“THE BUOY PROJECT”

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By

Adam J. Stratton

Thesis Committee:

Brad Taylor, Chairperson
Suzanne Wolfe
Fred Roster
Richard Mills

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ABSTRACT

The Buoy Project was an exhibition designed to communicate the experience of the artist’s investigation and research which occurred in Hawai‘i during the development of the project. The buoys in the project are made out of ceramics. Each buoy was installed and documented in the ocean around O‘ahu. Once removed from the ocean Video screens were installed into each buoy. The video screen in each buoy shows the documentation of that buoy in the ocean.

This paper will discuss processes involved in each stage of the project which include: how the idea originated in the studio and expanded to research in the ocean, why the buoy was chosen as the vessel, construction, documentation, the exhibition itself, why this work is relevant and important to me, art theory related to the work, influences of other Land Art artists, and other ideas associated with the project.
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CONCEPTION

“Nature is my manifestation of God. I go to nature every day for inspiration in the day's work I follow in building the principles which nature has used in its domain.”

- Frank Lloyd Wright

The simple manner in which an idea takes root and evolves into conception, fueled by passion and constructive influences, illustrates how an apparently insignificant object can change artistic direction. To follow the chain of thoughts in the compilation of work from inception to completion helps to understand what the project is all about. This gives each part relevance to the whole. The history involved in the project makes the work more interesting and adds an element of complexity, giving each part a story and a life of its own.

The process started in the clay mixing room while day after day, reconstituting thousands of pounds of clay. In the hours of repetitive work, I had time to contemplate the beauty of the creation of plumes that resembled swirling clouds when the clay and water mixed in the sediment. After the job was finished each day, my clothes were smeared with layers of clay. Realizing the plumbing problems that might result from washing clay covered laundry on a daily basis, I swam at the nearest beach to wash off the clay. Plumes of clay flowed off my clothes from the agitation created by the waves. As an artist and a waterman, introducing clay into the ocean of Hawai‘i became the object of my investigation.

During the development of The Buoy Project, I also researched different phenomena that naturally create effects similar to the clay plumes. Meteorology was the first vein of research that captured my attention which included fluid dynamics, the study of liquids and gases in motion. From a formal perspective, the visual similarities
drove me to uncover some scientific and mathematical formulas that directly relate to microcosm of hydrodynamics, one, being the Rayleigh-Taylor Instability process. It is explained by a formula that calculates the various properties, velocity, pressure, density, and temperature as they function in space and time. It is interesting how matter moves in a universal way, from the microscopic scale to the scale at which galaxies interact with gravity. The architecture of the universe incorporates universal patterns. This super synchronicity is apparent, not only in physical matter, but also in biological organisms and even in the structure of society (Lilly 1983:ix-x).

From a meteorological perspective it excited me to discover and study the direct relationship The Buoy Project had to the ocean, and how the weather affects Hawaii and the swells that move across the ocean. Being connected to the ocean was important in giving depth to the project. The facets involved derive from the intricacies of the experiences in learning how to navigate in the ocean and the time spent learning how clay reacts to manipulation. I would make a parallel to a ceramic artist who works for a lifetime. This experience is represented in each cup, bowl, and vase. There is a beauty in the mastery of a craft, rhythm and pattern in a life of dedicated pursuit.

“One of the beauties of art is that it reflects an artist's entire life.”

-Andy Goldsworthy
DEVELOPMENT

The next step in the evolution of the idea was to move the clay plumes from a less ephemeral to a more traditional form. I first went to something familiar and comfortable. The “vessel” was a way I could responsibly incorporate ceramics into the sensitive environment. The dispersion of clay oxides in the protected environment brought up environmental concerns that I preferred not to address in my artwork. I needed a purpose to create solid reasoning for putting a ceramic vessel into the ocean. Playing off the fear of the ocean being a dangerous environment, I first explored the concept of a vessel designed to give a person refuge under the water, a “diving bell.” Although the diving bell remains a part of the project that I would someday like to develop, the scale at which I conceived it would require more resources than reasonably available to me at this time.

The challenge was the buoyancy of the vessel as well as regulations involved in the installation of a mooring system. Initially, I attempted to pursue the diving bell idea and submitted a site approval plan to the Department of Land and Natural Resources. In order to represent the University of Hawaiʻi as a graduate student, I needed official permission to install my work in the ocean. The permission process became exponentially more complicated. I went through a loop of phone calls, starting at the University’s Marine Sciences Department, proceeding to the reading of state laws and getting official approval from Lieutenant Governor Duke Aiona. The issue was not about gaining permission, but about adhering to the Hawaiʻi Administrative Rules in Chapter 13-5 of The Division of Aquatic Resources, which issues various permits and licenses for fishing, selling aquatic life, and other activities involving aquatic resources. These
permits and licenses are authorized by state law and often require applicants to meet minimum qualifications and agree to specific conditions for their use. In some cases, special exemption permits allow persons or organizations to conduct certain activities that would normally be prohibited. The laws in 13-5 regarding the ocean for most of Hawai‘i deal with specific activities and items not allowed, and because the laws do not specifically refer to anything similar to “The Buoy Project” in the particular area that I was working, I was legally able to conduct my research.

By necessity and because I had a better understanding of the laws, I moved the idea from an underwater project to a surface project. This also proved to be a more natural way for me to work. Using the same inspiration and referring to the tools in the science of meteorology I moved forward with the project. I chose the “buoy” as the vessel, and the ocean as the focal point of my research.
Sunset Buoy, Ceramics, 2010
FUNCTION AND APPEARANCE

The buoy has well established parameters which reference the object related to shape and also shape to function. Because most buoys are visual markers designed to alert swimmers or boats, specific colors are used to stand out or guide people who navigate the ocean or record data on temperature, turbidity, and water quality. For example, while navigating waterways, a vessel should steer to the starboard side of a red buoy and to the portside of a green one. I used similar utilitarian color keys in The Buoy Project.

Other influencing factors during the experimentation process for the buoy as an art object included aesthetics, function, durability, maneuverability, and the specific environment or location that the individual buoy inhabited during documentation.

The first thing the viewer relates to is aesthetics. The use of ceramics to construct buoys, allowed many different options for surface treatments. I tried to incorporate various details in the buoys in order to intrigue a broader audience. I employed a combination of textures and glazes to enhance each buoy and made a variety of effects. The sculptural qualities of the buoy were referenced in order to tie the series together.

Clay, denser than water, made it a challenge to keep the vessels buoyant. Fired clay is essentially a rock, and the firing process is a violent event. During the expansion and contraction of the heating and cooling process, cracking is expected, requiring consideration in every detail of the construction if the vessels are to float.

The development of the buoy as a sculptural object was influenced by actual experimentation in ocean conditions. The spherical shape, the lugs connecting to the mooring line, the seam on the equator of the sphere, and other details help connote the
qualities and uses of the object. The site specificity was determined by the conditions in the water and accessibility at each location.

The lugs were significant to the buoy’s utilitarian function in the same way that a handle is a key in the functionality of a cup. The lugs serve as a tether point connecting the mooring line to the buoy. They were also a structurally sound point at which the buoy could be launched and collected from the water. I used them to tow the buoy out to the area chosen for documentation. If the ocean was hazardous, I played the line out far enough to avoid the danger of colliding with it.

The lugs not only served an important part of the buoy’s utilitarian function but also achieved an aesthetic intent. The lugs served as an appendage sculpted into the form to balance the visual weight of the object. If you look at a coffee cup, the handle would be a parallel to the lug in this function.

A not-so-traditional part each buoy was a window on one end. This window was first constructed to create a removable lid in order to insert a video screen. The firing process also required an opening in the vessel to release water vapor. Taking advantage of the opening by making a lid that would eventually seal and allow the buoy to float, I installed a glass lens into the lid, which became a window. The lens distorted the view into the vessel, creating an optical effect that made it possible for the viewer to become visually immersed into the video when it was installed inside the buoy for the gallery exhibition. I wanted the viewer to be able to adopt the role of a participant, engaging with the object and concept. This idea combined with the sounds of the ocean coming from each buoy was similar to what happens while watching a movie. The viewer’s mind projected their consciousness into the role of a participant. Like a movie, the buoy
became a vessel that literally communicated the documentation of itself, a buoy afloat in the ocean.

The video of each buoy documented a sequence of events while in the ocean. The narrative is chronological, usually starting with approaching the buoy in the water. The buoy was portrayed in different wave conditions often increasing in scale, and ending with a finale, of being engulfed by a wave and washed to shore.
The Buoy Project Exhibition, Yokohama Bay Buoy, Ceramics, 2010
DOCUMENTATION

Buoys mark boundaries in the ocean. A buoy is a device or a tool made to communicate. This is a reoccurring idea inherent to the object as it is traditionally used. The buoys in The Buoy Project were also made to communicate. The Buoy Project used the buoy to mark an event at a specific time and place. Each Buoy had a story and highlights that stood out in my mind as important events in the making of my project. Some are worth mentioning.

The first buoy, a free floating bottle form, was documented at Ala Moana Beach. Underwater photography was a new medium to me. I was challenged throughout the project to capture strong visual images representational of the event. As I worked with photography and digital video, I developed a vision of how it needed to be represented. Without having the resources of professional equipment and expertise and after using an older underwater camera, I invested in a better camera and an underwater housing. I intend to upgrade the equipment again as soon as my resources permit because I think it important to have the highest quality video so as not to distract the viewer with unprofessional, low quality images. After the first few experiments, other concerns needed to be taken into consideration. Water clarity, time-of-day, cloud and sun conditions, and other variables affected the quality of the project’s representation.

One of the most insightful experiments for the project as a whole was the “China Walls Test Buoy.” I tested two buoys equipped with windows which enabled the viewer to peer inside and through the vessel when it was deployed. Because there were ports on both ends of the vessel, it gave an effect of looking into and then out of the object. The ceramic object framed whatever could be seen out the other end. The vessel could be
used to peer from under the water out through to the surface, and visa-versa, as a window into each environment. In addition, the space inside the vessel reversed the function of traditional ceramics by keeping liquid outside the vessel rather than holding liquid inside.

The “Sun Set Buoy” documented a day when the wave height was at least fifteen to twenty feet in face. I set out swimming with the odd floating contraption, into some of the most inhospitable warm water conditions on earth. An obvious spectacle to the lifeguards, I swam out and documented the buoy in the large surf. Afterwards while slowly but comfortably making my way to shore, I encountered two curious surfers. They wondered what I had found and what I was doing. This happened to me often. It always makes things more interesting. I explained to the surfers what I was doing and, after getting my picture taken by a Japanese photographer for a surfing magazine, I continued swimming.

Because the large waves caused a rip current I swam in at an angle, thinking that I would slowly make my way out of the rip. The life guard apparently did not think I was moving fast enough. He grabbed his rescue board ready to jump in to save me. I saw him watching me from the beach, and I shook my head “no,” trying to let him know that I was fine. He came out anyway. I can just imagine what this looked like from shore, me on the front of the lifeguard’s surfboard trying to paddle with a large ceramic buoy balanced on the nose while the lifeguard paddled on the back end. When I realized we were about to get hit by a large wave, I did not think it a good idea to be tumbled around with the lifeguard, his board, and my rock-like ceramic buoy. I bailed off and made my way in on my own.
Some vessels were not completely sealed. Because of a leak that caused air to escape from one buoy, several viewers related to the buoy as an anthropomorphic form. They said that it looked like a diver expelling air from an underwater helmet. Their perception changed depending on how the object functioned, which was similar to the Buoy Project Exhibition where each buoy evoked unique reactions depending on the perspective of the viewer.

The “China Walls Buoy” filled up with water because of a leak, sank to the bottom, and shattered into pieces. Fishing it out of the ocean tested the limits of my physical capabilities. Some concerned people asked if I needed help. There were other nuances of the happenings that made my experiences interesting. A random beach-goer came up to inspect one buoy after it washed up on the shore, and while I documented another buoy during sunset at Waimānalo Bay, a canoe team paddled by.

At the beach, surfers and skin divers responded to me and my concept in different ways. They appreciated it because it changed their perspective of how they usually experienced the ocean environment. They thought it a curious and peculiar form of creativity to incorporate the ocean and ceramics into an art project. Others at the exhibition focused on how the object was documented, and that the vessel actually showed the viewer the documentation.

Because this is an ongoing project with unknown aspects, there is a question in how the visual language will be interpreted, which excites me. I look forward to getting more reactions and insight which will help in the further development of the project.
China Walls Test Buoy, Ceramics, 2009
THE EXHIBITION

Buoys are part of the societal structure, parts of a consistent foundation on which we depend on to protect are best interests. The buoy tells us how close we are to disaster. They warn us when danger is near. They exist for our protection, lending a sense of security, which leads to calm understanding in a dangerous environment.

The presentation of each buoy also helped in understanding some of the universal qualities of meditation. I say universal because there are cultural traditions around the world that have attributes related to the process of exercising the practice of the meditative ritual that give the practitioner a sense of calm and in the process, a strength of mind. There are many activities that have this effect but one is specifically done to isolate the pure essence of the meditative state.

Zen is a concept studied and practiced. The pursuit of balance is a lifestyle. The ocean in Hawai‘i is a place where I find my balance. The pursuit of balance seems to be inherent in the creation of art, not necessarily a conscious pursuit but a universal attribute that is an instinctual part of humanity. Complete harmony is impossible. In this project, I relate to Zen as the balance of opposites. Balance is referring to at least two variables. These variables in The Buoy Project are time spent in the studio balanced with time in nature. The outcome of this way of working became clear in the exhibition.

I did not see any indications that The Buoy Project reflected a meditative state until it was completely installed in the gallery. This calming quality came across in the audio as a whole and from each individual buoy. The sounds recorded to accompany the videos were presented at a barely audible level but could be heard clearly when close to each buoy. The sounds blended with the individual nuances of each buoy.
The “Sunset Buoy” was the only buoy with a constant soundtrack of waves breaking on the beach, and filled the exhibition space with the soothing, meditative sounds of the waves crashing on the beach, which also added to the Zen qualities.

Calm and security and understanding are not a constant. Calm is an objective state of mind. To be calm and carefree is a reward in life, encouraged by healthy activities such as meditation or exercise. I often wonder if my artwork is related to the bad habits I have given up. I smoked for ten years and was also a heavy drinker. I had a hard life because of it. I think, because of my history, I now give a strong precedence to the things in my life that help keep me balanced. Negative things such as excessive drinking and smoking don’t truly alleviate stress. The therapy of exchanging a destructive behavior for a constructive one has pushed me toward goals I never thought possible. This could be the drive behind my obsession with ceramics and the time I spend in the water.

The gallery installation helped in coalescing the ideas and the aesthetics of The Buoy Project. For the exhibition, other additions were needed to tie the buoys together into a cohesive framework. The sand boxes that the buoys sat on not only referenced the sand of the beach but also created a contrast between the buoys, and framed the presentation. The relationship of the smooth soft sand juxtaposed with the rock-like texture of the buoy created a relationship that suggested the ideas in a Zen rock garden.

The seven buoys in the gallery space were organized in relationship to each other in consideration of their aesthetics and the flow of the viewers in the gallery. Inside five of the seven buoys, a video screen played a video and audio of the particular buoy while it was in the ocean. I actually set up the exhibition with the expectation of receiving
some feedback from the viewers who experienced it. I also set up a “YouTube” channel, “The Buoy Project,” which showed all of the videos, giving viewers a means to revisit the experience and an opportunity for comments.
The Buoy Project, Exhibition, 2010
PERSONAL ASSOCIATIONS

As The Buoy Project evolved, ideas that I connected with the project also changed. On a metaphorical level, I first saw The Buoy Project as relating to things in our society that protect us from the environment. It then evoked questions about tools used in our world that guide our way of life. The contrast between the metaphorical and the real gives direction for future research which will help in the further development of the project.

Using the ocean as an integral part of my work seemed to be looked upon by some as unusual, despite the place in which we live. Many of the people of Hawai‘i have made it a habit of qualifying each other with some sort of unspoken hierarchal structure of legitimacy. After spending enough time in the islands, I find myself evaluating my place here as a person and an artist. I tend to qualify my legitimacy in the experience I have as a waterman. In order to survive in dangerous ocean conditions, you must move with the ocean. You can’t fight it. Using the ocean in combination with ceramics seems like a natural combination because I see it as connecting me to Hawai‘i. This is one of the reasons why this project is meaningful to me.
Yokohama Bay Buoy, Ceramics, 2010
INFLUENCES

I intentionally did not incorporate environmentalist agendas into my work because I thought it too political. Outside of the associations that I made with The Buoy Project, there were strong influences that came from other artists who have explored some of the same questions, answers, and ideas. Parallels arose because of similarities in subject, execution and presentation. These artists manipulate the environment around them using the inherent beauty in nature in correlation with their ideas and interests. These combinations present idealistic works combining nature and humanity with each other in harmony.

Andy Goldsworthy was an influence in the development of The Buoy Project. Site specific documentation is part of his processes. The more familiar Andy Goldsworthy is with his environment, the more ideas and options he has in his creations. As he records his ephemeral artworks, he familiarizes himself with the details in the art and in the environment. He explains the event calmly and clearly, almost simply in his documentation. He talks about the things he uses and how they’re associated with that particular place. Goldsworthy sets up an experience and records the happening in order to share his work with the world. Goldsworthy uses his work to discover ideas about the way people relate to nature and the way he relates to nature.

Although some people were able to witness the actual buoys in the ocean, the viewable record in the exhibition was more directly related to Andy Goldsworthy’s work because of the indirect participation with the viewer. The execution of the event, the chronological documentation, and the site specificity also parallel the concepts incorporated in Goldsworthy’s work.
Goldsworthy explores the connection that the environment has with the human on an elemental level. He includes a diary of his artworks, preferring to create one work each day. His sketch book/art diary is personal. He includes his own health concerns along with the description of his work from that day. Holland, New Mexico, Nova Scotia, and Scotland all have variables that change his work, but England, where he was born is the heart of his work. Where Goldsworthy has lived may change, but his work remains consistent (Goldsworthy 2000:12-26).

Besides specific beaches and water conditions that affected my work, I think it would have been interesting to expand the documentation of The Buoy Project to a detailed daily account perhaps including everything that could have had an impact on the observations of the buoy; the times, temperatures, and tides.

Incorporating Hawai‘i as the focus in The Buoy Project connects my work to the “Land Art” tradition. There are many instances where Land Art and my own work are connected. For example, Nancy Holt’s site specific architecture is used as a tool, similar to a sun dial. Also, James Turrell uses the elements in the environment to manipulate light. The buoy is a tool that is tied to meteorology and connected to the ocean as the element of water. Looking generally at the strings that tie Land Art together, time, place, and movement play an integral part in the natural environment where the work is incorporated. I see architecture not just as a utilitarian object, but as the apex in site specific Land Art (Kastner 1998:86-89).

The discourse on Olafur Eliasson’s work is directed toward the perception of the viewer. Along with other formal aspects of his artwork, many of the ideas are connected with The Buoy Project because of the same kind of reactions that viewers have of the art.
work. Viewers are confronted by a spectacle of an enormous object. Comparing the artworks there is a similarity in scale. There is a monumental aspect in both works. Eliasson’s work, “Waterfalls in New York Project” has a monumentality that indirectly can be compared to the scale of the particular environmental condition that is incorporated into The Buoy Project. The size and scale of wave conditions in which the buoys were introduced is comparable to the scale of any construction. Not that the effort was made to construct an edifice, but there was some effort involved in learning how to navigate the ocean in any condition (Art21 2008).

The Land Art of Christo and Jeanne Claude also give strong validation to The Buoy Project by using the planning and recording of a site specific event. The site specificity is important because it addresses the message that they’re trying to communicate to the viewer. They interfere with nature. The unnatural intrusion of the work into the environment affects the relationship that the viewer has with the work and the environment. This monumental change in perception plays with concepts that people think of as permanent. The Buoy Project changes how you relate to ceramics and the ocean (Maysles 1973).
Waimānalo Bay Buoy at Sandy Beach, Ceramics, 2010
CONCLUSION

The Buoy Project combines two elements, ceramics and the ocean in Hawai‘i. Each tradition feeds the interest of the other. This duality composes the outcome in the exploration and perpetuation of the concept.

The research during the project helped in clarifying my ideas. The intentional structure in the dialog is a type of interpreter or an intermediary between the experiences of that specific time. The interpretation from the critic helps in shaping the artist’s and the viewer’s perspective. This interpreter changes the way the artwork is seen during a span of time. The artist can change the meaning by incorporating his or her own biases. The careful structure of documentation helps in confining the rogue ideas that some parts of the work may reference. The art theory explains the fascination and relationship we have with Land Art. Researching art theory and other artists who work with the environment will help strengthen my own understanding of The Buoy Project.

Having a chronological accounting of the project from its inception to the exhibition helps in clarifying ideas, completes each stage, and directs the research that will follow in the next stages of the project. There are many personal ideas that have developed during the process and creation of this project. With work and guidance, I have clarified my ideas and improved my understanding of my own art. The knowledge of other artists and ideas that have enlightened me will continue to be a source of inspiration and are now and forever will be a part of the tools I will use as an artist.
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