

## Amy Hicks // Research Statement

### Overview

I have long been concerned with questions of belief systems and the impact they have on the individual and social body. My work in video, animation, installation, kinetic objects, and photography explores the validity of irrational thought, our relation to the natural world and to technology, and what it means to construct a life today. It comments on contemporary society's engagement with spiritualism, metaphysics, and pragmatism despite the overwhelming presence of hard-edged technology.

The content of my work stems from a deep interest in the history of errors made during the course of rational pursuits. It involves research in a broad range of subjects including history, psychology, neurology, ethics, media studies, popular culture, and contemporary art and media theory, by scholars such as Mikhail Bakhtin, Benjamin Franklin, Susan Sontag, Hito Steyerl, Lev Manovich, Christopher Turner, Rebecca Solnit, Julia Angwin, Wilhelm Reich, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Scott Bukatman, and Vivian Sobchack, to name a few.

My education and life as an artist is rooted in my background as an administrator at several artist-run and alternative spaces in San Francisco: New Langton Arts, Capp Street Project, and Southern Exposure. The form and content of my work, the choice of how to present it and to whom, and my teaching all grow out of the nation-wide movement of alternative, artist-organized, non-commercial spaces and organizations that foster critical and experimental artworks. Artist-run spaces, which include The Kitchen, Anthology Film Archives, A.I.R., and Artists' Space (NYC), Co-Lab Projects (Austin), Nexus (Atlanta), LA Filmforum (Los Angeles), and Randolph Street Gallery (Chicago), have been central to the production and presentation of experimental art for years, several since the 1960s. By their nature collaborative, they enable artists to create a respected and influential national network of venues and associations, such as the National Association of Artists' Organizations and Common Field, that foster communication among them. They function outside the commercial world of galleries, art magazines, and museums run by boards that primarily consist of wealthy collectors.

Artist-run spaces were the original venue for almost all performance and installation art, artists' books, art films, video art, work by women and artists of color, the interactive, often community-based projects which fall under the heading of *social practice*, and the recent interest in curatorial work *as* artistic practice. Working at artist-run organizations, I gained the values of working within a community of artists, sharing ideas and resources that ultimately led me to pursue teaching and to make collaboration and curatorial work an integral part of my creative practice.

In addition to independently produced work, I am part of an ongoing art collaborative of four primary participants living across North America. I, Daughter of Kong Center for Research (IDOKCFR) creates exhibitions and events with input solicited from participants in multiple disciplines. I am also a member of a curatorial collaborative, Grizzly Grizzly, which has a gallery space in Philadelphia.

My videos and installations manipulate the time and motion capabilities of lens-based media. They have been influenced by 1920s abstract film, stop-motion animation, Soviet montage, and experimental film of the 1960s. I am interested in the content, reception and production of camera-based media more than the narrative and documentary aspects of the medium. However, I do explore the paradox of their function as indexical records that also have a capacity for deep abstraction.

During a time of unprecedented consumption of virtual experience via cinema, internet, and television, I use time-based media to re-imagine and re-experience the landscape and history, creating an alternative view that replaces the drive for profit and logic with ingenuity, humor, and wonder. My practice is based on mining photo and film archives, and the histories they tell. I act as a storyteller, appropriating factual and fictional tales and altering them to reveal how the structure of myths shapes our cultural landscape.

## Solo and Collaborative Descriptions

*Happiness, Free, for Everyone*, the evolving body of work I began developing during a semester-long junior research leave, consists of six discrete parts to date. The entire ensemble began with my curiosity about one photograph of an FDA agent wearing an orgone cap and demonstrating the use of an orgone box. These pseudo-scientific objects were among those burned and destroyed when the psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich was accused of fraud. Reich's legacy has influenced diverse fields, including psychoanalysis, norms of sexual behavior, and political movements. This body of my work is about Reich's personal pursuit of knowledge and happiness, as well as a question for our times: is there room for error and irrational thought in contemporary society? If not, how does that impact our pursuit of happiness? What are the qualifiers that define an action that is deemed crazy or sane? In his diary Reich commented: *I hate the irrational, however, I believe that even the most flagrant irrationality must contain something of rational truth. There is nothing in this human world of ours that is not in someway right, however distorted it may be.*

Using the original photograph and additional documentation of orgone accumulators, I began constructing orgone devices. I traveled to Orgonon, Maine to film on location and toured Reich's lab. I became interested in the inherent impossibility of his healing science and began to construct installations that included similar impossibilities: interactive healing boxes with lights that turn on in response to viewers' breath; posters depicting cyber professionals and others donning metal caps; and video appropriating pop-cultural references to Reich's cloudbuster and UFOs from 1950s era Hollywood films.

The *Cloud* section of *Happiness, Free, for Everyone* involves video projected into an environment of 400 hand-made metal boxes that have been filled with cotton-poly stuffing and back-lit by LED lights. The cloud, once a symbol of Reich's personal triumph over nature (irrational though it was), is now imagined as a collecting device for human data (presumably rational but at what consequence?). In *Cloud*, as in the majority of my work, I use the high-keyed, seductive visual conventions of commercial cinema and television to serve a different message—one investigating fringe beliefs and low-tech constructions. Mixing the documentary footage of sky and ground with abstract painterly

electronic pigment, I create an illusionistic space rooted in the everyday. The sculptural installation's disruption of the projected image suggests the simultaneity of the ruminative and abstract, two-dimensional and three-dimensional, interactive and passive, still and moving, and transmitted and reflected light.

I co-direct the nomadic, project-based collective, IDOKCFR, which is an exercise in imagined science, revisionist history and journalistic chicanery where the act of creating an event or exhibition is the artwork itself. The four primary artists originate a meme and curate each production. We act together as a center for research, although each of us, often under a fictional name, contributes individual work to the resulting project. We periodically invite artists and others to participate by contributing artifacts of the daughter of King Kong to our growing archive. This is a constantly evolving project with many tangents, and offers potential to involve extremely diverse participants. We have currently worked with more than 60 professionals of varying ages and in a variety of fields including the visual arts, music, performing arts, psychology, philosophy, film, acrobatic arts, and law. They include internationally recognized participants such as cartoonist Robert Crumb, filmmaker George Kuchar, video artist Kristin Lucas and visual artist Robyn O'Neill, among many others.

IDOKCFR allows me to transform and expand ideas through collaboration. The open, collective nature of the project involves a great deal of communication and problem-solving during production since roles and responsibilities are not pre-determined. Each project is shaped anew by the participants and requires a sacrifice of control when I open my ideas to responses from new collaborators. The collective functions as a research center rather than as an individual artist when exhibiting its projects in cultural institutions. This is a challenge to conventions of authorship as well as an experiment in exchanging control for collaboration in art-making.

IDOKCFR's work has been inspired by other artists' collectives whose practice is ideologically connected but diverse in form, such as Ant Farm and General Idea. We are also inspired by collaborative practices prevalent in science and film-making where individuals work together to research/create something that has no single author. Our collaborative approach parallels the increase in interdisciplinary activity at universities and mirrors real-life situations most people encounter in their professional and personal lives. This way of working on open-ended projects which accept the possibility of failure has had a direct impact on my teaching.

## **Accomplishments**

The last six years of my studio practice and exhibition career have been extremely rewarding and have propelled me into a very productive trajectory in my life as an artist and teacher. In brief, during my tenure at the University of Delaware, my independently produced videos and installations as well as my collaborative exhibition projects have been widely disseminated. I have had four solo exhibitions in major metropolitan areas and a major video retrospective at an internationally recognized festival. My work was included in seven group exhibitions and screenings and eight juried shows across the country. I participated in seven regional exhibitions, three organized by UD faculty,

bringing my work to local communities and students. I spoke at three peer-reviewed international conferences and gave invited talks at four national universities and museums. I am also an active curatorial member of a Philadelphia-based artist collective.

Some recent highlights include the opportunity to exhibit my newest body of work funded by the UD General University Research Grant. I was invited to install *Happiness, Free, for Everyone*, an innovative media project, at Right Window, a seven year-old artist-run space located in San Francisco showcasing internationally recognized artists and recently voted “Best Conceptual Peek,” according to the SF Bay Guardian. *Luminiferous Aether* was selected to screen on ACRE\_TV, an artist-run on-line streaming network situated in Chicago. Another section of this new work will be featured in *Hybrid Art* at the Center for the Arts Gallery in Towson, MD, this September in an exhibition and catalog of international, national, and regional artists co-curated by Professor Susan Isaacs and Filmmaker Lynn Tomlinson.

In 2013, I was awarded a UD International Travel Award from the UD Institute for Global Studies to bring IDOKCFR to Galerija Miroslav Kraljevic, Zagreb, Croatia. The exhibition, *Skull Island*, was organized by scholars Nathan Brown & Peter Milat. With thirteen contributing artists, this was the largest influx of new work since IDOKCFR’s 2010 show in New York. We received press on the exhibition in the Croatian daily, *Večernji List*. In 2014, this endeavor grew in scale and IDOKCFR was invited to produce a new version for Co-Lab Projects in Austin, TX, that involved over 20 national artists. Co-Lab Projects “has grown into one of the few enduring symbols of Austin’s experimental art scene,” according to Seth Orion Schwaiger for *Glasstire*.

With the increased visibility of my work, my number of speaking engagements also increased. I am pleased to have participated in three peer-reviewed international conferences. I was selected as a panelist for *Expanded Animation: Breaking the Frame* at The College Art Association in New York City. I was selected to discuss IDOKCFR and screen *Testimonies & Evidence* at the *International Workshop on Democracy’s Non-Human and Non-Living “Others”* hosted by Authority Research Network in collaboration with the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council, Plymouth University and the Public Science Project CUNY in New York. I was selected as a seminar leader for *On the Practical Uses of Media Art for Economic Revitalization* with UD Associate Professor Colette Gaiter at Imagining America Conference, where we spoke about the impact of media on economic revitalization, specifically a project we co-directed in Wilmington, DE involving our UD undergraduate students in 2012.

I was invited to give artist lectures at the University of Texas in Austin, Massachusetts College of Art and Design in Boston, School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and the Biggs Museum of American Art in Dover, DE. I will be speaking at Towson University, Maryland, in conjunction with the *Hybrid Art* exhibition fall 2015.

Alongside my creative research, I have worked closely with UD faculty to strengthen existing pedagogical practices and taken leadership in several areas. With the continued support of UD, I look forward to further advancing all of these efforts with a particular focus on reinforcing ties with diverse communities both close to home and abroad.