The Difference Between a Duck

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The Difference Between a Duck

Shelby David Meier

A thesis submitted to the SMU Meadows School of Arts
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

Committee Members
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Q: What is the difference between a duck?
A: One of its legs is both the same.

The question “What is the difference between a duck?” is a finished joke in that the joke is unfinished. What is the duck different from? How is it different from itself? A duck is what it is, yet never exactly what it is. The joke is the distance between a thing and itself. An empty novelty filled with whatever meaning we pour into it. It flickers between what is seen and what is not. It is comedy, a gap between things that are separate and the same in an instant.

You can only “get it” when you realize there is nothing to “get” in the first place.

If you have to explain a joke it’s not funny. In the same way that the more you try to explain why a joke is funny it becomes less and less funny. Trying to understand something is reliant on there being something to get. What if there is nothing to get? What if the only explanation of a joke leads to another explanation of a joke? A lot of the work in my show comes contemplating nothingness or emptiness and the contradictions inherent in them. The possibility for something to have no meaning. To tear something apart, only to find that it could be reduced even further, maybe only to find that it’s turtles all the way down.

In this paper I will address each work individually to address concepts and references in each work to elucidate some of the connections I have made between the all the works. Concepts
and references range from the irony of the 19th century arts and crafts movement, the possibilities
of a blackholes, the subjective value of souvenirs, Tibetan prayer wheels and much more. And
they all seem to add up to nothing, which for me is a respite in the comedy of trying to make
sense of a world that doesn’t make much sense.

For the installation of my exhibition *the difference between a duck* I was intentional in
creating a space that was precarious, where every object seemed to be holding up another,
whether that was physically, by using sculptures as supports for other sculptures, or by recursion,
overlapping concepts that refer to themselves. The overall combination doesn’t point to one
direction or specific meaning for the show, but more of a labyrinth of objects that just lead back
into themselves

*Pharmacie (cover)*

The first work visible in the show was *Pharmacie (cover)* (Figure 1) which imitates the brush
strokes of an early work by Marcel Duchamp. The installation involves imitating the red and
green dots in gauche on three separate surfaces of glass throughout the gallery space. The dots
were painted on the glass door at the entrance to the gallery, on a circular glass table top leaning
on the wall, and on the glass table top of another piece in the show. The three iterations of the
same dots of paint are a reference to the three different executions of a work that Duchamp made
claims all iterations as the same singular work.

*Pharmacie* was made in 1914 and is considered an early rectified readymade made a few
months after making *Bicycle Wheel* in 1913, made of a bicycle wheel attached to the top of a
stool. Both were made before his infamous readymade *Fountain* in 1917. Duchamp talks about
making the piece while riding on the train, seeing light reflected on the glass of the train and
painting over two white dots of light on an artist’s print with red and green gauche. In his own description, his intervention transformed it into a pharmacy, referencing the iconic red and green bottles in French pharmacies at the time. Then in the lower right corner Duchamp wrote PHARMACIE and signed his name and the year 1914.¹

I first came across Pharmacie when I found a book by Stefan Banz. He collected as much information on the piece that has received very little scholarly attention although the work aligns within much of Duchamp’s artistic concepts at crucial moment in his artistic career. The work itself has been produced in multiple versions between 1914, 1937 and 1945. The first iteration of the work took the form of three identical prints; two were lost and never seen by anyone and the third was given to Man Ray. Although each iteration was different Duchamp would insist that each version was the same work. A major part of Duchamp’s aesthetic was the complication of what the artist says about his work in relation to the work’s reception by a beholder. He is known for intentionally contradicting himself in what he says about his work between interviews and his own writing. Duchamp’s philosophical underpinnings in regards of an art object’s relationship to the viewer are made clear in his lecture “The Creative Act” held at the 1957 Convention of the American Federation of the Arts in Houston.

“… The two poles of the creation of art: the artist on one hand, and on the other the spectator who later becomes the posterity. To all appearances, the artist acts like a mediumistic being who, from the labyrinth beyond time and space, seeks his way out to a clearing…All his decisions in the artistic execution of the work rest with pure intention and cannot be translated in a self-analysis, spoken or written, or even thought-out…art history has consistently decided upon the virtues of a work through considerations completely divorced from the rationalized

explanations of the artist… the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act.”

Banz claims that Duchamp is suggesting that his artist commentary is only important to the work if it is part of the work. And when considering *Pharmacie* Banz holds that when reading Duchamp’s descriptions of the work, his performative character should be assumed as part of the work itself.

For me it is ironic to claim that what an artist says about the work is not important to the work unless it is part of the work. When the artist claims that what she says is part of the work, can the viewer ignore the claims that the artist’s claims are part of the work? This creates a paradox cancelling out and crediting the artist’s intentions at the same time. This is a major concept that runs through much of Duchamp’s practice and as well as aspects of my work within the exhibition.

*Missing out on something*

My installation piece *missing out on something* (Figure 2) involves a randomized arrangement (determined by scattering dice on the floor or sprinkling dust on a sheet of paper), of an arbitrary number of 18 mm holes into the architecture of a space. The size of the hole is specific to the Earth’s event horizon which can be calculated as 18mm using an equation called the Schwarzchild radius after the influential German astronomer, Karl Schwarzchild. The first to calculate a specific solution to Einstein’s equations of general relativity, he also developed coordinates and a metric for mapping and measuring the universe. Working within concepts of
general relativity he calculated the possibility of black holes in 1916\(^2\). This means there exists the possibility of a mass in space so dense and with a gravitational pull so strong that it would bend light and spacetime. The existence of black holes was not accepted for decades by scientists and not physically observed until 2012 when Suvi Gezari was able to capture the trail of a red dwarf sun being pulled into a blackhole\(^3\).

*Missing out on something* is not directly about blackholes. It is more about finding a way to process and digest the lay-explanations of particle science, quantum physics, and black holes that I am able to casually access through Wikipedia articles, websites, and videos on the internet. For me finding and taking in this information is a kind of entertainment, a way to pass the time or a distraction, as much it is a way to place myself within the context of the universe. An explosion of chaos that has set everything in the universe in motion, spinning outwards and inwards in every direction with no intentionality, reason or meaning.

Timothy Morton uses blackholes as his first example of a hyperobject in his book *Posthumanities: Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*\(^4\).

Hyperobjects are present and influence our everyday life, but they cannot be fully perceived through a human perspective but only through devices and collected information that it provides us. Hyperobjects exists on a scale of size and time that is far greater and beyond the lifespan of an individual human. That aspect of blackholes stands out to me. Their invisibility, insofar as


they can only be detected by perceiving their influence on their environment. When I chose to install the work on the ceiling I know there is potential people might miss it.

The title *Missing out on something* is taken from John Giorno’s poem titled *Thanx 4 Nothin*. \(^5\) (Giorno 2011) Beginning of the poem, Giorno expresses his desire that others share in the experiences he has lived, from ex-lovers to every drug he ever took. But a stanza where he breaks into a history of the universe stood out to me.

“Twenty billion years ago/ in the primordial wisdom soup/ beyond comprehension and indescribable” as particles become quarks, and quarks become neutrons something happens. “something without substance became something with substance/ why did it happen? / because something substance less / had a feeling of missing out on something, / not / getting it / was not getting it/ not getting it / imperceptibly not getting something/ when there was nothing to have”

Following that stanza he describes his experience with Buddhist meditation and his pursuit of enlightenment, grasping at something just out of reach, something imperceptible that we can’t access as our physical bodies hold us back. *Missing out on something* is made of absence. The work is the hole in the surface, not the wall hole is drilled through. The surface that surrounds the hole only makes it apparent. There is nothing there to see, only what surrounds it. As for the scattering of the holes they take on an appearance of a numberless oversized connect the dots. The stars in the sky appear as a useless bunch of dots until they are mapped out and used as a navigation tool.

I survived a blackhole and all I got was this stupid t-shirt

The beginning of the work I Survived a Blackhole... (figure 3) was simply to make a large circle. Consider the large-scale minimalist sculptures of Fred Sandback, with their ability to suggest a large area through the use of a few strands of yarn. But instead of taking up the characteristic appearance of minimalism as something precise, geometrically perfect, alienating, cold and void of any kind of affect I wanted to make something that was fucked up. From a distance the work appears as a perfect circle; upon closer inspection it is riddled with gaps, flaws, soft edges, and barely held together with obvious, misused mending plates. I knowingly glued the pieces of the circle together in such a way that it wouldn’t fit through my studio door, which meant that I would have to cut it in two and later resolve a way to rejoin the two. Something I would figure out whenever the time came.

I often find myself repeating a phrase from Richard Wentworth’s series of photographs, “Making do and getting by”. His collection of images was not originally intended as a work but started as an archive for reference; last year the archive was published as a book. Since 1971, Wentworth has been taking photographs of objects performing functions that they were not intended for. Examples would be a plate propping up a window or a boot used as a doorstop. Wentworth takes notice of the imagination in human solutions when confronted with a problem or situation. The solutions are not ideal but perfectly clever in their immediate resourcefulness.

When I finished the circle, I realized it could also be described as a big blackhole, but more approachable than an actual blackhole. I contemplated the infinite possibilities of what could exist on the other side of a blackhole if I could pass through one. But the infinite number of possibilities means there is an infinite number of outcomes that are less than desirable. There is the chance that on the other side of a blackhole is another pathetic gift shop with unoriginal
merchandise A souvenir from a gift shop is more of a way to remember an experience through a physical object. The value of the object is not dependent only on its quality, but an experience or idea that is attached to it.

What are the chances?

An artist that comes to mind, and whose work was important for me in the early formation of the ways I thought about art objects, would be Martin Creed. To me his work is about the meaning we project on things, how we relate to them, and the way things serve as a medium for people to relate to each other. I experienced his installation Work No. 360: Half the air in a given space in 2011. Before, I was most interested in the conceptual nature of his work consisting of simple gestures and objects gently posed as challenges to traditions of art and Minimalism. But when I could physically move through the space with others the work shifted in my understanding. It not only makes visible half of the air that fills a space, it draws attention to a person’s movement through the space. For me this is a constant reminder to consider the conceptual nature of a work's relationship to the physical nature of a work and the potential cohesion or a dissonance.

“What are the chances?” operates in a similar way. A large amount of dice, different in colors, patterns and the number of sides, are scattered throughout the floor of a gallery. The dice are. Each one of the dice resemble small minimalist sculptures, geometric forms made from opaque, matte, speckled, marbled plastics. Purchased in bulk, the work operates as an activated readymade as viewers move through the work, kick it around and the sum total of the dice continually changes.
This work is meant to draw attention to our influence on the way we move through the space. I am reminded of the concepts at play in Timothy Morton’s writing on hyperobjects and his definition of global warming as a hyperobject. In relation to the Anthropocene, it suggests that we have entered a new geological era, shaped by global human expansion. What Morton aims to argue is that the human species not separate from “nature” but an active part of it. Part of an object oriented ontology is decentering humans from the way we think about ecology.  

**The Last Question by Isaac Asimov as Read to My Computer by Isaac Asimov**

The inspiration for my piece “The Last Question by Isaac Asimov As Read to My Computer by Isaac Asimov” (Figure 4) is a short story by Isaac Asimov that this book is based on. In summary, the story is about the evolution of humanity and technology through eras of growth and exploration. As humanity progresses it continues to ask a hyper-connected artificial intelligence if entropy can be stopped or reversed. This continues until the last star goes out, the end of space and time. Right before humanity ends, it joins its own creation: a universal Artificial Intelligence existing in hyperspace outside of gravity and time. After humanity is gone, the AI existing in hyperspace has found the answer. But with no one to share, the AI chooses to demonstrate the answer and declares “LET THERE BE LIGHT.”

With such a powerful story about the potential of our relationship with the technology we create, it is important that we build a healthy one. And as a mother might strive for her child, we should teach our creation how to love, show it compassion and teach it well. Because if/when our own creation, surpasses our abilities we want it to value those things, or else it might end up like

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In that spirit, I thought why not start reading bedtime stories to our technology? Reading to your children can do all those things I listed above.

I played the audio of Isaac Asimov reading his book to my computer while it ran a speech to text program. From the generated text, I pulled out small pieces of text while reading through the gibberish and created something that looked like poems. Some almost make sense, some make none, some are funny, stupid, profound. I also reformatted the paragraph breaks of the entire block of text to the closest I could match with original text and included it in the second portion of the book.

For the design of the book I selected a small 4”x7” binding and published the book through a service online. I chose to use a very simple design of a white cover with black text. On the edge of the binding is a black 18mm circle that folds over the front and back cover as a reference to the work Missing Out on Something. Conceptually the work is tied to our reliance on technology and its influence on our perception of the world we live in. As our technology changes so does our perception and understanding of the world around us.

**Vessel and Souvenirs**

A major theme of Asimov’s story is the desire to stop or reverse entropy, to stop the loss of energy and the decay of the physical world, in other words an end to physical death and decay. In the same way, a physical object can be changed over time, and become an image or a symbol.

The mask of Michael Myers from John Carpenter’s horror film *Halloween* is frightening on film. But when the mask is reproduced as a Halloween costume, the image of pure evil is spoiled by a stock photo lopsided mask with eyeholes exposing the dumb blank stare of the person behind it.
The original Michael Myers mask prop was a copy. The film crew purchased a mask of Captain Kirk, played by William Shatner, from the television series Star Trek. They painted the face white, teased the hair, and enlarged the eyeholes.\textsuperscript{8} Then throughout the unnecessary number of sequels the mask would go through various depictions. In the real world, the mask takes on different versions or copies of the mask. Seeing the evolution of Michael Myers into cheap latex costumes I bought one for myself to create the next iteration.

After a few failed attempts to transform the Michael Myers mask, the best solution also turned out to be the simplest by literally turning it on its head. I reinvented its function, it became a vase. \textit{Vessel} (Figure 5) is a durational piece, where an arrangement of flowers is placed within the mask and wilt over time.

The work \textit{Souvenirs} (Figure 6) takes the Michael Myers imagery even further. It is an open edition of slip cast ceramic models, recreating the mask through my own hand built model. This became a metaphor for the emptiness in mass produced object, the same thing that attracted Duchamp to conceive of the readymade, as well as the impetus for the beginning of Arts and Crafts movement in 19th century England.

During the industrial revolution, William Morris, disappointed in the quality and aesthetics of mass produced items called attention to hand-made decorative arts that met a higher standard of quality and artisan detail that was lacking from factory produced goods. Meant to be competitive with the industrial process instead the cost and time it took to craft the items created a separate market of luxury goods, where the scarcity and unique qualities add to their value.

Instead of freeing workers from factories, the arts and craft movement created a luxury market out of labor intensive processes.\(^9\)

**Sketchbook Pages**

These concepts of craft and its connection to culture, value and the exchange of material and technology taps into a long history of global trade and its effects on cultural exchange. In his essay for the exhibition “My Blue China: The Colors of Globalization” curator Laurent de Verneuil addresses global trade routes. Arriving in Italy via silk and spice routes, materials sourced from Persia and traded by the Portuguese. The Dutch and Germans later invented their own imitations followed by other European countries. “It remains one of the oldest but most long-standing illustrations of cultural globalization, for the history of humanity is about cultural mixing and opening borders”\(^10\) Artist Jayne Lloyd’s work for the exhibition consists of polystyrene plates and cups decoratively drawn on with a ballpoint pen in the style of Chinese porcelainware referencing local buildings where she worked. In this clever work, she trades a precious material in for the disposable.

In my series of *Sketchbook Pages (Figure 7)* I reverse that order, and transform a sketch into a valued material while still imitating its original form. Utilizing gestural sketches the I contemplate the significance of scratch on a page testing a ballpoint pen or a doodle drawn in the

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margins. Like automatic drawings, they show a fluid relationship between the hand, the pen and the paper.

This inversion of materials turns a scrap piece of paper into a delicate piece of blue and white porcelain. After an initial firing, I used a nib pen and china paint to copy doodles and drawings from my sketchbook, games of Pictionary, or scraps of paper and fix the material to the surface with a second firing. This material process required me to slow down and be intentional in the way I engage with the work. Physically making something creates a way for me to further my understanding of materials as well as concepts.

**Three stacked hypercubes, one incomplete**

When the drawings move from paper to porcelain, their physical presence becomes more apparent. The drawing becomes a detail on a low relief sculpture, moving from two dimensions into three dimensions. A hypercube (or tesseract) is a model used to illustrate an object that exists in the fourth dimension of time.

To draw a hypercube, one draws two cubes and connects all eight of the corresponding corners. The result creates multiple cubes at different angles and is meant to demonstrate the movement of a three-dimensional object in space and all the different iterations of that object from point A to point B, similar to the overlapping figure in Marcel Duchamp’s painting “Nude descending a staircase.”

The sculpture *Three stacked hypercubes, one incomplete* (Figure 8) involves taking a two-dimensional drawing and making it in three-dimensional space, welding steel wire into a hypercube. The wire for the piece is bent imitating a drawing done by a shaky hand. The cubes
are painted black to create an illusion of flatness, like lines drawn in the air instead of the surface of a page. An actual hypercube is impossible to create or perceive as we only exist in three dimensions and only experience time in a linear format. With advancements in virtual reality, it is possible to create an interactive digital model of hypercube and other four-dimensional objects to provide new perspectives into imperceptible dimensions.¹¹

**Give them what they want**

In my mind, the work *Give them what they want* (Figure 9) is about an object existing in two separate states based on the perception of the viewer. The piece is a set of tables and chairs reupholstered using carpet and sisal rope, two materials that are commonly used in the making of cat furniture. This work is developed from two large sculptures I previously constructed using the same materials that took on the form of modernist sculptures, imitating forms and angles seen in large scale public works by Mark Di Suvero.

I began covering human furniture in carpet and sisal to blur the distinction even further as to who is the intended audience. *Give them what they want* leaves an ambiguous space to decide which audience the work is intended. My cats constantly satiate their biological urges by scratching my furniture, maybe I just gave in and created furniture meant for them to scratch. The title of the work is also a refers to comments suggesting I make my previous sculptures on a human scale. Maybe it is in our own animal nature to desire something like that.

This work notes the effects of modernization that has taken place in not only our lives, but also the lives of our pets as they share in the comforts provided by modern life thanks to the

symbiotic relationship between species. It addresses ways modernization disconnected us from our animal instincts and how we still have urges to satisfy them.

**Nothing Feels Better**

*Nothing feels better* (Figure 10) utilizes a lot of strategies from other artists, resembling Carl Andre’s series of wooden blocks stacked in various arrangements. The materials for each sculpture are limited to one pack of tube socks. The title is a joke referring to the sensation of putting on a brand-new pair of socks, a simple physical sensation that could be taken for granted and experienced only once with each new sock.

The work also demonstrates that an object can be defined in multiple forms or parts. Each block of the sculpture is a unit. But then each color might correspond to another making two units into a pair 12 units becomes 6 pairs. If each pair is considered unit you now have 6 units, but the same number of socks. Sorting the socks by color creates 3 different units. Each sculpture is 12 individual socks, 6 pairs of socks or 3 sets of the same color and is modular and however it is organized it is still one pack of socks. It’s all the same but changes in the way it is put it together or taken apart.

*Nothing feels better* explores the concept that a thing can be itself while existing many different versions. Seemingly schizophrenic I sense that this currently applies to many numbers of fractured selves and personalities made more evident living a life in the age of the internet. I exist in my body but I can exist outside of it as well. Within these varying states of existence is it also possible to neglect physical sensations.

*Bread Cairns*
A major conflict I have with making my work is convincing myself that it is something that is worth attaching to the physical world. I struggle with finding a need for it. It often feels something excessive or wasteful. The Bread Cairn (Figure 11) sculptures are results of my own waste. I often baking my own bread, as. After bringing a loaf of bread to my studio the stale leftovers became material for an artwork. What is left over after I meet my physical needs could become waste, or it could be a place to contemplate what that constitutes to have more than enough and the act of finding art that exists in the everyday.

Collecting pieces of stale and leftover bread and cast them in iron and painted the crust with enamel imitating the gradient style of high-end Le Crueset cast iron cookware. Each work consists of five piece so of bread that range in size to be stacked as a cairn. The imagery of a cairn for connotes two different intentions, with similar results. Traditionally cairns were man-made interventions in the wilderness that serves as a marker to help someone reorient themselves on a trail that is hard to follow.

Stacking rocks has also become a kind of meditation practice. People go out into the wilderness and seeking to commune with nature, find a center and balance and stack rocks. This has led to some confrontations with conservationists as stacks of rocks might be confused with the traditional use for cairns and misorient hikers. One’s own search for enlightenment and clarity might lead another to lose their way.12

**Working the Room**

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The video installation of *Working the Room* (Figure 12) is the final work in the exhibition and acts as a punchline. In a small room with a faux-brick wall and a spot lit television on a stool, it plays a video with the comedy club set, while my sculpture *Nothing Feels Better (white)* sits on a stool and slowly begins to spin, faster and faster then slows to a stop. The audio for the video is provided by a laugh track.

The work considers how a sculpture performs for an audience or its intended viewer. There is nothing funny in the action, but in the context of a comedy club and the audio of obnoxious group laughter the absurdity make it hard not to laugh. All the cues are there to direct towards the idea that this is supposed to be funny, but it is all so fake and obvious that there is nothing very funny. And in that disconnect and that failure it becomes a success.

Reading through a book titled *Nothing: Three Inquiries in Buddhism* I came across a passage by Timothy Morton addressing the Western philosophical phobias of Buddhist practice regarding its ambivalence towards consumerism and capitalist production. “The Western anxiety about Buddhism is in particular concerned with the machine-like, nonhuman quality of Buddhism seen, for instance, in Tibetan prayer wheels. I can turn the prayer wheel without having to change my attitude—the prayer wheel is like canned laughter, insofar as it renders my subjective input unnecessary.” He summarizes saying that western philosophical resistance to Buddhism is a fear of subjectivity, rooted in an awareness that “we are not who we think we are – that the core of subjectivity is actually a kind of *object.*” This is an affront to the failures of modernity and opportunity to find something “more affective than basing arguments on

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aggression and fear.”14 In Working the Room the sculpture spins like a prayer wheel without intention, and the comedy is built around it.

Summary

A lot of this thought around nothingness, has caused me to rethink Chuck Klosterman’s introduction to his book Sex Drugs and Cocoa Puffs “In and of itself, nothing really matters. What matters is that nothing is ever in and of itself.” (Klosterman 2003)

My work is an exercise in discovering the ways in which I create meaning for myself. I do so by looking at what is around me, recalling memories and making free-associations ranging from popular culture, to other artists, readings, and conversations that I have had. I jump from one object to another idea that leads into another object or idea. This makes life feel meaningful to me, but when I start to pull apart the objects and recognize that they exist in multitudes, meaning starts to fall apart. There is no rhyme or reason to why things turn out the way they do. I exist in a universe that is chaotic and the funniest part of it all is that I keep trying to put the pieces together only for them to keep falling apart.

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14 Ibid
Bibliography


Images

Figure 1

*Pharmacie (cover)*, gouache on glass, 2017
Figure 2

*missing out on something*, 18 mm (the size of the Earth's event horizon) drilled into the ceiling, various dimensions, 2017
Figure 3

I survived a blackhole and all I got was this stupid t-shirt, wood, ink, steel, 8"x8"x.25", 2017
The Last Question By Isaac Asimov: Read To My Computer By Isaac Asimov

A Selection of Poems And A Short Story

by Shelby David Meier

Figure 4

The Last Question by Isaac Asimov as Read to My Computer by Isaac Asimov, paperback book, 4.5"x7", 2015-2017
Figure 5

*Vessel*, latex mask, flowers, appx. 24" x 12" x 12", 2017
Figure 6

Souvenirs, slip-cast ceramics, 4"x4"x6", 2016
Figure 7

Sketchbook Pages (multiple), porcelain, china paint, 5"x7"x.25", 2017
Figure 8

*Three stacked hypercubes one incomplete*, steel, enamel vibrating pedestal, 48"x48"x 104", 2017
Figure 9

give them what they want, imitation modernist furniture, carpet, sisal rope, hot glue, various dimensions, 2017
Figure 10

*Bread Cairn (blue)*, cast-iron, enamel, various dimensions, 2017
Figure 11

*nothing feels better (gray)*, one pack of socks, mdf, various dimensions, 2017
Figure 12

*Working the Room (video still)*, digital video, 7 min 1 sec