

How to Win Friends and Influence People

by

Jess Wheelock

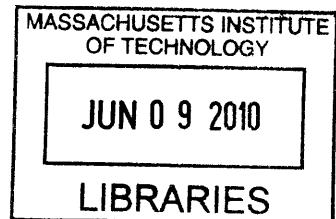
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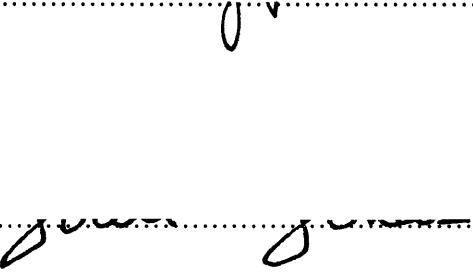
Submitted to the Department of Architecture in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the
Degree of Master of Science in Visual Studies

at the
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
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Abstract

My thesis work developed out of a specific book: *How to Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie. The book is one of the best-selling self-help books of all time. Every part of the book was material for my project: The words. The author. The style. The physical object. I also use myself, the reader as a material. These materials can be manipulated like paint or clay or wood. But materials have limitations and resistances. That's what makes the whole thing interesting. In fact, it was my material resistances – my shyness, my nervousness – which led me to begin working with *How to Win Friends and Influence People* in the first place.

My thesis project, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* is an animation and series of sculptural props that examines Dale Carnegie's book. The written thesis will explore notions of performance, humor, anxiety, and the self as they appear in this project and my previous work completed here at MIT. It will also explore my art in more general way. What is my process as an artist? How do I make decisions? Who do I make them for?

And here it is. I hope you like it.¹

¹ Dale Carnegie. *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. (New York: Simon & Schuster 1964) xvii. "Since no such book existed, I have tried to write one for use in my own courses. And here it is. I hope you like it."

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How This Thesis Was Written – and Why

Blank pages. That's what you start with when you begin to write a thesis. A blank page is daunting because it is filled with expectations. Expectations can be paralyzing. How do you even begin? You've got to make a good first impression. It's funny how much you can worry about something that only a handful of people may ever read.

So how do I begin? Let's begin with the book. My thesis work developed out of a specific book: *How to Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie.² This is also the title of my thesis. *How to Win Friends and Influence People* is one of the best-selling self-help

² Dale Carnegie wrote *How to Win Friends and Influence People* in 1937. One of the first bestselling self-help books, it has sold roughly 15 million copies and has been translated into almost every known written language. The publishing company, Simon & Schuster writes the following on the jacket cover: "As Carnegie explains, the majority of our success in life depends on our ability to communicate and manage personal relationships effectively, whether at home or at work. *How to Win Friends and Influence People* will help you discover and develop the people skills you need to live well and prosper. "People often ask me if I *really* read the book. Of course I did. I really enjoyed it.

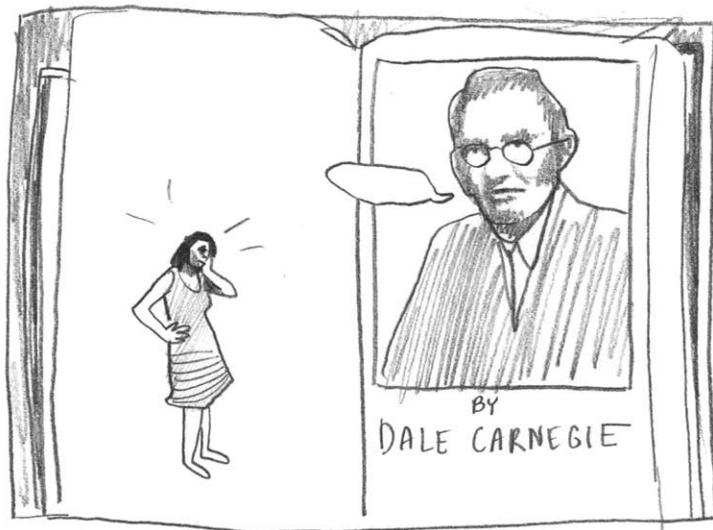
books of all time. Every part of this book was potential material for my project: The words. The author. The style. The physical object. I also use myself, the reader, as a material. These materials can be manipulated like paint or clay or wood. But materials have limitations and resistances. That's what makes the whole thing interesting. In fact, it was my material resistances – my shyness, my nervousness – that led me to begin working with *How to Win Friends and Influence People* in the first place.

For my project -- an animation and series of sculptures called *How to Win Friends and Influence People* -- I decided to act out Dale's book. In the animation, I fall into the text and am mentored by Dale Carnegie, who gives me advice and some absurd tools to help me deal with people. Through the process of making, I inhabited Dale's book and populated it with my own intentions.

I hope you're not offended if I sometimes have a conversational tone to my writing. This too was inspired by Dale Carnegie. It's easy for words to confuse and obscure an idea. Dale proves that eloquent thoughts can be delivered in a frank and straightforward manner. A relaxed tone should not imply a lack of precision.³ My intention is to be reflective and probative, not authoritative and omniscient. If I appear to wander, please keep in mind that it is curiosity -- the desire to know-- that takes me off of the fixed path.⁴ I have learned from making art that wandering is a good way to discover something.

³ French filmmaker Yves Lavandier notes in his book *Writing Drama* (pp. 316-326), "Although the apparent lightness of comedy may lead us to believe that it is written easily, it is, in fact, the hardest of the styles to master. Comedy needs careful handling and requires a certain amount of technique. There are fewer constraints involved in being serious than in being funny."

⁴ Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film*. (New York: Verso, 2002) 156. Bruno is a Professor of Visual and Environmental Studies at Harvard University. She writes in *Atlas of Emotion* (pp. 156), "Curiosity came to signify a particular desire to know, which, for a period, was encouraged constantly to move, expanding in different directions. Such cognitive desire



My written thesis, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, negotiates and plays with the text and chapters headings of the original book. This was a way for me to make fun with my thesis. I believe that thoughtful and rigorous tasks -- like writing a thesis -- can be fun. In fact it this type of work, which has been attributed with a certain importance, that so desperately needs some good goofing-off. As Kristin Stiles writes, “Goofing-off requires developing a fine-tuned sense of what it means to pause long enough and distance oneself far enough from wordly objects and events to recognize their illusory dimension and thereby reinvest the world with wonder.”⁵ And she should know, she’s an art historian.

implies a mobilization that is drift. It is not only implicated in the sensation of wonder, as is often noted, but located in the experience of wander.”

⁵ Kristin Stiles. “Fluxus Performance and Humour.” *The Artist’s Joke*, ed. Jennifer Higginbotham (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007) 52. Kristine Stiles is Professor and Director of Undergraduate Studies in the Department of Art, Art History, and Visual Studies at Duke University. Stiles explains (pp. 54), “I have lingered long on the earnest values of goofing-off because the ability to balance self-abandon and self-awareness in self-oriented activity is part of the ontology of Fluxus performance.

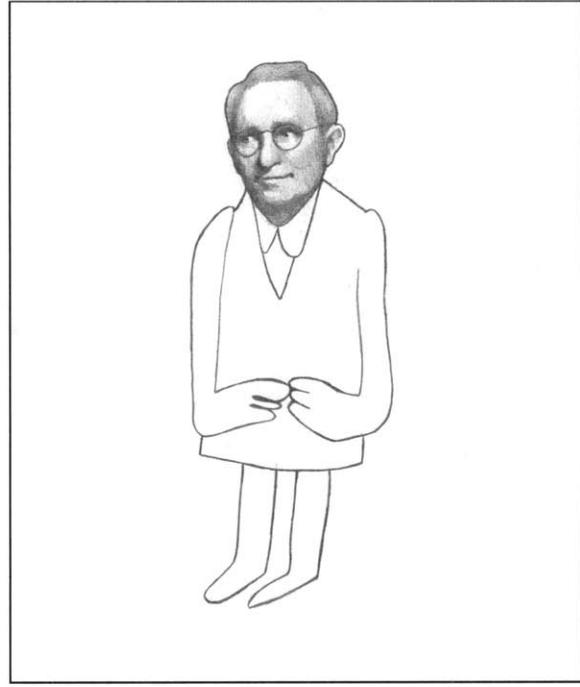
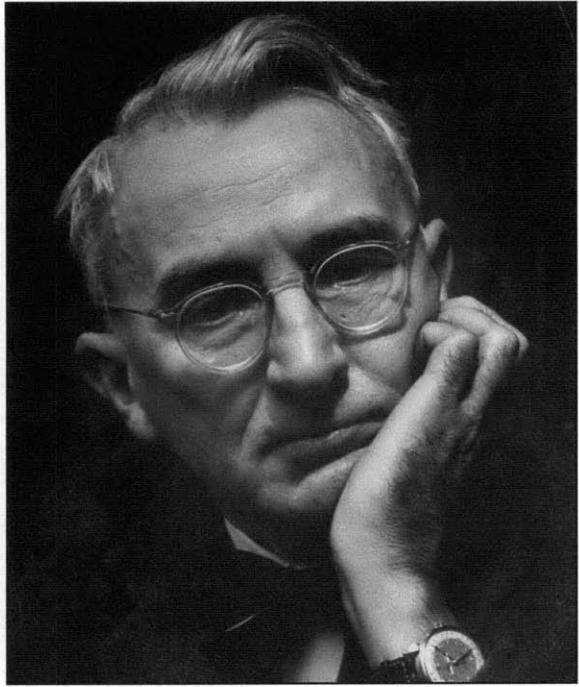
Dale Carnegie says that his book is an action book.⁶ You won't really learn from the book unless you try it out. As an artist, I too believe in action: making, causing, and doing as a way to know and shape the world. My thesis is a reflection on action. It will examine notions of performance, humor, anxiety, and the self as they appear in my project *How to Win Friends and Influence People* and previous work completed in my time here at MIT. But it will also explore my art in more general way. What is my process as an artist? How do I make decisions? Who do I make them for?

And here it is. I hope you like it.⁷

Such a delicate tension holds the potential to increase personal growth and at the same time recognizes that the self belongs to institutions and phenomena larger than that self.”

⁶ Dale Carnegie. *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. (New York: Simon & Schuster 1964) xxi. Carnegie quotes the British philosopher Herbert Spencer who says, “the great aim of education is not knowledge but action.”

⁷ Carnegie xvii. “Since no such book existed, I have tried to write one for use in my own courses. And here it is. I hope you like it.”



Dale Carnegie from LIFE Photo archive and a sketch from *How to Win Friends and Influence People*.

Suggestions on How to Get the Most Out of this Book

Buster Keaton taught me how to read a book.⁸ Well, he didn't exactly teach me how to read, but Buster did teach me how to watch a movie – which is how I began re-imagining the act of reading a book.

In the 1924 silent comedy *Sherlock Jr.*, Buster plays a film projectionist who falls asleep while screening a movie.⁹ His dream state “double” exits his sleeping body and wanders into the film *Hearts and Pearls*. In the world of the movie, he becomes “Sherlock Jr.” - a detective determined to solve a crime that eerily mirrors the young projectionist’s real-life problems. The actors in the movie transform into people he knows: his sweetheart and the

⁸ Joseph Frank “Buster” Keaton, 1895-1966. Buster Keaton was an American comic actor and director famous for his silent movies produced between 1920-1929 that often incorporated slapstick gags. My work has been influenced by his physical comedy and silent, dead-pan character. So Buster Keaton not only taught me how to read a book, but also how to fall down.

⁹ Buster Keaton, director. *Sherlock Jr.*, 1924.

awful cad who is trying to get between her and Buster. Through the device of the dream state, Buster's character projects himself -- his inner vision -- into the movie, thus altering both the movie and himself.¹⁰

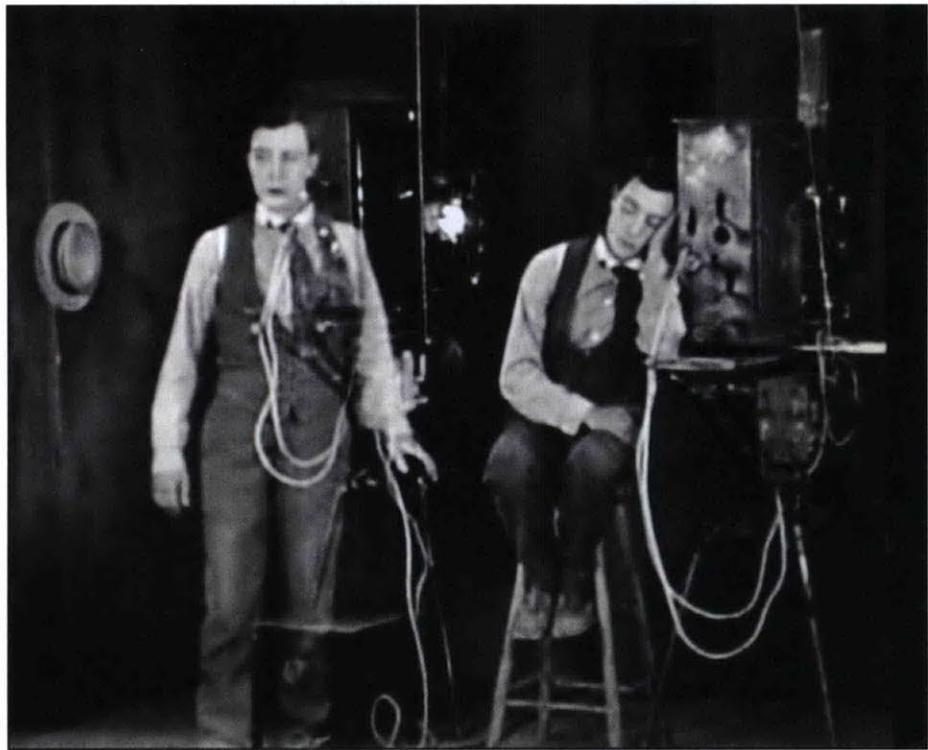
The surrealist painter and filmmaker Salvador Dali referred to Buster's work as "concrete irrationality" due to the imaginative use of the body as a tool for physically acting out an absurd idea. This concreteness allows his comedy to break the bonds of logic.¹¹ By getting up and walking into the film, Buster transforms the emotional journey of a movie spectator into the concrete journey.¹² Buster doesn't just identify with the detective; he becomes the detective. By using the plot of the movie, Buster literally acts out his inner conflict in concrete form. The fantasy world of the movie becomes a site to work through the irrationality of the character's real-life.

I too have my own illogical impulses that I attempt to make concrete in my animation *How to Win Friends and Influence People*: what would it look like if I fell into a book? What does the abstract relationship between the author and reader look like in physical form? How do I make the conflict between a self-help book and reader concrete?

¹⁰ Giuliana Bruno. Class Lecture, 5 Feb 2009. Bruno argues that cinema is a technology for vision and a mobilization of the gaze that affects the way we understand our own perception. In this way, cinema is not just about vision, but about inner vision. Film allows movement to be liberated from the body. Through the act of watching, the spectator may travel without moving the body.

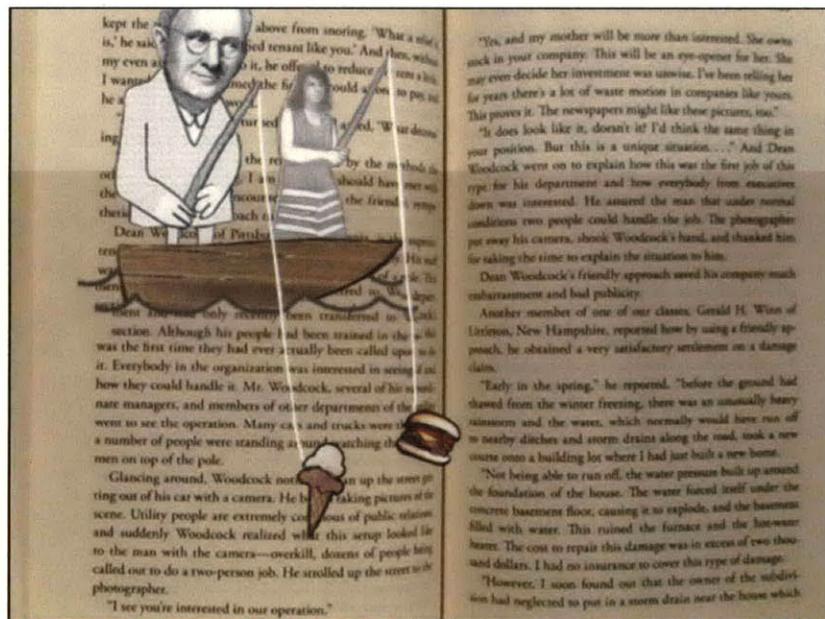
¹¹ Robert Knopf. *The Theater and Cinema of Buster Keaton* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1999) 112. According to Knopf (pp. 112): Since the 1920s, surrealist artists like Salvador Dali championed the work of Buster Keaton and argued that his work shares aesthetic and thematic concerns with Surrealist art of the 1920s and 1930s.

¹² Bruno. Bruno argues that there are mobile dynamics involved in watching a film. The spectator is not a static contemplator, a fixed gaze, or a disembodied eye/I. The embodied observer "is a physical entity, a moving spectator, a body making journeys in space. ...As we walk, it is our legs that construct the meaning."



Buster's dream double walks into the movie screen in *Sherlock Jr.* (1924)

In the project, the act of reading is translated into an animation. The pages of *How to Win Friends and Influence People* is the backdrop for the imagined world inside of the book. Dale's text is the landscape. The world that Jess falls into follows the rules of reading a book. Dale, the author, can speak to her – but only using dialogue straight from the book. Jess, the reader, cannot speak back to Dale: she can only listen. Although she cannot speak, Jess is rotoscoped, which makes her action more fluid and gives her voice through body language.¹³ Dale is animated using a cutout stop-motion technique, which makes his movement stiff and a bit clunky.¹⁴



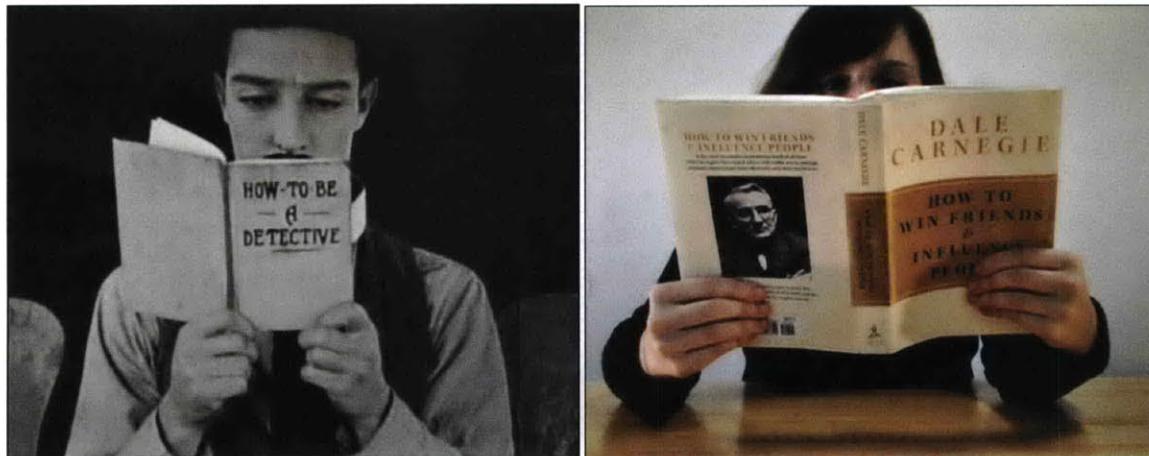
Dale and Jess literalize the notion of "catching someone's interest" by fishing. *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (2010).

¹³ Rotoscoping is an animation technique in which the animator traces over live action footage. For Jess, I shot footage of myself and made a pencil drawing over it.

¹⁴ Stop motion is an animation technique in which one makes a physically manipulated object appear to move on its own. Dale is a cutout figure that I animated by moving him frame by frame.

Despite these rules, there is still room to play with the world inside of *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. Dale's words and advice may be misinterpreted as it is reimagined through the act of "reading." In the animation Dale acts as Jess's mentor. But I, the artist, am able to manipulate his advice by making it literal and absurd.

As Jess wakes up at the end of the animation, Dale cries: "It's all in your head Jess! It's all in your head!" This is true. It is all in my head. In a way, Dale is like the ventriloquist dummy. In a ventriloquist act, the puppeteer and the dummy are really two halves of the same whole. The dummy allows a single person – me – to externalize an internal dialogue. The "conversation" between Dale and I is really my own conflict with social performance and decorum. Is it ok to not be ok?



Buster and Jess reading in *Sherlock Jr.* (1924) and *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (2010) respectively.

Part One: Project Documentation

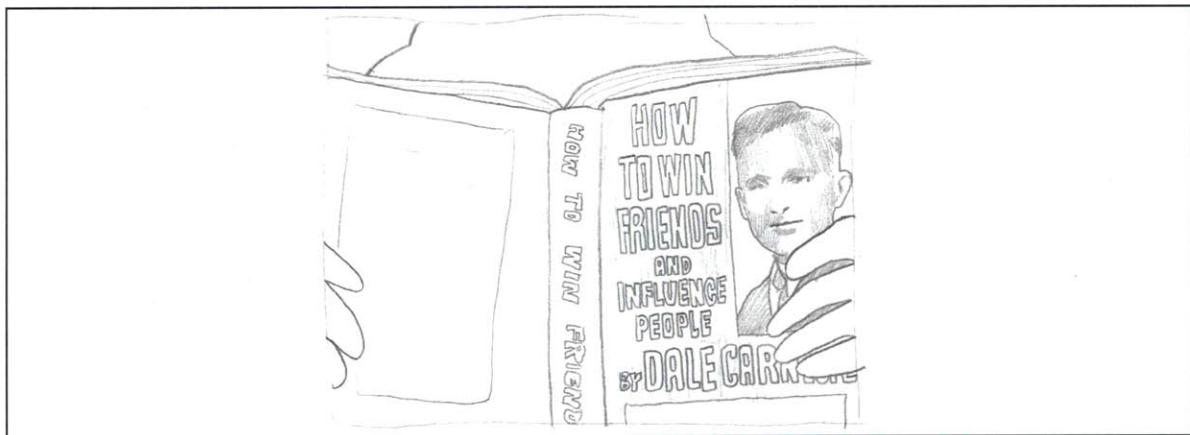
Fundamental Techniques in Handling People

How to Win Friends and Influence People

How to Win Friends and Influence People is an animation and series of sculptural props that examines Dale Carnegie's book of the same title.

In the animation, I fall into Dale Carnegie's book and am mentored by the author. Dale gives me advice and some absurd tools to help me deal with people. I then recreate the tools from the animation in sculptural form. The project plays with the self-help genre by testing out the etiquette of getting ahead and the peculiar rules that govern social interaction.

The Animation: Script, Stills, and Storyboards



[Jess is reading How to Win Friends and Influence People.]



[She yawns and appears to be tired. Eventually, she falls asleep, slamming her head into the book.]

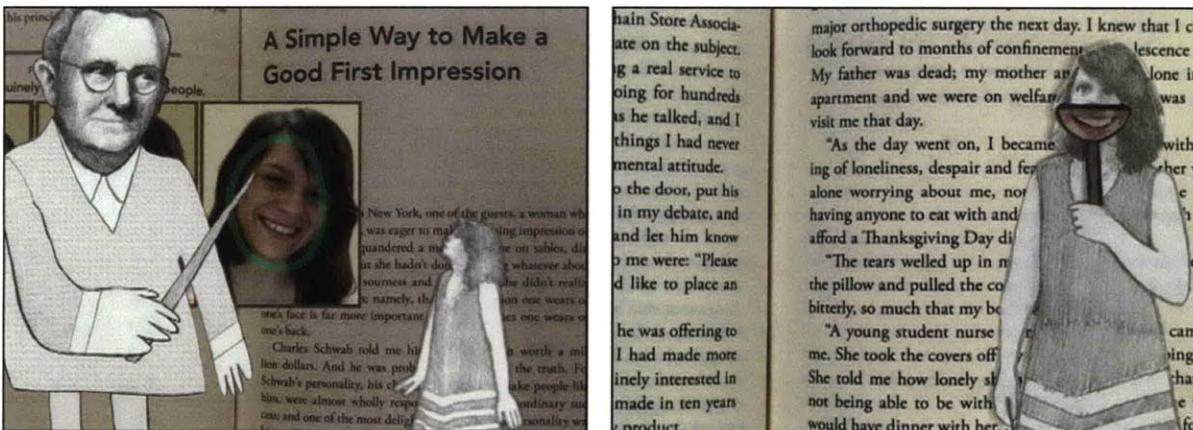
[Jess falls into the book.]

DALE: Hello Jess. It's me, Dale Carnegie. Come on in! It's time for you to learn how to win friends and influence people...



[The page turns.]

DALE: First things first! You've got to make a good first impression, Jess. You've got to smile. You see Jess, actions speak louder than words and a smile says: "I like you. You make me happy. I am glad to see you." Some folks just don't know how to smile. It's truly a shame. Why don't you give it a try, Jess?



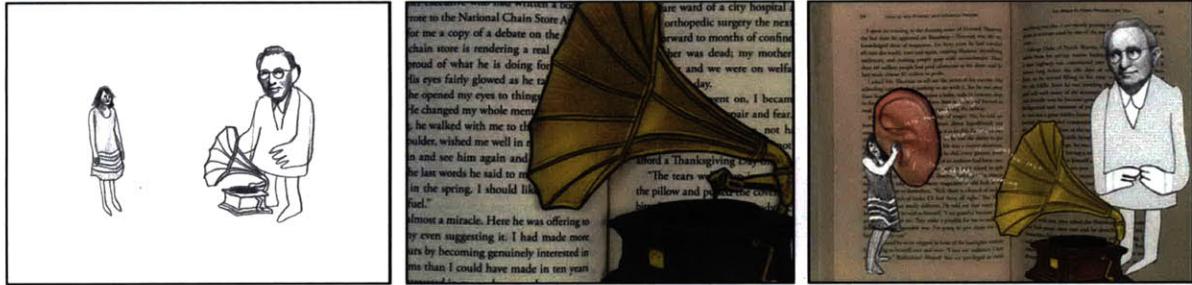
[Jess tries to smile.]

DALE: Oh, uhhh...well...that's a good start...I guess...

Listen Jess, you've got to act as if you're already happy, and that will make you happy.

[Dale hands Jess a smile stick.]

Here, try this, it'll make things easier.



[The page turns.]

DALE: Now Jess, you're pretty quiet, but that's what's going to make you a great conversationalist.

[Dale turns on the record player. Words come out of the phonograph.]

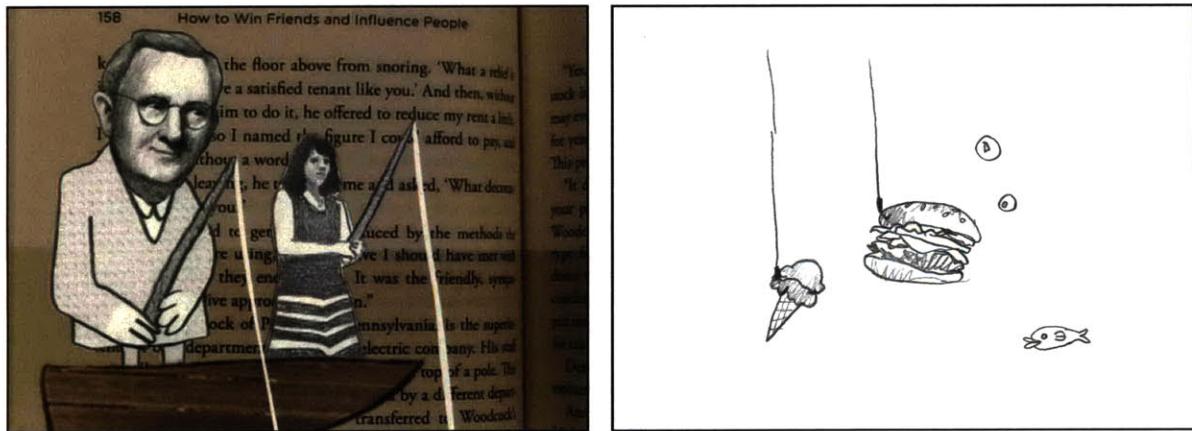
DALE: You see, People don't realize how important it is to listen to other people. The secret is to encourage other people to talk about themselves...that's what they find fascinating! That's what they want to talk about!

[Record stops.]

DALE: Here try this.

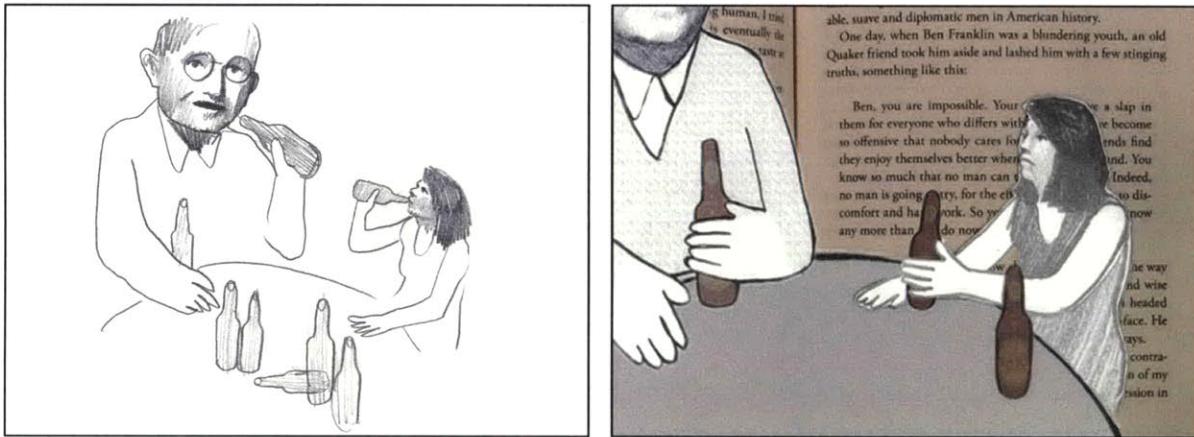
[Dale hands Jess a large ear.]

DALE: They're going to want to spend more time with someone who really lets them spend time with themselves.



[The page turns. Jess and Dale are fishing on a boat.]

DALE: Personally Jess, I'm very fond of strawberries and cream, but for some reason fish prefer worms. When you go fishing, you can't think about what you want. You've got to think about this fish. What do they want? Why not use that same logic when you're fishing for people?



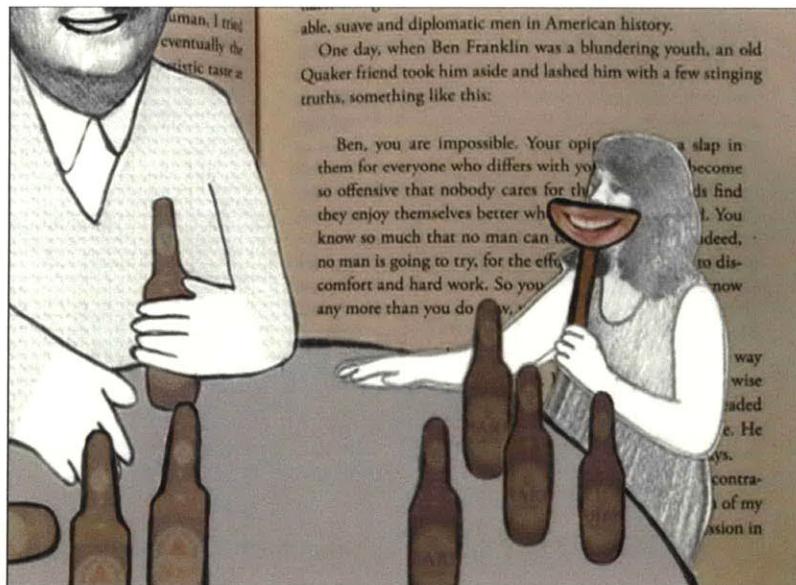
[The page turns. Dale and Jess are sitting and drinking beers.]

DALE: A lot of people wonder why I wrote the book...and I'm going to tell you the truth, Jess. I'm not crazy about people. Dealing with people is probably the biggest problem I have in my life. Why, I was the one of the unhappiest lads in New York.

I feel like we're all playing this big game -- but how can you win? There's no handbook. So I thought to myself: I'm going to make the handbook. I decided to undertake a systematic study of every practical idea that everyone has ever had, down through the ages for winning friends and influencing people.

And here it is. This is it. I hope you like.

[Jess smiles with her smile stick.]



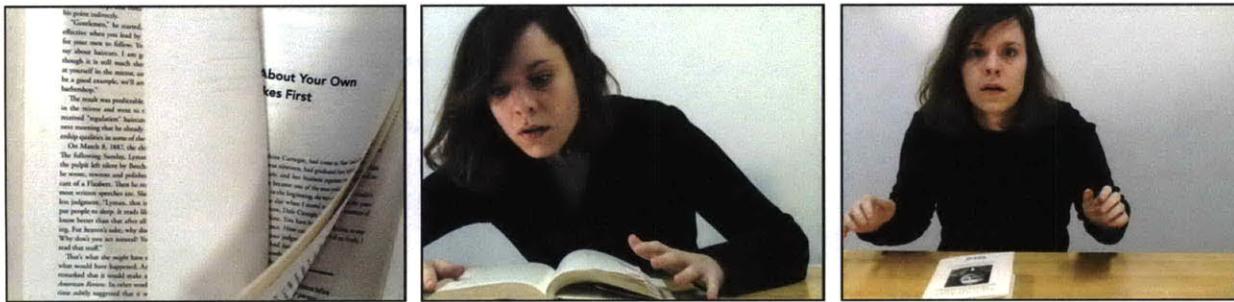
[Jess gets up and turns the page herself. Dale follows her.]

DALE: What is it, Jess? Where are we going?

[Jess picks up the corner of the page and runs through the pages like a flip book. A little animation appears.]

DALE: Oh wow -- would you look at that! Has that been here the whole time? I've never seen it before...how wonderful.

[The full page begins to flip, faster and faster. Jess and Dale are tossed around.]



[Dale yells the following:]

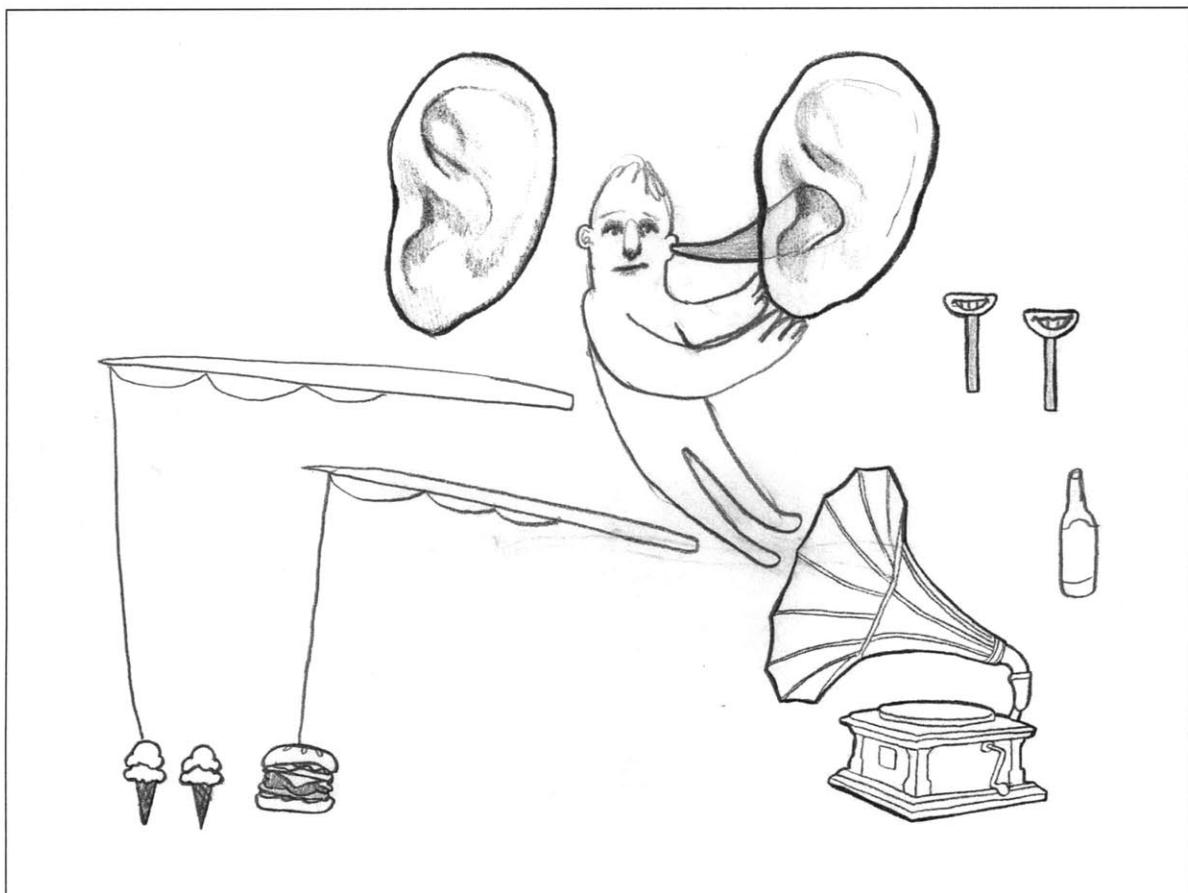
Everyone in the world is seeking happiness and there's one sure way to find it: happiness doesn't depend on outer conditions -- it depends on inner conditions!

It's all in your head! It's all in your head, Jess!

[Jess wakes up and closes the book.]



Sculptural Props

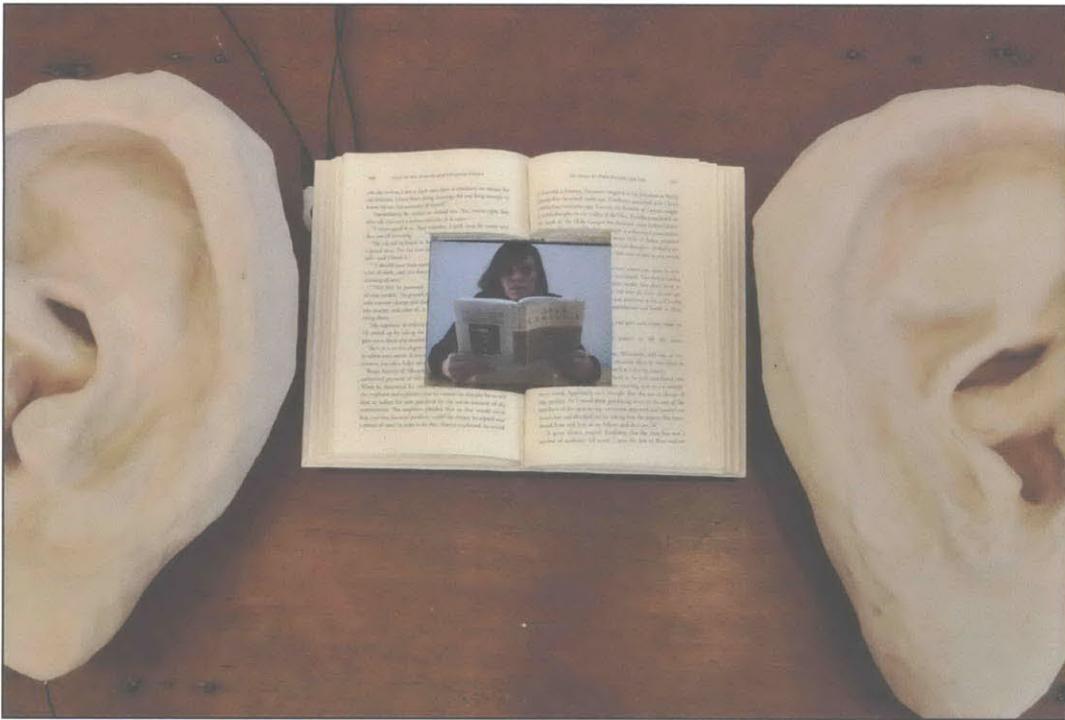




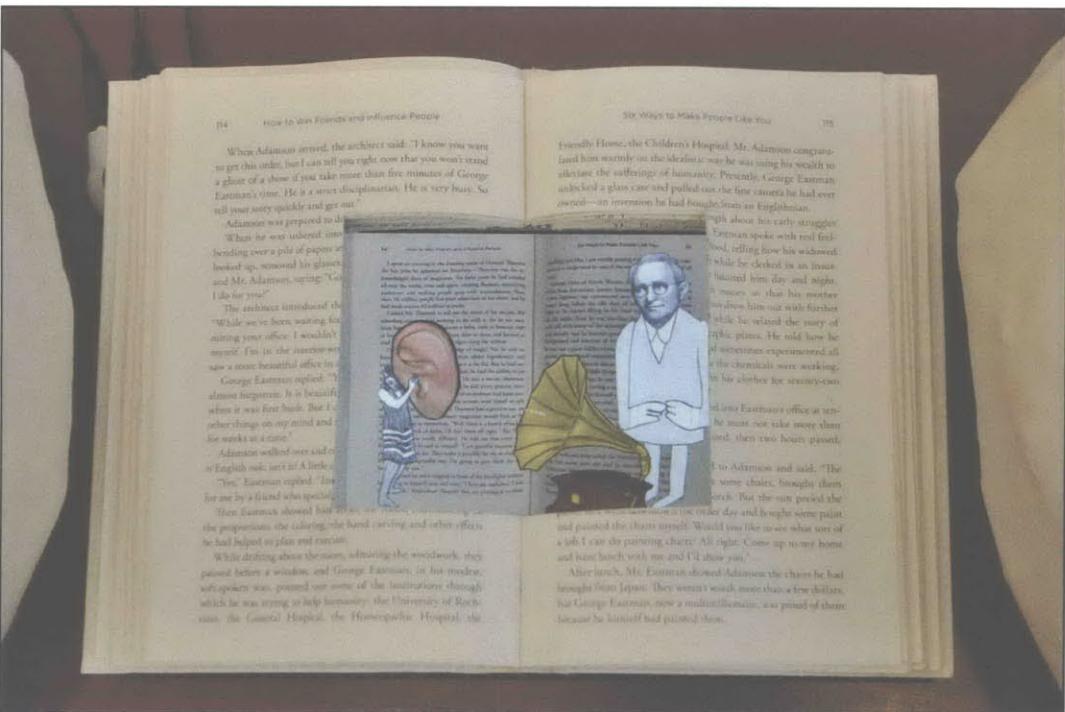
Smile stick.



Speakers are embedded in the ears. The viewer uses the ears to listen to the audio of the animation.



The animation plays inside of the book *How to Win Friends and Influence People*.





Fishing for people with a hamburger.



Part Two: Thoughts and Reflections

Five Ways to Make People Like You

Playing With a Lack of Control

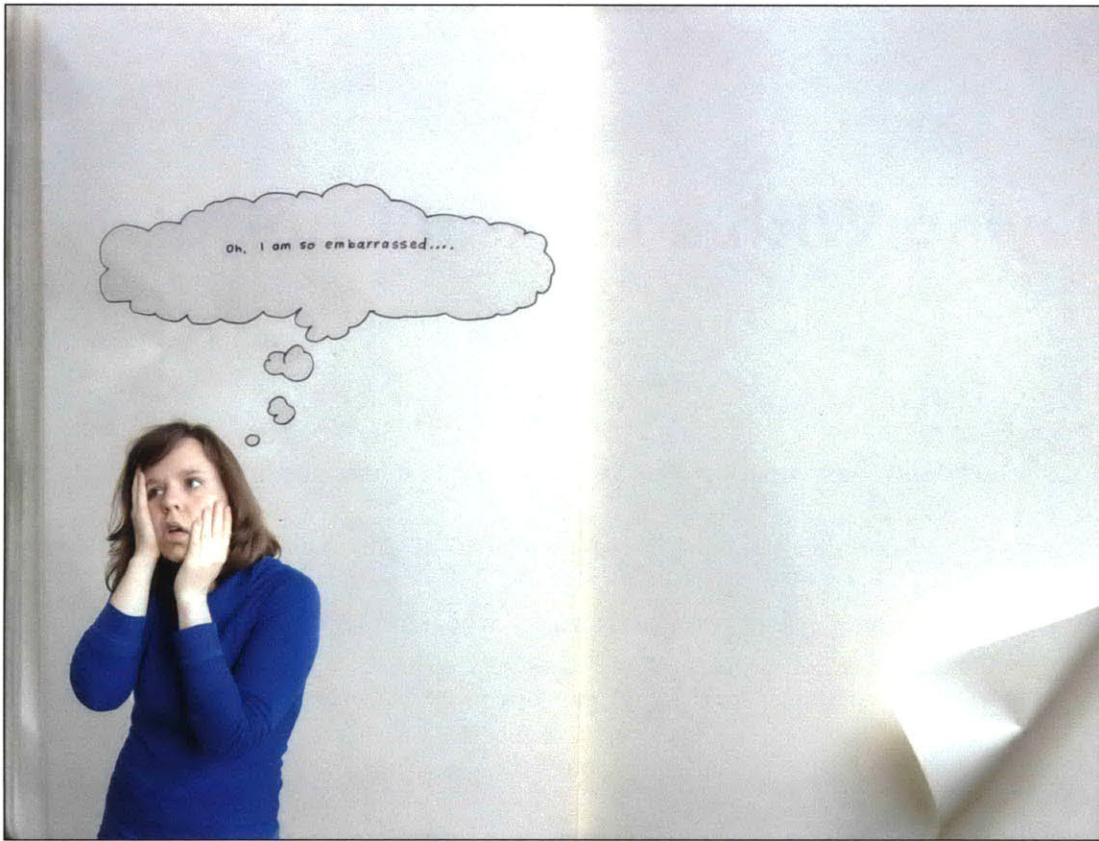
Who is this "Jess" that appears in my work? Is it me, the artist? Is it a character? Sometimes people confuse Jess and I because we have the same name and look alike. Even I get confused sometimes. Artists and performers who represent themselves onstage have a strange relationship to their identities. A gap opens up between performer and performed. Even if the intention is to recreate one's offstage personality precisely, the result is still a highly edited and crafted self that ultimately is presented for the audience.¹⁵ The presence of the audience creates a self-consciousness that affects one's behavior.

The world is full of these split person/persona performances. Joe Gibbons performs the mad genius, outwitting the world.¹⁶ Sean Landers performs Sean, the insecure egotist.¹⁷ Andy Kaufman played Andy, the sweet (or is it obnoxious?) infantile man.¹⁸ Andy's

¹⁵ Stephan Kaplin. "A Puppet Tree." *Puppets, Masks, and Performing* ed. John Bell (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001) 22. Kaplin examines the puppet/performer relationship by developing a diagram that maps out the spectrum of distance between performer and object, beginning with the actor and the character role.

¹⁶ Joe Gibbons. Gibbons is an American artist and experimental filmmaker. In his 1986 performance with Tony Conrad, *Laughter and Defecation*, Gibbons plays comedian researching laughter at MIT. He tells the audience: "We're not going to do the easy thing...which would be to make you laugh."

¹⁷ Sean Landers. Born 1962. Landers is an American artist whose work often involves confessional text that oscillates between self-doubt and over-the-top self-assurance. Landers says in "The Booby"



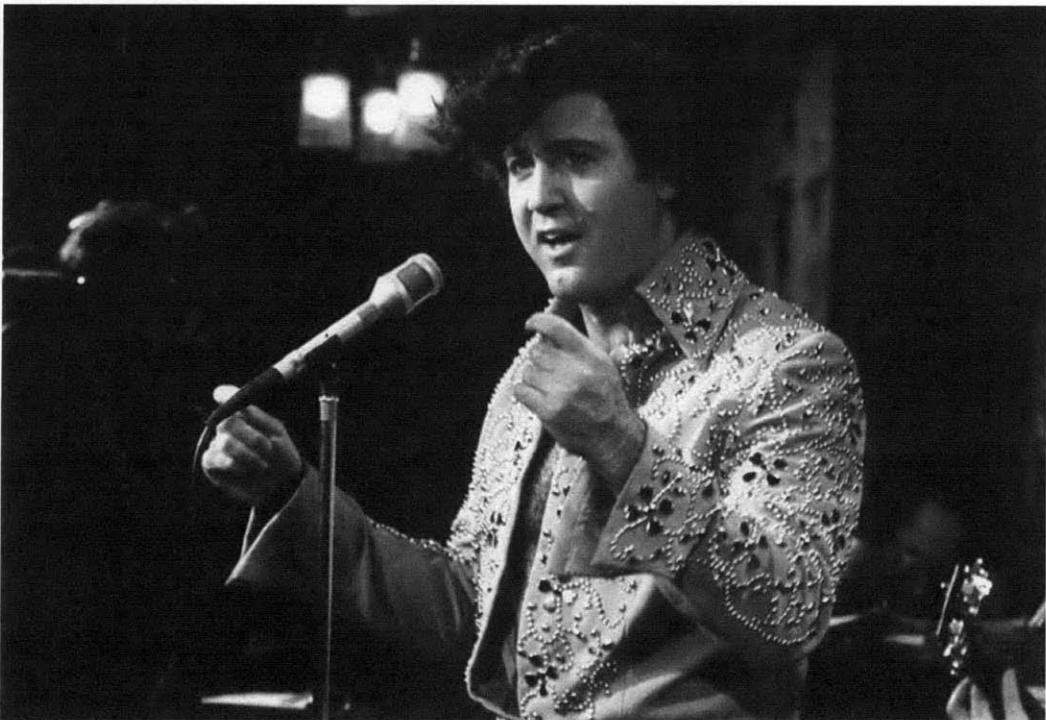
Jess in *There's a MONSTER at the end of this book!* (2009).

(1998): "My Original idea was to make conceptual art entertaining, sloppy, emotional, human and funny. Over the years I got so far out on this conceptual limb that I went around full circle until I was a traditional artist again. I tried to be ironic about it but eventually became sincere. Now I'm a happy victim of my own charade. I figure that it's better to be a sucker who makes something than a wise guy who is too cautious to make anything at all."

¹⁸ Andy Kaufman. 1949-1984. Andy Kaufman, one of the most perplexing figures to emerge from American stand-up comedy. At times endearing and at other points obnoxious, Andy was nationally known for his appearances on *Saturday Night Live*; the sitcom *Taxi*; *Late Night with David Letterman*; and *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson*. As Florian Keller points out in her book, *Andy Kaufman: Wrestling with the American Dream* (pp. 4), despite these connections to comedy and his history of stand-up in New York and L.A., Andy claimed to be a "a song and dance man" and denied the categorization of "comedian" by stressing that laughter was not what he was after. "I've never claimed to be a comedian. I've never claimed to be able to tell a joke."



Joe Gibbons in *The Genius* (1993).



Andy Kaufman as "Foreign Man" doing an impression of Elvis Presley. From the LIFE photo archive.

performances exemplify the confusion of performer and performed: where does one end and the other begin? *Oh, you thought that was the real Andy? That's just a character he does: Andy Kaufman – normal, sweet boy, and all that. That's not really Andy.*¹⁹ When does the performance end? Andy was so successful at blurring the lines between reality and performance that when he was dying of cancer in 1984, many thought it was another one of his performances.²⁰ This staging of the self naturally raises questions about role and reality, personality and character, having and being.²¹

Performed Jess is *more than* me in the sense that she is an exaggerated version of myself: quieter, clumsier, and more nervous. She is *less than* me in the sense that she is only an instance of my identity – a simplification. I am composed of many selves that are constantly in dialogue with one another. Believe it or not, I can sometimes be quite talkative, confident, and sometimes -- just sometimes -- I can actually be graceful. Performed Jess is a simplification and an exaggeration of me: less and more.

Vito Acconci described his performance personality in a similar way: a "male cartoon."²² His maleness was a blatant and amplified aspect of his performances.²³ I too sometimes feel that I am making a cartoon of myself. Does this mean my representation is

¹⁹ Julie Hecht. *Was This Man a Genius?* (New York: Random House, 2001) 12. Bob Zmuda, Andy's collaborator said this to Julie Hecht, who was interviewing Kaufman at the time.

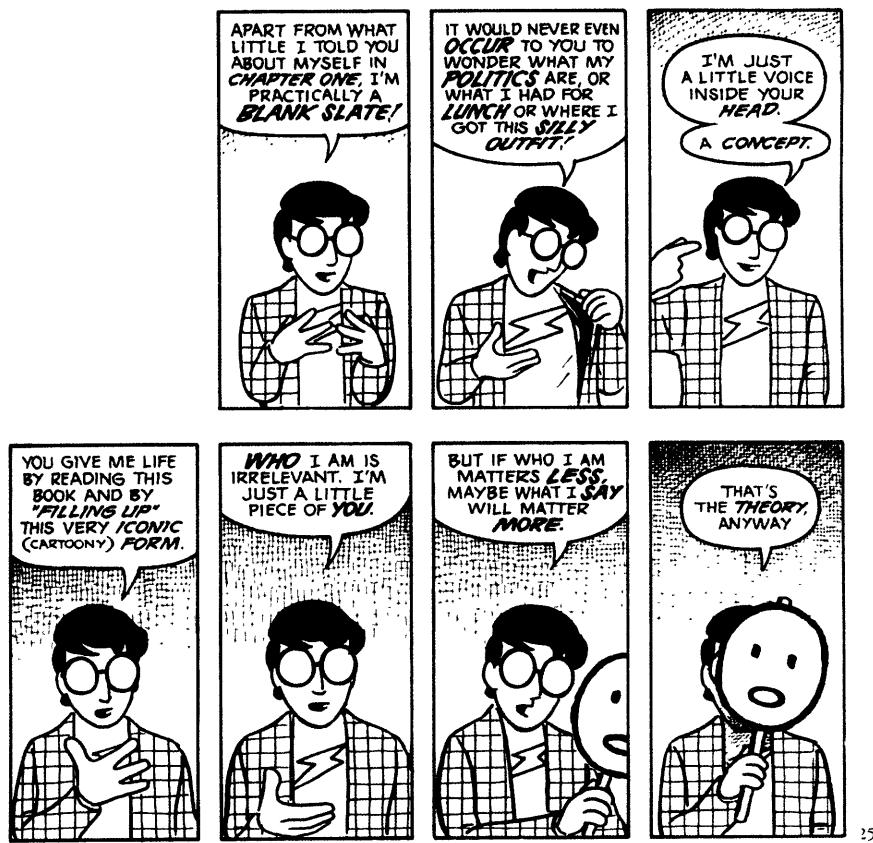
²⁰ Philip Auslander. *Presence and Resistance: Postmodern and Cultural Politics in Contemporary American Performance.* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992) 145.

²¹ Knopf 112. Knopf examines the stand-up comedians ability to evade and detach his or her identity. He notes that (pp. 117) the, "comedian whose name is Ellen DeGeneres [is] playing a character named Ellen Morgan in a show called *Ellen* (After the character? After the star?)."

²² Vito Acconci. Born 1940. Acconci is an American artist and architect.

²³ Richard Prince. "Vito Acconci." *BOMB* 36 (Summer 1991) 5. According to Acconci: "When I said that, I meant—I hope I meant—not "myself" but "myself-as-performer" in some of the early work, where maleness was made so blatant that it stood out like a cartoon: so then it could be targeted, it could be analyzed, it could be pilloried."

simplistic? "Simplistic" is a term often used disparagingly, but as cartoonist Scott McCloud argues in his text *Understanding Comics*, cartooning isn't just a way of drawing, it's a way of seeing. Cartoons abstract an image by eliminating detail and focusing our attention on specific points.²⁴ Beyond that, they allow for the viewer to identify with the cartoon. McCloud explains in comic form:



The attention in my performances focus on the limitations and anxieties of Performed Jess. She is confronted with her own limitations and those imposed upon her by the world – but -- she nevertheless struggles to move beyond them. This dramatized struggle is a very human

²⁴ Scott McCloud. *Understanding Comics* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993) 31-36.

²⁵ McCloud 37.

thing. You don't need to drop a giant birthday cake to have experienced something sweet go horribly, horribly wrong.²⁶



Digital sketch for *Balancing Act*.

Jess allows me to turn myself into an object – into a material that I can play with and examine. I refer to this relationship (between myself and performed self) as self-puppetry. Metaphorically, this doesn't mean that I am a puppet master that exerts complete control

²⁶ *Balancing Act*. See page ??? for the project description.

over my image. As puppeteer John Bell notes, complete control over an object is an impractical and ultimately boring process, especially if you are an artist.²⁷ Puppetry involves an idea of control, but not the one it's typically associated with. The puppeteer actively plays with a certain lack of control. She is aware of the puppet's material structure and limitations. She experiments with different movements and embraces accidental and unforeseen motions, incorporating those possibilities into her work.²⁸ You pull on the puppet and the puppet pulls back: there is reciprocity.

This is the tension between what it means to be an "object" (a thing that is acted upon) and what it means to have a "life" (something that acts).²⁹ The puppet is not just a crude object, it is performed material -- a metaphor which aligns with certain theories of the body as an "inscribed" site.³⁰ The body is a physical object -- a blank page -- that is performed. It is a nexus of cultural value and choice.³¹

There are aspects of myself that I do not have a lot of control over, such as that scared face I make when I am in front of an audience. I build these aspects of myself into Performed Jess. My limitations become the material I play with as a puppeteer. If I am too shy to speak

²⁷ John Bell The Puppet Show 17. John Bell also quotes Puppeteer Shari Lewis on the subject: "There's so much bad puppetry around because people simply *decide* that they're going to do a puppet, and then try to *force* a character onto the puppet. And you can't force it. You have to sit in front of a mirror, and let the puppet tell *you* if it wants to talk."²⁷ This isn't a mystical belief in the object, but rather a practical understanding of the material world.

²⁸ John Bell The Puppet Show 17

²⁹ Gideon Haberkorn. "The Muppets as a Metaphor for the Self." *Kermit Culture* ed Jennifer C. Garlen and Anissa M. Graham (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2009) 30.

³⁰ John Bell. *American Puppet Modernism: Essays on the Material World in Performance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) 4.

³¹ Judith Butler. *The Judith Butler Reader* (Malden: Willey-Blackwell, 2004) 105. Butler argues that aspects of identity, like gender, are performed "styles of the flesh." "These styles, she explains, are (pp. 113), "never fully self-styled, for styles have a history, and those histories condition and limit the possibilities. Consider gender, for instance, as a *corporeal style*, an 'act,' as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where 'performative' suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning."

in front of a large group of people, maybe I will find another way to project my voice -- through body language and narration. Maybe my nervousness can be part of that voice. Maybe I can play with the thing that embarrasses me the most.

Jess as a persona is portrayed through movements, expressions, and actions. Very little biographical information is actually communicated about Jess. What is her occupation? What is her sexual orientation? Did she grow up on a farm? Is she allergic to peanuts? I do not reveal this type of information. In this way, the creation of the Puppet Jess does not come out of an interest in constituting myself through narrative (i.e. autobiography) or from an urge to make sense out of the events of my life.³² The question isn't, "who am I?" but rather "what will I do if...?" I use myself – my personality and my body—as material. By examining this material through Performed Jess, the self becomes something that I can drop into a strange situation and imagine possible outcomes -- without completely putting myself at risk. Puppetry as a form lends itself to this process of self-examination because it performs human action in such a way that it may become strange in the spectator's eyes.³³

³² Michel Foucault. *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988) 101.

³³ Jenna Osman. "The Puppet Theater is the Epic Theater." *The Puppet Show* ed. Ingrid Schaffer and Carin Kuoni (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2008) 19. Osman is an English and creative writing professor at Temple University. She argues that puppetry evokes the notion of the cigar from Bertolt Brecht's epic theater: Brecht argued that the audience should smoke cigars as a way to fight against falling into the unreality being performed on stage. The smoke from the cigars would pull the viewer back to the actuality of the theater and awareness of the performance, allowing one to engage critically and watch the show with a detached, questioning gaze. "Puppets," Osman states (pp. 19), "demand that we become our own objects of inquiry."

The Secret of Socrates

"3. Irrational judgments lead to new experience."

"5. Irrational thoughts should be followed absolutely and logically."³⁴

"I am for an art that embroils itself with the everyday and still comes out on top."

"I am for an art that takes its form from the lines of life itself, that twists and extends and accumulates and spits and drips, and is heavy and coarse and blunt and sweet and stupid as life itself."

"I am for an art that is put on and taken off, like pants, which develops holes, like socks, which is eaten, like a piece of pie, or abandoned with great contempt, like a piece of shit."³⁵

³⁴ Sol Lewitt. "Sentences on Conceptual Art." 0-9 (New York), 1969.

³⁵ Claes Oldenburg "I am for an Art." *The Artist's Joke*. ed. Jennifer Higgin (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007) 59.

If You Don't Do This, You are Headed for Trouble

In his text *Stand up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*, theorist John Limon argues that fear, specifically the fear of being alone in uncertainty, is the topic of Ellen's work as well as the cause of her tendency to digress. He cites the following passage from her book, *My Point...And I Do Have One*:

"Someone recently wrote a letter recently to a magazine recently (and you know it must really be recently since I've mentioned it so many times) asking, 'Why does Ellen DeGeneres always wear pants and never skirts?'

I'm guessing that the person who wrote that letter meant skirt, a noun signifying an article of clothing, and not skirt, a verb defined as, 'to evade or elude (as a topic of

conversation) by circumlocution.' Because, if they mean the *verb* skirt, well, they're dead wrong. I'm always skirting."³⁶

Ellen avoids the question through word play, demonstrating exactly what she is talking about: skirting.

Somehow, I relate to Ellen's technique of digression and excessive chatter. Anxiety is not only the topic of much of my work, but also an integrated part of my working process. Often, I choose to put myself in uncomfortable situations and then use complicated workarounds to circumvent my fears as a performer. I am afraid of public speaking, but instead of practicing and developing this skill, I set up something much more complicated to get around it. In the performance *Ah Güzel İstanbul (Oh Beautiful Istanbul)*, I have someone narrate the action so I do not have to speak. In the animation *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, I set up a conversation between Dale Carnegie and myself where he does all of the talking. I am afraid of performing – or maybe I'm afraid of being a bad actor – so I set up my performances as a series of tasks that I can focus on instead of the audience: "I will carry a large and wobbly cake down this hallway.³⁷ I will turn on a television monitor, watch it, and then turn it off.³⁸ I will carry this large stack of books."³⁹

Ellen as a performer doesn't just ignore her fears: instead she develops an elaborate dance around them, which becomes the form of her work. DeGeneres continues:

³⁶ John Limon. *Stand up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000) 116.

³⁷ *Balancing Act*. See part three for full project description.

³⁸ *Ah Guzel İstanbul (Oh Beautiful Istanbul)*. See part three for full project description.

³⁹ *Carry that Weight*. See part three for full project description.

"All kidding aside – actually, I change my mind. I don't want to put all kidding aside. I want the kidding right there in front where we all can see it. The main point of this book is kidding. If I put all kidding aside, there would be nothing left but nonkidding, and believe me, that wouldn't make a very interesting book."⁴⁰

As Limon points out, kidding is her point -- digression itself is a point. This comedic form is a way of addressing and confronting something uncomfortable, albeit indirectly. The technique of kidding and digression is similar to the writer Italo Calvino's notion of thoughtful lightness. In his text *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, Calvino identifies lightness as a method in literature that may be used to combat the heaviness and seriousness of the human condition.⁴¹ To explain lightness, he presents the story of Perseus and Medusa, the Gorgon monster who transforms those who gaze directly upon her into stone. Perseus defeats Medusa by looking at her indirectly, through a mirror, and supporting himself on "the very lightest of things, the winds and the clouds."⁴² Perseus's strength always lies in his refusal to look at Medusa directly, which would instantly turn him to stone. He doesn't deny the reality in which he lives, he just finds a different way around it – a different way to gaze upon the monster.⁴³ In this way humor, lightness, and skirting become invaluable tools for me

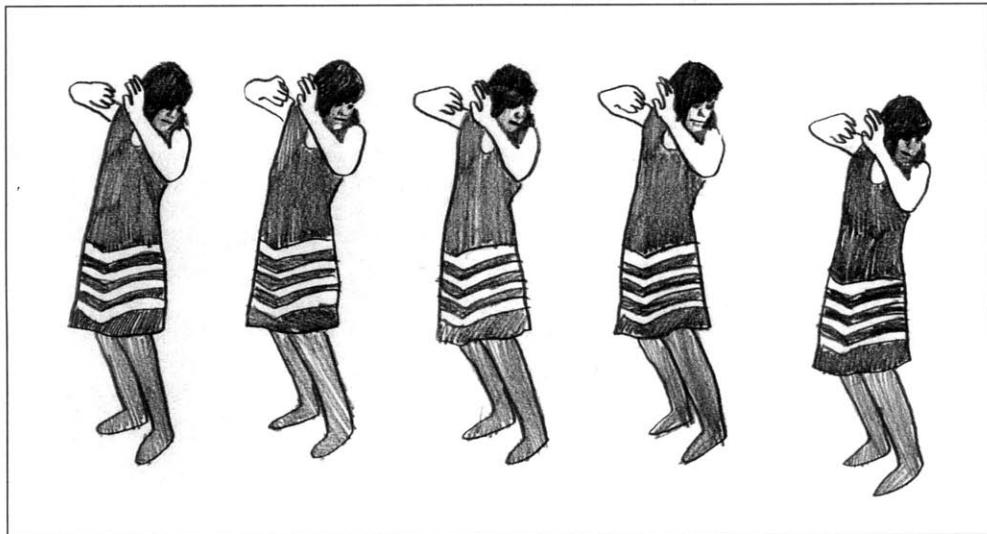
⁴⁰ Limon 116.

⁴¹ Italo Calvino. *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988) 4. Italo Calvino (1923-1985) was an Italian writer and journalist known for his short stories and novels. Calvino writes (pp. 4): "Soon I became aware that between the facts of life that should have been my raw materials and the quick light touch I wanted for my writing, there was a gulf that cost me increasing effort to cross. ...At certain moments I felt that the entire world was turning into stone: a slow petrification, more or less advanced depending on people and places but one that spared no aspect of life. It was as if no one could escape the inexorable stare of Medusa."

⁴² Calvino 4.

⁴³ Calvino 5. After he has beheaded the monster, Perseus makes a soft bed of leaves so that the rough sand would not harm the snake-haired head. As Calvino notes (pp. 6), "I think the lightness, of which Perseus is the hero, could not be better represented than by this gesture of refreshing courtesy toward a being so monstrous and terrifying yet at the same time somehow fragile and perishable."

when making art. They offer a way to look at a situation I am uncomfortable with a different, albeit sometimes silly, logic.



When I was working on the performance *Ah Güzel İstanbul* (*Oh Beautiful Istanbul*), I was afraid to work on a project relating to an unfamiliar city or culture because I was worried that I would misunderstand or misrepresent Istanbul in some way. Because I was so worried about this, I decided to misunderstand on purpose: I will watch a movie in a language that I do not understand, without subtitles, and try to retell the story in a performance. Misunderstanding becomes the form of the work and the means by which I can acknowledge anxiety without looking directly into its eyes.

Despite all of her skirting, Ellen somehow arrives at a moment that feels sincere and to the point. She finally addresses the original question of why she always wears pants:

"It is unfair to be judged by appearances. Even though I don't wear skirts, I know I'm a girl. . . . I'm a person who's a woman, and I don't like dresses or panty hose or heels. I guess you could chuckle and say that I'm a woman trapped in a woman's body. But if you did say that, nobody would know what you meant, and probably more than one person would ask you to kindly stop chuckling."

Here we hit the nerve of the issue: Ellen's entrapment.⁴⁴ Her digression isn't merely evasion. She reframes the issue, taking control of the situation and addressing it in her own terms. In this way it is a prison break: a hole in the fence she can slip out of.

J.R.R. Tolkien identifies a similar strategy through the idea of "escape" in literature in his essay *On Fairy Stories*. For Tolkien, escape can be a practical form of resistance. Emancipation occurs when reality is reconfigured.⁴⁵ Ellen enacts escape through word play and wit, while Tolkien does so through the fantastic. I enact escape by acting out absurdity.

How to Win Friends and Influence People originally came out of a desire to make light of my feelings of entrapment by acknowledging my discomfort with certain types of social performance. What makes me awkward and shy? What is it about the notion of "winning" and "influencing" people that makes me uncomfortable? Interacting with this book is a

⁴⁴ Limon 116. Limon observes, "witticisms of this sort – the sort that do not skirt – are precisely what the inquisitive public is not supposed to welcome. DeGeneres does not expect anyone to find humor in the horror of her perfectly fitting entrapment."

⁴⁵ J.R.R. Tolkien. "On Fairy Stories." *Tales from the Perilous Realm* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008) 376. John Ronald Reul (J.R.R.) Tolkien (1892-1973) was an English writer, poet, and philologist known for writing *The Lord of the Rings* and other high fantasy works. Tolkien writes (pp. 376), "...I do not accept the tone of scorn or pity with which "Escape" is now so often used: a tone for which the uses of the word outside literary criticism give no warrant at all. In what the misusers are fond of calling Real Life, Escape is evidently as a rule very practical, and may even be heroic. ...Evidently we are faced by a misuse of words, and also by a confusion of thought. Why should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if, when he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison walls? The world outside has not become less real because the prisoner cannot see it. In using escape in this way the critics have chosen the wrong word, and, what is more, they are confusing, not always be sincere error, the Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter."

confrontation with the peculiar systems we use to rule social interaction. I skirt around this conflict by "reading" the text in a convoluted way. I use an animated representation of myself – Jess – to feel the situation out. Jess falls into the text and meets Dale Carnegie, the author. Dale offers to take her through the book and acts as a mentor to Jess, attempting to help her social skills. These roles of teacher and student eventually break down and the two become buddies: Dale reveals his vulnerabilities over a beer and Jess is able to show him something new about his book – that the corner of the page is a flipbook. Jess does not necessarily learn society's rules, but instead learns how to move her illogical self through an inherently illogical world.⁴⁶ The journey through my absurd workaround of *How to Win Friends and Influence People* allows Jess to escape social performance and achieve friendship on her own terms.

⁴⁶ Knopf 113. Knopf makes a similar point about Buster Keaton (pp. 113): "As Keaton expands the scope of his gags in the final sequences of his films, the physical world takes on an irrational life of its own, as policemen self-destruct (*Cops*), houses spin and fly (*One Week* and *Steamboat Bill, Jr.*), and bulls take over cities (*Go West*). Buster may never quite fit in with society, but in the climactic, nearly apocalyptic conclusions of his films, he finds his niche amidst the chaos of the physical world."

How to Interest People

I would like my work to be made in the spirit of Gonzo the Great.⁴⁷

Not just because he's different, although he is. Unlike most Muppets, he's not a puppet version of a human, a recognizable animal, or even a monster – he's a "whatever."⁴⁸ His indefinability reiterates his personality, which is constantly questioning, negotiating and reinterpreting normality.

And not just because he is *The Muppet Show's* very own performance artist. As Jennifer Garlen notes in her book *Kermit Culture*, Gonzo challenges his audience like the

⁴⁷ Gonzo the Great is a puppet character and one of Jim Henson's Muppets.

⁴⁸ Jim Henson, director. *The Great Muppet Caper*, 1981. In *The Great Muppet Caper*, Gonzo is shipped to England in a crate labeled "whatever," while Kermit and Fozzie are respectively labeled "frog" and "bear."

best avant-garde artists and is often the recipient of skepticism. "Yokels!" Gonzo exclaims when he is booed off of the stage, "What do they know about art?"⁴⁹



Gonzo the Great on *The Muppet Show* and dressed as Hunter S. Thompson, the author and journalist credited with founding Gonzo journalism.⁵⁰

The reason I like Gonzo is due to his trademark phrase, "while, and at the same time." He uses the phrase to describe his performances, which are usually conflations of circus freak stunts and serious, high culture. His unconventional routines: include a reading of Percy Bysshe Shelley's "To a Sky-Lark" while attempting to defuse a high-explosive bomb; and attempting to eat a rubber tire while the orchestra plays Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's *Flight of the Bumblebee*.⁵¹ Gonzo refuses to acknowledge any hierarchical divide between "high" and "popular" culture. He is a cultural omnivore: someone who accepts and

⁴⁹ Jennifer C. Garlen. "Gonzo, (the Great) Cultural Critic." *Kermit Culture* ed. Jennifer C. Garlen and Anissa M. Graham (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2009) 119.

⁵⁰ Gonzo journalism is a style of reporting in which journalists involve themselves in the action of to such a degree that they be central figures in the story.

⁵¹ Garlen 119.

internalizes culture from many different taste levels.⁵² This isn't simply a rejection of Art with a capital "A", but a joy in the collision of art with low-brow activities – a collision that allows for the use and misuse of both categories and conventions.

"While, and at the same time" is a balancing act.

Can an artwork have broad appeal *while, and at the same time* intellectual integrity.

Can an artwork provoke laughter *while, and at the same time* be melancholia.

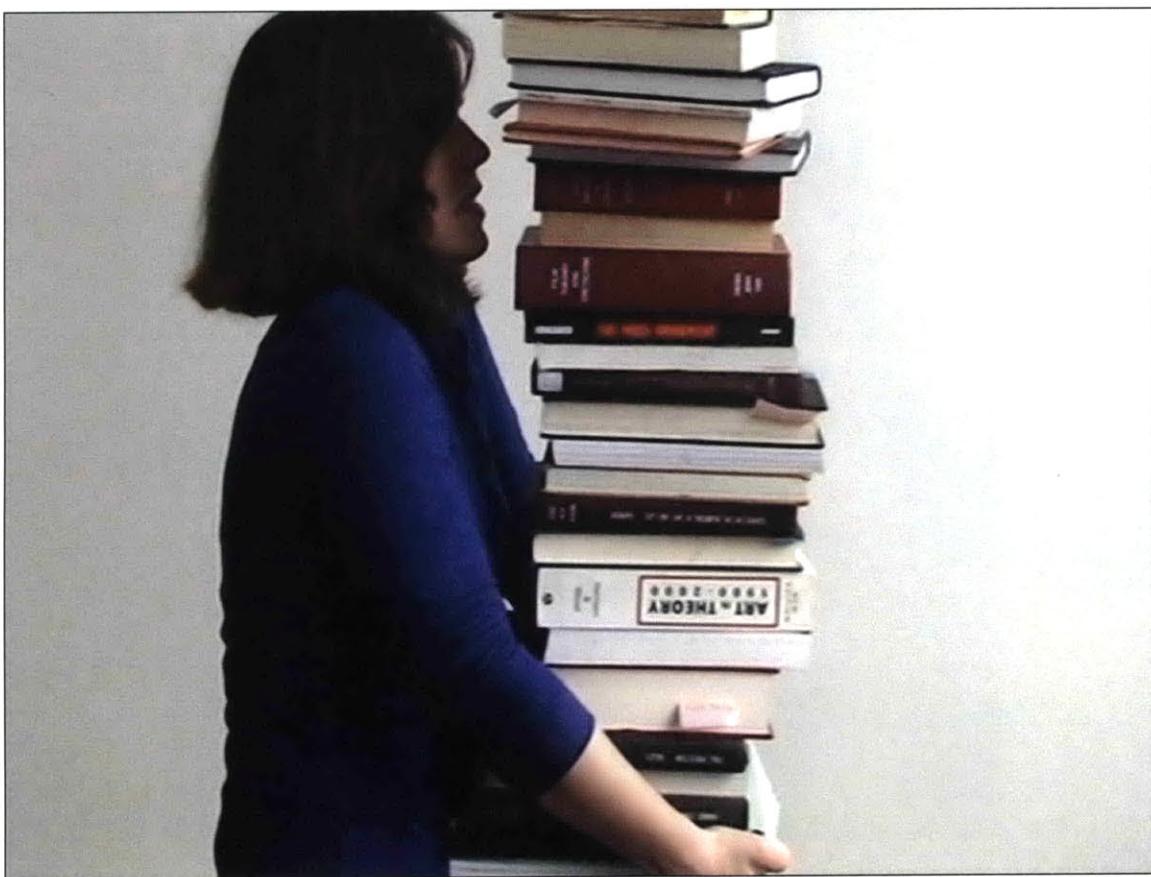
Can I take a silly idea seriously?

Can a silly artist be taken seriously?

Can an artwork be neither cynical nor naive?

⁵² Garlen 118. Herbert J. Gans refers to a "cultural omnivore" as someone who accepts and internalizes culture from many different taste levels in *Popular Culture & High Culture* (1999).

When Nothing Else Works, Try This



Problems are where my projects begin. When I was younger, I was worried that I didn't have enough problems to be an artist. Now I realize that I have lots of problems. Maybe it's a bad idea to say that I have "problems" because that is sort of a vague and loaded word. I mean, when a person says "problems" maybe you imagine something really big and awful. But sometimes little problems are big problems, if you know what I mean. And anyway, not all problems are bad. Well, problems are bad, but they're also occasions for opportunity. Or that's what people like to say when its time to make the best out of a situation.



Bas Jan Ader. *Broken Fall (Organic)*.

Part of my process involves placing myself into problems – into crises. These situations I create for myself are both theatrical and rhetorical devices. In ancient Greece, crisis was considered an important step for how things develop: a state of crisis is the experience of urgent need for the resolution of an unresolved situation. Crisis is a moment of confrontation – a moment that necessitates decision.⁵³ When I first came to MIT, I spent a lot of time hiding in my studio. I would sit in my studio waiting for an idea to come to me, but mainly I would spend my time worrying. I was worried that I would make something that wasn't smart or ambitious enough. The thing is, worrying doesn't necessarily stop me from making mistakes. It does, on the other hand, stop me from making anything at all.

I began placing myself into calamities as a way to get myself to make art – to become unstuck. A calamity is an event that is already a disaster. Starting from a position of failure can be liberating. I would like the work to work through failure and struggle – not just act it out. Worry, limitation, and failure can be materials that I can struggle against.

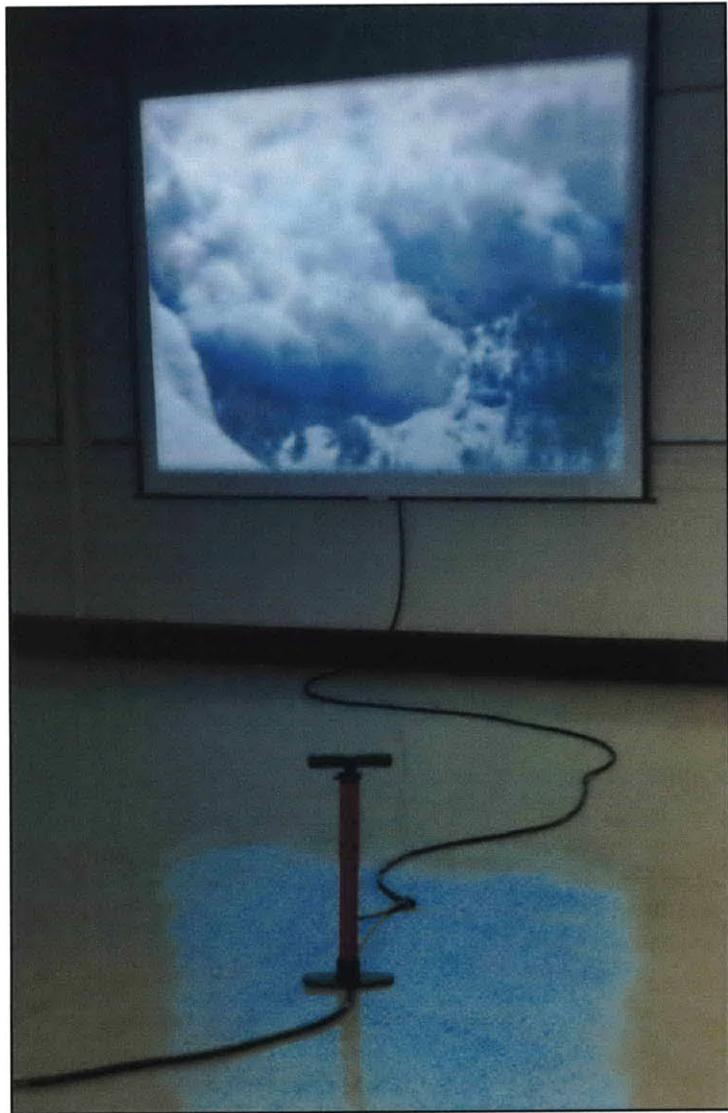
⁵³ Jan Verwoert. *In Search of the Miraculous*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006) 25.

Part Three: Other Projects

How to Win People to Your Way of Thinking

Pushing Back Avalanches

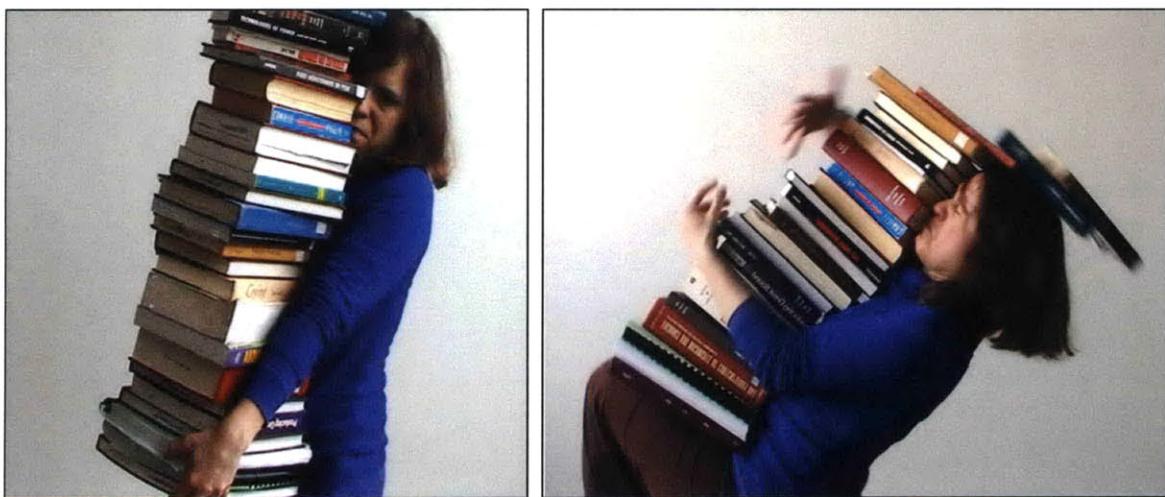
Pushing Back Avalanches is an interactive piece that consists of a video of an avalanche rolling down a mountain. When a person pumps enough on the bicycle pump, it pushes the avalanche back up the mountain. The pumping also triggers the sound of an inhaling breath (that sounds as though it is gasping for air). The avalanche is released when the person quits pumping and the sound of a gentle exhale is heard.





Carry that Weight

Carry that Weight is an interactive piece consisting of a video of myself carrying a large stack of books. Although I wobble and struggle to hold the books, I never drop them – unless the viewer honks on the bicycle horn, which causes an avalanche of books to occur. When I originally made the piece I thought that dropping the books was a slapstick-style calamity, but looking back I can now see that dropping those books was also a relief.





Burning the Candle at Both Ends

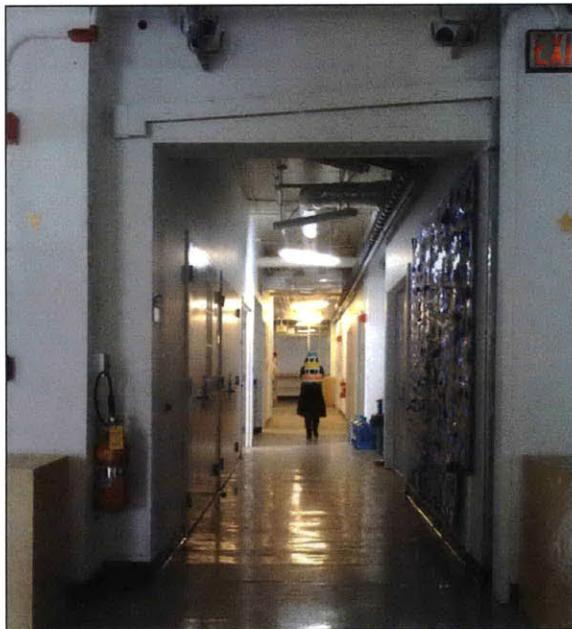
Burning the Candle at Both Ends is an interactive piece consisting of a video of myself holding a birthday candle that is burning at both ends. Sometimes the candle burns me, but I continue on until the viewer pulls on the fire alarm. When the alarm is triggered, I am doused with water over and over again – yet the flames manage to somehow stay lit.





Balancing Act

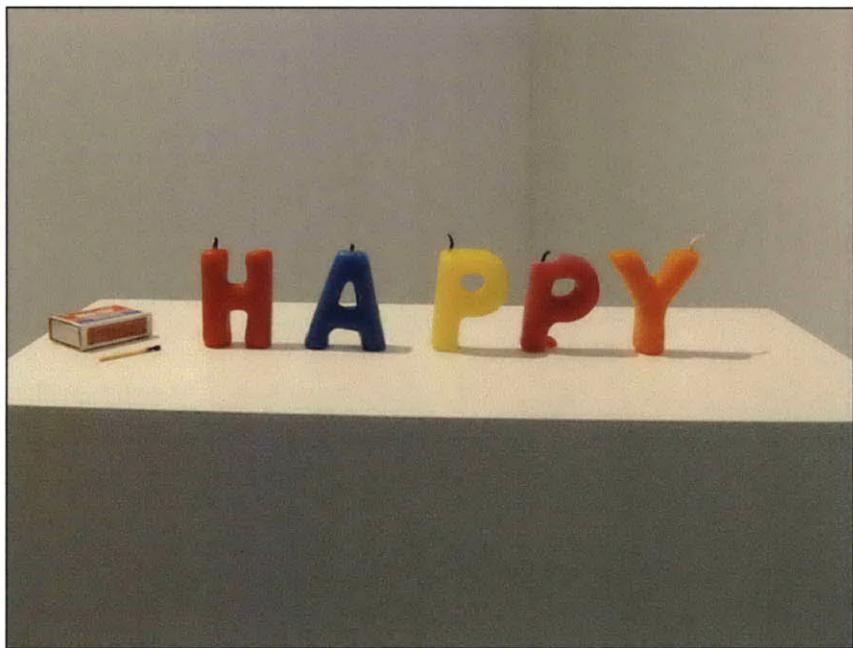
Balancing Act is a performance in which I carry a multi-tiered cake, an essential element of celebration, down a long corridor towards the audience. The cake is on the brink of calamity, wiggling and teetering as I carefully make my way down the hallway. Eventually, I drop the cake.

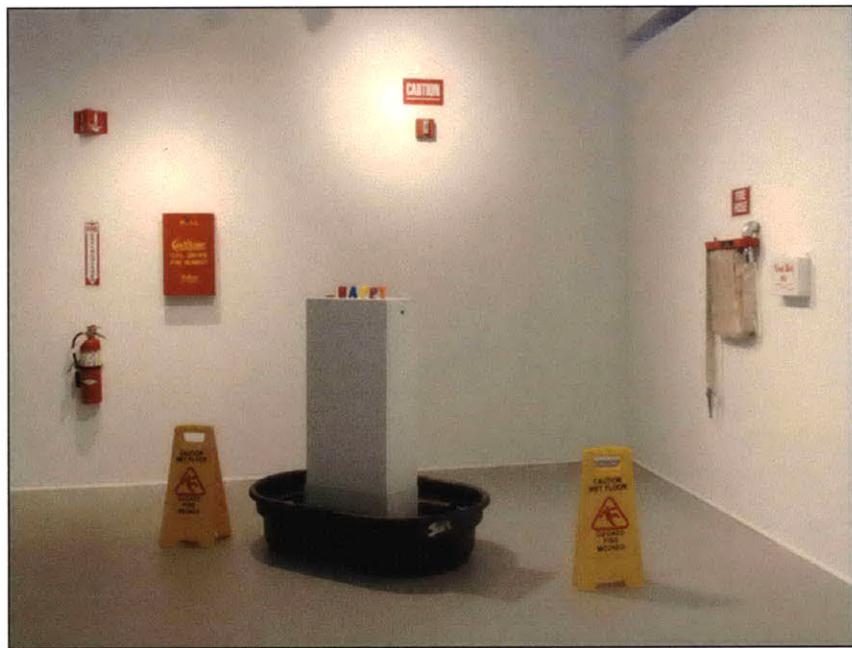




Precautions

Precautions is an installation that focuses on the potential calamity. The simple word “happy” is spelled out in birthday candles and surrounded with every form of safety equipment imaginable, including a fire extinguisher, fire blanket, and fire hose.





Jess Wheelock
Precautions, 2009

Installation

Candles, fire safety objects, inflatable swimming pool, matches

Dimensions variable

Wheelock's work often suggests the struggle against limitation and the desire for wholeness and happiness - all of which are infused with irony and absurdity. *Precautions* centers around the simple word "Happy," spelled in birthday candles. The artist has surrounded the candles with every form of safety equipment imaginable, including a fire extinguisher and a fire blanket.

Please be aware that the safety equipment in this project is for artistic purposes only.

There's a MONSTER at the end of this book!

There's a MONSTER at the end of this book! is a self-published book that reenacts the Sesame Street book of the same title.

PLEASE DO NOT OPEN THIS BOOK!

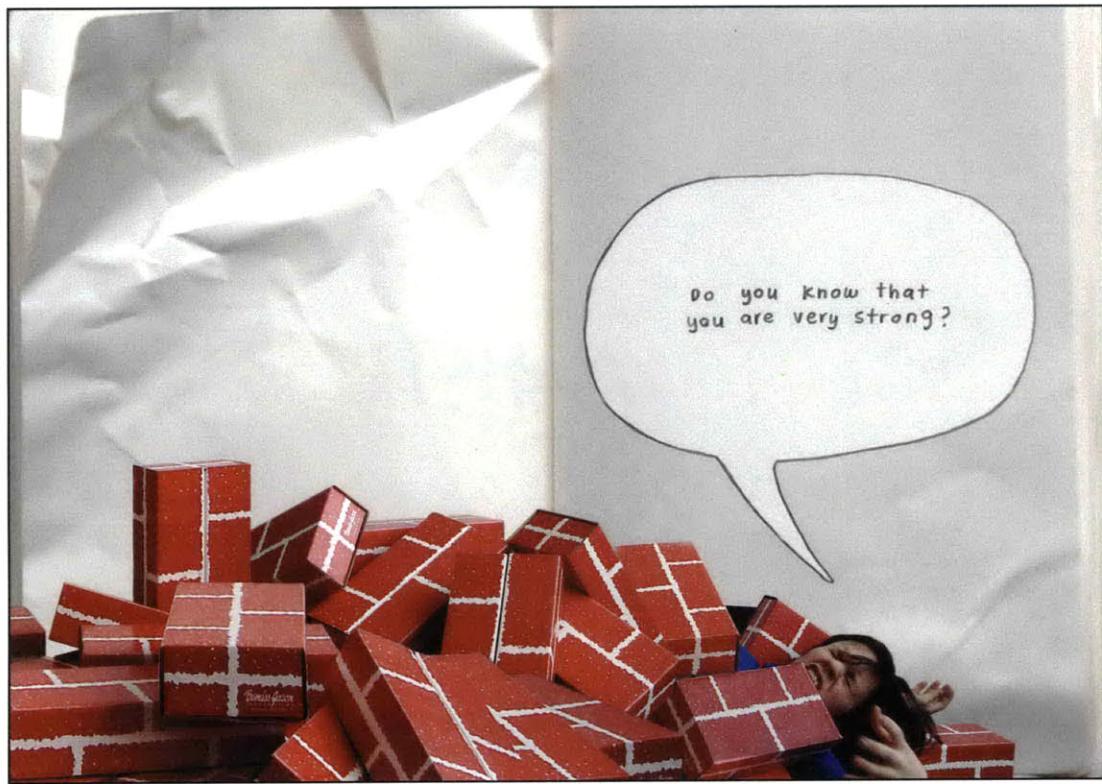
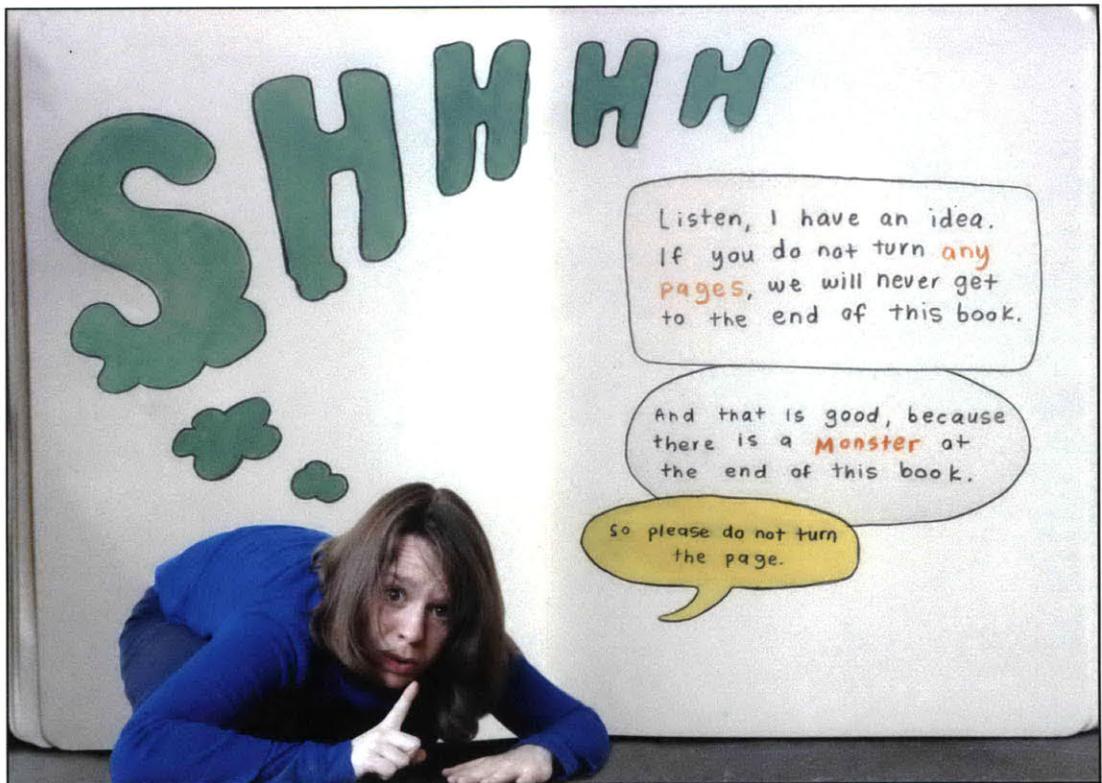
there is a MONSTER at the end of this book

starring
LOVABLE, OLD

JESS

Hello,
everybodeee!





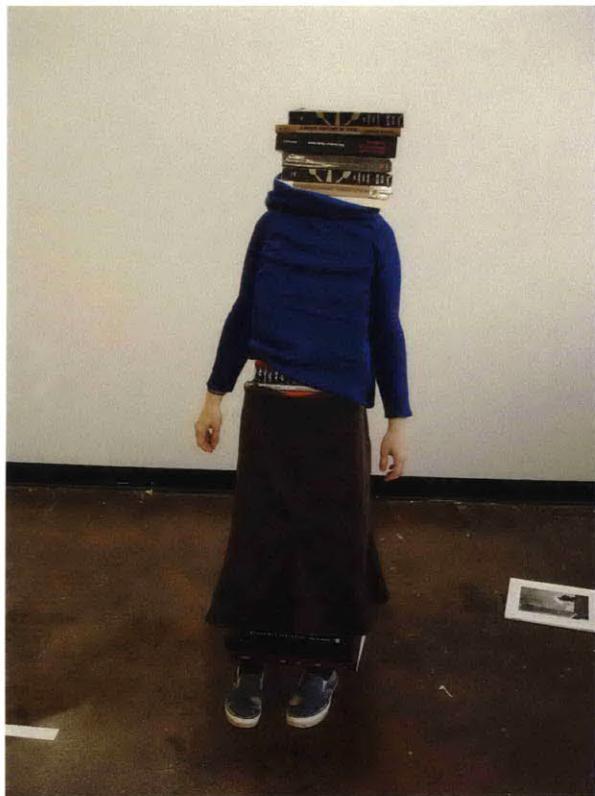
Ah Güzel İstanbul (Oh Beautiful Istanbul)

Ah Güzel İstanbul (Oh Beautiful Istanbul) is a performance that retells my understanding (and mis-understanding) of the 1966 Turkish film *Ah Güzel İstanbul*. I watched the film *Ah Güzel İstanbul*, but the movie does not have subtitles and I do not speak Turkish. Using toy theater, shadow theater (Karagöz), and video, I retell my (mis)understanding of the story, weaving myself and my struggles into the piece. The performance is narrated in Turkish by Aylin Yıldırım and subtitled in English. Through the reenactment, I become the in between point for Boston and Istanbul.





Self-portrait as a stack of books



Digital Print

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