, they continued to burn throughout the duration of the exhibition. Over time, portions of the work melted and burned, transmuting classical form into a pile of drippings. In his finely
crafted simulations, Fischer blurs the line between illusion and reality. These sculptures call attention to the nature of art spectatorship and to their own condition as artworks that are being showcased at the largest exhibition of contemporary artwork in the world. According to the Biennale website, over 370,000 people attended the exhibition this year. Fischer’s use of impermanence and imprecious materials reduces the sculptures’ long-term viability as objects of exchange, but ramps up the idea of the “spectacle” by unsystematically destroying this appropriated imagery.

Two rooms away at the same exhibition was Christian Marclay’s film The Clock or 24 Hours, which won the Golden Lion prize for best work in the Biennale that year. Marclay is an American born, Swiss raised artist who incorporates Fluxus tendencies into his practice. In the late 1970s, he was one of the first artists to use the turntable to rip songs apart, instead of bridging them together. Fascinated by the punk scene in New York, he performed and collaborated with John Zorn, Arto Lindsay and Sonic Youth. Marclay’s work often appropriates objects such as record covers, LP records, musical equipment and archived musical compositions. 24 Hours utilizes footage featuring clocks from theatrical movie releases to create a 24-hour timepiece. The work incorporates thousands of movie clips in montage, sequencing each depicted clock in order according to the time of day.

After viewing the work twice on different days for extended periods of time, I realized that Marclay’s cinema-clock possesses a certain mesmerizing quality. It seemed hours could breeze past while I sought the clocks in each of the film’s
montage clips. As each clip followed its precedent, I quickly tried to identify the films and the actors, visually scrambling to find the timepiece in each scene. I don’t know if I would feel compelled to sit through a 24-hour movie, but Marclay’s work exerted a profound attraction. His usage of appropriated material allows the viewer literally thousands of access points to the work.
THE INVESTIGATIONS

The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images. 8

My work investigates the spectacle of contemporary culture, focusing specifically on forms of masculine performance and collective experience. I use sculpture, audio/video and photography to inject politicized commentary into these aspects of contemporary culture. I often create work by harvesting images from the digital reservoirs that surround us. I then alter these images using digital and manual methods, trying to de-familiarize viewers’ expectations so that they are moved to reevaluate the content and the context of what they see. My earlier works about our collective fascination with professional sports (steroid usage in Major League Baseball®, fatalities in Nascar®) have primed my current interest in making art about popular music and fan cultures.

8 Debord, Guy, Society of the Spectacle (Black & Red Detriot, 1983), 4.
My work often hinges on specific, historically documented moments in which there is an identifiable change of state. These pivotal moments become the starting points for my investigations of singular and collective experience. These investigations often proceed by contorting and/or expanding the original moments through video and time-lapse photography. Since the work deals with contemporary forms of idol worship, it moves viewers to experience the intense emotional relations that fans develop with their icons. It induces viewers to inhabit what you might call "fanspace": a highly charged ambivalent state that oscillates between sympathy and criticism, love and disgust. The work is driven by my sincere love for and identification with the subcultures it represents. At the same time, elements of punk aesthetic and attitude seed the work with dystopic implications that suggest our civilization is in deep decline.

Postproduction is a technical term from the audiovisual vocabulary used in television, film and video (as well as audio). It refers to the set of processes applied to recorded material: montage, the inclusion of other visual or audio sources, subtitling, voice-overs, and special effects.  

What I am doing is called postproduction, to borrow a term from art historian Nicolas Bourriaud. Since I often work by mining YouTube® for video footage, I essentially have millions of cameramen and women “working for me.” I can edit this trove of free footage however I like. Having this endless reel of footage, allows me to be highly selective in choosing the most appropriate users’ video uploads for my compositions. This relationship is closely associated with

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9 Bourriaud, Nicolas, Postproduction (Lukas & Sternberg, New York 007), 13.
the DJ culture, utilizing the practice of sampling, appropriating bits and pieces of existing copy-righted songs, or in this case videos, and applying it to a new composition timeline. Another term used to describe this practice is “remix.”

However, by using this material I become plausibly guilty of copyright infringement, since I am stealing identifiable data off the Internet and offering no financial compensation to the images’ rightful owners. The legally unstable situation of voluntarily posted internet footage was initially brought to public attention in 2000 by the mega-popular metal band Metallica, who brought suit against thousands of their fans who were illegally downloading data files containing MP3s of the band’s music. The band filed a lawsuit against music trading website Napster®, arguing that their music was not free and that people would have to pay to listen. The repercussions of this lawsuit inevitably affected the band’s own devoted followers, and the fans lost.

My video One addresses Metallica’s legacy to the world of digital copyright. The video compiles one hundred perfectly synchronized YouTube® videos of boys and young men showing off their technical mastery of the metal instruments (guitar, drums and bass) as they cover Metallica’s magnum opus One. By taking Metallica’s music as my subject I instantly became suspect of copyright infringement — even though the audio that coincides with the video is not being played by the aging musicians in the celebrity metal band. Instead, the audio track showcases the combined efforts of one hundred passionately involved amateur musicians, each slightly out of tune and out of phase. Each one of these musicians is suspended in his bedroom or garage in an extended state
of intense absorption during the 7:42 duration of the video. Each one is fully engaged, making the most of this chance to show off his technical chops for the world to see. Thanks to the alterations I have made to this appropriated YouTube® footage, these private moments exist simultaneously in an artificial space. Coming together as a hundred-strong chorus, these isolated individuals become a strange, painfully sincere musical community that exists only in a technologically mediated parallel reality.

My companion pieces **Black and White** address related issues of authorship and ownership. **Black and White** are paired columns made up of compact discs containing illegally downloaded files containing the music of Metallica’s *Black Album* and the Beatles’ *White Album*. To access the music one only has to insert the disc into a computer, uncompress the file, and load the songs into iTunes before listening. Following these steps might make the listener an accomplice to copyright theft. However, the exact perpetrators of this alleged crime are difficult to identify. Is the more guilty party the person hosting the free music on the Internet, or the end user who put it onto his or her computer? In a gallery setting, **Black and White** exists in an unlimited edition and are made freely available so that members of the public can “steal” the bands’ music. Alternatively, there is an online component where the source web addresses are linked from my website.

My multimedia piece **The Final Second** artificially prolongs the last recorded second of champion NASCAR driver Dale Earnhardt’s life. On 18 February 2001, stock car racing suffered a great loss when Earnhardt crashed
during the last lap of the Daytona 500. Although Earnhardt’s crash was fatal, it did not appear to be unusually violent or graphic. As a result, it went largely unremarked in the excitement that accompanied the race’s final lap. Several minutes of post-race celebration went on until commentators and spectators belatedly realized the severity of the accident. In The Final Second I wanted to stretch out the last second prior to Earnhardt’s impact. In order to do this, I appropriated unauthorized video from the race, exported thirty individual frames (totaling one second of video) and printed each onto a sheet of brushed aluminum. The thirty resultant images are mounted in a horizontal row in order to establish the time code. These prints are accompanied by a recording of the Fox Sports spoken commentary over the race’s last lap, which is pressed onto a vinyl audio record. The record is housed inside a polished chrome storage box along with a folded white flag (which indicates the final lap in auto racing, but is also a symbol of peace and surrender). This NASCAR reliquary was produced in an edition of three.

In Lawrence Lessig’s essay “The Failures of Fair Use and the Future of Free Culture” says that because of the Internet and interconnected digital technologies, we have an unprecedented opportunity for creative work founded in the principles of remixing and sharing. He states, “as all art has done from the beginning of time, … works (using appropriation) draw upon objects of culture to reexpress them differently. Sometimes the reexpression shows us the same work, viewed differently. Sometimes this reexpression remixes the work with other work, revealing something in the collage that we wouldn’t see if we viewed
the works singly. However technically, these works all are presumptively illegal, having to infringe on the rights of the original creator.”

Video editing is and isn’t like DJing: it’s just dealing with what you have, what you’ve found, what you can do.

In his book *Postproduction*, art historian Nicolas Bourriaud compares the music practice of deejaying to the aesthetics of pastiche in contemporary art. In this book he argues, “that the gap that separates production and consumption narrows each day.” “We can produce a musical work without being able to play a single note of music by making use of existing records,” he writes. “The consumer customizes and adapts the products to their personal needs.”

Like Christian Marclay, Bourriaud sees similarity between video editing and deejaying: they are different platforms for pastiche. “Using a remote control is also production, the timid production of alienated leisure time: with your finger on the button, you construct a program.” Essentially this is what Marclay did with his work *24 Hours*: in remixing thousands of clips of pre-existing material, he constructed an entirely new program from found parts.

This is relevant to me because of my past experience as a DJ. From 2006 - 2009 I worked as a disc jockey in several clubs in downtown Chicago. Each

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night I would have to set the mood for club patrons. I became very perceptive to how attendees were responding to the music as the evenings went along. I see now that these activities fit right in with Bourriard's concept of relational aesthetics: "a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space."\textsuperscript{14} By simply arranging songs in a particular order, I could orchestrate the overall vibe of the club. It wouldn't even have to directly associated with the style of music (however mostly the case). If the equalization of the song wasn't balanced correctly, say for higher treble, the clipping music would be come piercing and agitating. This would alter the overall vibe of the club fairly easily.

Like Dale Earnhardt, Kurt Cobain is a media icon whose life ended in tragedy. Cobain’s suicide marked the end of an era in grunge music. In retrospect, this event came to signal the melding of punk music with the commercial mainstream. During Cobain’s life he often criticized of the corporate music industry. His disdain was aimed at major record labels, commercial radio stations and MTV® — all corporate structures that he was very much a part of. However, once Cobain signed over the rights to his music to the David Geffen Company in 1991 his control over his music began slipping away. Major corporations’ profit models had supplanted his independent punk ideology, and there was little he could do about it.

Like the other works in my graduate thesis exhibition, the David Geffen Videos examine the relationship between the artist, the producer and the consumer. In this particular scenario, I investigate the relationship between Nirvana front man Kurt Cobain, the David Geffen Company (DGC) and the fans of Cobain’s music. My Videos alter and distort the complete series of Nirvana music videos produced during the band’s final years, during the period of its
Geffen contract. I altered these original videos by using a practice called “data
to the code,” which means the manipulation of a digital file’s source code (the zeros
and ones). When this code is selectively altered, the video becomes severely
distorted, and the results can be almost unrecognizable. The new data-bent
imagery recalls hallucinatory images produced in the mental state known as
hypnogogia, characteristic of the state in between alertness and sleep. When
altering these videos I deliberately evoked this state to parallel the limbo
moments Cobain must have experienced in the transitional space between life
and death, when he had no control of what was going on around him. The videos
are silent in order to reference the loss of Cobain’s independent voice during the
period of the Geffen contract. The perspective of this installation views the
collective work of Nirvana as manufactured and marketed by the David Geffen
Company viewed through the eyes of Kurt Cobain.

I depict the time in between the signing of the contract in 1990 to Cobain’s
suicide in 1994 as a period characterized by a Manichaean struggle in Cobain’s
psyche between life and death, light and dark. In 1990 Cobain was persuaded
and encouraged to sign to DGC by Kim Gordon of the seminal post punk/art
band, Sonic Youth. Sonic Youth had also recently signed to DGC, releasing their
first album Goo on that label with cover artwork by Raymond Pettibon. Sonic Youth also released a song and mini-album in 1983 entitled Kill Yr. Idols, which is where
my thesis exhibition gets its title.

Originally Cobain had signed a long-term contract with Sub Pop records.
However, he had become upset with the label’s efforts and decided to leave after
the first record was released. Cobain was forced into exile from the “indie”

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15 Sonic Youth also released a song and mini-album in 1983 entitled Kill Yr. Idols, which is where
my thesis exhibition gets its title.
record company playing field because it was not possible to buy out Nirvana’s large contract with Sub Pop. It was originally anticipated that sales of Nirvana’s first album under the Geffen contract would match the sales of Sonic Youth’s Goo at 250,000 copies. However Nevermind, released on September 24th, 1991, far exceeded expectations. It has gone on to top sales at 30x Platinum (30,000,000 copies) worldwide.

The collected elements in “Kill Yr. Idols” include four large posters based on the images used for four Nirvana album covers (Nevermind, In Utero, MTV Unplugged and Bleach. *) (*Bleach was originally released by Sub Pop, but was reissued, marketed and promoted by DGC shortly after the contract was activated). The exhibition also includes six videos based on promotional music videos (In Bloom, Lithium, Come As You Are, Heart-Shaped Box, Sliver and the groundbreaking Smells Like Teen Spirit) that were created during Nirvana’s tenure at DGC.

The source images and videos in the thesis show were retrieved illegally in the digital labyrinth (the web) and data bent, a process also commonly known as “Glitch”. This digital process dissects, shuffles and reassembles the source code for any digital file. (For example, (0000110101010) might become (0101101010000)). The resulting images become selectively distorted, and somewhat unrecognizable. The image files were each converted into a digital audio waveform and imported into Audacity®, an audio software program for recording, editing and mixing. The files were then treated individually with audio effects such as distortion, phasing, echo and reverb. Each frame of the videos
(roughly 8,000 frames apiece) was exported individually and recompiled into a video time-code. These video files were then re-exported as .mov files at a standard 4:3 aspect ratio, commonly used in solid-state televisions or in 16mm film. The videos were then sent to a film lab where each frame was “photographed” and transferred to a 16mm film negative, by a 16mm film camera. This negative was converted to a finalized 16mm film print, in an edition of three.

The four still images were treated in the same manner. However there output and analog manifestation is different than that associated with the moving image. The still images were printed in a very non-traditional, yet archival way. Since data bending exports the images as hard-edged square pixels (high resolution photographic images use round pixels to create a more realistic reproduction through blending), the file can be enlarged via Adobe Photoshop without losing any resolution or experiencing any distortion. This allowed me to take the file and expanded it to 96” x 96” without concern for data-loss. These files were then processed and sent to China, where I had them fabricated into large vinyl banners, complete with silver grommet holes for mounting. These large banners have been and, in some situations, still are used as a large-format, inexpensive and durable advertising medium.

The installation of the work has been organized with the intent of recreating the sensation of spectacle. The films have been installed on six independent EIKI SSL-01 16mm film projectors that are set up in an evenly spaced horizontal row. This configuration immediately draws the viewer into a
confrontation with this series of obtrusive, antiquated motion picture machines. The projectors churn along while a conical beam of light projects the images through the air. Viewers of a certain age may be familiar with the machines—dating back perhaps to when they were in high school, watching World War II newsreels in a history class. Others may have never seen a film projector before. In either case, these fantastic devices serve as a gateway into the work. I spliced each of the six films into independent loops, so that the image projections would be continuous. The short waves of images recycle every eight seconds. My intent is to produce the sensation of being too fucked up to see straight, as though the room were spinning. The projectors have been placed atop two large black rolling equipment cases. These Nelson road cases are used as protective housing for audio and video gear while in transit. They are often used during concert tours, where bands’ sensitive musical equipment must make it to the next destination intact. In the ambit of the rolling cases are eight canister theatre lights, aimed at 45-degree angles towards the large vinyl prints on the walls. These floor-mounted cans, similar to those that you might see on stage at a concert or theatrical performance, create added drama and interactivity. As viewers move around, their shadows become stretched across the surfaces of the space, linking viewers’ physical presence to the objects in the gallery.
This work has a very personal basis in my life. For the past five years I have been producing, marketing and distributing audio recordings on my two independent record labels, Captcha Records and Kallistei Editions. The themes of authorship, piracy, distribution and copyright that run consistently throughout my personal artwork also manifest themselves in my business practice. I maintain close relationships with the twenty-seven bands on the two labels, and I collaborate closely with musicians, artists, and designers on each of the audio recordings. Collectively we conceptualize the visual aesthetic of the releases and navigate alternative and unconventional methods of production, marketing, distribution and exhibition. I demand that our dialogue remains crystal clear to ensure that the end product of each band’s recording process represents the label’s business model and aesthetics, while also insuring that the music lover has a financially accessible experience.

Online piracy is most certainly an epidemic. In 2011 alone, audio recordings on my record labels were downloaded illegally 250,000 times. In 2001, Metallica filed a lawsuit against the Internet peer-to-peer mp3 sharing site,
Napster. According to John Borland’s CNET article in May 2001, Metallica accused 335,435 Napster users of having illegally shared the band’s copyrighted material. Metallica sought reparations of $100,000 per each illegally downloaded song. It seemed as if the band were targeting and alienating their fans, waging a war against them.\textsuperscript{16}

While major corporations choose to fight this “copyright war,” I tend to embrace it. Personally, I would never want to punish the supporters of my labels and the bands I endorse for wanting to listen to the music we create. I choose to support illegal downloads of my own copyrighted material. While each illegal download represents a potential financial loss, I look at it from this perspective: the listener has millions of options of music to listen to. I feel humbled that listeners choose to listen to a record of mine over a record from Bob Dylan, or even Black Flag. However, if a title from the label were remixed and inserted into a Honda\textsuperscript{®} commercial, I would feel like I would have to intercede: not necessarily for monetary gain on my behalf, but on the grounds that the ideology of the label wouldn’t correspond directly with the company’s ideology.

My connection to analog devices and material maintain a close relationship to authenticity. I feel that through these objects that the likelihood of the copy becomes less prominent. For the amateur making a copy of a vinyl record is impossible without the appropriate equipment. Digital copying of sources and files are nearly impossible to police. By incorporating this digital

practice through means of analogue export, I limit the likelihood of becoming victim of copyright infringement of my own material.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


APPENDIX

The following pages contain examples of work created during my three years at the University of Notre Dame.\(^\text{17}\)

\(^{17}\) All images by the author.
"Kill YR Idols"; 16mm film projectors; Nelson cases; 104”x30”x48”; 2012; installation view at the Snite Museum of Art, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Indiana
Kill YR Idols; 2012; installation view at the Snite Museum of Art, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Indiana
*Kill YR Idols*; 2012; installation view at the Snite Museum of Art, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Indiana
Kill YR Idols; In Bloom; 16mm film; 2012
Kill YR Idols; Nevermind; Vinyl; 96"x96"; 2012