

Mores McWreath

CUE Art Foundation

Mores McWreath

Curated by Andrea Zittel

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CUE Art Foundation is a 501 (c)(3) non-profit forum for contemporary art and cultural exchange that provides opportunities and resources for under-recognized artists. We value the astonishing diversity of creativity that artists provide and the importance of their activity in the social context of the city.

CUE provides artists, students, scholars and art professionals resources at many stages of their careers and creative lives. Our programs include exhibitions, publications, professional development seminars, educational outreach, symposia, readings and performances. Since 2002, we have operated from our 4,500 square foot storefront venue in the heart of New York's Chelsea Arts District.

CUE exhibiting artists are chosen by their peers and a rotating group of advisors and curators from across the country. This pluralistic process ensures that CUE consistently offers diverse viewpoints from multiple disciplines of artistic practice.

Simply put, we give artists their CUE to take center stage in the challenging world of art.

Artist: Mores McWreath

My art interrogates and restages the fragmented nature of human subjectivity using video, photography, sculpture, and drawing. These artworks actively oppose the dominant cultural assumption of a unified subject. This investigation often leads to a deconstructive self-analysis. It is not a need to “know” one’s true self because that seems an impossible task, but it is rather a need to make public the theater of perceptions that form individual subjectivities. The goal is to take the vaudevillian theater of the mind and project it out for others to access for the sake of identification. The Nietzschean concept of Perspectivism posits: “In so far as the word ‘knowledge’ has any meaning, the world is knowable; but it is interpretable otherwise, it has no meaning behind it, but countless meanings.”¹

My body and the bodies of others appear in my work as stacks of pieces and parts. These piles of rubble are composed of clips, segments, and quotations from private and public, real and imagined histories. They perform on camera in short bursts of dialogue, action or sculpture. These vignettes allow me to quickly access a broad range of genres, styles, and sources. The Internet has created access routes to a flood of media that I channel through various screens and filter into my work as references, homage, transformations and appropriations. The juxtaposition of fragmentary elements culled from the world of images creates a visual and textual metaphor for the nature of human existence in the face of overwhelming information.

Freedom of choice
Is what you got
Freedom from choice
Is what you want²

Within capitalism, consumer choice is offered as a replacement for liberty. The propaganda industry, better known as public relations, leads us to believe that given enough choices to make between products that we will have a general sense of freedom in our lives. This industry generates campaigns for advertising and politics to sell us anything from toothpaste to healthcare reform. My interest is in potentially misreading Devo to support a desire for the “freedom from choice.” If what we are offered in contemporary western culture is “choice” then I believe it is a vital thought experiment to seek out a “discourse of the other of choice.” Roland Barthes’ idea of “The Neutral” is that which “baffles the paradigm” and this is the territory I am striving to reach in my artwork. Paradigmatic thinking demands that a conclusion be found and that a final meaning be determined. I have an ardent, burning desire to generate art and ideas beyond the binary.

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche; trans. Walter Kaufmann, *The Will to Power*, §481 (1883–1888).

² Devo; *Freedom of Choice*, produced by Robert Margouleff, 1980.

Biography

Mores McWreath was born in Washington, PA in 1980 and grew up in ten different cities scattered throughout the South and Midwest. He received a BFA from The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art in New York and an MFA from the University of Southern California Roski School of Fine Arts in Los Angeles. He attended the Whitney Museum of American Art Independent Study Program in 2008-2009. Recent group exhibitions include: *Theoretical Practice* at the International Studio and Curatorial Program, New York, 2009; *Worlds Away: New Suburban Landscapes* at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 2008; *End-Times* at the Lasso Gallery at the Butcher Shop, Chicago, 2007; *Ghosts of Presence: International Emerging Artists' Video* at the Art Gallery of York University, Toronto, 2007; and *Flex Your Textiles* at John Connelly Presents, New York, 2006. His work has been screened in film festivals both nationally and internationally, including the Athens International Film and Video Festival and the Jakarta International Video Festival. He currently teaches at the Cooper Union. McWreath's exhibition at CUE Art Foundation marks his first solo show in New York.

Curator: **Andrea Zittel**

About a year ago I was walking down 23rd Street between 7th and 8th. It had rained earlier in the day and the street lined with piles of damp black plastic trash bags waiting for pickup, and near one of the piles of bags was a semi-wet piece of paper with clumsy scrawled crayon writing that said: “think with your head.”

Learning to think with our heads, or to think critically, is the benchmark for becoming an engaged adult participant in the discourse of contemporary art. But before critical perspective enters the door we think with our stomachs, relying on intuitive barometers like gut reaction. Often when I look at Mores McWreath’s work I feel like I’ve exhumed my teenage gut, enmeshed with pre-critical sensory confusion. Without knowing any of the particulars about McWreath’s upbringing, I instinctively believe that he grew up in a suburb just like I did, and that even though he was generally content, he simultaneously experienced that same latent sense of foreboding that something was “off” in the world.

Most of the dialog in McWreath’s videos is found (or pillaged) rather than his own, and it is clear that he objectively “gets” the emptiness of living in a culture that oppresses its citizens via the empty rhetoric of freedom. But it is also clear in his work that he is a fully “indoctrinated” participant in this same consumer culture. Without giving up on the big questions (Why are we here? What is life for? What is our purpose?), McWreath points to a world in which meaningful relationships to labor, other people or self-empowerment can easily be relinquished, in exchange for the ever evasive fulfillment promised by a continual consumption of commodities.

Similar to consumer culture that offers us variety without granting choice, McWreath’s videos are generally comprised of clips that fit together in a seeming interchangeable order. Rather than discrete works, each episode is in a sense a cellular segment that can be reconfigured into the evolving recombination that creates the larger whole. The repetitive order of his work also brings to mind the dictate of the earlier generation of minimalists who used the stance of “One thing after another” as a means to eschew subjective composition in favor of a more rote sequence that was the earmark of capitalist modes of production.

McWreath’s work is repetitive, smart, juvenile, considered and foolish. The videos have a handmade feel – as if they were crafted in the corner of a bedroom and aren’t sure how to be public. And when they do go public it can be through many various channels of distribution including Bittorrent, YouTube and Vimeo. Or then again they may just as easily be projected supersize on the walls of the white cube. The image and content privilege neither the art world nor the realm of internet techies, and the medium doesn’t dominate the message. Or in the words of McWreath when talking about his decision to post his videos online – “I don’t see the point of hiding it from anyone.”

Biography

Andrea Zittel was born in 1965 in Escondido California. She received a BFA in painting and sculpture from San Diego State University, and an MFA in sculpture from the Rhode Island School of Design. In the early 1990s she first established her practice in New York. One of her most visible projects in New York was *A-Z East*, a small row house in Brooklyn which she turned into a showroom testing grounds for her prototypes for living. In 2008 she moved back to the West Coast, eventually settling in the High Desert region next to Joshua Tree National Park. She presently divides her time between *A-Z West*, located in Joshua Tree, CA, and Los Angeles where she teaches at the University of Southern California. Andrea is a co-organizer of the *High Desert Test Sites* and is currently organizing a new project, the *A-Z smockshop* in Los Angeles. Her work has been included in group exhibitions such as the Venice Biennale, Documenta X, Skulpture project in Munster, and both the 1995 and the 2004 Whitney Biennials. She has had solo exhibitions at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, The Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh, The Diechtorhallen in Hamburg, The Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria, NY; The Museum for Gegenwartskunst in Basel and the The Louisiana Museum in Denmark. Her traveling survey show *Critical Space* recently traveled to The New Museum, The Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, TX; the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, NY; the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, and the Vancouver Art Gallery. Andrea Zittel is represented by Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York City, Regen Projects in Los Angeles, Sadie Coles HQ in London, Massimo De Carlo in Milan and Spruth-Magers in Munich.

Mores McWreath



Consistently Could, 2009
Lightjet digital print, 18"x 12", Edition of 5



There is Nothing to See, 2009
Lightjet digital print, 10" x 15", Edition of 5



Capital O, 2009

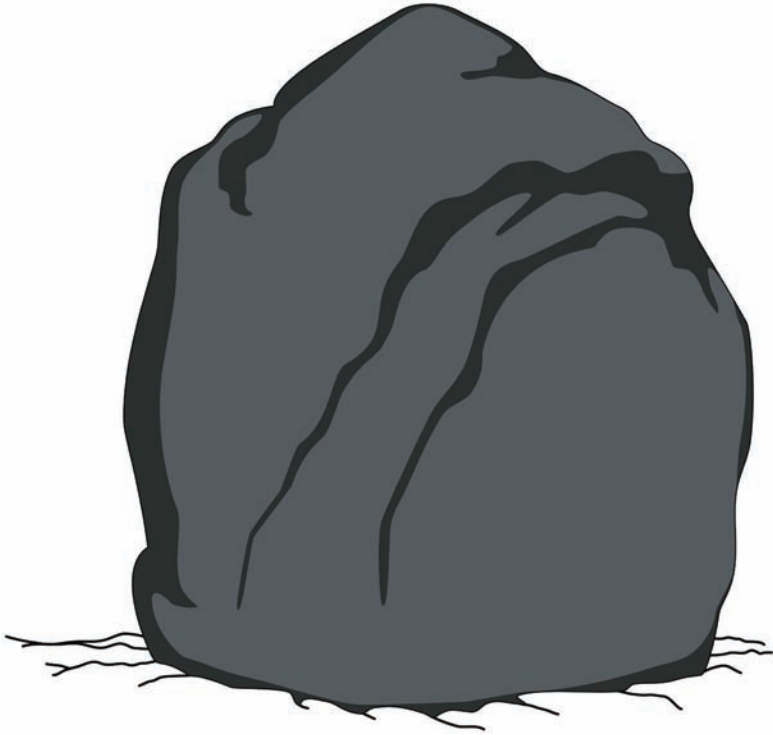
Lightjet digital print, 10" x 16", Edition of 5



ТОР: *Arms Like... Hands Like... No Fingers...*, 2009
High-definition digital video, 12 seconds
ВОТТОМ: *The One Who Bends*, 2009
High-definition digital video, 47 seconds



ТОР: *Perfect Strangers*, 2009
High-definition digital video, 1 minute 26 seconds
ВОТТОМ: *Momentum*, 2009
High-definition digital video, 30 seconds



The Bud, the Seed, the Egg, 2006–present
Digital video, currently 29 parts
Infinite and variable loop



Long Sleep, 2008
Primer on found vacuform plastic, 13" x 23" x 3"
Photograph courtesy of Josh White



The Right Place is Everywhere, 2008
Lightjet digital print, 17" x 56", Edition of 5
Photograph courtesy of Josh White



Airlock, 2008
Lightjet digital print, 17" x 56", Edition of 5
Photograph courtesy of Josh White



Like, Like, Like, Like, Like, Like, Like, Like, 2008
Wood, chipboard, mdf, compact fluorescent bulbs,
fixtures, light panels, latex paint, 64" x 35" x 6"
Photograph courtesy of Josh White



The Bud, the Seed, the Egg, 2008
Digital video, 20 minutes



Remain, 2009
High-definition digital video
5 minutes 20 seconds

Mores McWreath: “Maybe If I Keep Talking...”

By Cameron Shaw

This essay was written as part of the Young Art Critics Mentoring Program, a partnership between AICA USA (US section of International Association of Art Critics) and CUE Art Foundation, which pairs emerging writers with AICA mentors to produce original essays on a specific exhibiting artist. Please visit www.aicausa.org for further information on AICA USA, or www.cueartfoundation.org to learn how to participate in this program. Any quotes are from interviews with the author unless otherwise specified. No part of this essay may be reproduced without prior consent from the author. Elizabeth Baker is AICA's Coordinator for this program for the second season.

In 2003, after graduating from Cooper Union in New York City, Mores McWreath had the letters WW tattooed onto his bicep. His inverted initials and the monogram of his alter ego Will Westlake, the tattoo now resembles a pale stencil. His body literally rejected the ink. The incident makes a striking metaphor for the relationship between McWreath, the artist, and Westlake, a recurrent character in his art. Ironically, it has also come to symbolize a sense of failure for McWreath that he embraces and actively cultivates in his practice—failure to be unique, failure to communicate, failure to make the “right” choice.

The Manhattan-based McWreath works primarily in video and digital animation—two distinct arms of his practice that sometimes converge to haunting effect on screen. For an artist whose mediums are immaterial, he is constantly bringing objects into his studio, like packing peanuts, cardboard boxes, plastic masks and balloons. He uses them as building materials and props in scripted vignettes that he stars in, and he treats his body as just another object on set. Recalling the corporality of late 1960s Bruce Nauman and Vito Acconci, McWreath kicks walls, bangs the floor and hurls himself in front of the viewer. Often appearing with a

shaved head, donning a tee, polo shirt, or hooded sweatshirt, McWreath asserts an aggressive masculinity on camera. He produces unintelligible sounds, rants about losing a leg, and makes hand puppets mocking the correct pronunciation of Iraq. This is Will Westlake.

McWreath has lived in cities throughout the South and Midwest, but he considers himself and the character Will Westlake to be products of Westlake, Ohio, near Cleveland. Reflecting the area's dreary post-industrial history, Will Westlake is part defeatist, part agitator—a volatile and sometimes hostile poster child for suburban malaise. He first appears in a series of mock commercial spots simply titled *Westlake* (2004). Set to the blaring guitars and alt-rock crooning of Top 40 hits, each numbered segment is an individual advertisement for the eponymous community or for a suburban lifestyle brand: mega-chains like Abercrombie & Fitch, Burger King, Outback Steakhouse and Kmart.

Though McWreath does not acknowledge his doppelganger by name until later work, *Westlake - Spot #18 Dreams End* articulates the separation of the two. To the soundtrack of Avril Lavigne's *Complicated*, one cowers on the ground while the superimposed double taunts him and throws rocks at him. The viewer's ability to identify McWreath as distinct from Westlake here is confounded by the fact that they look alike, but it is their actions that set them apart. Westlake is clearly the antagonist, McWreath the victim. Together they suggest the schizophrenic relationship to modern consumption that subsequently unfolds within the series, and throughout the artist's growing body of work. And like much of his subsequent work, the *Westlake* spots vacillate between grotesquerie and restraint. Some of the segments are deliberately ridiculous as the Will Westlake character revels in the excesses of consumerism, for example, gobbling Burger King hamburgers while wearing a devil suit as if in fast-food hell and loving it. Most, however, sidestep the confident images and affirmations that are habitual to commercial television in favor of abstract visuals or decontextualized facts.

In 1973, Chris Burden purchased airtime on two Los Angeles television stations, to broadcast himself crawling through broken glass. Over the next few years he periodically interrupted late-night programming with puzzling, if not disturbing, imagery. Fifteen years later, Canadian video and installation artist Stan Douglas created his *Television Spots* (1987-88), brief glimpses of totally banal commonplaces interspersed into regular broadcast television. Though McWreath does not rely on the same modes of dissemination as these predecessors, one main intention remains the same—to challenge viewers' acceptance of television's endless monologue and its bombardment of capitalist ideology.

McWreath continues to build upon established models of advertising to subvert its system. Most of his work is composed of short scenarios that can be as brief as a few seconds.

With this format, the artist captures not only the feeling of television, but more aptly the variety of the internet, emulating the infinite stimulation of the digital age. In *The Bud, The Seed, The Egg* (2008), McWreath (as Westlake) seems to be trapped in a miniature, empty office space. He performs a spectrum of actions which include laughing hysterically, describing the number of toothpaste choices at a Target store, and singing the theme song to the television series *Growing Pains*. The work brings to mind the erratic video blogs that pepper YouTube.

This idea of information overload may be best evidenced by the artist's digital animation pieces. Begun in 2006 and continuing, *Everything's Better* is a collection of clips that digitally combine audio and visual elements—both original and appropriated. McWreath borrows from popular songs, television shows, YouTube videos, and cult science fiction movies like *Cyborg, 2001: A Space Odyssey, A Boy and His Dog,* and *Terminator 2*. He also creates his own images, ranging from actual footage of a desert to animated crashing waves or the cartoon silhouette of a man seen against television static. For example, one segment pairs a floating figure from the apocalyptic film *Omega Man* with the theme song to the television show *Cheers*. Another pairs a falling boulder extracted from a Roadrunner cartoon with the theme from NBC Nightly News.

Everything's Better embodies the informational potpourri of surfing the web, but there is one major modification: lack of viewer control. Here, the viewer is force-fed the artist's desired messages. It is a referential exercise, as the viewer attempts to unpack the familiar and the unknown in the videos. Much of the source material can be recognized by a viewer well versed in recent history and popular culture—a line from John F. Kennedy's inauguration speech, the Pizza Hut logo, or a classic guitar riff. Some of it, however, is extremely obscure or too divorced from its original context to be recognizable, though McWreath willingly divulges its provenance on his own website. In pairing familiar elements with visuals that he has produced himself, McWreath thwarts the impulse to attribute every image to an identifiable source. Despite the plenitude of information being exchanged, the question of creating meaning still remains.

One way of understanding this question is to look back to McWreath's earliest video project. The same year he sat for his WW tattoo, McWreath completed a documentary on aphasia—a condition caused by brain trauma that results in the loss of a previously held ability to speak or understand language. For *Picturing Aphasia* (2003), which is now widely used as a rehabilitation video, McWreath worked with patients to translate their experiences into drawing, thus transforming loss into a new mode of exchanging ideas. While this project may seem unrelated to his later work, it establishes his interest in multiple ways

of generating meaning, and the potential freedom that can exist in bypassing expected modes—an interest that is the cornerstone of his current practice.

In his most recent work, *Remain* (2009), McWreath appears again as Westlake, wearing a succession of polo shirts acquired at a Wal-Mart. The shirts come in a rainbow of colors; he wears pink in one scene and green the next, and so on, symbolizing the plethora of choices available in today's marketplace. In front of a crumbling set, composed of cardboard boxes digitally layered close to 100 times, he offers a litany of sound bites and platitudes. "Maybe if I keep talking, I'll say something profound," "Craft matters," "Your instincts are always wrong," and "Fashion is all about self expression" are just a smattering of the variably deep and inconsequential statements thrown at the viewer. The on-screen provocateur has left the tags on all his clothes and wears a visible microphone as evidence of his making as a fictional character in a fabricated environment. Like many of McWreath's other works that evoke science fiction movies, this scene establishes an apocalyptic context. It seems possible that Will Westlake is the final survivor of some cataclysmic event. He is trapped, talking to himself, failing to communicate with others. Perhaps there is nobody else left.

The writer, **CAMERON SHAW**, is a critic and fiction writer based in Brooklyn, NY. She graduated from Yale University in 2004. Shaw frequently contributes to *Artforum.com* and her articles have also appeared in *BOMB Magazine*, *SZ-Magazine*, and on *ArtinAmericaMagazine.com*. Her essays, poetry, and short fiction have been included in books on Marcel Dzama and Chris Ofili, among other artists.

The mentor, **EDWARD LEFFINGWELL**, is an independent curator and writer who lives and works in New York. He has published reviews and articles for a variety of publications and is corresponding editor for *Brazil to Art in America*. He served as program director and chief curator for P.S.1 in the 1980s and subsequently as director of visual arts for the city of Los Angeles.

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