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Fringes

by

Dantaye Walker

A Thesis
Submitted to the Honors College of
The University of Southern Mississippi
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ABSTRACT

Fringes is an experimental sound installation containing five stations, each representing unique experiences which shaped each associated personality. The installation, though bearing witness to these personalities is seen from my own perspective. This creative journal explains the narrative and story behind each station, provides the artistic context that guided fundamental decisions, and details the final draft of each station and the overall experience of attending the exhibit. Additionally, it was created out of necessity for expression brought on by the traumas I experienced personally. The project also serves as an experiment in low-budget tools and methods for creating conceptual art, taking inspiration from other avant-garde installations from artists such as John Cage, Harry Partch, and Steve Reich, but using little to no money to create similar pieces. The exhibit created an intimate environment where attendees experienced moments of intense vulnerability to utter shock in order to understand these individuals living at the edge of society.

Keywords: Avant-garde, sound installation, experimental composition, readymade, DIY methods, musique concrete

DEDICATION

I dedicate *Fringes* to my grandfather and brothers, though our feelings have been unspoken for years it seems we have found a new, lovelier way to live. In all things I do, I have you in my heart.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my partner, Matthew Olszewski, and my advisor/mentor, Paul Linden. It was impossible for me to see my potential when I first began this project, but you both have given me clarity of mind. Without your patience and diligence, I could not have done this project. I would also like to express my gratitude to the many different personalities outside the scope of this project who just as equally contributed to who I am today. I am truly privileged and grateful to have experienced as much as I have at such a young age, and it is all because of you.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Fringes is an experimental sound installation hosted at a local bar called The Thirsty Hippo in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. For two nights on November 18th and 19th, viewers could interact with several stations producing soundscapes inspired by experimental avant-garde compositions and their composers. Among other concepts, the exhibit explores trauma, vulnerability, and empathy. This paper serves to clarify and support the ideas, methodology, and processes which made the project come to fruition. It also provides others interested in sound installations, sound art, and experimental art mediums with information that can provide support and insight towards an often-cumbersome creative process.

I knew that thoroughly dissecting my own trauma as well as the many different personalities associated with it would be an arduous process. There were many times I became too overwhelmed to even work on the project at all. However, this project has become a genuine source of fulfillment for me in hindsight. I looked to my artistic idols to guide me through the process of creating a sound installation and used their concepts and methodologies faithfully. I even hosted the exhibit at a local venue, swearing by John Cage's approach to artistic spaces (Austin, 2011). I conveyed the stories of many people in my life sonically through the chaotic mess of the exhibit, providing people with a way to understand their life as well as mine. The exhibit serves as an interactive space that allows viewers to participate in the lives of different personalities in a tangible way. It also allowed me explore vulnerability and offer a piece of my life to people who may resonate with my experiences.

CHAPTER II: THE FRINGES

Upbringing

Katrina served as a great equalizer for kids like me in Mississippi and Louisiana. My partner walked into her bedroom at five years old, burst into tears, and shouted, “My room!” upon seeing the roof that was sleeping in her bed and on top of her belongings. Even today, one of my closest friends is jobless living in a one-bedroom home with both of his parents, a situation driving him to excessive drinking, all in the wake of Katrina. We were all affected greatly.

During that time, my family was already falling apart, Katrina just accelerated the process. In Harvey, Louisiana, I would experience lifelong traumas in my early childhood at the hands of a careless, damaged, and neglectful family. One of the most critical and enigmatic personalities of my life, my mother, began to fade away. Needles and prostitution started to become a habit, and an unrequited love for men who were fond of burning women with hot knives accelerated the process. Scattered across the fuzzy and undesirable memories I hold are physical family photos showing me and my brothers in dimly lit, poorly painted rooms sleeping on top of clothes and dirty stuffed animals. When Katrina hit, my grandmother could no longer stand my mother’s behavior under the pressure of rebuilding the house, and we left for Saucier, Mississippi.

When we arrived, I was shocked by our new house. A raised mobile home sitting behind a “Dead End” sign at the back of a trailer park. It was a startling contrast to the massive home we knew in Harvey. Here, we really began to develop significant behavioral issues. The issues of our early development years were beginning to manifest through our actions, exacerbated by my grandmother’s burgeoning mental health issues.

Personally, I stole food from other kids at lunch, I manifested relationships with girls I had never spoken to, and, at one point, I even brought a knife to school to show my classmates. To my credit, the school was not full of the most pleasant characters to begin with. One of my childhood friends relayed a story to one of our homeroom teachers that I had been knocked unconscious after having my head shoved into a metal pole by an older student. I had no recollection of this event and was just as shocked as the teacher when he told the story in class. Regardless, my brothers and I had a hard time making friends with kids and found solace in our only neighbors, Drew and Tory.

Both were at least three to four years younger than us, an unusual combination of age ranges considering we were anywhere from seven to ten, but beggars could not be choosers. They were simple, Southern children just like us. Drew loved riding his bicycle over poorly built ramps, and Tory just wanted to be around to monitor the idiotic male behavior going on. There was a greater understanding at play that I would not understand until much later when I began to digest my childhood and this project. Drew and Tory's mother was an unusually skinny woman, who looked very tired and gaunt at any point during the day. Her partner was a reddish man who was prone to yelling and leaving for an indiscriminate number of days. Drew and Tory would come and ask if they could play with us inside and, thinking nothing of it as children do, we simply just let them in and played together. Now, it is clear to me that they wanted to escape much like us. Our favorite way to try and escape our home lives was to play House. In House, you simply roleplayed as family members. Every single time we played, we simply pretended to be a normal, loving family, craving what we lacked in our daily life.

After moving away for years, I came back to Saucier in my own time to understand what happened in Saucier. While standing outside of this old mobile home that had now been converted into a meth lab, I had the thought to knock on Drew and Tory's door. No part of me wanted them to answer that door, it was clear that staying in a place like this would thoroughly break any human spirit, especially that of a child. To my confusion, another woman answered the door. Their mother was gone; this was their father's new girlfriend. After I explained who I was, she brought both Drew and Tory out. My heart sank. Firstly, the age gap made the encounter extremely uncomfortable since they were still wholehearted children at this point, and I was approaching the age of 20. Secondly, neither of them had any life behind their eyes nor soul in their voices. They had become husks, all that childlike energy bursting from their minds when I lived there was dried up and gone. Everything I had wished not to happen did. It was heart wrenching, and I could barely speak a word to their so-called mother. After making some small talk about stopping by, I left quickly. I was overwhelmed and sobbed through my drive back home. This entire experience in Saucier with Drew and Tory became the inspiration for the station, "Playing Home." Though the game was named House, we were creating that sense of home children need with the game, and I needed to express this juxtaposition between the initial innocent radiance Drew and Tory exuded and its conclusion as dreadful emptiness.

I mentioned in passing my grandmother's rapidly developing mental health issues. Her behavior ranged from moments of unbridled rage to full paranoid psychosis. My grandfather was physically present but emotionally absent. Amongst several accusations, she suggested he was sneaking men into our home late at night for sex.

There were many nights where my grandmother came into my room and woke me just to whisper about how those men were in the house right now. Her paranoia reached new heights over time, and she decided one week that we would move (with no planning or money to be seen) into the ghetto of Terrytown, Louisiana.

At this point in my life, things become blurry. There were many things which contributed to this lack of presence and awareness. My grandmother started to show signs of Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy and was also quick to physically abuse me and my siblings. Pills and fists rained daily on me and my brothers. I was also prone to depressive episodes as a child and found myself escaping as often as possible from my life during this period. Unfortunately, I was also a painfully sensitive and emotional child. I would often have extreme reactions to the excessive bullying I was receiving at school, resulting in constant beatings and abuse at the hands of my peers. On a certain night, I remember being so exhausted and drained that when I got home from school in the evening I simply went straight to my bed and laid down. I stared at my ceiling for what felt like forever and looked out the window to see that it was already night. Then, I blinked. Now, it was morning. A dreadful feeling washed over me as I walked into school feeling as if it were simply the continuation of the day before. This began my self-destructive journey into mental self-harm, as I began seeing just how long I could stay up for. I experienced severe derealization and still suffer from its effects to this day because of my self-inflicted insomnia. The disorder was also accelerated by a constantly drugged mental state. Despite my lack of consciousness, I can vividly remember those feelings which accompanied my torn memory providing me with a way to interpret and understand my experiences from this time. Lucidity slowly returned to me when we moved to Pass

Christian, Mississippi. It would be here in this small coastal town that I would find my way towards healing, a journey that required reflection on my experiences and the people who surrounded me in my life.

My grandmother was quick to mention God and Satan when she was experiencing mania. Faith was a tool that was used to the most devious ends. However, I saw salvation in Christianity and hoped the school of religion could provide me a way out of my circumstances. Once in Pass Christian, locally known as “The Pass,” we began attending church three times a week. The lineup was seminar on Sunday, choir rehearsal on Monday, and bible study on Wednesday. I attended every event, every week and studied my own personal bible daily. I prayed for 20 minutes every single night confessing my sinful thoughts, expressing my gratitude, and asking for my family to get better. My mind was entirely focused on this spiritual path to salvation, but I couldn't help but notice flaws within its logic.

When I read the bible, I found contradictions in every other page. There were firm rules which bent depending on what God wanted, homosexuality's sinfulness as an example. I started to feel uneasy, understanding that some of the universal truths I held were beginning to melt away. As a child of the internet, I started to read and study debates between Christians and atheists. Video after video, my existential dread grew and I experienced epistemological shock, understanding that not only was my faith in question, but my grandmother's state of mind as well. Though I knew in my mind that I could no longer believe my grandmother and God, I could not see another way to live my life and ran from these new truths. I continued going to church as a Christian by name only. It would not be that easy as the guilt that came with being a non-believer and thus

bound for Hell would eat at my mind every night. I still prayed from time to time out of fear and started to be more involved in the church itself to overcompensate.

Church had started as a place of curiosity and hope but had now become the source of my daily anxiety. The only solace I found was singing, but even that became poisoned when my music director passed away. The day I truly relinquished my faith was when I fell to my knees at a church altar. I sobbed desperately as the congregation sang “God Is So Good” and I sang with them. From that night on, I would be atheist. I would also in turn question everything my grandmother had ever told me. “The Doxology” would represent this unified experience within the church, expressing the different facets of anxiety, comfort, and, most of all, confusion I endured navigating my own spirituality as part of a collective.

During this reflective period of my life, I decided I should find my father and did. It is quite possibly one of the most awkward and alien experiences a sixteen-year-old teenager can have. We shared a few memories here and there; I did my best to get to know him, and he tried his best to get to know me. I would learn soon that my father was a cancer survivor who went through extensive radiation therapy, permanently damaging his vocal cords and lungs. His body was worn, and my time with him was scarce. He would pass away three years later as I turned into a sophomore in college. His death reignited tensions between family, and ultimately, I would end up estranged yet again but longing now for the family I had tasted.

That same year I was incapable of lifting myself up from the new low I had found and began rummaging through my contact list to find any person I shared an intimate enough relationship with to talk to. In passing, I felt a brief connection to my aunt, Tricia.

She was aggressive in both appearance and personality, but she carried a welcoming presence. This combination made me curious; I thought she may be the perfect person to talk to. On a whim, I made a phone call to see if she had the time to hear me out and ended up having the longest conversation, I've had with a family member to date. We addressed a lot of things, like her turbulent lifestyle. She cited multiple occasions where she verbally threatened harm against another person, screamed at the top of her lungs, and destroyed her possessions in fits of rage. One of her favorite experiences to humbly brag about was her time in prison, serving a year-long sentence for aggravated assault. On paper, it seemed like Tricia was dead set on being despised, but she ultimately knew that the only way for her to beat the deeply embedded hatred in her heart was to push it away with care and empathy. Addiction, severe anger issues, melancholy, depression, and antisocial personality traits were all commonly shared experiences on my father's side of the family. As a part of this bloodline, we were destined to suffer greater challenges than the average person. After getting to know her, I could only rant about the injustice I felt having my father taken away from me so soon. Only now do I realize she had just lost her brother then but made no mention of the fact. She was letting me air out my frustrations, knowing the pain herself. Strife was in abundance, and she had found a way to deal with it in a way that made sense to not only her but me as well. Without her ear and inherently loving character, I would have suffered longer than I already had, so I tried to capture her essence in "Too Good for Your Own Bad." This station aims to capture her aggressive persona, but also her laid-back, caring demeanor.

As mentioned previously, my father's passing occurred during my sophomore year of college. This year I would see troubles of equal proportion to those I saw in my

developmental years as a child, but now I only had the company of my partner to help me through. A tornado ripped through my life just to turn around and make certain its wake was adequately decimated. One of the numerous tragedies to occur during this period was the simultaneous death of my grandmother and her daughter, who was also my mother.

Amanda made attempts to stay in contact with me and my brothers when we were children, but she never stayed long and never really left a good impression. The few times my grandmother gave her a chance to stay with us, some money, a few bottles of pills, and my mother went missing. She was a walking ball of flames and inflicted emotional pain on all of us throughout my life. In her defense, emotional pain was a shared experience in my family. Regardless, it was difficult on my grandmother, and she was quick to deflect the topic. “Don’t get your hopes up” was a phrase which followed my mother like a stray dog following a passing stranger. But no matter how much my grandmother downed my mother’s name, she could not help but mention the quality of her heart. She said it was made of glass and gold. My grandmother was also quick to compare my own heart to my mother’s; this would be the only way I could ever say I was truly my mother’s child. We both shared an extreme sensitivity to people and their emotions. I saw this with my mother firsthand when my grandmother was diagnosed with terminal liver cancer. She had been wasting away for years, but we lacked the money and stability to help her. In a few months, my grandmother would become bedridden at our house, a literal skeleton of her former self. To complicate the situation, my mother was in rehab during that time and decided to reconnect with her father and sons. I began texting her every week, and she said she felt like she needed to be around more. Naively, I immediately opened up to her. I traveled to Louisiana nearly every weekend while in

college trying to know as much as I possibly could about my own mother. It was clear to me she may disappear at any moment. All at once I learned more than I ever knew my entire life. She was a registered sex offender, a charge I learned punishes prostitutes. She was in and out of prison for possession of crack, heroin, and meth. She was attracted to mentally ill men, like my older brother's father who was diagnosed with autism at 18. She had a mouth disease known colloquially as "meth mouth" and was treating it with Amazon dentures. She was a Virgo.

I tried my best to stay aware of her habits. She was heavily damaged and prone to spreading her pain to those closest to her. A large talking point was my grandmother's death wish; my mother needs to complete rehab. How could someone who has spent their whole life high suddenly turn around and complete rehab? I spoke with her often about it, it was concerning how often she downplayed the significance of completing the program. I became despondent when she floated the idea of moving in with a few friends around the area and dropping rehab all together. For a week or two, I didn't hear from her. During that time, my grandmother passed away. The smell of death emitting from her bedroom still lingers in my nose to this day. I was in furious ruin. That week, my mother was truly the most pathetic person I had ever encountered: how could she so effortlessly leave at such a critical point in our family's history? Why did she even bother showing her face at all? What was I thinking? I told myself I would never speak to her again. Then, she sent me a photo. Her framed degree stated that she had completed rehab. For the first time in decades, my mother kept her word, and everyone was excited to see the prospect of a new Amanda. A week later, I got a call from the Louisiana State Coroners

Association. She overdosed and died. “Mercedes” was dedicated to her and her legacy as the most enigmatic person I ever knew.

My grandfather was much more emotionally underdeveloped than I was at this point in our lives. As a result, we simply could not get along without fighting. After he began slinging the word “coward” around, I decided to leave home and stay with whoever would open their doors. I was working non-stop to pay for my basic necessities and found a welcoming crew at a local restaurant in Hattiesburg. It was a misfit team of alcoholics, smokers, and just bizarre people. There was a comfort I found in being around these semi-lunatics since this was the crowd I was most familiar with growing up. However, I lacked a foundation. During this time, I stayed up every night to the early morning wondering who I was and what I was meant for in this world. I was looking for some cultural ground that I could stand on, so I could say who I was in a few short sentences. Thankfully, I met Ant. A man I met working at a barbecue restaurant called Murky Waters in downtown Hattiesburg. Through our discussions, I began to understand that some individuals are born outsiders. There are no words to express an outsider’s experience since they feel on the outside of everything, including their home.

Ant was familiar with the low-down lifestyle that comes with growing up in poverty since he was himself a survivor of such experiences. My sense of humor aligned with his. Ant would often tell hilariously self-deprecating stories pertaining to intoxication, relationships, and situational absurdity. Behind the comedy, anyone could see what Ant was honestly saying. In many ways, he lacked self-respect, sleeping with women he was not interested in just because they showed interest in him. He was a compulsive smoker and knew his lifestyle disappointed his wife and children. He was

also an alcoholic and felt the weight of his addictions often. Despite the turbulent lifestyle, Ant worked numerous jobs to cover the costs of caring for his family. He also spent most of his time outside of work with his children, relaying humorous stories involving his unfamiliarity with domestic life. He came off like an intimidating fool but was a well-informed person with life experiences to justify his reasoning and approach. In many ways, I looked up to Ant as a pillar of strength, a testament to how perseverance is greater than any challenge life may drop on your shoulders. In his honor, “YMP” would be dedicated to Ant. The abbreviation stands for an explicit phrase Ant shouted whenever he felt inclined, just for the sake of doing so.

CHAPTER III: LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic Expectation

The process of recording and producing music is one of patience and diligence, virtues which were not familiar to me. I did not have the mental fortitude to look past the trauma I was dealing with during my time in the Media and Entertainment Arts program and spent many days wasting my time, missing the critical practice needed to develop skills as an audio engineer. When my professor announced it was time to develop a senior project, I immediately saw issues in following the normal route expected of students. Typically, in the sound and recording arts field, academic work concludes with a fully produced EP, album, or live sound recording. I had to find a way around this but still stayed firmly within the creative boundaries of sound and recording. I decided to invest in the irreverent perspectives I carried as a young child to make peace with my past, stand out from my program, and engage with sound and recording arts without following the beaten path. So, by the end of that class where our senior projects were announced, I decided I would assemble a sound installation. This medium included many avant-garde composers who sought to holistically express their creative endeavors by expanding how music, and more broadly sound, can be expressed. Sound installations can utilize space and its effects on timbre, it can take place in a small room that creates a sense of claustrophobia, and it can be many things in between combining several different senses as well (Austin, 2011). At this point, my collaborator and close friend, Matthew Olszewski, joined the project as well. In hindsight, he would be the engine for developing the concepts I wanted to realize but lacked the grit to produce. During that time, I would

spend most of my time researching the movements and installations which most inspired me and would guide the project holistically.

Conceptual Foundations

Marcel Duchamp

Duchamp was a controversial figure during his time. Some saw him as a pretentious, lazy elitist who took credit for creating “art” when he simply put random objects on for display. Others believed him to be a pillar of the Dadaist movement, directly revolting against the conventional structures which defined art. Regardless, Duchamp’s work itched at something unspoken in people’s minds. When browsing the works of Picasso, Rembrandt, and Monet, their eyes were met with a men’s urinal crudely placed upon a podium. This re-contextualization of such an ordinary and crass everyday item forced viewers to question their experience within the exhibit so far. However, it also forced them to consider their experience with art entirely. Duchamp was a master at posing these sorts of questions with his work: Where does the appreciation for art begin and end? Who are artists? At what point has art been created versus being stolen? What belongs in an art exhibit? What can art even be defined as? We as artists now see questions like these and shrug. These questions are overplayed and overdone in the media today and carry a snobbish air to them that hypocritically conflicts with the original intent of the associated artwork. However, our jaded perspective on artists like Duchamp are born of the long-standing discussions had over the years regarding this style of art. His work and the question it carries still causes uproar in artistic discussion and rhetoric. And, to put it simply, all he did was paint a fake pseudonym on a urinal and submit it as art.

Duchamp self-labeled this style of sculpture “readymade” because of its easily accessible nature (Goldsmith, 1983). In *Fringes*, I was early in the conceptualization period and found myself taking the whole project too seriously. The subject matter was quite dark, but the emotional impact it was having on my well-being was making it difficult to work. To combat this, I started discussing how to incorporate humor into the installation with my partner and advisor. A common issue I ran into was wanting so badly to be as original as possible despite knowing how impossible such a thing is. Art is born of inspiration, and inspiration is the direct appreciation of an existing art form. To step outside of my comfort zone and effectively utilize humor, I took inspiration from Duchamp and executed his “readymade” concept. To represent my experience with each personality, I would find a readily working item that produced sound. It was funny: we were trying to construct a sound installation which typically utilizes sound design personally created by our hands. But in this instance, we are taking the work of manufacturers and repurposing it for experimental art. This idea also expanded upon the emotional capacity of readymades, not only appreciating the sounds of these everyday objects, but intimately connecting with them as if they were the spiritual pathway to understanding the station’s character.

Harry Partch

Harry Partch was known for his ability to create sculptures that were aesthetically pleasing and fully functioning instruments. When analyzing his designs, it is clear how inspired Partch was by surrealist movements considering how some of the instruments look like they were ripped from a Salvador Dali painting. Many people do not realize

how Partch's perspective towards constructing instruments was born of necessity, rather than creative interest (Ogdon, 2017). When capturing emotions deep inside our psyche, it can be restrictive to work with the narrow confines of modern instruments. Additionally, most of these modern instruments follow the strict rules of traditional Western classical music theory. Equal temperament, as music theorists call it, is a compromised tuning system which negates the natural harmonics of an instrument for the convenience of musicians performing together in orchestras. Partch's understanding of this system and extreme interest in native traditional music developed a hatred towards the dogmatic nature of Western music.

Partch's protest came through in his compositions of avant-garde music as well, creating his own scales and tuning systems. The tuning system used 43 notes tuned to intervals only sensical to Partch's mind. This was a painstaking system to operate under, and musicians who worked with Partch spent countless hours practicing his compositions and working with him to produce recorded work (Ogdon, 2017). Much like Duchamp, Partch's work has been overlooked in recent years as pretentious nonsense that is simply trying too hard to convey elevated art concepts. However, Partch explained that his sculptures allow him to play from his soul. The shape of the instruments and the tuning systems they utilize are entirely designed by Partch's mind. I related to this philosophy of creative necessity and used it to justify decisions about which representative devices would be involved in the installation. Additionally, selecting the medium of sound installation was necessary to me to express the truest feelings I held about the exhibit's many personalities.

John Cage

John Cage is a name most artists and musicians are familiar with because of his exceptional success as an avant-garde composer. Cage was a disciple of the movement's pioneers and has some of the most varied acts associated with avant-garde composition. In one piece, aptly titled "4'33'", Cage sits at a piano for three minutes and forty-four seconds in silence (Austin, 2011). In another, Cage hangs various plant-like cactus leaves and sunflowers using wires and conducts electricity through each of them. The altered voltage is then processed into tonal music. On other occasions, Cage has constructed experimental theater designs along with experimental plays creating unorthodox theatrical experiences.

Cage believed in the many different mentors who laid the groundwork for avant-garde work. It was his assumption that there was no boundary between art and life since both only served to inform the other (Austin, 2011). His work always directly involved the audience and at times used them as tools in composition. In the previously mentioned silent composition, Cage was using the subtle sounds within the theater as musical tools. It was this tenacious and bold energy Cage exuded that brought these compositions to life. Cage understood that more than anything, art is a spiritual process that requires faith and dedication from the composer.

This was useful to me during the development of *Fringes*, as Cage's confidence and faith was the key component for realizing his work. In the early stages of installation development, it was easy to doubt any approach used for developing the stations. However, understanding that faith was the key component to building a full body of work made conceptualization simpler and more efficient. It also assisted in logistical

troubleshooting when modifying and constructing the stations, remembering that the vision of the project is of the utmost importance and everything else simply needs to support the greater purpose of the piece. Cage's idea of using theater ambience as musical composition seems ludicrous initially, but his conviction when performing the piece made many believe in the work as much as he did. I originally had concerns over isolating sounds within the exhibit to prevent mixing soundscapes, but wished to create an atmosphere that supported the visual and sonic aspects. This idea was directly taken from Cage and his holistic sense of art and how it interacts with space.

Edgard Varese

Edgard Varese was a French musique concrete composer. Musique concrete was a genre of experimental music which focused on the manipulation of sounds through physically altering the audio recording format (François, 1991). In Varese's time this was magnetic tape. He was the first of many artists at the time to take a personal, individualized approach to composing within the genre. This style of music appeared when recording technology was initially invented or at least became commercially available. Most music was composed using tape manipulation solely. Artists would record any sound such as train engines, people talking, orchestral recordings, etc. Then, they would take the tape the sounds were recorded on to and manipulate them in several ways. You could stretch the tape, cut it into pieces and rearrange them asymmetrically, or even flip the tape upside down. Through whatever physical means of manipulation, the tape could be altered and re-purposed for other musical purposes. Varese's name is most known for his piece which inspired many in the genre, *Poeme Electronique*. Before his

time experimenting with tape, Varese was already known for his instrumental compositions which bore a striking resemblance to the sound of his tape music. Varese's musical approach was focused on organizing sound, rather than composing music. This is reflected in his work which uses atonal harmony and unusual percussion (François, 1991). He also had a chaotic and lively sense of rhythm, disregarding it for the sake of creating a wall of sound. Varese described his style of composition as the organization of sound (François, 1991). When we began assembling the stations at the exhibit, there was a compositional aspect to *Fringes* I had not considered. How was I going to make all these sounds uniquely personalized but fit together within the space provided? I needed to make the different textures and sounds fit together so nothing was overpowered but everything was heard. Upon research, Varese's composition and methods for making music seemed to fit my objective in overwhelming exhibitgoers with the persistent sound of each station in one room. Taking inspiration, I thought of the different stations as different atmospheres and if each were distinct enough, they would combine and create a unified energy in the exhibit. So, each station had highly varied characteristics between each other. Some were almost entirely rhythmic in nature and used a small loop, while others droned and used more melodic elements in their sound.

Independent Creators

In a much less academic setting, I am inspired by the countless independent musicians and artists who are paving their own path in the digital age, artists such as: Jack Stauber, Andres Guerrero, and Barrington Hendricks. These artists think deeply on their own experiences and use their given resources to create masterful works that exude

passion and care. Most of these artists are creating every aspect of their work, as well as animators using professional sound design, musicians hosting exhibits for sculptures, and rappers who rival performing live musicians with their concert performances. Being unrecognized, these artists rarely have the funding many others are granted working with largely funded corporations but excel in their ability to create meaningful, inspiring art.

Jack Stauber is a musician and animator who has mastered DIY methods for music production and animation. Most of his songs utilize cheap drum patterns and synth sounds that can be found in any Casio keyboard in any thrift store. He runs these sounds through VHS players to color the sound and then sings over these songs in an unbridled chaotic manner that is both exciting and anxiety-inducing. Combining this music with the animations he makes in the digital art program, Microsoft Paint, he creates a world originating entirely from his own curious mind.

Andres Guerrero, also known as ANDYLAND, is an animator and independent game developer who uses game engines familiar to any amateur game developer to create games which explore topics like faith, relationships, and insanity. Investing all his time and money relentlessly, Guerrero's storytelling abilities and sincere expression of life's simplest moments are colored by the strange but familiar aesthetic of early CD-ROM computer games.

Barrington Hendricks, also known as JPEGMAFIA, uses a variety of free digital audio workstations to create experimental hip-hop that he then remixes to perform live. Though there is no academic work and even less proof of the methods these artists use to create and express, they have so heavily influenced my perspective on art and creation that I feel it necessary to address their work.

CHAPTER IV: THE INSTALLATION

Format and Exhibit

Fringes has five stations: “The Doxology”, “Playing Home”, “Mercedes”, “Too Good for Your Own Bad”, and “YMP.” To create stations which represented entire personalities, it was necessary to narrow the scope of what the stations contained. This prevented us from neglecting time away from other stations, but also forced us to think critically about each aspect. As a result, we decided we would only use three pedestals in each station, and each pedestal would house one device. The first pedestal would provide sound for the whole station. It was essentially the heart of the station and served to represent the core of the associated personality. The second pedestal would provide that sound in one way or another, representing an event, mentality, or change in that person. The third pedestal would provide the primary output of the station and represent the current state of that person in the current day. All the stations were situated in a local Hattiesburg venue, the Thirsty Hippo. The stations were placed against each wall of the exhibit, some in darker corners, others in more apparent lighting. The goal was to have the aesthetic and space of the venue contribute to the greater vision of the project, as well.

Finding Fringes

Along with my partner, Matthew Olszewski, we started our search for our primary materials. It occurred later than we had both anticipated due to my financial difficulties encountered that summer. Luckily, the goal in our search was not to find working equipment and professional-grade technology but to find objects which spoke to their representative personalities. We began traveling nearly every other weekend to different

thrift stores, flea markets, and consignment stores between Mississippi and Louisiana. After a fruitless search, however, it was clear we needed to determine which devices were critical to the represented personalities. In hindsight, the biggest hurdle we had to overcome was my inability to be vulnerable.

Matthew is a modern-day engineer that is as pragmatic as he is inspired. When I discussed my ideas with him, he would be able to convert them into tangible plans and schematics in a matter of minutes. Also, had I communicated my concepts clearly at the very beginning of the project, we may have had time to dive deeper into the details of each station. I know now that I was scared to share because speaking aloud my experiences validated them as real. Those experiences being real meant being alone. I knew that in college only a very select group of people could understand the place I was coming from, and it frightened me to have people blankly look at me when I shared my experiences. However, I developed through the course of this project the ability to disregard this fear; I understood that we as individuals can never truly know another's experience. Once I allowed myself to be honest and vulnerable with Matthew, we could more efficiently compromise and plan the project's development.

Our searches were mostly aided by a list of the stations and three critical components without which *Fringes* could not work. Once we had those components listed, searching became easy. There was concern over money, but we received a support grant from the university which made it possible to travel and purchase items as we saw fit.



Searching at the Fringes

The Doxology

1st Pedestal: CD Player, CD

This first station ended up being worked on much later, as it uses numerous, faceless personalities to convey one unified mind, the church. The CD player was chosen simply because this was the actual device used to play music in our building. It is a humble piece of equipment with no fancy bells and whistles, no interesting colors, and no function beyond playing music. It is this solitary function and lackluster appearance that conveys how the church became once I understood my own faith. It feels prison-like and, to put it bluntly, boring. No modifications were made to the device, touching on the concept of “purity” within Christianity. Despite the pure state this player is in, it is still just a CD player. Much like the device, people are simply people, and if we were measured by quantifiable amounts of purity, we would all be ashamed. The player uses a

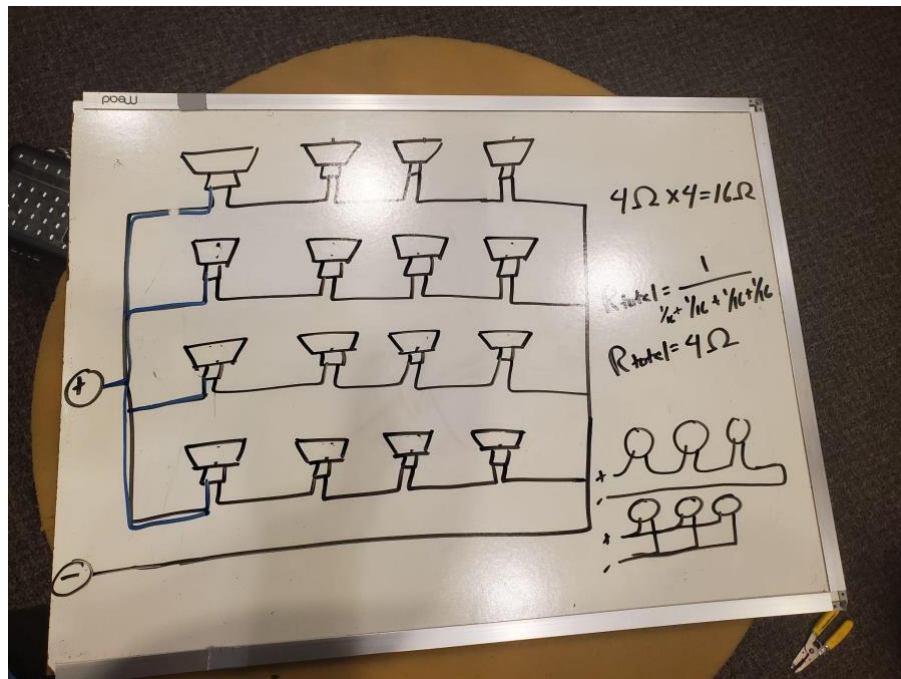
single CD with gospel music burned onto it. The music is just one of the endless Baptist sing-a-longs with numerous children singing and a poorly produced band behind them. I recorded the audio into Audacity, a digital audio workstation so that I could analyze and modify the audio file. I took the original audio and cut the instruments from it entirely, leaving just the children's vocals. The vocals were copied and "Paul stretched" which is an effect that can elongate a few seconds into five minutes. This created an ambient texture that I then mixed in with the original vocals, adding a sense of anxiety to the film. I then looped the audio for hours, so it would last the entirety of the exhibit. I made these unnerving changes to the song to convey a brainwashing element about the music.

2nd Pedestal: Wooden Box, Chorus Pedal

The second part of this station utilizes a Marshall SV-1 Supervibe Chorus pedal housed within a wooden box. This pedal has a subtle timbral effect on the signal being accepted. I wanted to create an effect that created an audible double-take; the change in timbre is not easily detectable. This leads to an uncanny experience where the listener runs in circles determining what the change in signal was. During my time spent questioning my own faith, I often found myself in this uncanny territory of thought that forced me to constantly revisit my thoughts and consider how real what I believed was. By utilizing such a subtle timbral change to the station, I was inflicting on listener's the same questionable confusion I was experiencing navigating Christianity.

3rd Pedestal: Eight Computer Speakers

For the final portion of the station, we wired together eight different old computer speakers. Aesthetically, they are varied in size and design, but still speakers, nonetheless. They represent the congregation of the church.



The Doxology's Schematics

The congregation is represented by the speakers simply because they only reproduce and promote the hegemonic material being carried through by the CD player, the primary sound source. The technical modifications also contributed towards the greater purpose as we had to gut the speakers of all their internal circuitry to unify their specifications and allow me and Matthew to run the same audio signal through all of them.

Too Good for Your Own Bad

1st Pedestal: Cassette Record/Player, Cassette Tape

This station, representing my Aunt Tricia, began with a vintage cassette player to place her personality in time. As a product of the 80s, Tricia's mentality towards society and personal tastes has a distinct character to them that needed to be captured. The cassette inside of the machine was a tape loop Matthew created out of a sample I had sent him. The original sample is Beau Jocque, a Cajun zydeco artist. My father's side of the family are cultural representatives of Cajuns, and Tricia was no exception to the rule. The distinct bayou accent along with her philosophies of life placed her in Southern Louisiana, so Zydeco, traditional Cajun music, felt appropriate. The loop was a drum break, featuring scratching turntables and Beau Jocque saying, "Work, baby! Be careful not to break your hip." (Jocque, 1998) This phrase has two meanings in the context of the station. In this state, it is simply a humorous comment about older individuals dancing.

2nd Pedestal: Wooden Box, Fuzz Pedal

On the second pedestal is a wooden box similar to the one used in "The Doxology." Inside is a fuzz pedal, fuzz being an extreme form of normal distortion. Pushing this signal to the point of distortion represented Tricia's susceptibility to emotional outbursts. Further supporting this sudden aggressive change in behavior, the pedal's volume output was adjusted to be slightly higher than the volume of the signal being received. The intention was to startle whoever activated the pedal to garner a reaction like those exposed to high amounts of rage. In a purely literal sense, you had to push Tricia's button only once to see what she constantly fights.

3rd Pedestal: Shure Vocal Master, Electro-Voice Aristocrat Speaker

The last portion of this station served almost entirely as a visual support to the previous two stations. Though the Electro-Voice speaker and Shure Vocal Master affected the timbral quality of the signal, they were massive pieces of technology that gave off a powerful presence. Matthew and I wanted to capture that idea of threatening demeanor. The height and width of the equipment was comparable to the size of the average person, so any listener standing in front of it felt challenged by its size. As curiosity drew them in and they pushed the button, the signal would jump out at them and that uneasiness standing in front of the large equipment would amplify their reaction. It was validating to see the number of people who were not only scared by this station, but also delighted by its effectiveness.



Too Good For Your Own Bad's Studio Test

YMP

1st Pedestal: Car Stereo, Computer Power Supply

I knew Ant as a tinkerer of sorts, he was always working on cars and making strange modifications to vehicles brought to him. In one sense, he was a capable mechanic that knew exactly what he was doing. In another sense, he was experimenting on cars that were not his at the owner's expense. When it came time to express his essence Matthew and I decided that an old car stereo would be a perfect fit. To incorporate a junkyard quality and also supply an amount of power equivalent to a car battery, we modified a computer power supply to power the stereo. It was a semi-dangerous process that was nerve-racking but felt right in the end. The car stereo itself was tuned to a local radio station that played regional genres to Mississippi like gospel, R&B, and what is generally called "soul music." I have been a listener of this station since I came to Hattiesburg and knew that the unpredictable nature of the commercials would provide a humorous element to the station. Low-fidelity voiceovers of local tire shops and poorly written jingles about insurance were sprinkled in the radio waves between songs.

2nd Pedestal: Behringer Mixer

The second portion of the station used equipment local DJ's might use in more intimate settings. It was a cheap, twelve-channel mixer, and we only used two of the channels to monitor the receiving radio signal. Attendees could modify the signal using equalization, different effects built into the mixer, and the simple ability to increase and decrease the volume. In a more metaphorical sense, the mixer was a loose way to control

and restrict the radio signal. It is the loose restraint that felt characteristic of Ant who, functioning on a constant state of intoxication, still managed to keep his life together more than most others participating in the same lifestyle.

3rd Pedestal, RCA Tower Speakers

To further support the junkyard aesthetic, Matthew and I used two roadside speakers as the output. Though they looked like a quality set of speakers, they were constructed of particle board and used very small speakers incapable of handling the lower signals they were putting out. However, if you overloaded the speakers by raising the volume of the mixer and played with the equalization on the channel strips, you could get a distorted bass sound from the speakers. This was terrible for the health of the two towers and represented Ant's jeopardized health at the hands of "having a good time."

Playing Home

1st Pedestal: Modified Toy

The idea of lost innocence is somewhat perverse in nature as our minds typically associate children with that concept. I wanted to capture the discomfort of this idea and knew that a toy would appropriately represent innocence but needed to disturb others. Our approach to this was to open the toy up, exposing its circuitry for all to see, and crudely modify it to provide signal to the next pedestal. Everything magical and pleasant about a child's toy was now ruined, the internal components and LEDs were now clear as day. Drew and Tory were children, but when I had returned to see them, it could not have been more apparent the horrors they had seen over the years. Though they dressed the same, in their green and pink attire, they had lost that joy they held when we knew each other.

2nd Pedestal: Transducers, Screen Door, Contact Microphones, Mixer Board

Though the pain and sadness were apparent in their eyes, Drew and Tory seemed to now spend most days inside. Inside, it is hard to say what they experience. Was their mother exposing them to drug use? Was their father abusing their mother? Was their father abusing them? No one could say for certain, but most could see that there was something going on behind that screen door. On certain days when we were younger, Drew and Tory would also run outside with the sound of banging and screaming behind them. So, we decided to use a door which visually resembled the doors often seen in trailer parks, much like the one Drew and Tory occupied. We converted it into a speaker to express this giant question mark that lingered beyond their front door. By attaching

two transducers to the door, we could force the door to resonate with the signal it was receiving from the toy. To force engagement, we placed a sign encouraging viewers to knock on the door. Whenever they knocked, they significantly increased the amplitude of the signal resonating through the door. Contact microphones were placed behind the door to pick up all the audio flowing through the door. After going to a hidden mixer board, the signal went to its final portion.

3rd Pedestal: CRT TV

In 2008, most low-income families were still using CRT TVs, and we were no exception in Saucier. These TVs fill me with a great sense of nostalgia and coincide directly with my memory of Drew and Tory. It only felt appropriate to make one the final output of the station. The design was archaic and somewhat crude, we took the two audio signals coming from the mixer board and plugged one into the audio input of the TV and the other into the video input. These TVs were not capable of distinguishing video signals and audio signals from each other, so whenever the audio increased in volume, visual glitches would appear on the screen. The knocks from viewers in combination with the toy's original signal volume would flash bright stripes across the otherwise blank, dark screen. It was a violent and disturbing scene that successfully captured the sense of despair I associated with my visit to see Drew and Tory once more.



Playing Home Being Assembled

Mercedes

1st Pedestal: Modified Toy Record Player, Vinyl Record

My mother was an anomaly that existed in the past, so it only felt appropriate to use some oddball technology from a time before myself. After browsing many thrift stores, we came across a Fischer-Price record player made in the 70s intended for children. It was a fully functional machine that read both LPs and singles and even had variable speed for records. This would be a great tool for viewer interaction as they could slow down and speed up the record, creating a dreamy, chaotic sound when combined with the other pedestals. The record we selected was a slow pop tune from 1962, the sound of which embodied my mother's interests. She had multiple tattoos of both

Marilyn Monroe and Betty Boop located across her legs and arms, two of her greatest idols. The record provided this lounge room quality that was necessary to capture her personality. To get the signal from the record to the next pedestal, we re-routed the audio away from the speaker and put a connection at the which effectively turned it into an instrument.

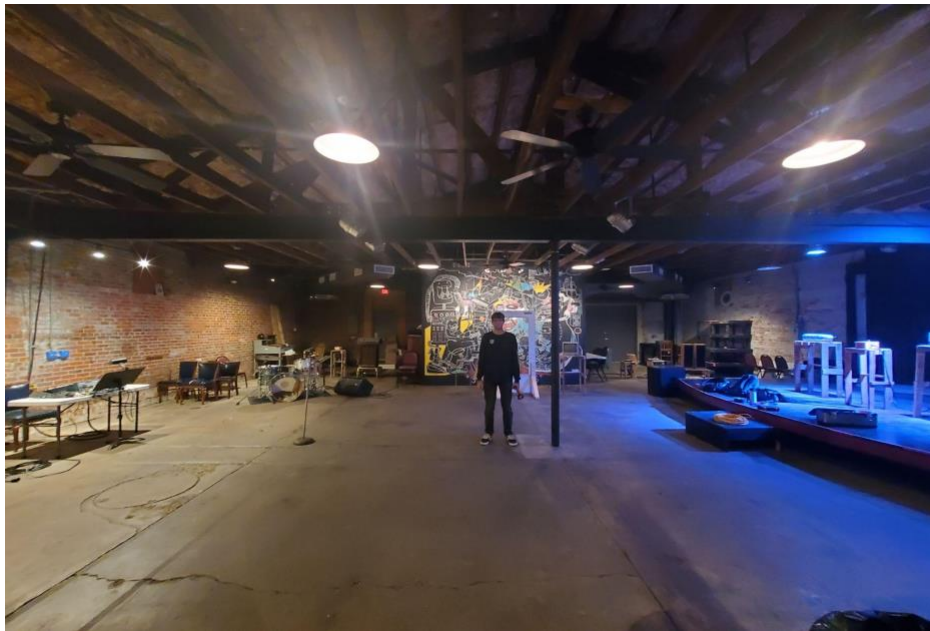
2nd Pedestal: Wooden Box, Chorus Pedal

Located in the wooden box we constructed was a FAB Chorus pedal. My mother's constant substance abuse and damaged character made it difficult for her to firmly create her own identity. In an attempt to convey such a concept, we heavily applied a chorus effect to the station's sound to create a disturbingly dream-like atmosphere. This atmosphere represented the mental turmoil my mother must have found herself in when using drugs in the face of emotional troubles and mental health issues.

3rd Pedestal: Modified Answering Machine

The final pedestal hosts an old answering machine, repurposed to accept whatever signal was sent to its speaker. This device conveyed the relationship I had with my mother as an answering machine works one way and only when no one is actively listening to what is being said. Many times, she would call, and we would not be around to pick up. There are many different tonalities that came from our childhood answering machine: fear, anger, disappointment, joy, and all shades between. We were never allowed to call her back; she was only allowed to speak to us once my grandmother allowed it. As the installation went on, the signal driven through the machine's old and

frail speaker would degrade the quality of the song. By the end of the exhibit, the only thing which could be made out was the melancholy melodies distorted by the speaker's self-destruction. This effect represented her descent and eventual death, both of which were witnessed in real time by my family.



Fringes at the Thirsty Hippo

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

Fringes is a success in many regards. It followed in the footsteps of many avant-garde artists before, advancing and combining their ideas into one project. Duchamp inspired nearly all the devices which were gifted or found by us. In true readymade fashion, only a select few were exceptional in nature while the rest were ordinary household items. Cage's freeform expression could be found in the holistic cohesion of the exhibit. The space itself represented the personalities and had a spiritual effect on individuals who attended the event. Even Varese's organized sound strategy was apparent in the cacophonous music that constantly played.

As far as scholarly work, it was difficult to translate ideas and purposes into academic settings. Typically, we see two territories in thesis work. The first follows experiments and hypotheses that are tested and disproven to come to some definite conclusion that can be publicized. In the second, the work is almost entirely creative involving composition, physically practicing, and performing. With this exhibit, the process was driven solely by curiosity and creative vision. Sound installations have a loosely recorded history that may provide some inspiration, but there is ultimately no framework to follow. There is also no data available in related sources that can inform the piece as the problems which require data only arise out of seemingly ridiculous ideas and concepts. In the case of YMP, Matthew researched many ways to power a car stereo without a car battery and found a computer supply would suffice. However, the computer supply would not provide power until we bypassed a certain fail-safe within the circuitry. After cutting several wires and crossing our fingers, we could then supply power to the station. Sound installation assembly is only possibly through constant focus, discussion,

and analysis. It is those three concepts which bring artists into scholarly territory as research becomes a necessary process to solve unexplored issues. It is a simple process in concept, but arduously cumbersome in practice.

Throughout the night, I also spoke to many individuals who had questions pertaining to the different stations and thought processes behind them. This was an excellent exercise in vulnerability, and I have come to a clearer understanding not only about myself, but people in general. Through this exhibit, I was able to explore my trauma and discuss the different people who informed my personality today, regardless of the positive and negative effect they had on my mental health. Most of all, however, this project has gifted me with a greater ability to build intimate relationships along with a clearer understanding of how to navigate the world. I will continue to learn from this world and provide a voice for those who have never been heard.

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