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Artist Statement and Research: *We Will Not Die Old Together*

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The reality of the situation is we live on a planet so overpopulated that people are beginning to make estimates as to when it will end. We spend our whole lives surrounded by others but only really know a handful of them. And then one day, just as suddenly as they arrived, they leave. You may wonder how one can ever truly be alone, but I can be alone in a manner of ways - the physical presence of other human beings does not necessarily add or subtract from my underlying sense of aloneness.

We need and long for the connection and comfort that friends and family provide, yet we can often remain isolated because of our own insecurities. By opening ourselves up to relationships, we open ourselves up to fear. We become afraid that those we love will abandon us and leave us to fend for ourselves, afraid that meaningful connections are impossible or will not last... How will someone new to you react to you? Will they judge you? It is this lack of comfort and security that leads us to feel abandoned, desolate, alone. When we cannot connect to others how do we know we are alive? The disconnect that happens with the passing of time happens for different reasons: different places, timing, personalities. What causes this disconnect? If time can drift us apart how come this is possible?

As a child I grew up moving every six years, constantly having to leave behind places as well as friends. At first I resented this, not understanding the exotic countries and being frustrated at them not understanding me. Moving meant months of bullying, of nobody trying to understand what you thought about this or that, of coming home and maybe spending time with the one other friend who picked you out of everyone on that dreaded

first day of classes because they too knew they would be moving soon. Children react to everything with such open emotion that somehow they understand what the adults did not: someone leaving you is not a nice feeling. It is this simple statement that shaped my view on relationships. I could be the one leaving or you could be the one leaving: either one included someone being left.

By the time I was sixteen I was choosing the leaving. My parents let me go off to boarding school and those two years brought me closer to people than I'd ever been before. I lived with them, talked to them, ate with them, studied with them - anything you could imagine, we did together. This leaving was harder. But then the usual occurred. We took different paths, lived in different places, made new friends, different friends. Life is constant change and relationships are no exception to the rule. As I started to get ready to leave yet again, I decided I wanted to explore the topic - I wanted to visualize the feeling of leaving, of being left. I wanted to understand why it was possible to feel so alone in a room full of people.

In *We Will Not Die Old Together* I address this feeling (and fear) of being alone by representing, in a variety of ways, the number of people we will not know when we die. This piece explores the interpersonal relationships we experience throughout our lifetimes and the variety of ways in which these can change. The people in my installation are present only as images. Their presence is virtual, their identities constructed. They are closed off from the viewer behind screens and boxes so that the viewer cannot interact with them. They cannot speak to you, you cannot feel them as you would real people, they are simply THINGS rather than BEINGS. It is this lack of connection which isolates the viewer

from their surroundings, finally leaving them with the realization that *We Will Not Die Old Together*.

I decided that in order to show this idea I needed to take the viewer on a journey of sorts as a way to mimic the leaving process. I set the installation up in three different segments, meant to be viewed in a particular order. The viewer walks through an area filled with human sized cubes, on through walls of photographs, until eventually reaching a tent-like structure where a video is shown. These different mediums are used to highlight how each section is a different part. This difference is meant to be noticed as I mean it to draw attention to how things are different in life as we move forward (as corny as that may sound). Here the layout of the installation is important as the different experiences should add onto one another to make more sense as the viewer moves forward in the piece. First the viewer is presented with the physicality of humans that they cannot connect with, then they see a more intimate portrayal of these same people and hopefully begin to connect to them in a way, before seeing the video where the viewer is eventually left alone.

Each segment has been carefully thought about as a separate piece as well as how it communicates with the installation as a whole. As one of the overlying statements I am making with this piece is the temporary nature of human relationships, I decided each segment of the installation should appear temporary. The fact that *We Will Not Die Old Together* is an installation means that it is in itself temporary as that is the nature of installations. One of the first sections the viewer sees is the looming structure, built to look like a nomadic tent. This visual association helps as these structures are MEANT for leaving. Their sole purpose is to be easy to pack up and travel with. The string holding the bamboo in place further demonstrates the temporary nature of the structure as it does not appear

stable. The structure appears as if it has been installed but could be taken down at any moment. The empty interior mimics the empty feeling of leaving, helping to complete the metaphor of the tent as a human vessel. Just as a person leaves a place, this installation will too. The viewer unwittingly enters this otherwise inviting structure only to have to leave it - an action which does not leave them feeling alone but rather as if they had done the natural thing. In this way I am emphasizing how naturally leaving comes and how occasionally it happens so slowly one does not even notice it.

The walls of photographs are another segment of the installation which I hope will lead the viewer to understand the temporary. The photographs recollect a past time. They are fragments, not whole moments - leading to the feeling of missing something. You do not necessarily remember them. They are nostalgic. When you change, your view on others changes. The things that make them individuals may appear different to you and we may begin to not see them as they truly are. Are they really that way or do we simply remember them that way? We tend to forget that as we are changing, so too are others.

These scenes are already past and cannot be achieved again, and as such play into the concept of the temporary. This is highlighted by the writing under the photographs that shows that these are simply memories. These photographs in particular are taken in such a way that they appear extremely intimate. I chose to increase the level of intimacy by including writing that is meant to be interpreted as from the perspective of the photographer or the photographed. An example of this is "*I absolutely adore the way the morning light plays across your shoulders and collarbones and how you don't know where your freckles went and laughed when I suggested they may have gone for a walk. I like your morning laugh.*" This diary-like entry is meant to heighten the idea of a fleeting moment

being remembered, just as it talks about. I chose the writing style to appear like a diary-entry or personal letter so as to make the viewer feel closer to those I photographed. I hope that this allows the viewer to think about how photographs capture a particular moment that is then frozen in time, never to be experienced again.

I was inspired to add writing underneath my photographs after a discussing I had with the photographer Brea Sounders on how to make the installation seem more personal to the audience. I had previously been researching the photographer Duane Michals and our conversation reminded me of his use of text. Duane Michals was a photographer who explored the link between narrative and photographs, ultimately creating photo sequences that led the viewer to interpret his work as a series of stories (Meaux, 1995). In *This Photograph Is My Proof* (1974) Michals uses writing that is interpreted as that of the photographer even though the photograph was not autobiographical. Through choosing to use his own handwriting, Michals not only acknowledges his link to his work but rather brings it to the forefront of the viewer's mind, thus leading the viewer to believe what is written (Reznik, 2014). Michals used writing to evoke a memory through an absence in this photograph. I adopted a similar approach after revisiting his works and remembering how they made me feel. *This Photograph Is My Proof* (1974) in particular causes a kind of ache within me because although the image appears to be happy, the writing clearly shows that the happiness has passed. By putting the viewer in the mindset of the photographer or the person being photographed they are easier able to connect to the photographs and understand them as intimate, temporary moments.

These moments are then acted out in the video as there are different zoom ins on people's more intimate actions. The video is used to show the daily actions of people and

what one starts to forget first. Here the disconnect is shown in how temporary each action is. Time passes quickly in the video before each person exits the screen, leaving the viewer alone. I intend this to allow the viewer to make an instant connection between the idea of time passing and the loss of relationships. In the video people are physically leaving, but the fact that the viewer does not ever fully see a single body plays into the idea that they were never mentally connected either.

By keeping the installation in different parts I have compartmentalized them, dehumanized them. The idea is that they are confined to their separate sections - they cannot interact with one another just as you cannot interact with them as you would a real person. The passage through the piece provides a structure to the viewer's experience as they repeatedly see the same figures but in different artistic mediums. The fact that the subjects depicted in each picture are the same is meant to show the passage of time as it shows our inability to connect with our past self. As the viewer moves through the installation they see different sides to each person shown, none of which connect.

This idea of being confined to different sections is continued on a smaller level within each section. An example of this are the photographs which draw us in, promising a personal encounter only to find that our ability to connect is impeded by the rigid structure of the grid which contains them. Each image is sealed in plastic and thus separated from real contact with both us and each other. This compartmentalization, which results in a lack of connection, reinforces the work's overall theme of disconnect. Here the action of chopping up images and putting them in a grid is just as important as the images themselves. It is important to me that the audience understand that this action highlights

the feeling of aloneness as the plastic material keeps us from connecting with the otherwise intimate moments.

You can further see this use of the grid in the video work as I use the frame as a way of confining the various characters whilst blurring them together into one to mimic the way we begin to remember people as time passes. The obvious separation of videos keeps the characters from being seen as whole as no combination of videos ever creates a complete person just as the individual videos themselves only show parts of the people depicted within. These videos are meant to look as if the subject could be interacting with the audience, however they are completely silent.

A key concept of *We Will Not Die Old Together* involves many cubes that each feature body parts shown from each angle so as to give the illusion of a real person when placed on top of each other. Just like the video, the subject is placed into a medium in which they cannot interact directly with the real world or each other. This demonstrates the disconnect that can occur between people not only as time passes, but also as people take different paths or simply change who they are. Each cube is the size of the average human body part shown on it, which is used as a way to generalize the public and further the disconnect felt through the lack of personalization. These cubes represent all the different people we will meet in our lifetimes that we will no longer know when we die. These cubes convey a strong message through their physical presence as the people shown have been contained to boxes. By putting them each in their own box I am separating not only the people as a whole but each part of them. Just as we forget the everyday actions of the people we used to know the best, we forget their appearances. People blend together in our

minds, creating new forms that don't exist in reality just as any arrangement of these boxes does not form the real human.

The stackable nature of these boxes mean that the audience is meant to interact with them to create their own idea of a person. The interchangeability of these implies the interchangeability of people in our lives. As we lose some, we gain others. This way of looking at people as parts may seem morbid, however I view this connection between people to be natural. Just as the boxes are empty constructions, so too are the composite people that populate their surfaces. Here people are shown as fabrications of our own minds - we project onto them what they are like and what part goes with what other part. Our ability to reassemble these "people" according to our desire shows me the way in which we edit or remove parts of people's personalities when we remember them. Our disconnect leads us to ignore certain parts of them just as the viewer is invited to pick and choose boxes based on their own desires. This physical interaction is made even more important by the fact that the audience cannot actually interact with the people shown in each section of the installation. Although the viewer is able to rearrange the boxes, they cannot speak to the people portrayed.

Throughout *We Will Not Die Old Together* the viewer experiences the disconnect that time and chance provides. People have been constricted to boxes, sealed in frames and plastic, set in a screen in which they cannot speak, unable to properly interact with one another as well as the audience. The idea that these are placeholders that cannot talk to you illustrates the feeling of being alone, of remembering what it was like to talk to somebody and having the inability to connect with them now. It is through this lack of connection that

I attempt to isolate the viewer from their bizarre surroundings in order to emphasize the natural process of leaving and the aloneness it leaves us with.



THIS PHOTOGRAPH IS MY PROOF

*This photograph is my proof. There was that afternoon,
when things were still good between us, and she embraced
me, and we were so happy. It did happen, she did
love me, look see for yourself!*

Duane Michals. *This Photograph is my Proof*. 1974. Photograph.

http://www.shanelavalette.com/images/journal/duanemichals01_large.jpg

Works Cited

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