

# **complicit:**

## **An Essay by Raphael Cornford Regarding his MFA Thesis Exhibition**

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## I. An Introduction:

I work across print, installation, bookmaking, and digital media to create immersive, engaging, and challenging experiences. Drawing from my lifelong love of pulp magazines, novels, and comics as well as the contradictions in my identity, my practice responds to inequity and social constructs by situating viewers within contemporary and historical discourse. Rather than simply displaying what my ideas are, I make viewers complicit in the ethical dilemmas, narratives, systems, and structures my work<sup>1</sup> presents. My interest in compassionately addressing inequity comes from my personal history. I am White and grew up in an impoverished, predominantly Black part of East Oakland.<sup>2</sup> My household was academic, multi-racial, and unrelatedly unstable. During my childhood, Oakland was in a time of widespread violence and social upheaval. These facts have given me a perspective significant in the formation of my worldview. Though my work is not explicitly autobiographical, it draws from the complexities of my experience and the kinds of critical discourse that have reinforced and informed that experience.<sup>3</sup> My identity remains relevant, even if indirectly, because of the realities of privilege

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<sup>1</sup> 'Work' is a problematic term, used here to expedite a discussion that will be more well explored later in the essay, with special regard to 'work' vs. 'Text'.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen M. Leuthold writes in Cross-Cultural Issues in Art: Frames for Understanding about fragmentation, the multiply constructed self, and a loss of identification with particular ethnic origin due to that immigrant culture which unites Americans nationally rather than ethnically. For white Americans, it is easier to ignore one's ethnic origin and for one's own ethnicity itself to become a transparent or 'natural' state from which the "Others" are differentiated. In my particular case, whiteness was never truly established or banished as a 'natural' state. I, from early childhood onwards, was aware of racialized experience, messaging, preferential treatment, etc., as relatively uncommon characteristics of growing up as a minority within my local context while still enjoying the cultural/hegemonic benefits of my ethnicity at a macro level. Adding another layer of confusion is the experience of poverty or a working-class childhood paired with an intellectual legacy reaching back three generations to Charles Darwin, my great great great grandfather. (New York NY: Routledge, 2011) pp. 152-154

<sup>3</sup> hooks, bell. *Art on my mind: visual politics* (New York: The New Press, 1995), p.10

and cultural appropriation that shape American experiences today. My work must never assume the voices of marginalized groups, undermine them, or presume to speak for them.<sup>4</sup>

Before my arrival in graduate school, my work focused on two themes: representation of my own heroes via the appropriation of pulp publication cover structures and metaphors for the process of delineating social group membership (with all its connotations of making outside people “alien” in some fundamental way). In this new environment, I was not interested in repeating myself out of a desire to push my own boundaries. Furthermore, I did not fully understand the significance of that early work; I viewed most things through the lens of cultural criticism learned in part through University of California’s approach to multicultural pedagogy in the Education Department.<sup>5</sup> My focus became the representation of fragmented experiences and identities, especially as interrupted by the digital aspects of contemporary life. This desire led me into utilizing projection as a way to combine printed and video information, a pivotal moment for my studies. Not only did it open new doorways for me creatively, it also made it clear just how important collaboration is for me—I love and depend on working with others, both for their technical expertise and for their creative insight.<sup>6</sup>

Interactivity became a new framework for me to consider work in, allowing me to combine my interests in cultural criticism, pulp materials, and viewer engagement. The most interactive of my various methods and aesthetics of print/projection combination seemed the most prescient. I returned to pedagogical theory as a research avenue for art creation, seeing a

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<sup>4</sup> hooks (1995), pp. XIV-XV.

<sup>5</sup> There I encountered intersectional feminism, anti-racism, and more nuanced methods of critique than the worldview I held in early undergraduate years. I learned about bell hooks, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Paulo Freire. It was there ‘identity’ as a term took on the significance it now has for me, a topic to be explored later in the essay.

<sup>6</sup> My work in print/projection would not have been possible with the guidance of Rachel Lin Weaver, with whom am I honored to be associated. Subsequent ‘high-tech’ work has been done in collaboration with long-time friend and professional developer Jaimen King.

natural fit for the kind of cultural commentary that carries my conceptual interest with the interactive experiences I was beginning to create. Engaging with ideas kinetically and in novel manners allows people to approach ideas fresh and open. In the case of an interactive work, it can be argued that the nature of the interaction (rather than its form or its content) is of the most importance.<sup>7</sup> From there, I began to re-explore what I had so deliberately removed myself from: comics and pulp material. Having implemented new structures and methods to bring viewers into the content of those graphic works, I developed the methodology that informs me to this day: books, sculptures, wall works with alternative hanging structures, and even viewer interactions within the gallery operate as a single Text.<sup>8</sup>

My work often masquerades as simpler than it is: interpretation awaits mirage-like and ephemeral, shimmering just out of reach. The familiarity and literalness of the appropriated materials in my work allows for an access point in a more receptive and open state<sup>9</sup>, instantly a part of the larger intertextual context of shared culture. Pulp materials act as citations and cultural echoes; they are references to culture that reflect simultaneously my interest, some kind

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<sup>7</sup> Kreuger, Myron W. *Responsive Environments, Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artist's Writings*, (London, Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012), pp. 556-557, 563-567.

<sup>8</sup> Barthes, Roland (Translated by Stephen Heath). *From Work to Text Image-Music-Text* (New York Hill and Wang, 1977) reprinted in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, edited by Brian Willis (New York, NY and Boston, MA: The New Museum of Contemporary Art and David R. Godine, Publisher, Inc., 1984) pp. 169-174. Barthes' discussion of Text will be explored at great length, later in the essay. Suffice it to say for now that my work responds uniquely to Barthes' conception of Text.

<sup>9</sup> Ackerman K., Edith. *The Craftsman, The Trickster, and the Poet: 'Re-Souling' the Rational Mind, Art as a Way of Knowing*. (San Francisco: Exploratorium 2011) pp. 2-3. Ackerman discusses at length the beginner's mindset and its implications for understanding. She differentiates adult play from child's play, and talks about receptiveness to unwelcome or critical ideas, especially in regard to the artist as trickster. It is worth noting that the trickster is considered as one third of a trifecta for creative practice, including the craftsman and the poet. My practice simply aligns most with the trickster in her terms. Enrique Chagoya offers a nearly identical perspective on the approachability of graphic and cartoon works, as will be discussed later in the essay.

of implication of original intent, and a subversion or shattering of the “original” intent to have more personally contingent connotations.<sup>10</sup> I break the signified from the signifier, forcing it into varied and dynamic new positions. I rely on graphic aesthetics from the comic book tradition—so influential for me as a child. I re-present and lift from existing pulp material (primarily from the 1940s-1970s although judicious use of more contemporary material is featured) to draw from it as a cultural referent. I read, scan, and recombine, subverting that material’s original cultural meaning, inserting my own, and/or exposing its problematic nature or ambiguity. Specifically, the dated pulp material I appropriate is indicative of dominant culture and mainstream ideas during its time. American culture has always held elements of racism, sexism, environmental entitlement, and other related issues. Dated material often draws from those culturally problematic themes in more overt, noticeable ways than its contemporary equivalents. Appropriation allows me to explore American culture, rather than my own psyche—the inevitable result of generating these kinds of images myself. Paradoxically, my re-organization and re-presentation of this material reveals me completely, just as repeated acts of curation reveal much about the curator. The material’s age, juxtaposed with the contemporary nature of the politics presented, speaks to the longstanding inequity of our society. The fact that a topic is relevant now does not mean it is new. I capitalize on the material authority of the pulp: its age, its degradation, and the shifting combinations of style that results.

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<sup>10</sup> Barthes (1984) p. 172. Barthes’ discusses the ‘semelfactive’ nature of reading the Text, woven with citations, references, and cultural echoes that do not require a definite knowledge of their sources. They become complete in the instant they are perceived/ The term semelfactive is used in linguistics to describe verbs with this immediate completion, like ‘knock’ or ‘blink.’

Within the confines of Printmaking, there exists a clear relationship between my work and both the work of Joseph Lupo and Enrique Chagoya (Full disclosure: Lupo is a hero of mine and has served as an advisor to me in the development of my thesis. Chagoya is highly influential in Bay Area Printmaking and I have had the pleasure of working alongside him at Kala Art Institute.) Lupo's work is an ongoing deconstruction of a single Invincible Iron Man issue into something so much more than its original pages contained. Lupo reorganizes, removes, recontextualizes, and unmakes this issue in a variety of ways, speaking to the contingency of sequential narrative on viewer assumption (Figure 1). He focuses on various aspects of communication, on how the viewer completes and fills in what they might perceive as 'incomplete,' relying on their own preconceived notions to do so.<sup>11</sup> Chagoya uses the familiarity of appropriated comic characters and iconography to comment on ongoing social and societal trauma, specifically tied to global relations and his own history in Mexico, the US, and Europe (Figures 2 and 3).<sup>12</sup> While Chagoya uses his own marks to create new scenes depicting these characters, I more frequently lift less recognizable content from dated books, borrowing meaning from the style and the original marks rather than the symbolic and associative world of the character depicted. In that sense, my strategy can be seen as a hybrid of Lupo and Chagoya—if one is to look exclusively within Printmaking (you may have guessed, dear reader, that I do not look exclusively within Printmaking).

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<sup>11</sup> Paraphrased from Joseph Lupo's artist statement:

< <https://josephlupo.com/statement/> >

<sup>12</sup> Paraphrased from Enrique Chagoya's artist statement:

< <http://enriquechagoya.com/statement.php> >

My approach to image<sup>13</sup> making is flexible. I move easily between highly dense, text-dominant work to simple, juxtaposition-oriented and image-oriented (Figures 4 and 5) kinds of panels. The alternative bindings of my books are able to carry both kinds of information through non-linear, associative narratives. I work from my source material in an improvisatory way that allows me to respond to the structures I have meticulously crafted with spontaneity and freedom, essential for me creatively and analogous to my other creative practice as a musician. Digital process allows for that freedom and spontaneity in composition while working within a compressed timeframe. Traditional print methods do not offer this work irreplaceable marks or meaning, although I do see myself returning to traditional print as components of work in the future. If I had unlimited time, I believe that I would print most appropriated comic information using photolithography, if only to appease my deep love of craft and the printing process. I frequently find myself at the limits of what digital double-sided printing can actually provide. However, my practice is not about process in that way, it is about viewer experience.

The manner in which a viewer receives information is crucially important in my work, an aspect I refer to as the “structure” or the “delivery method.” What is it like to engage with my creations? I need the structure—in the form of various installation techniques and in alternative book structures—to transcend the milieu of aesthetically similar appropriated work. At first, one interacts with a piece and begins to see how that interaction represents more—then it compounds when one notices others doing the same. Individual works place the viewer within the conversation of structural inequity, societal trauma, and injustice before the viewer is even aware that the work has done so. For instance, in both *A Perfect Crime Mystery* and *FIRE*, pages coated

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<sup>13</sup> “Image” is a problematic explored in greater length later in the essay. Here, the term is used out of convenience and to maintain a coherent ‘flow.’

in powder pigment rub off on your fingers<sup>14</sup>, implying different kinds of direct involvement in each case. Extended interaction reveals the depth of the work, designed to make disengagement metaphorically problematic. Disengagement from the art object parallels complacency and disengagement from the issue it presents.

That said, individual responses are never enough. Installation as a form offers a decentered, inherently fragmented art experience. Rather than privilege a single viewpoint (used literally to describe ideal viewing angle and distance, physically) that can be understood privately, an installation is a communal space.<sup>15</sup> The installation of my work is geared towards de-neutralizing the gallery setting and encouraging viewers to talk amongst themselves, start discussions, and address the complexity in which they find themselves immersed. It is not the case that dominance paradigms are separable: there are elements of crossover between rape culture, racism, police brutality, economic exploitation, and corporate oligarchy, but these connections shift and flex dynamically in different combinations.<sup>16</sup> As Audre Lord writes, “There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not lead single-issue lives.”<sup>17</sup> It is that inextricably joined but constantly changing set of connections my installation is apt to

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<sup>14</sup> Kirsch, Andrea. *Carrie Mae Weems: Issues in Black, White, and Color*, *Carrie Mae Weems* (Washington D.C.: The National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1993), p. 13. My touch-based idea for the confrontation of racism is indebted to Weems’ *Ain’t Jokin’* series, which included mechanisms for viewer participation in the completion of the signifyin’ “jokes” paired with the portraits, physical manipulation was required to reveal text.

<sup>15</sup> Bishop, Claire. *INSTALLATION ART* (London: Tate Publishing, 2005), pp. 10-12.

<sup>16</sup> The study of these shifting dynamics is known academically as Intersectional Feminism, first introduced as a term in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her work *Demarginalizing the Intersection of race and sex: a black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics*, from the *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 140, pp. 139-167. As bell hooks points out in *Art on My Mind* (and I echo above), it is vitally important for progressive white males to cite their sources and not erase the voices of the African-American women in particular upon whom their scholarship is built. (hooks, p. XIII)

<sup>17</sup> Lord, Audre *Learning From the 60s*, 1982. Reprinted online at <http://www.blackpast.org/1982-audre-lorde-learning-60s>

comment on. From a roundtable as the centerpiece of the installation to off the wall work that invites viewers to face inward, viewers are asked to consider and engage with one another.

(Figures 6 and 7)

A projected, comic book style cover along the back wall unites my thesis exhibition. The projection responds to the various kinds of sensors installed within the gallery to provide uniquely tailored content reflecting the current viewer engagement. Not only do individual works offer interactive elements, but also the entire thesis installation itself is interactive at a meta-level. Large, flat, white buttons placed under each of the pieces at ideal viewing distance present opportunities for an action on the viewer's part to have 1:1 response in the space. Rather than trying to represent all of the themes in my work simultaneously, different combinations of activity within the installation result in different cover information, stories, titles, etc. The standardized, geometric divisions of the comic book cover format allow for those shifts to happen in subtle, graphically stylized ways. For instance, the art on the page, the title, publication information, different featured stories within the installation, and promotional blurbs offer spaces for unique and responsive content. Put simply, each potential combination of viewer engagement results in a different cover. The cover acts as another mechanism to make viewers notice one another; when the content shifts based on someone else's participation, that action is effectively emphasized. The variation of the cover projection gives it "replay value," offering differing experiences based on what parts of the show are being engaged with and how. (Figure 8)

Engaging physically, kinetically, narratively, graphically, and personally offers every chance for viewers to arrive at deeper connections. Here it is useful to discuss again the role of structure: viewers are brought to these concepts because of the subtle effect of the structure,

which then invites further consideration of the function of “structure/system”—within the exhibition and within society.<sup>18</sup> A systems approach to understanding art leads to a look at relational and contingent aspects, or the ways in which things affect other things (as well as the things themselves).<sup>19</sup> The frantic, intense layering of the work builds a sense of urgency in my images and narratives. They hum in response to their individual and meta-structures, creating a fierce feedback loop. The installation provides an outlet and a platform for that rising energy in the roundtable, where viewers can engage one another with their discoveries and responses.

(Figure 9)

## II. Academic and Conceptual Aims

The function of *COMPLICIT* is well described by Roland Barthes’ From Work to Text. Additionally, my use of the term “structure” exists in response to Barthes’ and others’ exploration of its implications and limitations as a critical concept. Barthes’ Text is defined over seven metaphorical “touches” or propositions, with a brief introduction concerning interdisciplinarity and the breakdown of old hierarchies and divisions (a central component of my work on multiple levels). For Barthes as a literary critic, “Text” means written work that in some ways transcends its function as singular and occupies more roles. In short, Text busts signifiers. In the tradition of the American appropriation of Barthes’ work (this essay’s existence in collections of art writing is citation enough here), I assert that Text can also refer to other forms of art and cultural production. I also contend that the heavy use of text in my work, the construction of various objects as analogous to books, and the literal use of books make this an

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<sup>18</sup> Leuthold (2011) p. 189.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., (2011) pp. 186-189.

apt discourse. In the subsequent paragraphs I will breakdown my work as a response or even materialization of Barthes' Text, as doing so offers useful methods of consideration and analysis.<sup>20</sup>

Barthes proposes first that a Text is experienced only in an activity of production, which translates in my work to providing every opportunity for viewers to produce the content they experience at every level of the exhibition. He writes that Text cuts across or traverses multiple works (that it is essentially intertextual) to the degree that it actually subverts old classifications and genres. Text goes up to the limits of enunciation (rationality or readability) and is always more than what it seems. Furthermore, the Text as a sign practices a constant deferment of the signified (I refer to this as the impossibility of arriving at the mirage-like meaning one at first thinks is implied). It is the serial movement of overlappings, disconnections, and variations as opposed to a comprehensive and deep inquiry into singular ideas: its activity is metonymic (it cannot be named as itself, only in things that it is associated with) in its associations, contiguities, and cross-references that act to liberate its radically symbolic nature. A Text is a work conceived, perceived, and received as integrally symbolic—it accomplishes an irreducible plural meaning (paradox) as opposed to having several acceptable, agreeing interpretations.<sup>21</sup> It is less a coexistence of meanings than a passage and a traversal leading to an explosion or dissemination of that plurality. This plurality also means that the Text is structured but decentered, without an end (paradox). Another way of saying that is Text features no “grammar” (or linearity) per se, its citations and references (which are the appropriated comic materials in *COMPLICIT*) are experienced instantly and completely as well as in the form of cultural echoes;

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<sup>20</sup> Barthes (1984) pp. 169-170.

<sup>21</sup> Leuthold (2011) p. 188 reinforces the idea that multiple simultaneous meanings express the complexity of system/culture, itself containing contradiction and irreconcilable differences.

these citations and references do not necessarily need to be followed to their origin points, but instead exist in stereophony of simultaneous possibility and varying interpretation.<sup>22</sup>

A Text can be broken easily from the intent of its progenitor (whom Barthes refers to as Father), and that progenitor or Author is re-invited to the Text as a guest would be; it is exactly in this manner that my thesis operates. I, like any other viewer, participate in the collaborative production of the nature and meaning of the interactions presented. This concept folds naturally into the idea of *play*, explored from multiple angles with regard to Text. First, a Text has play in the way that a loose door or mechanical part has play. Second, a Text invites play in the sense of gaming, strategy, or even imaginative fun. Third, a Text is played by its viewers as a piece of sheet music is played by an amateur at an impromptu recital for a reciprocal and amateur audience (an audience of non-professional musicians). This particular analogy speaks to both the imperfections of an ill-informed viewership as a part of the (or perhaps *a*) “meaning” of the work as well as the collaborative and performative aspects of constructing that fleeting, paradoxical, and inherently incomplete meaning; these kinds of *play* speak to the plurality of the text, its integrally symbolic existence, and the impossibility of singular interpretation. Through all of this, Text operates as a circular ‘social utopia’ where social relations are made more transparent. Barthes calls it a social space where no language is safe, outside, nor any subject of the enunciation in position as judge, master, analyst, confessor, or decoder, finally asserting that the theory of the Text can coincide only with the practice of writing. I refuse to take Barthes literally, in part because of his own assertion of metaphorical proposition and in part in light of philosophers Deleuze and Guattari’s conjecture that writing is not so much about signifying and

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<sup>22</sup> Barthes (1984) pp. 170-172, “touches” 1-4 are summarized in this paragraph.

more a cartography of extant and imminent realms.<sup>23</sup> Instead, I put forth the idea that writing within my Text is the co-creation of meaning and experience by gallery viewers, especially around the table but truly in all of the relational and contingent aspects whose conglomeration equate to my exhibition (defined metonymically).<sup>24</sup>

I invite viewers to bear witness not to my work but through it.<sup>25</sup> Michael Taussig has defined witnessing as a special kind of active observation, in which the witness is implicated in a process of judgment (without of course actually *being* a judge, nor any of the roles defined in relation to Text).<sup>26</sup> He relates the state of bearing witness to being in court, even if that court is only imaginary, only held in one's conscience. Bearing witness need also be understood as an act of endurance if we are to continue Taussig's metaphor—it involves a sacrifice of one's time and one's habits, a kind of attention on which the fate of others depends. Relatedly, Kathy Acker writes about realism not as an art practice but as a critical one in which a mirror relation is created between herself and the world of the painting—there is again that process of implication, by which she becomes directly involved.<sup>27</sup> Taussig's original conception of witness describes the act of drawing whereas Acker's describes instead relations of perception. Witnessing (or Acker's critical realism) places a lot of weight on the shoulders of the viewer. Indeed, even the term 'bearing' underscores the demanding nature of the task, the metaphor of carrying weight. In my

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<sup>23</sup> Deleuze, Gilles, and Guattari, Felix (translated by Brian Masumi), a thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia, pp. 4-5. (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014 and 1987), first published in 1980 as *Mille Plateaux, volume 2 of Capitalisme et Schizophrénie* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit).

<sup>24</sup> Barthes (1984) pp. 172-174, "touches" 5-7 and the conclusion are summarized in this paragraph.

<sup>25</sup> This positional metaphor of looking is expanded and interrogated later in the essay.

<sup>26</sup> Taussig, Michael. *I Swear I Saw This! Drawings in Field Notebooks, Namely My Own*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2011) pp. 71-74.

<sup>27</sup> Acker, Kathy. Realism for the Cause of Future Revolution, *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, edited by Brian Willis (New York, NY and Boston, MA: The New Museum of Contemporary Art and David R. Godine, Publisher, Inc., 1984) p. 33.

view, our unconscious judgments, our passive non-witness state must be challenged: let's pick up the slack together. Much has been written on art that relays epitomized scientific and mathematical concepts to a layperson audience.<sup>28</sup> Art within these terms offers a new and unfamiliar way to approach a seemingly difficult concept; its essentialized, physical, optical, and kinetic characteristics allow the viewer to intuitively understand.<sup>29</sup> I, too, believe art is and can be a way of knowing that is tied to the body, to our experience and presence in a holistic way. I contend that these values are not by any means limited to scientific or mathematical constructs—instead my art is of a kind that realizes cultural criticism. Our experience is not limited to visual perception, it cannot be. Perception depends on the perceiver, on the physical location of who perceives and what is perceived, on all of the directly and indirectly related conditions affecting that situation. By opening my practice up to touch, to position, to observation of the self and others, I expand the scope of my work into the realm of everyday life—in Acker's terms the mirror relation of the work to the viewer extends beyond the duration of their viewership and into the rest of their life: this is the action of realism as criticality or vice a versa; this is Barthes' infinite deferment of the signified into an experiential reality. When a viewer bears witness through my work, they are invited to become aware through enduring and negotiating the densely layered narratives, metaphors, images, and spaces; this increased awareness may begin with the self or with another, but it only grows from there.

### III. Art Historical Context

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<sup>28</sup> Multiple contributors, *Art As a Way of Knowing*, conference in 2011.  
<<http://www.exploratorium.edu/knowning/index.html>>

<sup>29</sup> Penny, Simon. *What is Artful Cognition? Art as a Way of Knowing* (San Francisco: Exploratorium, 2011), p. 8.

Andreas Huyssen has discussed at great length the relationship of the European historic avant-garde to the emergence of conceptual art in America in the 1960s; the single most salient aspect of this is the shared desire of both to fuse art with everyday life.<sup>30</sup> This synthesis, in its European context, was focused on the demystification of high art culture. In the American context, this synthesis became more about the relationship of mass culture and its various products to high art. Specifically, Modernism as defined by both Theodore Adorno and Clement Greenberg sees mass culture as inherently kitsch and mind-destroying, necessitating a great divide between ‘high/art’ culture and everything else. Huyssen’s analysis of American art in the 1970s discusses the emergent postmodernism as an archaeological exercise. He sees it as a mining of previously used strategies and ideas applied to new and formerly off-limits concepts or methodologies combined with ‘randomly’ [a word choice I see as problematic in its overarching implications] chosen images from pre-Modern, non-western, and mass culture.<sup>31</sup> Jan Verwoert makes the connection between postmodernism and politics more direct, stating that the exhaustion of old revolutionary discourse is both the impetus for and the legitimacy of the new; these cyclical critical departures are the result of the limitations of older practices.<sup>32</sup> I utilize this construction of postmodernism as archeology as well as the cartography of imminent realms as outlined by Deleuze and Guattari: my strategies for both the production of work and the use of concepts rely heavily on a process of research, appropriation, and recycling in search of uncharted experience and territory.

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<sup>30</sup> Huyssen, Andreas. *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 192-195.

<sup>31</sup> Huyssen (1986), p. 196. It should be noted that Huyssen does not equate the two, declaring as much on p. 216.

<sup>32</sup> Verwoert, Jan. *Exhaustion and Exuberance: Ways to Defy the Pressure to Perform*. Art Sheffield 08, Yes No and Other Options\* (2008), pp. 107-109.

There are a number of strands within discussion of postmodernist art that are useful here to connect: stability, personal experience, mass culture relations, and identity politics. Robert Morris wrote in response to Walter Benjamin's *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (a text whose legacy is felt particularly for Adorno) that, "Work that results in a finished product ... finalized with respect to either time or space ... no longer has much relevance."<sup>33</sup> Put another way, our experience of art has expanded to include viewer authorship. Adding to that discourse, Michael Fried wrote that minimalist works were inherently theatrical, locating the viewer within a performance of experiencing the space; the hyper-controlled installations shifted experientially based on how they were engaged with and in what numbers. Along the same line of thought, the experience of the installation is dramatically altered by the performance of self within body within space.<sup>34</sup> For example, consider the role of scale or material in relation to body: large objects appear small from afar; industrial materials seem both inhuman and paradoxically symbolic of human society. Huyssen describes Pop art as having "...sprung full-blown from advertising," an inherent reference to viewer experience outside of art space, as well as to cultural forces shaping that experience (the core of Adorno's cultural criticism).<sup>35</sup> That close relationship to mass culture guides my choices for appropriation, as well as helping to underscore the differences in my Postmodern approach from the historical avante-garde.

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<sup>33</sup> Morris, Robert in *Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects* (New York: New York Cultural Center, 1970), p. 47

<sup>34</sup> Grubbs, David. *Michael Fried. Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998. Chicago Review, Vol. 44, No. 3/4 (1998), pp. 193-195. Fried's observations were meant as a scathing critique, however artists have since inverted those claims and used them as a foundation for the creation of art. Of interest is the idea that objects can perform themselves without activating the viewer—this is a contemporary interpretation of Objecthood most antithetical to my aims, but valid to its own.

<sup>35</sup> Huyssen (1986), p. 193. For Adorno, resistance to the commodification of art (its integration in capitalist structures) was paramount. He was critical of Pop art's troubled relationship to the culture industry. I, however, rely on that relationship, as so many artists have before me.

Rosalind Krauss writes about the modernist discourse of originality vs. copy as a set of problematic constructs whose analysis reveals their co-dependence, discussing the implications of copying copies and copies without originals as definitively postmodern in their split from other modes of image production.<sup>36</sup> Krauss's delineation of the postmodernism as a break with even the avante-garde is echoed in Huyssen's analysis. She speaks of the truly postmodernist work much as Barthes' discusses Text: it voids what she terms the 'fictitious condition' that Barthes would refer to as old classifications or genre divisions, working to create a social utopia of more transparent (as opposed to the 'opacity' of post-war Modernism espoused by Fried and Greenberg) social relations. Identity is a necessary and huge part of making those relations more transparent; in fact Christopher Reed wrote that, "Issues of Identity are crucial to postmodernism, so much so that some propose a new awareness of certain identities to be the defining characteristic of the postmodern age."<sup>37</sup> Reed is talking about Identity within the conversation of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, cultural awareness, and related issues; I agree wholeheartedly and expand identity specifically into materials, objects, and images. Put another

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<sup>36</sup> Krauss, Rosalind. The Originality of the Avante-Garde: A Postmodernist Repetition, October no. 18, Fall 1981: 47-66, reprinted in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, edited by Brian Willis (New York, NY and Boston, MA: The New Museum of Contemporary Art and David R. Godine, Publisher, Inc., 1984), p. 29. Krauss tackles Sherrie Levine's photographs of other photographers' photographic prints as a means to have pointed and non-random appropriation. The landscape as convention, as a non-original copy in its very core as an idea, becomes the subject of Levine's work, while the paradoxical distance (close/far) of the copy from the notion of the perceived intent of the original (as well as its reception) occupies this realm in my approach to appropriation.

<sup>37</sup> Reed, Christopher. Postmodernism and the Art of Identity *Concepts of modern art: from fauvism to postmodernism* (New York, N.Y., Thames and Hudson: 1994), p. 274. Reed neglects to discuss the kind of postmodernism espoused by the Young British Artists like Damien Hearst or Jeff Koons. One wonders where Richard Prince's more arguably randomly chosen non-western images and appropriations fit in to this framework—instead they fit the more alarming implications of Huyssen's paradigm, or Adorno's concerns about integration with commerce and the culture industry. Isn't there something inherently self-aggrandizing in the pretense of these works that speaks to a profound acceptance of privilege? One can certainly place Joe Scanlan's body of work within Reed's framework, albeit in an unfavorable light.

way, the identity of an object is contingent on its relationship to ‘Identity’ on Reed’s terms. There are implications here for field of view, surveillance, observation of others (their i/Identities and bodies), and shared experience all in contingent relation to charged content within my work. It is certainly not uncommon for installation work to feature political content,<sup>38</sup> but it is only through the creation of objects rather than images (within a narrow definition) that my work can exploit the theatrical, bodily implications of minimalism.

Images, traditionally defined, invite a viewer “in” rather than “at” or “through;”<sup>39</sup> it is universally the second two kinds of looking that are central to my work. It is useful to consider objects as having a surface that one looks at, that objects simply are; they carry the history of their materiality, the identities of the component parts each speak. Specifically, viewers are invited to look through my work into the implications of their role within larger constructs. For example, most of my images at some level masquerade as an artifact of some kind, with varying degrees of literalness and sincerity. The question of artifact is a natural connection to anthropologist Taussig’s discussion of witnessing. Taussig’s original consideration of witnessing falls within the frame of his own drawing (and all drawing) experience; my objects (or works or Text) expand that framework, relating it to Fried’s theatrical/bodily discussions of experience. The work becomes a means of accessing another kind of awareness transferrable beyond the confines of the gallery (Text, in Barthes’ terms). My use of appropriation and collage capitalizes on the implied *identity* inherent to the original sources as well as the subjectivity of our position in relation to those assumptions. While our output differs greatly, Fred Wilson’s approach to appropriation directly inspired my own, “To this day, the issues that underpin my work are based

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<sup>38</sup> Bishop (2005), p. 11.

<sup>39</sup> Judd, Donald. *Specific Objects*, 1964. *Arts Yearbook* 8 [1965], p. 94; reprinted in Thomas Kellein, *Donald Judd: Early Works 1955–1968* [exh. cat. New York: D.A.P., 2002]

in general cultural knowledge—issues that in some way fly under people’s radar. That’s what I do. Flip something you think you knew so well, and put it in a context in which you learn something new about that subject, and about other subjects. It’s because you have a basic understanding of the essential subject that it engages you, brings you in. That goes all throughout my practice.”<sup>40</sup> It is therefore not only the identity of the materials, but also the i/Identity of the viewers themselves that is interrogated by my practice; my work questions viewer assumption and subjectivity (with special regard for gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and related issues), going so far as to problematize it (one could argue Fred Wilson, in vital work like *Mining the Museum*, does the same to objects).<sup>41</sup>

I have written already about the identities of appropriated images, but what about the identities of materials themselves? Deleuze and Guattari argue that what a book talks about is no different than how it is made, claiming that a book is an assemblage containing its own time, pacing, and multiplicity.<sup>42</sup> They go on to argue that books have no subject or object, very much in accordance with Barthes’ notion of Text as not tied to the work that (fails to) contain(s) it. My work/books/objects frequently use(s) both material and process to carry meaning. In the case of *FIRE*, the entire construction of the book is built on materiality. The oak cover is of a species affected by California fires, modified by woodworking tools, and featuring a laser-engraved plexi-glass window: it becomes analogous to human structures. The vellum pages are coated in carbon black powder pigment, the residue of fire. Subsequent pages are laser-engraved and cut vellum, emblazoned with actual government data around the fires I photographed as components

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<sup>40</sup> Ladope, Malope. *Unsafe Ideas, Public Art, and E Pluribus Unum*, *The Indiana Magazine of History Volume 108 Issue 4* (2012), p. 391.

<sup>41</sup> Ackerman, (2011) pp.4-5. Ackerman discusses the transgressive role of artist-as-Trickster, focused on the blurring of distinctions and the questioning of assumptions. Here, in attempting to describe questioning viewer assumption, I invoke and then question Taussig.

<sup>42</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, (1987) pp. 3-4.

of the collage work in the center, and interspersed with scientific drawings of native species affected by fire.<sup>43</sup> The fragile vellum pages act as a frail and failing barrier between the implicitly valuable collage content of the book and its destructive environment. Our actions on the book will spread that destruction through the barrier—our grubby fingers eagerly smearing page after page, staining the unfinished oak, tearing the vellum—and affect the culturally problematic but nonetheless valuable, human America we inhabit. Each piece for me involves this level of consideration, so that investigation and questioning is rewarded with an enriched, often visceral experience. All extended metaphor present in the work offers strands to follow out into the world, into the self, and back into the experience of the work. (Figures 10-13)

Installation can function in such a variety of ways that it is useful to narrow down my aims: my thesis exhibition will be anti-aesthetic in the tradition of Carrie Mae Weems, Renée Green and Lorna Simpson, whose works are functional in the most excellent manner. What Wilson does to objects, Weems has done to portraits and images. *Magenta Girl* features three identical, magenta prints of a young African-American girl; under each is written “magenta”, “colored”, and “girl.” This juxtaposition transforms the three images into an exploration into semiotics, linguistic interpretation, questions of normativity, representation, and historical precedent. While each of the aforementioned artist makes highly aesthetically refined work, the final installation of that work often subverts aesthetic appreciation in favor of concerns like Identity and the deconstruction of bias in language or communication, some Barthes’ key functions for Text. Specifically, that distanced and faux “objective” state, necessary for traditional aesthetic appreciation within Greenberg’s definition, is pushed out into vulnerable

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<sup>43</sup> During the summer of 2015, I traveled up the coast of California, photographing effects of drought and ongoing fires. In Taussig’s terms, my act of photographing captured them without actually witnessing them, a valid and interesting distinction.

awareness and subjectivity. Consider again the roundtable in my installation as a functional object: it holds books, it symbolizes and prompts discussion, it puts people face-to-face with one another. And recall, if you will, each of the described aspects of *FIRE*, situated on that table. Any given piece I create, despite its aesthetic characteristics, is guided by its function and my personal history. The work's aesthetics could be seen as materialized utility, the most efficient means for me to accomplish what I set out to do. That said, it is imperative to keep those personal and significant relationships accessible. I reject readings of function and utility as ugly or apart from art, and cite again the writing in *Art as a Way of Knowing*. The experience of art (and, in turn, my art) is a vital way to understand complex, difficult, and emotionally weighted subject matter. (Figures 13 and 14)

My work becomes a shared, intimate, uncomfortable, and ultimately frustrating experience. Viewers become witnesses; they endure and perform their navigation of densely layered narrative and signifier in shared space. Each part acts to amplify that awareness beyond the whole, a kind of poetic, third meaning.<sup>44</sup> I facilitate intensely personal and varied viewer inquiries that each draw from my experience,<sup>45</sup> realizing cultural criticism in a way that reflects honestly my personal connections, complexities and contradictions in a broader fashion. I will continue to unite activist concerns and discourse with conceptual and theoretical developments in art and pedagogy; this dynamic synthesis is my life's work. (Figure 16)

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<sup>44</sup> Barthes, Roland (translated by Stephen Heath). The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Some Eisenstein Stills, *Image-Music-Text*. (London: Fontana Press, 1977) p. 53.

<sup>45</sup> Krauss, Rosalind and Michelson, Annette, Editorial, *October 10* (Fall 1979), p. 3-4. The authors discuss Barthes notion of the death of the author in regard to political work, writing that works of art that use personal expression as a means for cultural commentary. Again, I utilize Taussig's notion of the witness to bridge the gap between writing about performance art for performers and the role of endurance for my viewers.

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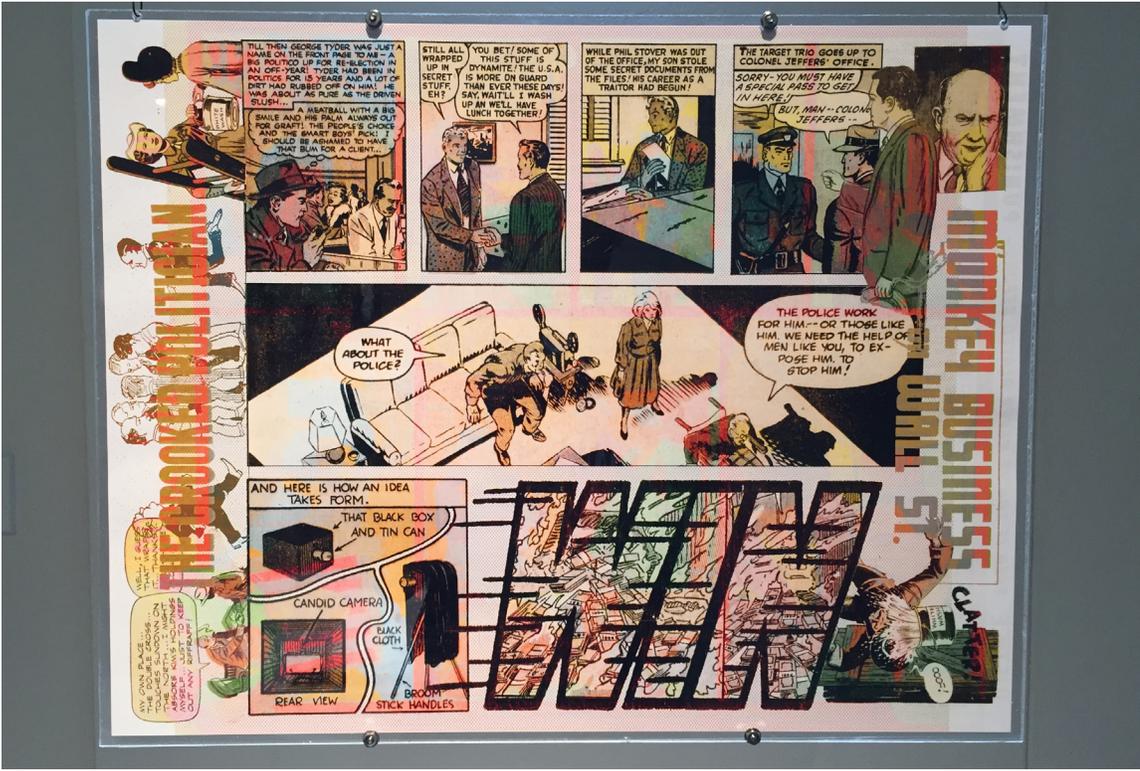
(Above) Figure 2: Chagoya, Enrique, “El Cruce 1”, “The Crossing 1”, 1994.

(Below) Figure 3: Chagoya, Enrique “The Governor’s Nightmare”, “La pesadilla del gobernador”, 1994





**Figure 4:** Cornford, Raphael. *Rendez-vous (side 1)*, double-sided digital print on archival semi-gloss paper, 15.5" x 20", 2016.

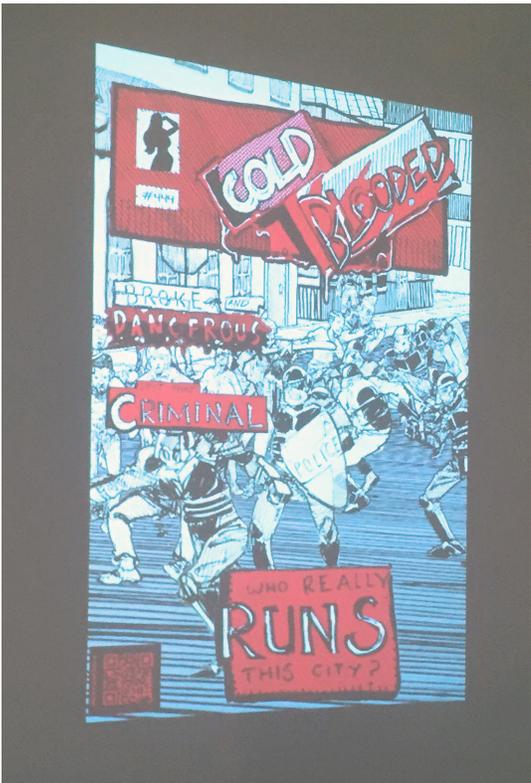


**Figure 5:** Cornford, Raphael. *The Crooked Politician (side 1)*, double-sided digital print on archival semi-gloss paper, 15.5" x 20", 2016.



**Figure 6 and 7:** Each of these shots helps to understand spatial relationships and positionality within the gallery. Looking at works is impossible without looking at who else is in the exhibition.





**Figure 8:** Cornford, Raphael. *complicit projected cover*, projection, 2016. One of thousands of possible covers for the exhibition, projected against the back wall.

**Figure 9:** Viewers and I read in the center of the exhibition, while the cover reflects our combined involvement.

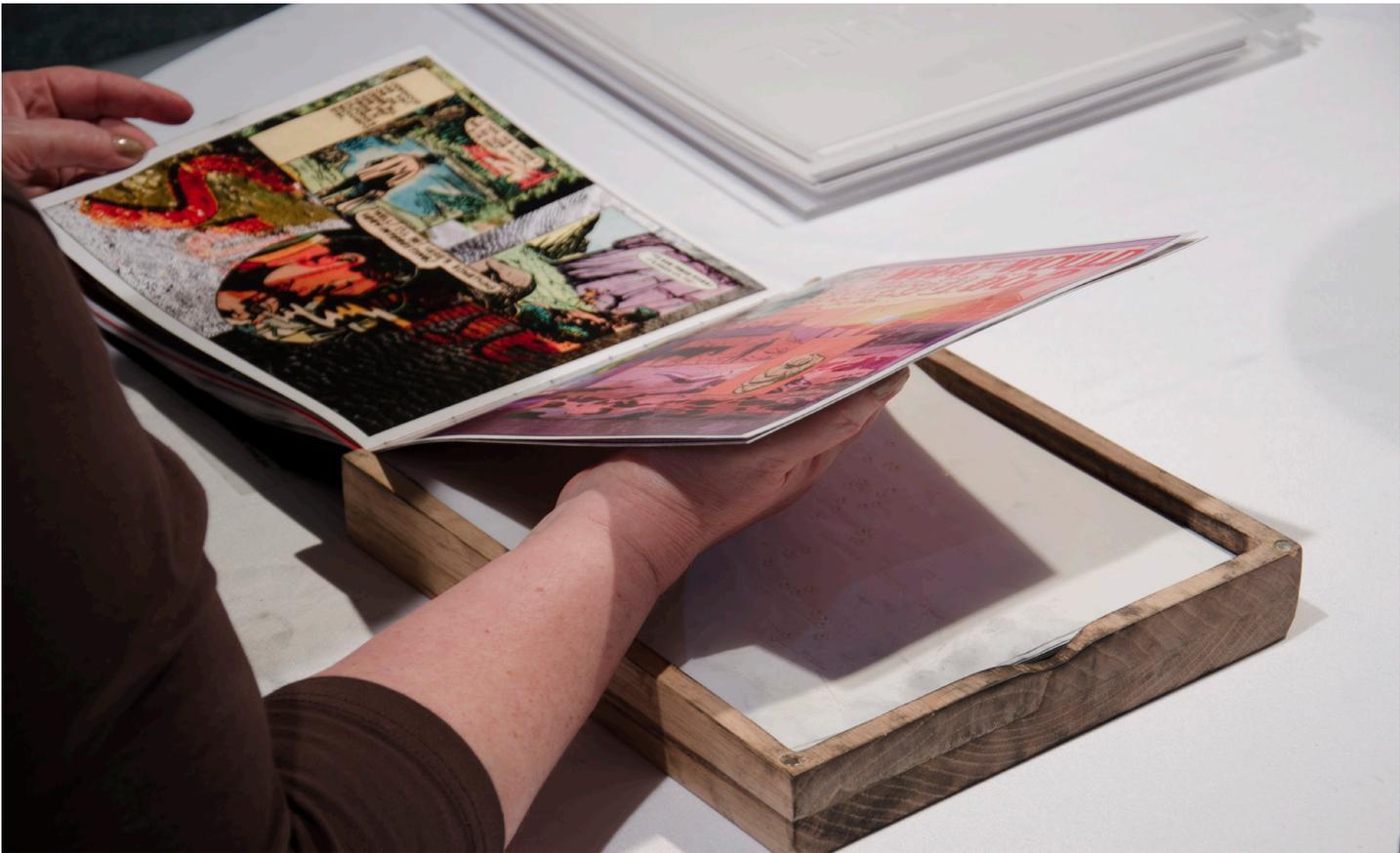




**Figure 10 (Left):** Viewer reads *A Perfect Crime Mystery* during the gallery opening.

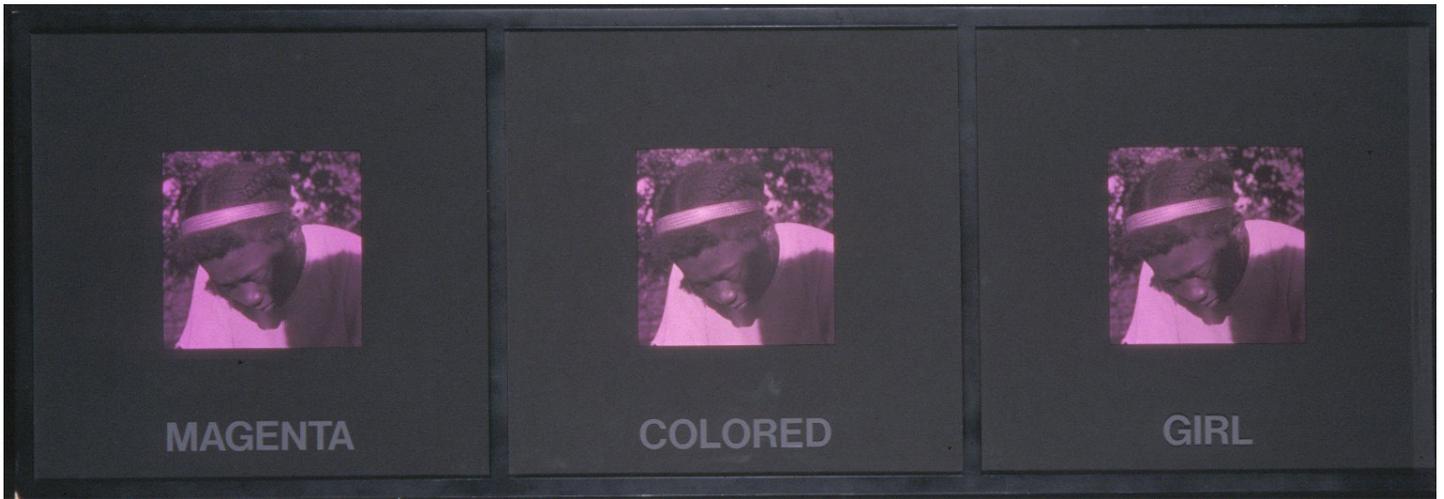
**Figure 11:** Viewer reads *ERASURE* during the gallery opening.





Figures 12 and 13: Viewer reads *FIRE*.





**Figure 14:** Carrie Mae Weems, “Magenta Colored Girl” (1997), Silver print with text on mat, 30 7/8 × 30 7/8 in.



**Figure 15:** Simpson, Lorna. “You’re Fine” (1988), 4 color Polaroid prints, 15 engraved plastic plaques, 21 ceramic pieces, (101,6 x 261,6 cm).



**Figure 16:** Gallery installation shot featuring myself and viewers at the central table.