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THE CONTINUING BALLAD OF FRANCO THE KID

By

Jayson Ming Triplett

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of
Mississippi State University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Fine Art
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The Continuing Ballad of Franco the Kid is an installation housing a collection of thoughts, both static and animated, addressing the absurdities of cultural dichotomy in contemporary America. Its theme-park aesthetic is an intentional appropriation meant to echo the spectacle that makes up America's cultural landscape. Within this presentation the action of various iconic characters merge with fragmented text to form an allegorical matrix used to address America's consumption and entertainment-obsessed culture and the consequential malaise induced by such obsession. *The Continuing Ballad of Franco the Kid* addresses this cultural state of being while underscoring current methods of communication and thought-control carefully orchestrated by corporate driven media machines, and the resulting dangers of such productions.

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my family and friends for their abundance of love, support and understanding.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to extend his sincere gratitude for all the individuals who gave their time and attention throughout the duration of this project. I would like to thank William Andrews, Robert Long, Kate Bingaman-Burt and Herbert Rieth for being members of my committee.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. AMERICA’S MENTAL ECOLOGY	3
“Is everybody crazy?”	3
3. AMERICA’S TOTALITARIAN DEMOCRACY	8
“Reign, Reign, Go away”	8
4. SIMULATIONS IN AMERICA	12
“I feel fictional.”	12
5. THE CONTINUING BALLAD OF FRANCO THE KID	14
Overview	14
Textual Elements.....	15
Niagara.....	16
A Motley Crew.....	18
6. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK	23
REFERENCES CITED.....	25
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	27

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Continuing Ballad of Franco the Kid is a collection of thoughts, both static and animated, addressing the absurdities of cultural dichotomy in contemporary America. Cartoon-like and fragmented in nature, this installation at first glance may seem as cryptic to the senses as it is overloading, but its theme-park aesthetic is an intentional appropriation meant to echo the spectacle that makes up America's cultural landscape.

Within this presentation the action, or relative inaction, of various iconic characters merge with fragmented text to form an allegorical matrix used to address America's consumption and entertainment-obsessed culture and the consequential malaise induced by such obsession. An experiment in both phenomenology and contemporary strategies of marketing propaganda, *The Continuing Ballad of Franco the Kid* sub-textually examines the media siege under which our individual core values and authenticity is currently being tested.

America's physical and mental landscapes have become polluted and congested. Our think-space is now cluttered with a most subversive type of product placement. We have fallen prey to the "long con" – conspicuous consumption – resulting from marketing shenanigans aimed at our frivolous nature and worse, our fears and insecurities. Daily we find ourselves being addressed not as citizens but as consumers, members of an amorphous, dumbed-down mass rather than thoughtful individual.

We have become lost inside the production and consumption machine we have built. Economic forces have assumed the technology we once controlled, subjugating all. Its steady hum of “progress” permeates all our senses; silence is foreign and “quiet” no longer exists. We find ourselves enveloped in a full-spectrum of static as the soundtrack of our world grows more “white.”

Besieged by constant stimuli our senses have become immune, numb to its presence. Permanently “logged in,” we have become the *disconnected-connected*. The production machine has made solitude in the meditative sense technically impossible. The very condition that has sustained the individual against and beyond society through moments of reflective transcendence is no longer in our grasp and our psychic well-being is suffering. These issues and more reverberate in the sights and sound found in the installation, *The Continuing Ballad of Franco the Kid*.

Once fiercely free and unfettered, an instinct hard-wired into each one of us, America’s general populace or more appropriately, market base, has fallen under a Huxleyan “soma” induced by contemporary media strategies. In a world of manipulated emotions and manufactured desires, many of us find ourselves gathering daily at various check-out lanes, sheep-like, in an effort to fill an ever growing void brought on by disconnection and anomie.

The Continuing Ballad of Franco the Kid addresses this cultural state of being while underscoring current methods of communication and thought-control carefully orchestrated by corporate driven media machines, and the resulting dangers of such productions.

CHAPTER 2

AMERICA'S MENTAL ECOLOGY

“Is everybody crazy?”

I'm sure all of us have at some point asked ourselves this – most often a flippant aside kept to ourselves while driving in traffic or standing in line at a service desk or even arguing with a loved one – but perhaps it's a question worth taking more seriously. I find myself wondering this more often in regard to the ever growing number of people I know who prescribe to a daily regiment of pharmaceuticals in order to cope with recently named and popularized “professionally diagnosed disorders” that I dismissed long ago as nothing more than normal human reactions to the daily frustrations encountered in life.

Apparently I have not been alone in my query. While researching for this paper I discovered that writer Jim Windolf, in the October 1997 issue of “The New York Observer,” posed the same exact question. In his essay Windolf does the math, reporting the number of people who suffer from some kind of psychological ailment: ten million from Seasonal Affective Disorder, fifteen million from being pathologically socially anxious, fifteen million from depression, three million suffer panic attacks, five million are obsessive/compulsive, and the list continues. While allowing for the overlap created by those suffering from more than one disorder Windolf concludes that, “77 percent of the adult population is a mess.” To Windolf our population was just a few new quantifiable disorders away from being officially nuts in 1997 (Windolf, 1997).

Other publications reach similar conclusions:

Drawing further attention to America's ever declining mental ecology is Arthur Barsky, MD, of Harvard Medical School and the author of *Worried Sick: Our Troubled Quest for Wellness*, 1988. In reference to medical advances alone – Dr. Barsky sheds light on a populace suffering from an unsurpassed affliction in demand of a, “constant need for medical care” (Zerzan, 1994). He further states that the number of ailments claimed to be suffered by Americans rivals the number suffered by those in India and other poor countries – a telling fact (Brody, 1989).

In the 1997, May/June issue of *Psychology Today*, Michael Yapko writes, “The U.S. has a higher rate of depression than almost every other country,” more importantly he adds, “...cross-cultural data show that as Asian countries Americanize, their rates of depression increase accordingly” (Lasn 1999, p. 10).

No doubt the many recent achievements in medical technology are allowing us to live longer while constantly lowering our risks of serious illness. Americans have access to the best, but ironically, it would seem we are feeling worse now than in previous decades or at least we think we are.

An earlier study suggests the same.

The results of a R. H. Bruskin Associates poll from the 1970's to the mid-80's found a 61 percent to 55 percent drop in the proportion of adults who were satisfied with their health and physical condition (Brody, 1989). I find it interesting that the time the poll was taken coincides with the spread of mass communication through the form of television.

As more recent evidence of this growing tendency, a September 3, 1998 overview

of the Pharmaceutical Industry conducted by the Pennsylvania Health Care Cost Containment Council (PHC4), found that new products had contributed to industry growth since 1970. Research based pharmaceutical sales are projected to reach \$124.6 billion by 1998. According to the overview national spending for health care in 1996 increased by 4.4% while spending on prescription drugs increased at over twice that rate at 9.2%. Another telling sign of the general health of our mental ecology is the study's finding that pharmaceuticals which act on the central nervous system topped all the industry's top five product classes in 1996 at 23.9% (PHC4, 1998). Prescription sales, along with diagnosed sufferers, have been on the rise ever since while shockingly only the age of those prescribed seems to be on a steady decline.

American author and philosopher John Zerzan cites the April 2, 2004 edition of the New York Times and brings to our attention the surging use of anti-depressants among preschoolers – *preschoolers* – in his essay, *The Modern Anti-World* (Zerzan, 2004).

Do we really feel as bad as we think we do?

Are our children suffering the same malaises too, or has our society succumbed to yet another carefully marketed campaign of “false needs?” Our nation's psychic well-being, including that of our children, threatens to become a newly discovered world ripe for economic exploitation and colonization.

Surely a populace afflicted with ever-greater levels of disconnection and anomie – a continually growing sadness – must imply an instinctual awareness that life could be better. If our psychic suffering is only increasing, then why aren't we taking steps to recognize and correct the problem rather than simply treating the symptoms? What do

these and similarly focused studies tell us about ourselves and our society? Perhaps our purchasing habits can tell us just as much.

A sobering moment of clarity is reached when reading Saul Bellow's novel *Humboldt's Gift* when the narrator questions the American cry of "suffering." The validity of such a claim must surely be amusing when echoing through a landscape as richly blessed as ours. When compared to the rest of the world one wonders how the majority of Americans could justify such a claim and yet Bellow follows with the interesting perspective that ours is a suffering of a different nature – a suffering caused not from scarcity or deprivation but *plentitude* (Lasn 1999, pp. 10-11).

We now find ourselves living during a time of technological advancements only dreamed of mere decades ago; some genuine, as seen in the many medical advancements that offer hope and even cure to afflictions and diseases recently thought to be life obstructing at the least, fatal at the worst. While many more are designed to relieve our modern populace from as many of our daily burdens as possible; strategically marketed so that we believe we could never live without their aid. Incessant technological renewal results in a multitudinous array of products which reconstruct all social roles and lifestyles. Here lies the problem as all social relations have been subjugated to one of economics.

New products and services are offered daily to help manage our lives in the most efficient way...so many modern conveniences whose unspoken guarantees are to "keep you informed," "lose weight while you sleep," "stay connected," "get you there faster and safely" and "in more style." Yet the most casual reflection of our lives show how little time we feel we really have. A reflection that prompted writer Trish Hall to conclude in

“Why All Those People Feel They Never Have Any Time” (New York Times, January 2, 1988) that, “everybody just seems to feel worn out” by it all (Hall, 1988).

Why then, in the midst of all our prosperity, are we so miserable?

Could we be drowning in the deluge of a production machine run amok? It feels we are aimlessly adrift in a sea of industrial manufactured pseudo needs, wants, and desires which offer a meager level of distraction at best but provide enough sedation that the gears stay oiled and the machine grinds forward; here one last gasp of air is a blessed act before the production current pulls us under yet again.

CHAPTER 3
AMERICA'S TOTALITARIAN SYSTEM

“Reign, Reign, Go away”

The works of both Herbert Marcuse and Guy Debord have been crucial to the formation of a theoretical ground on which to stand the project, *The Continuing Ballad of Franco the Kid*. However, it would be misleading to imply that Marcuse and Debord were alone in their thoughts. These were issues on many minds of the industrial era, most notably the work of Columbia University marketing professor Paul Nystrom. Published over thirty years before some of Marcuse's and Debord's works saw press, Nystrom described the disposition caused by the monotony of the new industrial age in his *Economics of Fashion* by coining the phrase “philosophy of futility” (Nystrom 1928, p. 68). It can be seen as a precursor to “conspicuous consumption.”

Many other visionary authors working in both fact and fiction have addressed the economic issues of marketing, consumerism, and commercialism in conjunction with their resultant affects – control and domination. However, I find the work of both Marcuse and Debord to be particularly relevant in their critiques of mass media and its potential powers of influence on society when controlled by commercial interests. Discussions written in the sixties which suggested a globalizing affect in the subjugation of all social and power structures by economic and commercial agendas seemed oddly familiar.

German philosopher and sociologist Herbert Marcuse addressed these issues and several of his works continue to have a profound influence on both intellectual discourse and scholarly studies of popular culture. In *One-Dimensional Man*, first published in 1964, Marcuse documented rising new forms of social repression, both public and personal, through a wide-ranging critique of both contemporary capitalism and the Soviet model of communism, two societies of the day exhibiting a parallel rise. The work served as a scathing denouncement of the all-encompassing methods of control Marcuse believed to be at work in advanced industrial society, prompting him to promote the “Great Refusal” as the only adequate opposition to this repression (Marcuse 1964, Chapter 3).

One-Dimensional Man exposed the creation of false needs which Marcuse believed integrated individuals into an ever-growing system of production and consumption via mass media, advertising, industrial management, and contemporary modes of thought. He sought to champion the remaining non-integrated forces of society; nourishing oppositional thought and behavior where it still survived (Marcuse 1964, Chapter 3).

As Marcuse saw it, the prevailing system of production and consumption led to a “one-dimensional” universe of thought and behavior in which aptitude and ability for critical thought and oppositional behavior would cease to exist resulting in a flattening of society. He warned against the assimilation of ideals, specifically those of freedom and fulfillment, with reality through mass media communication; the end results providing the groundwork for such Marcuse concepts as the “conquest of transcendence” and the “Happy Consciousness” (Marcuse 1964, Chapter 3).

Marcuse believed an unchecked and ever-more dominant system of production and consumption would turn such powerful ideals into meaningless sounds as it processed them into their common denominator – the commodity form – perversely emphasizing an exchange value over a truth value. These were radical thoughts both then and now, leading many to consider Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man* the most subversive book of the twentieth century.

Commenting further on the developing totalitarian affects implemented by modern society’s production and consumption system is *The Society of the Spectacle*, published a few years later in 1967 and written by the philosopher and critical theorist, Guy Debord. By reapplying Karl Marx’s concepts of commodity fetishism and his theory of alienation to contemporary mass media, *The Society of the Spectacle* argues against a progressive degradation of human life resonating throughout the counterfeit world of commodity rule. Debord describes this spiritually debilitating process of replacement brought on by the invasive forces of mass media as “the decline of being into having, and having into merely appearing” (Debord 1967, Thesis 17).

In a society spellbound on spectacular images endlessly fed to all spectators of contemporary mass media, Debord’s mission became a massive re-awakening which led to the formation of the Situationist International, a politically and artistically charged organization of which Debord was a founding member. Encouraging individuals to revisit their environments without any preconceptions, the Situationist International promoted strategies based on the working methods of Dada and Surrealism. In *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Post Modern Age*, author Sadie Plant explains that such strategies, including *derive* and *detournement*, were practiced in the

hope of allowing the individual to rediscover an authentic self by “bringing an inverted perspective to bear on the entirety of the spectacular world” (Plant 1992, p. 57).

It has been suggested that the efforts of both Debord and the Situationist International served as major catalysts for the Paris uprising of 1968 as evidenced in the resultant anti-work graffiti which included many passages freely lifted from *The Society of the Spectacle*. Even today, Debord’s influence continues to resonate in such radically minded anti-consumerist organizations as Adbusters, Reclaim the Streets, and the Billboard Liberation Front, organizations whose names alone clarify their goals. Artistic threads of his influence can be traced in much of the work and methods executed in contemporary street art. Some better known examples are Banksy, Space Invader, an early street art campaign of Shepard Fairey known as *Andre the Giant Has a Posse*, and the subvertisement work of KAWS.

To Debord art was revolutionary or it was nothing at all. As evidenced in his writings, he sought to supersede art as a separate and specialized activity transforming it into the basis of an invigorating practice of a new type of everyday life.

As mentioned earlier, Marcuse and Debord were not the only ones to critically address these issues. However, their work involving the confluence of economy and mass communication seems strangely prophetic today as technology continues to move forward allowing the shortening of both time and space and insuring the continued expansion of the prevailing system of production and consumption.

CHAPTER 4
SIMULATIONS IN AMERICA

“I feel fictional.”

Life as an authentic and directly-lived affair seems even more fictitious now than ever. The system of production and consumption has grown larger and stronger, staking its claim globally as it integrates the economy with all forms social and state. In this way the system is not only social, but also political. Simulating all it absorbs and then selling it back to us as the real thing, nothing escapes its subjugation, particularly any and all oppositional thought. After all, rebellion is an easy sell as America is “a society of individuals” – at least that is the image we want to project. But when it comes to true revolutionary behavior, why go to the trouble when one can just dress like one?

Individual autonomy is the spectacle’s price of admission; our inherent desires are its bait. We now gather on a plane of “hyperreality” where our consciousness has lost the ability to distinguish reality from fantasy. We are continuously subjected to a reconditioning process that turns need against life. All original events and experiences are radically shaped and filtered through a multitude of media until all that remains is the representation in commodity form, ready for sell and purchase. With a downpour of products all projecting promises of the good life, the production and consumption system keeps us on the run, chasing after an ever elusive fulfillment through each and every purchase. This is not the totalitarian system the Orwellian nightmare described in *1984*

but rather the one found in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. No Big Brother is required here as oppression is self-imposed through our nearly infinite appetite for distractions and our self-serving desires.

The spectacle has woven our every existence into the fabric of its screen. Having obliterated time and space we find ourselves in a continuous present that is the spectacle and with no discernible sense of past or future it leaves no ground on which to question its authenticity. It prevents us from realizing it is only a moment in time, capable of being overturned. A continuous present sees no past from where it came, nor is it aware of any future its actions will lead to. Consequences do not exist in a continuous present; its party never ends and no one ever leaves.

No matter how engulfed we are in the spectacle's wake, on varying levels we are all aware of the feelings of alienation and discontentment it carries just below its surface. It is the system's management of these feelings – our weakness – that the spectacle exploits, leading to our corruption and subsequent domination. This is the totalitarian hold of the system of production and consumption resulting from a confluence of advanced capitalism and mass media. All social and political relationships are mediated by the images it produces.

Jean Baudrillard addresses the resulting state of psyche immersed in a system of simulation in *Simulacra and Simulation* by explaining that, “melancholia is the fundamental tonality of functional systems, of current systems of simulation, of programming and information. Melancholia is the inherent quality of the mode of the disappearance of meaning, of the mode of the volatilization of meaning in operational systems. And we are all melancholic...” (Baudrillard 1994, p. 40).

CHAPTER 5

THE CONTINUING BALLAD OF FRANCO THE KID

Overview

The Continuing Ballad of Franco the Kid is a response to the alienation and confusion felt from the overload of technological stimuli present today – more and more information with less and less meaning – resulting in the data flooding of America’s physical and mental landscapes. It is a response to an ever-growing malady of irrelevance.

The theme-park aesthetic found in *The Continuing Ballad of Franco the Kid* echoes the simulated world we call America. Its cacophony of sights and sound parallel our over-stimulated environments and their intrinsic dissonance. When all solid ground is in constant upheaval we find ourselves in a timeless present. With no past and present there are no consequences. No apologies are needed.

In *The Continuing Ballad of Franco the Kid* marketing jargon bobs and weaves within the traffic of our own think-space infiltrating the stream of original thought until one can no longer distinguish the two. Our think-space has been colonized by economic forces; we think and speak the language of products.

A motley cast of characters navigate the stage of *The Continuing Ballad of Franco the Kid*, some on a quest for deeper meaning while attempting to reconnect with their truer selves, each other, and the world around them. *The Continuing Ballad of*

Franco the Kid allegorically addresses the search for an authentic self and authentic thought, free from the influence of a system of production and consumption. In the “hyperreality” of the spectacle we seek out higher ground on which to solidify a coherent perspective of our selves and our relation to each other, our world, and our universe. It is no different in the landscape represented in *The Continuing Ballad of Franco the Kid*.

Textual Elements

The piecemeal threading of phrases and slogans throughout the installation *The Continuing Ballad of Franco the Kid* are meant to echo the persistent media intrusions that clutter both our physical and mental landscapes – our public and private domains. Here uniquely personal thoughts collide with familiar marketing “hooks” of a more generic nature simultaneously deconstructing original narratives and meanings while suggesting new ones through the process of amalgamation.

Fragmentary in both a literal and figurative sense, these textual elements are strategically placed in pictorial scenes at varying degrees of prominence. Some compositions find these elements functioning in a stealth-like mode – barely visible, barely audible – covertly entering into the interpretive field subtly influencing meaning. In other compositions these elements appear more prominent challenging all others for attention and space, disorienting the viewer as to what the interpreted “truth” of the narrative should be. Still, other inclusions serve to undermine any illusion of depth created through formal methods of linear perspective contradicting perceived intentions.

The fragmentary manners in which textual phrases and slogans appear are meant to echo their occurrence in both our thoughts and the physical landscape we navigate

daily. Among other interpretations, it can also be understood to represent modern society's debasement into a sound byte culture. America's physical and mental landscapes are filled with distractions...obstructions, if you will. It is with all intentions that this installation shows the same. Taking possession of our think-space is after all their marketer's goal.

Niagara

The frequent use of "Niagara" in the lexicon belonging to *The Continuing Ballad of Franco the Kid* is at once an obvious reference to the massive waterfalls on the Niagara River. However, multiple meanings are suggested when considering the history – commercial and social – surrounding the falls.

Formed by natural forces at the end of the last glaciation period, the most powerful waterfall in North America has been a source of economic gain since the 18th century when tourism would become the area's main industry (Wikipedia, 2008). After the American Civil War the New York Central railroad launched an advertising campaign around Niagara Falls as a destination for pleasure and honeymoon visits – a way of escape.

Maintaining a balance between recreation, commercial, and industrial use has proven to be a challenge for the management of the falls since the 1800s. In 1879, the New York state legislature commissioned the Special Report on the Preservation of Niagara Falls (Wikipedia, 2008). This report advocated for state purchase, for restoration and preservation through public ownership of the surrounding scenic lands, and suggested restoring the former beauty of the falls as a "sacred obligation to mankind."

Although preservation steps have been made, economic development continues to threaten the area's natural beauty. An example of this can be seen on the Canadian side of the falls where recent commercial development of several tall buildings (many of these hotels supporting tourism) has resulted in a change of airflow which, ironically, causes a layer of mist to frequently obscure the view (Wikipedia, 2008).

The tug-of-war between economy and preservation surrounding the Falls of Niagara encapsulates humankind's persistent need to overcome nature, a desire to "humanize" nature into an image that is at once familiar and its own. Reconstructing our physical environment and replacing it with something of our own design is an inclination as old as civilization. Mankind has repeatedly accomplished this through the constructions of roads, bridges, cities, and such.

New and more elaborate forms of replacement and simulation can be seen in the development of fabricated landscapes such as theme parks, zoo exhibits taking place inside artificial rain forests, and now virtual worlds created inside digital domains. A correlation can easily be made between these new "worlds" and the forms of art and literature, both allow us to transcend our physical realities by exploring alternative models of human experience.

In the lexicon belonging to *The Continuing Ballad of Franco the Kid*, "Niagara" bridges the gap between physical reality and myth while serving as a metaphor for humankind's inherent desire for a better life and deeper meaning.

The name "Niagara" is said to originate from *Ongiara*, an Iroquois tribe who were the region's original inhabitants (Wikipedia, 2008). Among other figures that have been suggested as first circulating an eyewitness account of Niagara Falls is Belgian Father

Louis Hennepin, who is believed to have observed and described the region's splendor in 1677 after traveling with explorer Rene Robert Cavelier. His account is credited for bringing the region to the attention of Europeans. Since then, Niagara Falls has become renowned both for its beauty and as a valuable source of energy – literal and figurative. It has been a destination for pleasure, marriages and honeymoons, daredevils have hoped to become famous by performing life threatening stunts there and many movies have used the area's splendor as a backdrop for mood; a darker side reveals accidental death and suicide. Considering its majesty and history, it is little wonder the area has become representative as a place of transcendence.

In *The Continuing Ballad of Franco the Kid*, “Niagara” metaphorically represents a place of replenishment, a place of renewal and rebirth, a way to escape the present...a dip under a waterfall, through the bottom of a bottle, or the hope of something better waiting in the afterlife. A collective dream of Niagara is shared by the nameless, and to some degree faceless, workers who populate the landscape of Franco's world – a shared dream of fulfillment no matter how elusive.

A Motley Crew

Performing on the stage that is *The Continuing Ballad of Franco the Kid* is a motley crew of archetypal characters. Through symbolism they express many of the dilemmas facing human existence in modern society. Allegorically these characters reflect a deeper and often spiritual, moral, or political meaning through their suggested narratives.

In *The Continuing Ballad of Franco the Kid* brief scenes – vignettes – featuring

these characters are offered in purposeful clusters in hopes to lead the viewer into a common field of understanding that is wide enough to stock multiple interpretations somewhat related. The overlapping and interlacing of these seemingly disparate vignettes forces the viewer to form their own connections resulting in an overall narrative based on the confluence of these individual scenes. It is intentional and of utmost importance to allow for individual interpretation. Though I may lead the viewer part of the way to concluding meaning, their interpretation should be uniquely theirs, reflective of their individual thoughts, emotions, and perceptions. In a world of manipulated emotions and manufactured desires I hope to instigate a reawakening of the senses.

Briefly reviewing the cast which make up *The Continuing Ballad of Franco the Kid* we have the following:

Franco the Kid is appropriated in name more-so than in form referencing an early series of prints by Pablo Picasso, *The Dream and Lie of Franco*. Franco the Kid first appeared in one of my earlier works called *The Dream and Lie of the Father*. By referencing one of the few anti-war works of Picasso's, I hoped to address America's war on Iraq in a more timeless and universal manner as well as the absurdities of war in general. Through the title of my work, *The Dream and Lie of the Father*, I sought to call attention to the disinformation and half-truths distributed by the Bush administrations, past and present. When appearing in my work, Franco the Kid is never far from wielding a lantern or a sword. Symbols of light and war, these extensions suggest a self-righteous arrogance similar to that permeating both Bush regimes. Their juxtaposition exposes the contradiction between the two.

The Workers Without Hands make up the majority of the populace found in *The*

Continuing Ballad of Franco the Kid. They represent what 18th century European bourgeoisie society under the influence of the Enlightenment termed the “shiftless and thriftless.” The nameless, and to some degree faceless, Workers Without Hands represent attributes commonly associated with the proletariat class then and now – excessive consumption, perceived laziness, and an inability to save money. With hardly any noticeable individual differences, the Workers Without Hands symbolize the standardization of the American public. The fact that they only have hands when “clocked-in” at work represents their enslavement to the production machine. On a more subtle note this fact references Marshal McLuhan’s concepts of extensions and amputations regarding the status of man in a technological and media-dominated society – concepts found in his 1964 publication, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*.

The Sad House is essentially a maternal symbol that is literally part woman and part house. The Sad House represents the disintegration of American values by way of the eradication and exploitation of the family unit. Throughout *The Continuing Ballad of Franco the Kid* the Sad House can be seen weeping and at times even bleeding from her front door. Among other possible interpretations this can be understood as emblematic of death from within. When visually paired with the symbolism associated with Franco the Kid, a weeping and bleeding Sad House may represent the exploitation and appropriation of the poor by the military. At other times the Sad House appears in *The Continuing Ballad of Franco the Kid* stating, “I feel fictional.” When seen doubting her very existence the Sad House becomes a reference to the demise of family values and the family unit while underscoring feelings of alienation and disconnection brought on by the construction of one’s identity through the language of commercial products –

“conspicuous consumption” and “pastiche personality.”

Further addressing America’s suicidal consumption binges in *The Continuing Ballad of Franco the Kid* are the Mad Diners. Like many Americans, the Mad Diners’ consumption binge is one without consequences. Cold, mechanical and shark-like, the Mad Diners emotionlessly devour all without hesitation. In a perpetual present there are no repercussions, no consequences. Though ecological economists – bio-economists – of our world have long been speaking of an oncoming ecological nightmare in such forms as global warming, the dominant economic paradigm in America remains that of expansionism, or neoclassical economics. The problem I find with those from the expansionists’ camp is the disbelief that there is a limit on the natural resources that the earth can provide. As an example I quote Lawrence Summers, former chief economist of the World Bank, “There isn’t a risk of an apocalypse due to global warming or anything else. The idea that the world is headed over an abyss is profoundly wrong. The idea that we should put limits on growth because of some natural limit is a profound error.” (Lasn 1999, p. 87). As further testament to the illogic I see surrounding this aspect of the expansionists’ mindset I quote Nobel laureate Robert Solow, “then...the world can, in effect, get along without natural resources, so exhaustion is just an event, not a catastrophe.” (Lasn 1999, p. 87). It is my concern that expansionists now view our mental landscape as a potential source for growth and economic gain with the same disregard. As guardians of the production machine found in *The Continuing Ballad of Franco the Kid* the Mad Diners symbolize similar authoritarian figures on a massive “consumption without consequences” binge; one in dire need of detournement.

Perhaps most directly addressing the mental states of alienation and disconnection

commonly found in American society is Astro Jackson. Permanently adorned and insulated from all worldly contact within a spacesuit-like outfit, Astro Jackson represents the inability to feel, touch, or connect with anyone and anything in a truly authentic manner, conditions of being which are becoming more prevalent in our society daily. In *The Continuing Ballad of Franco the Kid* we find Astro Jackson alone and adrift, locked away inside his spacesuit, representative of humankind's technological achievements in a self-imposed exile.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

The aesthetic style and content that make up *The Continuing Ballad of Franco the Kid* rests amidst a myriad of influences offering even more possible directions from which to follow. However, the fundamental premise of this project has remained the same. It is this underlying thread – the intent of addressing feelings of disconnection and alienation felt by many in our modern society – that extends through all of my creative endeavors. In a land as blessed as America, feelings such as these should be a truly ironic anomaly.

There are those in our society who have the influence to change the course we are on. The fact that most of them are more than happy – intent even – on spreading this sickness is an issue we should all be concerned with. Unfortunately it is these people who are unaware of the repercussions of their actions, oblivious or resilient. Mockingly perhaps, they feel no tug of their conscience, no pangs, no void, and no feelings of disconnection for the truly “disconnected.” Perhaps these people, the status quo, have the most to gain from the way things are. Allowing no sense of past or future, the spectacle perpetuates a continuous present and gives all inside enough satisfaction to ensure no one wants out.

Ultimately, this is an issue of greed and power, of control and dominance. On some level we are all guilty. The technology belonging to the production and

consumption machine produces convincing simulations but in the end our psychic well-being is offered only counterfeit forms of reflection and false forms of transcendence. These states of being are crucial to preserving our humanity and staying true to ourselves. America is threatened by the menace of unreality, offering no sense of consequences. However, an awareness of our actions must be maintained. A sense of past and future must be preserved if we do not wish to lose all authenticity to simulation. We must make a conscious effort to wake ourselves from the Huxleyan “soma” the machine provides, even if only for a brief moment. It is amidst many of our technological achievements that we are at risk of losing all traces of compassion and empathy; perhaps the characteristics that make us most human, most individual.

What if Jean Baudrillard spoke the truth when he wrote in *Simulacra And Simulation* that, “today what we are experiencing is the absorption of all virtual modes of expression into that of advertising...all current forms of activity tend toward advertising and most exhaust themselves therein” (Baudrillard 1994, pp. 87-94). Have we become a nation of salesmen and conmen, both market savvy and market hollow?

Perhaps we have succumbed to our own desires – the spectacle knows our ego well – and like Narcissus, we are at risk of becoming lost and buried in a gaze upon ourselves. To reflect all and nothing is the power of the spectacle. Our oppression is not an externally imposed type, but self-imposed through the screen of the spectacle. Confirming some of Aldous Huxley’s fears, what we love is ruining us. Addressing these issues is the path I have been on and am now more aware of. It is the path I will continue.

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