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Entities: A Field of Imaginary Games

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ENTITIES: A FIELD OF IMAGINARY GAMES

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by

Thrasyvoulos Kalaitzidis
Integrated Master, Athens School of Fine Arts, 2017
August 2022

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ABSTRACT

With this body of work, I am looking for visual symbols that help communicate unuttered meanings through storytelling and stimulate an affectual response to the viewer. This exploration is presented in two different forms: a surreal sculptural installation and a board game. The installation consists of large-scale sculptures made from light and soft materials (polyurethane foam, plastic waste, paper) that are available to move inside the gallery, while the board game is presented as a set of 3D prints with instructions on how the participants can play it. The materials used in the installation suggest a way to transform waste into art and reveal further meanings of the objects-symbols depicted. I offer these symbols to the viewers as a vocabulary of available metaphors to rediscover poetic meaning, reflective free play, and communal storytelling. “Entities” is a word used to describe the things and objects that, in this project, possess agency. Each entity is a self-contained singular existence but also part of a whole. *Entities* can be used as metaphors for emotional states and memories, and eventually act as a lever for storytelling.

PREFACE

I started exploring objects-symbols a few years ago, while working on my Thesis in the Athens School of Fine Arts. There, I was drawing inspiration from the ancient Greek trilogy of *Oresteia*¹ for which I created an installation of objects-symbols representing each character of the story. I read this story as a myth that establishes patriarchy in the mind of the Athenian audience—an audience comprised of free male citizens. Even though ancient Greece did not invent patriarchy through this myth, I still took this trilogy as an important historical document and a suitable poetic guide to direct me in the exploration of archetypical meanings, as they were captured through the characters of the play. My poetic contribution was to match the heroes with objects in an effort to de-literalize the meanings, create playful associations, and make the story relevant to my space and time. Living in a patriarchic society, I was concerned with the gender stereotypes that are deeply rooted in our culture. The young, hot-headed Orestes was associated with a flock of birds, his father, the military leader Agamemnon, was represented by a screw and two screw nuts, Orestes's mother, the strong queen Clytemnestra, was replaced by an imposing clawfoot bathtub, etc. The katharsis was (hopefully) accomplished through the replacement of human characters with inanimate objects, which involved humor and playfulness, something that was risky to present to a Greek audience, taught to take ancient Greek tragedies very seriously. The viewers of the

¹ Aeschylus's *Oresteia* is the only surviving ancient Greek trilogy, consisting of the following three tragedies: *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, and *The Eumenides*, written and presented in 458 BCE during the Dionysia festival in Athens. The trilogy tells the story of Orestes, who, guided by Apollo, killed his mother Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus, to revenge them for killing his father, Agamemnon. Subsequently, the Furies, ancient spirits that represent the ancient female deities and are described as wounds of the earth, are chasing down Orestes to take revenge for the killing of his mother. Athena organizes a formal trial in Athens to discuss the crime and, eventually, she declares Orestes innocent.

exhibition had a strongly positive response to the installation even when they had not read the accompanying text that explained the symbolisms, which I saw as an accomplishment of my goal.



Figure 1. Oresteia (installation), 2017, Polyurethane foam, metal rods, twine, wood.

Empowered by the effectiveness of the above symbolisms, and the force that the representations of the objects brought into my work, I decided to expand my vocabulary of symbols, this time working the opposite way: I started from the objects that were visually appealing to me, and then proceeded to reflect on their meanings and possible symbolisms. The inspiration very often came from the world around me: the digital interface of my phone, emoji pictograms, conversations with friends, random images. When I started this MFA program, I was working on a series I titled “Chains & Events” which was blending chains, as a symbol of connection or constraint, with previous work. In my suitcase, while flying from Greece into Louisiana, I carried a foam chain and a foam rope. Using these as a starting point, I embarked on a discovery of new symbols.

Finding myself in a foreign country, I put myself in a process of introspection and, at the same time, extroversion: to search for what matters to me, what symbols can describe it, and what these symbols mean to the people that surround me. Through this exploration, I created a visual vocabulary, a lexicon of objects-symbols that describes the world around me. This MFA Thesis is an archive of my exploration.



Figure 2. Chains & Events III, 2019. Polyurethane foam, wood, wire, found objects.

During the three years of this MFA program, I was able to take multiple classes outside of my specific area that were highly influential for the trajectory of my work. They exposed me to a variety of epistemologies and equipped me with a toolbox capable of assisting me through this journey: the “Scenic Design” class I took in my first semester introduced me to the world of contemporary American theater and helped me further improve my abilities in model-making; the “Performance Theory” class was a good introduction to theoretical discourse and, more specifically, phenomenological analysis of

image (Barthes) and performance (Schechner); the “Cultural Theory” class I took as part of the Doctor of Design program, that I am concurrently enrolled in, brought me in touch with the work of major thinkers, including Claude Levi-Strauss, whose writing on myth was highly influential for my work, and Ian Hodder, who transforms his archaeological experience as a vehicle to talk about the future; the Contemporary Art History class on the “Sites of Contemporary Art”, which exposed me to examples of art existing outside of museums and galleries, and the effect these initiatives have on the adjacent communities; the class on “Material Culture”, which showed me the ways people are in a constant co-dependence with things; a class in “Game Design”, which was a small introduction to the design of video games and Game Theory, which explains what keeps us interested in playing a game; the class on “Interactivity in Art”, which presented me with various examples of how art can require the participation of the viewer and in which I first tested the early version of my board game.

Finally, my work presented in this paper has been affected by the people I have met here and the relationships I have formed, by the specificity of the place—on one hand the culture of Louisiana with its long history and folklore, on the other hand the United States, with its distinct values—, the time-specificity of the COVID-19 pandemic and historical upheavals, as well as my personal journey through all of the above; my art is my response to the world that surrounds me.

INTRODUCTION

The objects-symbols of this body of work are referred to as “Entities”. Not all of them can be described as objects; the terms “things” or “animals”, “nonhuman actors” (ANT)², or “entities” are probably much more appropriate. The purpose of this specific choice of wording started as a way to capture the substance of my large-scale sculptures based on what their presence suggests: things that are usually small and utilitarian are scaled up close to the human size—at least close to my size —suddenly acquiring agency. By possessing human dimensions, these inanimate things stand up for themselves; they are saying “I am here.” Very often, the sculptures are personified by minor alterations to their usual shape that reveal an animated state which is not identifiable in their standard state. Even more, they transform the space, and they make us “smaller”. Both the large scale of the sculptures and the small scale of the maquettes (game pieces) are used to promote interaction engaging in an Alice-like, playful confusion; the large scale makes me feel unusually smaller than the world around me, thus curious to play and explore). The small scale makes me feel in control of things that I cannot otherwise bring together, allowing me to create stories. The purpose of this exhibition is to offer fragments of my own imagination to the visitors in the form of symbols, and to encourage them to play with these symbols. The prompts of the board game are just a fire-starter. The visitors can come up with their own games, giving new meanings to the provided symbols. The process of providing a limited vocabulary of symbols as a vehicle for

² Bruno Latour has developed the concept of ‘actors’ (actants), either human or non-human, “that try to form links with other actors in order to become stronger or more persuasive”.
Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (London: Pelican, 2017), 57.

uncontrolled storytelling is used to “wash away” the specific meanings we may sometimes think they possess. This way, I aim to prove that symbols are ambiguous, fluid, and their deciphering promotes communication.

This work is the result of approximately five years of experimentation on the visual and community effects of symbolic language that started during my undergraduate Thesis in 2017. This MFA program and the interactions it offered me were of extreme importance for the progression of my research and artmaking. After *Oresteia*, I was trying to find symbols that could mean something to me. I was working more intuitively, often looking for symbols on the emoji keyboard of my phone. When I started presenting my work to critiques, studio visits, and reviews I often realized that specificity mattered; the viewers wanted to know more, to see more, to understand more about the pieces. Trying to impose a specific narrative on these combinations was a rushed idea. Most of the symbols I am employing do not create distinct associations; they are rather ambiguous and fluid. Instead, I decided to invest in the meticulous rendering of the objects-symbols, including painting them, which makes my sculptures more accessible. However, specificity can also be a specificity in the presentation. In other words, I tried to dive deeper into why I chose those specific objects and not others. The objects were able to tell a story, in fact many stories, depending on how they were combined. At that time, I had started researching Graphical User Interface icons and specifically the ones depicting office objects. I realized that my own fascination with office objects is something I could talk about and explain. So, I focused on a specific combination of three objects-symbols (scissors-pin-blade) deriving from the office environment, that I repeated in various mediums. The repetition created a sense of iconicity: I felt that my classmates

and professors started seeing something in that image that was not necessarily related to my story. They responded to the image with their own memories and associations just because they kept seeing it again and again.

This interactive and performative aspect of symbols prompted me to the idea of a life-size game: if symbols are something ambiguous and negotiable, something that can be either unremarkable or immediately identifiable, depending on how many times you see it and the relationship you build with it, then what will happen if I directly ask people to interact with the symbols that I am producing, to the extent that their sculptural qualities (size and material) allow it? I started making maquettes of objects I had made and others that I could potentially make in the future. During the process, I fell in love again with the small-scale work that I had practiced while making maquettes for theater productions. Also, the feeling of the polymer clay maquettes in my hand made me think of game pieces in board games like *Clue*. Later, and while engaging more with writing, I brought back the element of storytelling. Combining my work of the last three years, I created a hybrid version: a storytelling board game and an interactive installation. The installation is characterized by the element of free play, while the board game is more structured, using prompts, cards, a time limit, etc., without however prohibiting an experimental or reflective approach. *Entities* is a collection of symbols that is not finite or absolute. It is a suggestion and work-in-progress but also a documentation of what matters to me at this point of my life. A desideratum for this project would be to be reexamined and rearranged in the future when the place and situations I find myself in demand it and allow it.

This thesis paper is divided into five parts that address what I identify as the main staples of my work. The first part is dedicated to my influences, artists or elements that have shaped my thought and imagination as well as visual stimuli and goals that I am trying to reach. The second part describes and discusses my choices of materials, explaining my focus in transforming trash to art. The third part contains stories about the *Entities*, revealing the symbolisms or memories connected to them. The fourth part explains the board game, and the fifth part guides the reader through the installation.

PART 1: INFLUENCES

Often, I find myself stimulated by words, phrases, lyrics. Poetry is the most prominent literary genre of my country. Later in this paper I will focus on a few examples from songwriting, since I consider lyrics to be the most approachable form of literature. Contemporary Greek songwriting has been blessed with a multitude of women lyricists (Lina Nikolakopoulou, Marianina Kriezi, Lena Platonos, Eftichia Papagianopoulou) whose words are rich in figures of speech, a linguistic phenomenon whose bold presence in the Greek language has shaped the way I think and express myself. Lakoff and George (1980) argue that metaphor structures human cognition.

Children's book illustrations were my first contact with art; I still bring to my mind the roundness of the forms of Uderzo's *Astérix*, the abstraction of Hargreaves's *Mr. Men and Little Miss*, and the fascinating details of Spirin's watercolors for *Gulliver's Adventures in Lilliput*. Since my family didn't own a TV until I was thirteen, most of my experience watching animation was at my grandmother's house; I was mostly drawn to Japanese animation like *Sailor Moon* and *Dragon Ball*, also *Pokémon* and *Digimon*. The last two were very special for me because they were describing a world where communication between humans and animals (and computers in *Digimon*) was something achievable. At the age of eight I started taking painting classes where I was introduced, among others, to the abstract surrealism and bold colors of Joan Miró and the distorted portraits of Amadeo Modigliani. At the same time, I was watching Disney movies with my cousin (who had a TV) while enjoying the illustrated, book versions of the same movies when I was on my own. The book for *Fantasia* was by far my favorite one,

although I wasn't lucky enough to watch the movie until much later, probably in my 20s. The image of the animated, personified brooms carrying the water buckets was consistent with the personified characters of household objects in *The Babaloos*, a kids cartoon I was also watching when I was granted access to a TV.

Later, I identified similar qualities of surreal objects in the work of René Magritte and Salvador Dalí. I feel particularly close to Magritte's work because of the careful rendering of everyday objects. In his paintings, representations of mundane objects like a pipe, a mirror, a comb, take up a philosophical, psychoanalytic, and symbolic meaning. A similar psychoanalytic and surreal approach is performed by Louise Bourgeois, whose work amazes me for its bravery to portray her fears and desires. My connection to Surrealism is even deeper because of the work of its pioneer, Giorgio de Chirico. De Chirico grew up in Volos, the same city I grew up, only a century earlier. Buildings of the city depicted in his paintings, many of which were designed by his father, still survive in the landscape, creating a visual "tautology" in my mind, meaning that what I was seeing in his metaphysical work was largely part of my outside reality.

The connection between art and life is something I am particularly interested in; I believe that my first introduction to this idea came from the art of Frida Kahlo whose life and bodily experiences were metaphorically—yet quite precisely—depicted in her art. One day, while watching TV (when we finally had a TV at home), I ran across an interview of Marina Abramović. Her embodied and performed connection of art and life, expressed through her pieces *Rhythm 0* (1974) and *The Artist is Present* (2010), revealed to me a new understanding of artmaking. During my undergraduate studies, my professor Marios Spiliopoulos, prompted me to look at Niki de Saint Phalle. Searching through her

prolific work, I discovered an artist that is now very dear to me for multiple reasons. Her sculpture installation *The Tarot Garden* (1974-1998) has been working in my mind like a lighthouse, directing how I think about my installations as a space for free associations, new and playful imagery, and revolutionary communal structures. I admire Claes Oldenburg's public sculptures of enlarged everyday objects for their precision and scale, however they do not seem as interesting to me as his soft sculpture period and his ever-inspiring statement (often referred to as his manifesto) "*I am for an Art...*"³ This text covers a variety of roles that art can play in life, roles that are often neglected, sidelined, and disdained in the frivolous or arrogant deals of the Art Market. Similarly, Yoko Ono's *Grapefruit* (1964) book suggests a way of experiencing life and art as an existential exercise. Living in the United States for the last three years, I had the chance to get acquainted to the work of some less known American artists. From Lynda Benglis's beautifully experimental work I distinguish her *Wing* (1970), a piece representing a fluid form that could be lava or water, and which influenced my work on the *River*. I feel Ree Morton's unapologetic handcrafting in her almost frozen-in-time, flowing fabrics to be very close to my own crafting practice. Finally, the fragments of Tina Girouard's work I was able to enjoy, showed me ways for communal artmaking.

Still, a big part of my inspiration does not always come from visual art. I am very much affected by theater, cinema, music, architecture, and design. The visually rich dance performances created by Dimitris Papaioannou combine strong, symbolic imagery with bodies that do not need to talk. Andrei Tarkovsky's films as well as his book

³ Claes Oldenburg, "I Am for an Art: Claes Oldenburg on His 1961 'Ode to Possibilities'", Walker Art Center-Sightlines, Accessed on April 3rd, 2022, <https://walkerart.org/magazine/claes-oldenburg-i-am-for-an-art-1961>.

Sculpting in Time (1986) trained my affectual responses in real time, during his magical storytelling. The architectural style, fashion, and the artistic renaissance of the 1920s is always a source of inspiration for me, and I often refer to this era through subtle stylistic choices in my sculptures. At the same time, my inspiration derives from the aesthetic or the structure of video games, not because I am a gamer, but for the exact opposite reason. Since I didn't grow up with a TV, I didn't know how to play video games; therefore, I would always be so fascinated watching other people play. A similar, though more lived, experience comes from the world of digital interfaces. The icons on the computer interfaces I had access to as a kid, an old Macintosh, and a Windows 95 computer, as well as their design progress throughout the years, were imprinted in my imagination as meaningful signs of orientation in the (digital) world.

PART 2: MATERIALS

waste, trash, residue, leftovers, remnants, refuse, litter, garbage, junk, remains, rubbish, debris, detritus, scrap, leavings, rummage, fragments, filth, shavings

The Global Waste Management Market size was valued to USD 394.1 billion in 2020, and is predicted to reach USD 715.0 billion by 2030, witnessing a CAGR of 6.1% from 2021-2030.⁴

When I entered this MFA program, soft polyurethane foam was still my primary material. However, I soon started expanding to other materials, like wood and metal that opened new possibilities for my work. My wooden pieces prompted me to wooden kids' toys, while my metal pieces reminded me of the metal miniature pieces used in board games. When the COVID-19 pandemic started I started collecting recyclable trash on impulse; it seemed like I could probably use this leftover material somehow in my work, the same way I was using foam remnants. I saw the potential of these materials (papers, plastics) as they were piling up, creating homogenous surfaces and patterns. I decided to work with them and allow them to transform into textures different than the foam, resulting in a visual counterpoint between my large-scale sculptures. Regarding the smaller-scale maquettes, I started by using polymer clay because of its plastic properties

⁴ "Global Waste Management Market (2021 to 2030) - by Waste Type, Service and Region," Research and Markets, Accessed on April 3rd, 2022, <https://www.researchandmarkets.com/reports/5480744/waste-management-market-by-type-and-service>.

and its easiness of use that supported my initial explorations, and later turned to 3D-printing for its durability and uniformity

Working with my or other people's trash has been an educational process. Above all, it has taught me to take the time to reconsider my choices as well as my relationships with myself, the others, and the environment. While not denying the environmental sensitivity that partly directed me to the utilization of waste for my artworks, there is also something warm about trash; it possesses history. Ian Hodder, an archaeologist who writes about complexity theory and how material culture has evolved with time, has developed the concept of "entanglement" which refers to the connections of dependence and dependency that we have with things and with each other.⁵ The appreciation of waste is connected to the appreciation of the materiality of objects and the realization of our unity with them, an idea reflected in my choice of objects as the majority of things that make up the *Entities*.

In the fall of 2018, I was working in the art direction team of a TV series production. During that period, we were visiting various locations around Athens to consider them as shooting locations. One of these locations was the biggest landfill of Athens, a city of around four million people. Our visit there was a life-changing experience. Despite the ferocious smell that resided in the area, what impressed me the most was that the symbolic conception of trash in my mind was forever changed after that visit. Trash was no longer something that we do not need and magically disappears

⁵ Ian Hodder, *Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships between Humans and Things* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

from the urban landscape. There it had presence; it formed and dominated the landscape by creating mountains and paths.

Foam

My journey with using trash started with foam remnants I was buying at a low price from an upholstery business in Athens, Greece. I was looking for a medium that would give me the opportunity to create volume while remaining light and friendly to touch. I embraced and celebrated the serendipity of the oddly cut shapes, the variation of colors and thicknesses. This process taught me to hold back on my impulse to heavily manipulate the materials I am using, and instead prompted me to identify and appreciate their beauty. When I arrived in Baton Rouge, I was provided foam remnants by a former LSU grad student working in an upholstery business in the city. I was also offered foam from the Tiger Stadium cushions, rescued by my professor, Loren Schwerd, who also offered her old mattress.

As the sources where my material comes from reveal, the way foam is used in everyday life is associated with comfort, padding, and protection. Comfort is conceived here as the opposite of toughness and hardship. In my work, foam usually replaces metal, which in turn is a highly conductive material associated with power, punishment, domination, or just with high significance because of its weight and durability. Contrasted to that, foam accentuates lightness, playfulness, flexibility, malleability. Even more, against the negative connotations of metal to power, war, and torture, it promotes comfort, luxury, and self-indulgence qualities which, together with the idea of play, make up the bases of the world of *Entities*.

Plastics

I take as a fact that we should all be concerned about our environment and the crisis it is going through, human-provoked, or not. In a similar way, we should be concerned about our environmental fingerprint and the residues of our consumerist lifestyle. However, we may want to be suspicious of what is often presented to us as “recycling” and “green” solutions by the Waste Management market, since this often involves the reuse of plastics as a fuel. In my home-city in Greece, Volos, a big cement factory which is located at only 300 feet from the first line of houses, uses RDF (Refuse Derived Fuel) and SRF (Solid Recovered Fuel).⁶ Cancers, childhood cancers, cardiovascular diseases, and strokes have seen a dramatic increase since this fuel was put in use to replace parts of an equally harmful fuel, petcoke (Petroleum Coke). Walking in the city while trying to cover my respiratory tracts was not going to be a memory of the past; Baton Rouge is also a city that hosts a big number of chemical plants, near “*Cancer Alley*, an industrial hub, with nearly 150 oil refineries, plastics plants and chemical facilities.”⁷ Inevitably, I started feeling connected to this material: I inhale its birth, I buy it and use it every day, I drink it as I drink water, I fill my lungs with the smoke that announces its death.

⁶ Eva Krithari, “Greece: air, water, and democracy,” Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa, July 16th, 2020, <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Greece/Greece-air-water-and-democracy-203623>.

⁷ “Environmental racism in Louisiana’s ‘Cancer Alley’, must end, say UN human rights experts”, United Nations-News, March 2nd, 2021, Environmental racism in Louisiana’s ‘Cancer Alley’, must end, say UN human rights experts || UN News

Wood & Paper

I was always fascinated by the scrap wood pieces that one can find in the school's Design shop: curvy cutouts from the "Intro to Sculpture" projects, remnants from some painter's frame boards, mysterious leftovers from architects' models. Each time the content of the scrap wood bucket gets emptied, I mourn for all those lost possibilities that existed in there, for all those pieces of wood that are suddenly gaining value from their absence, becoming less "objects" and more human-like just because of my need to feel the responsibility to save them. Maybe, sometimes, it was not the material object I was concerned with but the projection of myself to it. It is not hard to feel emotional towards wood; its color, feel, and temperature make it one of the most human-friendly materials.

Similarly, cardboard and paper are materials we are constantly using and discarding carelessly. Quite a few sculpture classes are also using cardboard for their projects, creating piles of cardboard pieces and cutouts that are picked up by the janitor every day at 6 pm., without anyone appreciating their beauty: the traces of someone else's work. Looking at the colorful pile of carton packaging boxes, I decided to start saving the paper too, trying to bring it back to its initial form through the representation of a tree. Thinner paper, like supermarket bags, is used as paper mâché for the surface of the large-scale brush.

Other Materials

The presence of metal is limited in my work. Apart from a few cast metal pieces, there is minor use of wire and chicken wire as an armature covered with softer materials.

Fabric is used for the bristles of the large-scale brush, which was filled with spray-foam and coated with silicone.

My initial maquettes are made with polymer clay which allows a versatile manipulation while also being very convenient to use. However, when I decided to use the maquettes as pieces for a game, I transferred to 3D printing compounds like PLA, which provide durability that the polymer clay lacked. Engaging in the practice of 3D printing with the invaluable support of Mary Ratcliff, I explored the possibilities of this method. First, I started looking for already constructed 3D models that I could easily find on the Internet through the website “Thingiverse”. Later, I used a 3D scanner to replicate my handmade, polymer clay pieces in 3D prints, that way exploring more possibilities for their size, color, or texture.

Regarding painting, I used acrylic paint, gesso, and craft glue, both for the large and the small-scale pieces. I used craft glue for the paper mâché and silicone to coat some of the foam sculptures.

PART 3: SYMBOLS

During my first year in the MFA program, I realized I had already created a small repertoire of objects-symbols, including the ones employed in my undergraduate thesis. I started drawing simple representations of these symbols on cards, borrowing the form of a tarot oracle. This small collection of objects-symbols gradually evolved into a lexicon able to express a multitude of meanings. These symbols remain ambiguous and poetic. During this process of recovering these symbols from the bed of my imagination, I looked inside of me; I wanted to find these words, these images of objects and things that were imprinted in my fantasy through stories, songs, memories, and fears.

For the purposes of this paper, each object-symbol is explained through stories that justify my associations. However, I do not consider these stories necessary for the approach of my work, since I prefer to rely on the immediate, visual response of the viewer as the best method to approach an artwork. Even more, while the existence of these symbols in my work has to do with my own imagination, their function relies on the viewers' interpretations. This work is an experimentation on the process of moving from the personal to the collective. Meanings are inherently fluid; words are always in flux. I propose these symbols in an effort to communicate, to negotiate meaning. Still, the following list can prove useful when someone is interested in learning more about why I chose these specific objects-symbols and not others.

Some of these objects appear in the installation, while others only appear as maquettes (game pieces). The stories connected to them derive from personal thoughts or

experiences, stories from my grandmother's sewing room, lyrics from Greek songs, the *Oresteia* trilogy, graphical user interfaces, the emoji keyboard, etc.

These thirty-two symbols are just a suggestion. There could be hundreds of them, or just five of them. They are not definite nor arbitrary; they can evolve and mature; they can decline or be forgotten; they are dependent on my, and our, stories.

LEXICON OF SYMBOLS

Arrow

In *Oresteia*, I used the arrow to represent the presence of a god. The directionality of an arrow activates the space around it, it gives urgency, meaning, and significance. In American culture, I am still curious what the double arrow means on western shirts' smile pockets. When I became aware of it though, I thought it was a great visualization of the way I think and talk. Very often, I end my phrases by "...or not", as a way to contemplate on what things would look like from a different perspective. The double arrow is a symbol of the belief that things can go both ways.

Alligator

The alligator as a symbol refers to my fear of reptiles. In another assortment, it could be substituted by a snake. Since I am living in Louisiana for the last three years, this fear is directed towards alligators. While kayaking in Lake Fausse Point State Park with Gillian, we could see the alligators bubbling underwater, silent but deathly. Their calm presence maintained a thin balance in the landscape. A year ago, I was fascinated by the stories of Lafcadio Hearn, a Greek Irish writer who resided in New Orleans during the second half of the 19th century, before moving to Japan. In a collection of his stories, I am

reading about the alligators: “None discovered aught of beauty in them; yet they were once worshiped as gods. They were not of this world, in truth, but of another—the Antediluvian world of monsters and dragons and vast swamps broader than continents—where there were frogs larger than oxen, and ferns two hundred feet high, and alligators longer than the serpent slain by the army of Regulus.”⁸ In the past, I wanted to make a huge serpent from plastic bags. This piece hasn’t been realized yet.

Barricade

Sometimes I feel like I put obstacles to myself and my progress: rituals, fears, lack of self-confidence. Rarely are obstacles put for me. Looking at the world from a very privileged position (on many levels), I ask myself what creates this deep need of mine to hold back. I often feel tired, unmotivated, unequipped, unprepared, psychologically not ready, etc. I feel tiny in front of a huge obstacle. Hurdling runners overpass an obstacle with a certainty that I rarely possess. The only way I have found so far is attacking the center of it, while at the same time attacking myself in the process. In my artistic practice, I cannot keep a steady pace. I hold ideas in my mind, turning them around, mentally sculpting them. It takes me time and a sense of absolute necessity to find the strength to jump over the hurdle.

Bathtub

In *Oresteia*, I represented Clytemnestra, Orestes’s mother, with a monumental bathtub. I was looking for a big object that could meet the requirements of an archetypical—always in my mind—female as something homogenous against something

⁸ Hearn, Lafcadio, and S. Frederick Starr. 2001. *Inventing New Orleans: writings of Lafcadio Hearn*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, p. 113-114.

fragmented that represents the male. A bathtub is a symbol of relaxation and luxury, Ancient Roman bathtubs represent the opulence, decadence, and vanity, qualities that Clytemnestra is characterized with. Also, she killed Agamemnon in the bath. Specifically, a clawfoot bathtub is even more animated, since it borrows elements that belong to an animal, like the claws, literally and metaphorically. The bathtub, or a furniture in general⁹, does not have actual legs like an animal does; still we call them legs, feet, etc. In an early drawing for that project, I had sketched a bathtub with its front legs elongated and menacing, reminding those of a wild beast.

Bell

The bell is a symbol I associate with community and communication. Traditionally, the bell is an object used for religious purposes in different cultures. However, their symbolism cannot stop on the level of religion. In *Andrei Rublev*, hundreds of people are depicted struggling to cast a bell. The bell caster claims to know the secret for the perfect bell casting from his father, but this is nothing more than a lie, a cry for help, the desperate need for a position in the community. The bell is a regularly used icon on interfaces: on Facebook it represents notifications that connect the user to the community; in other cases, the bell has to do with alarms or sounds. On the LSU campus, a bell from the Memorial Tower signifies the divisions of time with a different melody for each one. In Greece, bellringing is also a very common sound, sometimes overwhelmingly present.

⁹ In furniture design, this type of leg made up of two curves is called *cabriole* leg.

Bird

In *Oresteia*, I employed birds as the representation of Orestes who is portrayed as a young man, who fights to get liberated from the feelings of revenge towards his mother for killing his father. He thinks that by killing her, he will finally be free to spread his wings into a bright future. However, the Erinyes (Furies), are after him to punish him for his crime. The birds capture this chase as well as Orestes's vitality and arrogance. They are a representation of immaturity and carelessness but also of ambitiousness and youthful force.

Bottle

The bottle is one of the most abstract symbols in this collection. I am reminded of Marika's heavy drinking in late 1920s Paris¹⁰, a bottle used to store olive oil, a message put in a bottle and thrown into the ocean, a broken piece of its dark tinted glass that protected the eyes while watching the solar eclipse of 1999. Spending long days at school during these three years, my water bottle is something—or someone—that gives me strength and that I can rely upon.

Bridge

I see the bridge as a symbol of technological and engineering advances that promote prosperity while maintaining a balance between the wishes of the people and the wishes of nature. Bridges manipulate the terrain to favor humans' interests, like roads or

¹⁰ Maria Polydouri (1902-1930) was one of the first female poets of modern Greek literature. Although I appreciate her romantic poems, it is her diaries that mostly catch my attention and I go back to them very often. At the end of the 20s she resided in Paris where, among other things, she took sewing and design classes, partied, and contracted tuberculosis, which led to her premature death.

dams. They are a culmination of millennia-long trials and errors to connect two shores with a minimum number of resources, while also not disrupting the continuity of what flows underneath, whether that is a river or a sea. In Greek folklore (though similar legends exist throughout the Balkan region) there exists the atrocious myth of the *Bridge of Arta* that would collapse every night until, under the guidance of a bird, the master-builder sacrificed his wife to be built inside the bridge. It is implied in this myth that a chthonic force is what did not want the bridge to stand and asks for a human sacrifice to allow for this plan to be executed. Does this ideology still survive nowadays? Who or what are we sacrificing while trying to impose over nature? In Greek, the “Bridge of Arta” can be used as expression to mock or describe a process that is taking a long time and does not show progress.

Brush

Before I started painting my foam sculptures, I kept imagining a gigantic brush swiftly painting/marketing parts of them with bright-colored, slimy paint. For a long time, I kept debating between simply using the nude foam colors and a very intentional, bright-colored approach. Eventually, I ended up adopting a middle-ground solution of light painting, that I sometimes enhance with silicone coating. I see the brush as an animated entity, similar to *Fantasia*'s brooms. In the Korean custom of “Doljabi”, which is the celebration of a baby's first birthday, the toddler is placed in front of a number of objects, supposed to represent the path this young person will follow later in life. Although the objects are not always the same, the brush is traditionally used to represent the occupation of the artist.

Button

Sewing a button was the first—and one of the few—sewing skills my grandmother taught me. She had a drawer full of buttons of all colors, shapes, sizes, and materials. I was so amused by the sound they were making as I would shuffle them and was often drawn to observe their different embellishments. I am still fascinated by the intricacy of some buttons, and I consider them to be miniature art. In Greek, the verb “to button (up)” also has a metaphorical meaning of holding back, becoming less communicative or outgoing. An example of its use can be found in the following lyrics: *What is the point of wearing a shirt, / Buttoned up to the neck? / In between the buttons, / Love sneaks in.*¹¹ The button here is a symbol for opening up to romantic love.

Chains

In Ancient Greek mythology we find Prometheus who was punished for offering the fire to people. His punishment was to be chained on a rock where a vicious eagle would come every day and eat part of his liver. This grotesque mythological scene sounds like a fairytale compared to the lived experience of millions of incarcerated or captive people (and animals) in the past and present. Whether it is slavery or punishment, holding someone captive goes against all humanitarian ideals we are supposed to be moving towards. The paradox of incarceration has been a recurring philosophical question in my mind, and I do not have a good answer for it. What creates the belief that holding someone captive will stop the harm in the society? What justifies anyone to feel they possess the authority to hold anyone captive? Chains have a specific significance for

¹¹ The lyrics are written by Lina Nikolakopoulou for the song “Ap’ ta Koumpakia Anamesa” (In Between the Buttons), by Nikos Kypourgos, sung by Haris Alexiou.

Louisiana since it holds the record high on incarceration rates in the US, the country with the highest number of incarcerated people worldwide.¹² Metaphorically, chains can also be conceptualized as a form of psychological confinement, the inability to act or think freely. In language though, as well as in digital interfaces, a chain does not always have negative connotations. The linking properties of a chain are more important in these environments, where they promote connection and communication, admitting that one cannot make it alone. Recalling Hodder's theory on dependence and dependency, one thing seems to be common in both interpretations: vulnerability. I started working on the symbol of chains with foam. There was something in the contrast between the heaviness of metal and the lightness of foam that created a strong visual effect, a release from all bounds and all bonds, an imaginary deprivation of all connections—positive or negative—, a violent moment of freedom.

Coins

I had heard how important money is in the US culture, but experiencing it is a different thing. Money is one of the core values of the American identity, in a way that I was not used to think about it in my country. Naturally, money found its way into the digital world, controlling most of our activities online. Capitalism of the contemporary age liquifies love and appreciation that we show online. We are trapped in the flat two-dimensional plane of a coin, incapable of complex feelings. The coins I created here have a heart symbol on one side (signifying appreciation) and a X symbol on the other side (disliking or negation).

¹² "Criminal Justice Facts," The Sentencing Project, Accessed on April 3rd, 2022, <https://www.sentencingproject.org/criminal-justice-facts/>.

Cow

This symbol entered my repertoire after a strange encounter me and Teaque had with a cow in what would be one of the most metaphysical nights of my life. Driving somewhere in the mountains of Northern California, we found ourselves with an almost empty gas tank, stuck behind a cow which would not let us drive past it. In astrology, Taurus is supposed to represent patience and stubbornness, among other things. I can confirm that for that cow that was definitely an attribute. Intimidated by the cow's size and unfamiliar as we were with farm animals, we hesitated to get out of the car and direct the cow towards the side of the road, which was what we should have done, as we found out later. When the cow turned its head to look at us, I told my friend to switch off the lights. The events of the rest of that night are of little importance here, but the cow remained as a lead character in my pantheon of symbols. Despite their imposing stature, cows are extremely peaceful and docile. It is this characteristic that we have exploited as humans and turned them into living, over-exhausted and over-worked machines of food production. The Minotaur of Greek mythology, part human and part bull, is a symbol of powerful knowledge, whose killing by a man is understood as the conquest of that knowledge. Considering, also, the Spanish bullfighting traditions, it is still a mystery to me why we are in such a conflict with this species whose aid to the human culture has been undeniable.

Cross/X

There couldn't be a more abstract but complex symbol. First, it can be seen as an x (a letter or the multiplication sign), a symbol of negation, a + (plus symbol), or a cross. Other meanings of this symbol are also in use in different disciplines and contexts. For

me, this red-painted cross/X refers to health and hospitals, sex, the Christian religious traditions, and negation.

Frog

Before I left Greece, Marsha gave me a beautiful Chinese frog, which is supposed to bring in prosperity and wealth. While walking around the university lakes near LSU, I often hear a booming sound of a frog that my imagination has given gigantic dimensions to, based on the frequencies of its voice. I have never actually seen the frog, but it could easily be the protagonist of the famous fairytale. The frog in this group of symbols represents playfulness; it is a trickster. However, it is also a courageous hero, attempting jumps that are disproportionate to its size. Marsha had said: “*Do not let anyone change your rhythm*”. I didn’t understand exactly what that meant, and I still cannot entirely grasp it. Could the jumps be a part of my rhythm?

Key

I constantly go back to make sure I have locked my door. I always fail to remember. The only thing that can save me is to bring back the specific memory of me actively locking the door. Unless this memory is clearly recalled and confirmed to be true, and unless I find myself in such distance from my apartment that it is practically impossible to check it myself, I must go back and lock my door. Then, after I take a few steps away from the door, I am allowed to carelessly self-indulge and doubt myself again, go back and twist the door knob a couple of times, and then, finally, leave (live). One can imagine my stress and astonishment when, upon my arrival at LSU, I was given approximately ten keys. It took me a few to weeks to memorize which one opens which

door, but I was also amazed by their designs that were often different from keys in Greece. The first key that I made of foam was the key to my former studio, in the old Studio Arts building, before its renovation. It had a bright, almost golden color and an odd square shape; mysterious numbers were inscribed on it (I much later realized that the numbers referred to the rooms it could open). The key in this collection represents power, knowledge of secrets, a smart solution, or their opposites.

Ladder

My best way to categorize the ladder is as something between a tool and a vehicle, an apparatus, a machination that extends our reach. When I was working on the sculptural installation for *Oresteia* during my undergraduate Thesis project, one of the objects-symbols I employed was the ladder as representative of Electra, Clytemnestra's daughter, who was unsatisfied with her devalued place in the palace and subserved Orestes's plan to kill their mother. I associated her character with someone who wants to ascend socially, someone who tries to reach a goal through careful planning and stratagems. However, a catalyst to represent her through the ladder was the initial letter of her name in the Greek alphabet that is "H", which I saw as the smallest unit of a ladder. This symbolism has survived in my mind, independently of Electra, as a representation of working towards a goal. Also, in the sphere of superstitions, an open ladder is something that will bring you bad luck if you walk under it.

Mirror

This symbol refers to philosophical reflection and contemplation and it is an homage to Magritte's *La Reproduction Interdite* (1937). In this collection of symbols, the

mirror asks “who am I?”, “what do I look like?”, “is the reflection the real me?”, “how far can my vanity go?” These questions have always been around, but they are particularly important today, if we think at our online profiles in social media and our structuring of the self through our entanglement with things.

Measuring Tape

My grandmother’s measuring tape was always in the vicinity, an object I found so fascinating because of its colors. I still cannot make sense of how my grandmother was figuring out all these calculations—apparently, sewing involves a lot of math—, since World War II forced her to abandon school at the age of 10. When I arrived in the United States, I had to learn how to use the imperial system; I am happy the measuring tape I brought with me had both inches and centimeters. The two measurement systems (the imperial and the metric system) have profound differences in the way they shape each culture. The metric system implies the acceptance of a universal rule, a catholic, ubiquitous presence of a language that favors precision and calculations. The imperial system promotes individuality, approximation for the sake of time, confidence in one’s own judgment, and fluidity.

(Olive) Tree

As a person, I am really interested in food, and I consider olive oil to be one of my biggest satisfactions. I do not often talk about my nationality in a proud or pompous way, mostly because I am not a friend of nationalities. My interest lies in the visceral experiences of a place: the connection to the earth and its fruit. Here comes the olive tree; above all touristic stereotyping, there she stands, centuries old and patient, loving and

unselfish, gladly offering its fruit. One can observe on her body the wrinkles and turns of time. Sacred and tortured, to my eyes she looks like a gigantic bonsai. Independently of my connection to the olive tree, this symbol can also be seen as just a tree, always personified, and it is used as such in my work, maintaining its symbolism as a source of wisdom, connection to the earth, and a loving figure.

Orange

A very special Greek song says: “*Oh, orange / Give me some energy/ Life, sex, cigarettes [drained me].*” Listening to this song as a kid, I didn’t have any idea what was so exhausting about cigarettes or sex; I only knew they were forbidden for kids. However, I was intrigued about orange’s magical properties and made sure I ate it when my father was cleaning oranges for me even though its sourness was causing severe perspiration to my head. My generation grew up simultaneously with the rise of the “eat healthy” frenzy. Our parents started being worried about the amount of sugar we eat and the amount of fruit and vegetables that we do not eat. Years after this, the only thing we know for certain is the complexity of our organisms and of the food industry. Only some foods have been proven to be relatively harmful under any circumstances, while some others are advertised as healthy whereas they are not. Still, we might obsess over a dietary habit that we read, heard, or assumed is healthy, whether that is oranges, chia seeds, or intermittent fasting. We are exhausted from the food that we eat and from the food that we do not eat but we should have been eating, we are hungry for a longer life, a better life, a more productive life; we need some energy.

Pencil

As soon as I learned how to write, I started writing stories and poems. When my teachers read my first texts, they encouraged me to write more. Growing up in a family with close ties to writing, this was not hard for me to do. I am very thankful for that encouragement because it kept me sane in a period when I didn't have many friends.

Pill

The pill refers to the current pharmaceutical habits of the contemporary Western world. We become more and more obsessed and dependent on drugs, vitamins, supplements, etc., which most of the times are self-medicated. A big influence on this subject was Paul B. Preciado's *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*. In this book, Preciado develops a theory that explains contemporary capitalism as "pharmacopornographic", a term that "refers to the processes of a biomolecular (pharmaco) and semiotic-technical (pornographic) government of sexual subjectivity—of which "the Pill" and Playboy are two paradigmatic offspring."¹³ Based on examples around sex and gender, Preciado describes a reality where what is considered "real" is what can be constructed and manipulated, often with the help of science and, nowadays, biotechnology.

Pin (Thumbtack)

Belonging in a category of office objects that are often seen as icons on digital interfaces, the pin is a metaphor that refers to the location of someone on a map, or the

¹³ Paul B Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2017)

temporary placement of something in a toolbar, etc. The pin stands out for me due to its beautiful symmetry. On the vertical axis, the two halves are identical. On the horizontal axis, the two halves have the same height but very different shapes. I see the metal tip as having a phallic connotation, whereas the main body possesses an accentuated set of curves, similar to the ones created with corsets and prosthetic crinolines. In my work, the pin is often seen curved or softened as a way to subvert its sharpness.

River (Body of Water)

I refer to this symbol as river, although I should better describe it as an uncontrollable, furious body of water. Water is limitless; it is bigger than us and we are made from it. As a kid I used to see the same recurring dream (almost nightmare) which was not illustrated with clear images. The best way I can describe it is by the feeling of a drop of water touching the surface of a terrifying ocean. I would wake up in my sleep, feeling anxious but also overwhelmed by this brief connection to something that felt huge. My perception of furious water probably comes from the two streams of my home city, which turn into uncontrollable torrents twice a year. One of them is Anavros which, according to the myth, took Jason's sandal. Another reference of animated water comes from the Bible, where Moses splits the Red Sea, an unfathomable image for my mind as a kid. Now, while living next to the biggest river of Northern America, I am thinking about it as a continuous stream of information, trash, dirt, kindness, and sins. Nothing can stop its inevitable course. If we try to control it, it takes revenge. What try to hide will appear in front of us in the form of huge, angry waves.

Roach

A permanent resident of both Baton Rouge and Athens, the roach is referring to feelings of disgust and the fear towards bugs that comes from the earth. The roach, specifically, seems to be coming from the “underworld”, which is also known as the sewage system. On my walk back home, in Athens or in Baton Rouge, I often try to count the roaches I encounter in the street as a protective measure to keep me alarmed and ready for action.

Rope

I started working on the symbol of the rope while in Greece. Invited by the curator Faye Tzanetoulakou, I was taking part in a group exhibition that was raising awareness around the issue of the sponsoring of the destruction of traditional handmade boats and their replacement with new, imported boats. The rope there represented the connection to the artisans’ traditions that are slowly getting lost. However, this symbol also systematically evades concrete explanations. A rope can refer to connection, strength, or power; a rope can hold an anchor; a rope can be cut; a rope can be turned into a knot. So, NSA (in dating culture, NSA is referring to the avoidance of confirming a relationship).

Scissors

My grandmother was a seamstress. Her pair of heavy iron scissors was always in the vicinity. She would carefully design the patterns on the fabric using a soap chalk, then cut them with the scissors, ending up with odd shapes that she would pin and then sew together to create the dress. Having spent a lot of my childhood with her, I used this

heavy pair of scissors before using scissors made for kids. It became the first visualization of “cutting”, or maybe “cutting” was the word for this very primary image. The intricate design of this object was also something that did not go unnoticed. Its weird, ambiguously sexual shape, combining generous curves with disciplinary lines, was often personified in my imagination. It was becoming a substitute for a doll, only a heavy one, with a distinct metallic smell. As an object, it synthesizes deliberation with creativity and danger with sexuality. The above properties are what made it for me such an exciting prop in the movie *Edward Scissorhands*. As an icon on digital interfaces, scissors are a metaphor for “cut”, an action somewhat definite, usually coming before “paste”. Unless you hit “undo”, which still doesn’t exist outside of digital interfaces, cutting is an action that permanently alters the form of something, always with the goal to reach a better result. Human intelligence, arrogantly or not, decides that disrupting the continuity of something can result in something better. I learned to see this object as the beginning of a creative process. Eventually, it became one of the main tools I use in my artistic practice.

Screw

In *Oresteia* I employed the screw and two screw nuts as the representation of Agamemnon. Beyond the phallic symbolism, I was looking for ways to depict an archetypical male. In my mind, the male is an assortment of individual elements, contrasted against the female, which is conceived as a homogenous, unified substance. Thus, these hardware pieces, sharp and made of metal, represent in my mind a type of masculinity that is bold, fragmented, and calculating. My grandfather was a carpenter, great handyman, and exceptional hoarder. His little boxes of miscellaneous hardware pieces were found everywhere around the house.

Shield

This symbol comes from the Internet world. The GUI icon that depicts a representation of a shield refers to settings that have to do with security issues. At first, I found it funny that computers (a very recent invention) employ a medieval shield, such an anachronistic object as a symbol. It makes me wonder what the common element between cyber-security and the Middle Ages is. We do not use the shield in our everyday life, so what part of this object is surviving in our cognition and why? Inevitably, my mind goes to fear as a driving force and defense as a filter that distorts life.

Volcano

Stories and lyrics make it hard to discern what is real and what is not. Learning at school about the volcano in Santorini that destroyed the Cycladic city which existed on the island, constructed a connection in my head that if the eruption had not taken place, the ancient city would not have been preserved and unearthed revealing these beautiful frescoes. Instead, it would have probably been repeatedly altered in the course of time. During the same period, this music album was released, which is the inspiration for many of the symbols included in this lexicon. “Lava” was the title and main song, and it became a huge hit. The song has a strong, rhythmic layer, above of which, plucked string instruments with a lot of audio effects were creating a liminal space. The lyrics are caught saying: “like a volcano that awakens from a deep sleep, and what creates mountains cries to be born...my lava, my warm blood...I received the light, and I can withstand the fire in the chest, I didn’t take into consideration whatever in life looks pale”. The Dionysiac feeling of the song literally made me believe that the eruption of a volcano is something like a celebration. It is a liminal moment in itself; in Greek “eruption” is metaphorically

used to describe an emotional outburst. Gradually I found out that it is something extremely dangerous and destructive. However, I can still observe myself, as well as other people, finding pleasure in scenes, even experiences, of natural destructions or fire. One of the closing scenes of the ten-year TV saga “Game of Thrones” is portraying a similar moment where Daenerys Targaryen rides her dragon and burns King’s Landing to the ground, the city she was for years trying to conquer as a queen. The scene left many people disappointed, but it made sense to me, wrapped of course as a work of art. I would guess it is the same curious satisfaction of the TV viewers that demands news reporters to stand under the rain while reporting a hurricane. There is something stress-relieving in the imagination of accepting the violence of nature.

Worms

One of the childhood memories I hope to always keep with me is being privileged enough to have access to a garden where I could play with nature, exercise my inventiveness, and get dirty (cities in Greece have a minimum amount of green and most people live in apartment buildings, like I did too). Except for the “Bug & Worm Inn” (with a pool) that I had built in my grandfather’s side of the garden, my cousin Viktoria and myself were always excited to pick up worms from under the tiles of her grandmother’s yard. We would grab a big bowl from the kitchen, sit under the bay leaf tree, and mix vegetables, leaves, weeds, and worms together with a quick “vinaigrette” made of pure mud. Now that most of our grandparents are dead, these worms make me think of death, loss, the cycle of life, and how matter recycles itself. In Greece, burial is the common practice for the deceased since cremation has only recently started becoming

available as a choice, thus worms create a direct visual and even linguistic reference to decay.

PART 4: THE BOARD GAME

Borrowing the practice of creating maquettes for scenic design, which was my main occupation while in Greece, I started using polymer clay to make maquettes for large-scale sculptures. My goal was to explore the possibilities and the scope of my objects-symbols as a life-size game. The scale and the material of these maquettes gave me the opportunity to expand my vocabulary of symbols creating a rich and flexible repertoire.

While working with these maquettes, I realized I was bringing back my childhood habit of arranging all my miniature toys (Playmobil, etc.) on a desk for as long my break from school would last. During that time, I was creating groups of toys, little sections, and separations. In a similar way, I started separating groups of the objects-symbols based on meanings, associations, even colors. Some vague stories and atmospheres began to form in my mind. The combinations started to create meaning and stories that I could talk about. I took these maquettes in a class to see if my classmates would also respond to the impulse of creating stories with the maquettes. I asked my classmates to use them as pieces in order to answer a series of simple prompts like: “express how you feel today using 3-7 pieces”, “tell a story from your childhood using 3-7 pieces”, “tell a fictional story using 5 pieces”, “arrange the pieces in a way that would make sense to you and explain why”. My goal was to see how other people would interact with the objects-symbols I was offering to them. The result was positively overwhelming; I saw people talking as if they were waiting for somebody to ask them how they were feeling that day, as if they needed the visual cue to express what cannot be shown otherwise. It was then

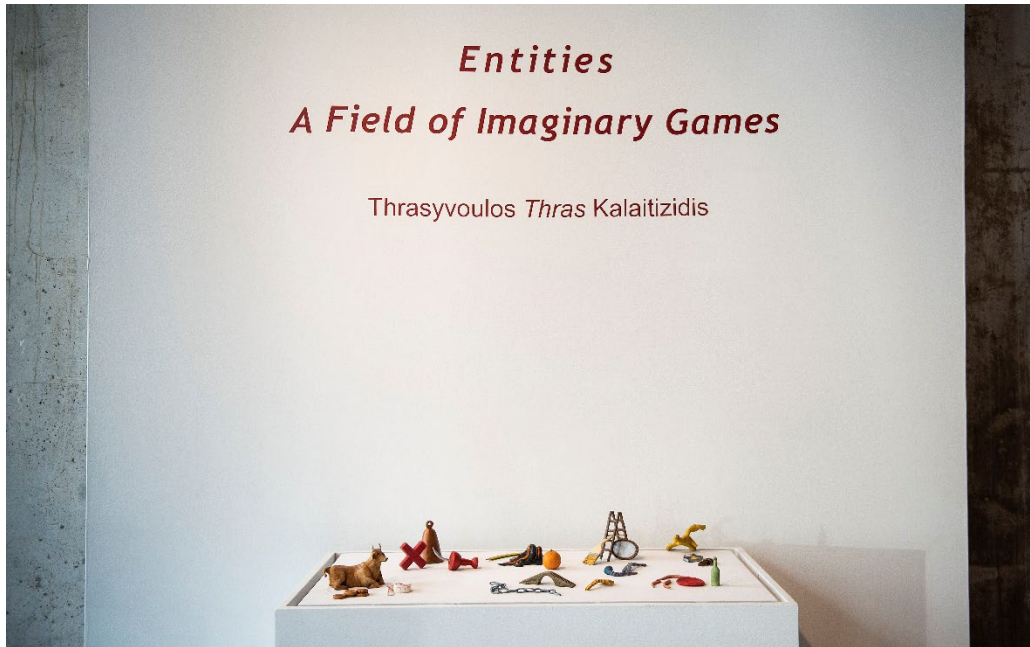


Figure 3. The polymer clay maquettes (2021) exhibited as the prototypes for the board game.

that I realized the significance of what was done: dissecting an area of my own imaginative reach, and sharing it with other people, seeing them use my symbols to create their own stories, I was experiencing unity. Additionally, the game pieces offer a protective shield that allows someone to talk about traumatic experiences metaphorically, without sharing specific details and without focusing on a sterile description of a negative event. By contrast, the negative event can be worked, associated with other images, it can become 'softer'. As adults, we rarely have the chance to find ourselves in a playful situation. Most of the times, specific things are expected from us precluding any chance for play. With this game I wish to create a space where adults can feel seen, and where all our hard work in doing life is appreciated. Still, this game does not exclude kids from

interacting with it, although they would need to make their own rules, which I assume they are very capable of.

Richard Schechner argues in his book *Performance Theory* that “[t]he separation of performance activities from productive work is a most interesting, and unifying, factor of play, games, sports, theater, and ritual.”¹⁴ Work on the theory of play, its parallelism with rituals and others forms of performances, and its importance in co-creating culture has been done by Johan Huizinga in *Homo Ludens* (Huizinga, 1950) and Roger Caillois in *Man, Play and Games* (Caillois, 1958). Huizinga introduces the concept of the “magic circle” which refers to “[t]he arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function playgrounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.”¹⁵ Huizinga continues by explaining why rules matter in such an environment. Raph Koster, who wrote the most extensive book on game design *Theory of Fun for Game Design* (Koster, 2014), adopts a more cognitive approach, analyzing that, people always seek to form patterns that “chunk” reality and games “are concentrated chunks ready for our brains to chew on. Since they are abstracted and iconic, they are readily absorbed.”¹⁶ The reason we play games, Koster argues, is that our brains want to learn, and we keep playing until we learn everything the game has to offer. What the game I am designing has to offer is the stories exchanged between the participants. These stories are expressed through the multitude of meanings that the game

¹⁴ Richard Schechner, *Performance theory* (New York: Routledge, 1988) p. 9.

¹⁵ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1980) p. 10.

¹⁶ Raph Koster, *A Theory of Fun for Game Design* (Sebastopol, Calif: O'Reilly Media, 2001) p. 37.

pieces evoke. I consider stories to be another fundamental element in structuring human culture. The social anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, borrowing Saussurean Linguistics, examines myth as containing cultural information about how to understand and explain the world, and it does so by using binary oppositions.¹⁷ To stimulate these fundamental coordinates, I am including prompts in the game that help players “orientate” in the world of *Entities* through binaries like male/female, love/fear. A big inspiration for this game is “Dixit”, a board game created by Jean-Louis Roubira and illustrated by Marie Cardouat. Augusto Boal’s *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* was also influential in determining the scope of this game, which seeks to bring to surface internal conflicts that are put in a dialogue, a healing, cathartic practice. Augusto Boal believed in the ability of everyone to be a “Spect-Actor”¹⁸, meaning an actor and observer simultaneously. Similarly, in this project, everyone’s ability to use his or her imagination, tell stories, and listen to stories is trusted and encouraged.

The following prompts are directed towards adults. The game can be played by two to eight people, although this does not prohibit playing on your own, or playing with more than eight people. In each turn, the players respond to the prompt written on the card that is on top of the stack. The players have one minute to pick the requested number of pieces from the center and exceptions in time or the number of pieces can only be made when the group agrees to do so. The participants should be able to provide at least a short reasoning for choosing the pieces they chose, and a short story when this is required. At the end of each turn the participants vote who provided the best

¹⁷, Claude Lévi-Strauss, “The Structural Study of Myth,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 68, no. 270 (1955): 428–44, <https://doi.org/10.2307/536768>.

¹⁸ Augusto Boal, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* (London: Routledge, 1999) xxx.



Figure 4. The thirty-two 3D-printed and hand-painted game pieces of *Entities*.

argumentation or story, and this person wins the card. The pieces chosen in each turn are returned to the center before the next turn starts. A prompt can be bypassed only if all the players agree to do so; in that case nobody wins the card. The winner is the person with the highest number of cards, but this is of little importance. The participants are encouraged to take pictures of their combinations and upload them on social media or email them to me, while sharing their story, if they wish so. Also, they are asked to write their own prompts, if they think of a prompt they would like to suggest.

- Choose a piece that represents something that you love.
- Choose a piece that you feel curious to touch.
- Choose a piece that represents something you are afraid of.
- Choose a piece that you would offer as a present to a friend.
- Choose a piece that you would like as a president.
- Choose a piece as a religious leader.

- Choose a piece that you would remove from the group.
- Choose two pieces that represent your past and future.
- Choose two pieces that represent the female and the male.
- Combine two pieces to create a new object.
- Use three pieces to help you express how you feel today.
- Use three pieces to help you tell a story from your childhood.
- Imagine the world ends. Choose three pieces to help you build a new world.
- Choose four pieces that make up a family or group.
- Use four pieces to help you tell a fictional story.
- Imagine you are making new friends. Choose four pieces to be your new friends.



Figure 5. View of the game area. Instructions printed on a big self-adhesive paper on the wall.

PART 5: THE INSTALLATION

In my installations, the sculptures are usually put together in surreal combinations, using scaling, change in material, and levitation, three basic practices of the Surrealists. Due to their size, the sculptures are in a dialogic relationship with the visitors; they embody the essence of *Entities* and transform the space into a surrealist playground. Merging Niki de Saint Phalle's sculptural installations and Claus Oldenburg's soft sculpture, *Entities* prompts the visitor to reexamine his or her relationship to the material world. The pieces are arranged in the gallery based on combinations that make sense to me and make good use of the space, but visitors are encouraged to touch the sculptures and even interact with and move them. In a pamphlet available at the entrance, I printed a map of the installation with directions on how the objects can be handled based on their fragility and safety precautions. Some sculptures hang from thin red twine, allowing this levitating, frozen-in-time illusion to occur. At its other end, the twine is attached to cast metal sculptures of pins, bells, and keys. The levitating pieces add to the animated character of the installation and present themselves distorted and anthropomorphic in front of the visitor who can unhang them from their hooks and interact with them. I also used three ladders as found objects that contribute to the blending of the surrealist sculptures with elements from the real world. The experience of witnessing the visitors interact with the sculptures throughout the duration of the exhibition and especially at the reception night was a dream come true, since they unlocked more possible uses for the sculptures than I could ever dare to imagine.



Figure 6. Entities: A Field of Imaginary Games (installation view), 2022.



Figure 7. Map of the installation.



Figure 8. Irina Kruchinina playing with one of the worms during the reception night.

Arrow

This double arrow is made of foam and dry-brushed with gesso paint. The foam was sourced from a local upholstery business with the help of a former LSU student. It is safe to interact with.



Figure 9. Arrow, 2019.

Bell

One of the first pieces I made in this program, this bell has a characteristic muted sound. It is made of small foam cubes glued together masonry-style. It is safe to handle but it's weight and volume (relatively small for a bell of that size) should be taken into consideration.



Figure 10. Bell, 2019.

Bridge

The bridge is made of scrap wood found in the School of Art's Design Shop. I collected shapes that were thrown away, shapes that had no purpose anymore, and I quickly put together a bridge-like shape. I tried to keep my intervention at a minimum. While some parts are connected together, some other parts are just sitting on top of it, making it a sculpture that one should be cautious around.



Figure 11. Bridge, 2022.

Brush

This piece is made with a combination of many materials, each of which represents a different material of an actual brush. The wood is replaced with paper mâché of supermarket bags sitting on top of chicken-wire and filled with spray-foam. The bristles are made of fabric sewn in the form of tubes that are then filled with spray-foam and coated with paint and silicone. The metal part is replaced with soft foam. The neck of the brush is slightly twisted to give animation to the sculpture. The piece is relatively heavy and should be handled with some care.

Chains

I carried the blue chain in my suitcase while flying here from Greece. It is made of soft foam cylinders that are glued together to create the links. The green chain is made in LSU with foam sourced from the Tiger Stadium old cushions. Square foam pieces were glued together to create the rectangular shapes of the links. The material creates a

contrast between the heavy, cold metal chains and their connotations and this light, soft version of them. They are safe to handle.



Figure 12. Brush, 2022.

Coins

These coins are supposed to be something between a frisbee and a thin pillow. I find this idea really funny, considering the preciousness we usually attribute to money. The coins are made of foam and are perfectly safe to handle.

Keys

The first objects I made in the program, these keys represent three stressful ways of organizing and making sense of the world: time, sex or gender, and God. They are made of foam and do not require any special handling. The experience of a soft key that one can bend and squeeze is something that is worth trying.



Figure 13. Chains, 2019.



Figure 14. Coins, 2022.



Figure 15. Time Key, 2019.



Figure 16. Gender Key, 2019.



Figure 17. Sky Key (God Key), 2020.

Pushpin

This piece is made of insulation foam collected during the move out of the old Studio Arts building. It belonged to former graduate students who have left it behind. The tip is made of soft foam. The body is covered with multiple layers of paint and glue that protect the foam while still revealing the lamination and some of the scratches that I saw as a texture offering “humanness” to the inanimate object. The piece should be handled with moderate care. Scratches on the paint are expected, if not desired to happen. The tip is reinforced with twisted wire in its center.



Figure 18. Pushpin, 2022.

River

This is not a sculpture that directly talks about recycling or the environmental crisis. It is a piece I created using my own plastic waste. Going through my trash, I was having flashbacks of memories that connected me to stuff, commodities, or food that I had used a few days or a while ago; I criticized, laughed, or reevaluated my

consumerism. Working on this sculpture in the future, I would try to get rid of the chicken-wire support and replace the volume of the empty space inside the structure with weaved plastic waste. The chicken-wire underneath the plastic prevents the piece from being fully user-friendly. The piece is a work in progress in which the visitors can participate during the exhibition time, and even provide their own plastic waste.



Figure 19. River (Body of Water), 2021-2022.

Scissors

Made of soft foam coming from a mattress, this pair of scissors is connected in the center with a cylinder from the same material, so it will tear if it is stretched in opposite directions. Except for that, it is safe to handle. The wavy texture of the foam creates a playful impression, making it inviting to touch.



Figure 20. Scissors, 2022.

Tree

I created this piece by stapling cardboard cut-outs collected from the recycling bins of the sculpture classrooms. Seeing all the pieces that were thrown away, the mysterious organic or geometric shapes caught my attention. I wanted to give them the chance to an afterlife. I decided to make a tree, one of the symbols from my lexicon, as a way to poetically restore a tree, the source where paper comes from. The piece should be handled with caution and, thus, cannot be moved by the visitors. However, they are encouraged to participate in expanding it by stapling pieces to its trunk, branches, or roots.



Figure 21. Tree, 2022.

Worms

When I saw those two long remnant pieces of foam, I immediately thought about worms. They are made of soft foam coated with silicon, which maybe makes them seem disgusting, but they are safe to handle.



Figure 22. Worms, 2020.

CONCLUSION

With this paper I am documenting, explaining, and introducing *Entities*, an exploration around symbols that started during my previous degree and was culminated during the three years of this MFA in Studio Arts program. These last three years, I was able to expand my symbolic vocabulary, search for new media to employ in my art, read and write beyond my expectations, meet new people, and create unforgettable memories that will feed my future artistic practice. The writing of this paper was a necessary process for me as an artist to create an archive of my current thoughts and expectations. The exhibition itself was a fruitful and valuable experience where I was finally able to enjoy the participation of the audience in the interactive aspects of the work. The visitors sat around strangers and listened to their stories while groups of friends played with the large-scale pieces like kids. *Entities* will remain a work-in-progress, an ever-evolving collection of symbols that tickles imagination and encourages us to share our stories.

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VITA

Thrasyvoulos *Thras* Kalaitzidis was born in Greece where he studied painting and other media in the Athens School of Fine Arts. During those years he became interested in sculpture and desired to further explore it through an MFA. After working in film and theater sets for a few years, in 2019 he enrolled in LSU School of Art’s “MFA in Studio Arts” program, where he will graduate from in the Summer of 2022. His work presents the power of metaphors and symbols through surreal sculptural installations. He is interested in the idea of play as a tool for acquiring

knowledge, the power of communities to evoke change, and the grey areas between the material and the digital world.