

WE BELIEVE IN THE SYSTEMS  
THAT KEEP US ALIVE

A Thesis,  
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
In partial fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

In  
The School of Art

By  
Ezra Kellerman  
B.F.A., University of Kentucky, 2004  
August 2008

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....iii

WE BELIEVE IN THE SYSTEMS THAT KEEP US ALIVE.....1

WORKS CITED.....8

VITA.....9

## ABSTRACT

*We Believe In the Systems That Keep Us Alive* is a body of work that uses parallels identified between writing and media critique of contemporary events. The parallels are labeled as four specific systems: nutritional, administrative, life-support, and nurturing. Through a combination of interactive and object based sculpture, each system is represented with visual metaphor and allegory to place the viewer in a direct and specialized paradox. Paradoxes audience members encounter are intended to illustrate to the audience what conflicts can arise by being included in a system where governing agency of any sort does not meet with individual desires.

## WE BELIEVE IN THE SYSTEMS THAT KEEP US ALIVE

Jokes, song lyrics, conversations, books, there are a number of ways in which words collect together to form complete thoughts and ideas. Habitually, I come into contact with words and ideas that are new to me, yet they are eerily evocative of concepts and terms from the past. Whether from a comic book I enjoyed as a child, the different advice my three parents tried to impart regarding my first job, or a financial recommendation from Bloomberg, concepts and phrases I have never encountered before can be alarmingly familiar. Correlations between past and present can be very acute, but sometimes the exact nature of the connection is dim and vague. Awareness of specific associations between things can linger in the periphery of my own thoughts for a long time and, just when I think it is about to fade away never to be fully illuminated, I'll encounter more words and expressions that help to make sense of the already existing connection. Before long, evocative assumptions fall away and, after enough pieces of the enigmatic relationship fall into place, are replaced by connections and parallels between past and current impressions. Negotiating between a past and present tense, attempting to clarify a connection from precedent to innovation, awareness of some chronological repetition of ideas and phrases; all of those links become a method used for digesting and making sense of contemporary conditions. Sometimes this process reveals unique systems.

A system is a link between autonomous entities, a communion parts share when they come together to complete one, unilateral desire. Many systems leap to the front of a person's daily routine. Systems exist for traffic, waste management, eating, washing clothes at a Laundromat, breathing air, even retrieving money from an ATM. All of those actions require several different pieces to fit together in some way or another so that a specific aspiration from some type of bureaucracy can occur.

A system exists when a Nun disciplines a child with a ruler. Hand, Nun, ruler, child, broken-rule, tear duct, shame. All of those components have an independent subsistence until they gravitate together to complete one specific desire, the Nun's discipline. The unity sovereign parts share when they are united under one desire is system. From the molecular scale to the capitalist society, we are met with systems that keep the vast machine of our daily lives functioning. However, much like the child in the system of the nun's discipline, sometimes the goals and desire of a particular system do not support or advance the desire of the people operating within it. Systems are limitless in their influence, reaching into every nook and

cranny of actuality. And, depending on the party responsible for unifying a system's parts, they are capable of carrying unilateral desire across vast social plateaus. Conflicts and suffering begin when systems are imposed over social and cultural cusps, inflicting one party's desire over groups of peoples unfamiliar with its derivation or purpose.

There are inexhaustible numbers of systems penetrating every aspect of certainty and uncertainty alike. For the work in this exhibition, four specific systems were singled out: nurturing systems, administrative systems, life support systems, and nutritional systems. Each of these particular systems is unique in its desire. Yet, all illustrate how each system developed over a period of time. Parts of the four systems were assembled over months, sometime even years, as the connection between words and ideas from different sources revealed itself over the last few months leading to the exhibition. Working in both interactive and object-based sculpture, I have chosen to represent certain systems that are hybrids, amalgamations that are meant to also function as allegory for more globally penetrating ideas and conflicts.

Nutritional systems are represented by the interactive sculpture, *Together in the Darkness*. *Together in the Darkness* is a set of massive spoons, fifteen feet in length, suspended from the ceiling opposite each other. Constructed from wrapping a steel armature in bright blue fiberglass saturated with epoxy resin, the spoons themselves take on the appearance of long, brilliantly colored spears with ladles where points should be. Randomly growing off of the shaft of the spoons are red and pinkish sores, created from pigmented foam. Standing on the floor next to each spoon is a basin, resembling a funerary urn. The basins are found objects made from stainless steel then painted a powdery white on the outer surface. Inside the basin the cool, reflective surface of the stainless steel was left untouched to contrast with the white surface of the exterior and the other brilliant colors of the spoons and the pomegranate juice that the basins contain.

It is only a matter of a few feet from the ladle of each spoon to its corresponding basin. The implication of this composition is for the people interacting with the spoons to use them to scoop the pomegranate juice from the basin. Despite the imposing size of the utensils, they are lightweight. It is no trouble for an audience member to guide the spoon from its resting place on the floor into the basin, catch some of the juice with the spoon, and then sip the juice from the spoon. However, if the audience member chooses to grasp the spoon close to its ladle, they will come into contact with the contagious sores covering

the shaft. If the audience member elects to grab the spoon from its handle instead, located fifteen feet away from the craved juice, then they will not be able to feed themselves with the spoon as it is too long and cumbersome to reach the operator's mouth.

The paradoxical elements built into this system were designed to provide agency for the viewer/operator invited to negotiate this instrument. This system does not aspire for people to use the system selfishly to indulge themselves. Instead, users of the spoons are encouraged to set aside their own hunger and ambition and use the massive utensils to safely and compassionately feed another person. When used in unity with the suggestion of the composition, this system only allows for the interface of two people. If they use the spoons to feed each other, infection from the sores is avoided, nutrition is delivered, health is sustained, and pleasure is enjoyed from the gratifying taste of the juice.

The imagery of *Together in the Darkness* is inspired by a Zen fable where the compassion of souls is challenged. Shundo Aoyama offers a contemporary version of this fable in her collection *Zen Seeds*. Souls of the dead find themselves engaged in a system for sustaining the life of their dead and new consciousness. One group of souls sits down to eat and discover that their utensils are too long to bring nourishment to their mouths. Panic ensues and, unable to find a way to sustain themselves, the dead souls wither and wail until they repeat their mortal deaths in the afterlife. The second group begins exactly like the first, but when the souls realize their utensils are too long to reach their own mouths, they begin to feed the strangers around them. They forget about their own needs and instead fulfill the needs of another, trusting in the goodness of their fellow strangers to reciprocate the care they are receiving.

An administrative system is represented by an object-based sculpture named *Is There Life?* Much like the influence of Zen fable behind *Together In the Darkness*, creation myths from various civilizations inspired the visual components of *Is There Life?* Greek mythology told of Atlas, the being that held up the Earth. Iroquois legends tell of entire civilizations on the shells of turtles. Similar ideas are found in Indian storytelling where elephants carry nations on their backs. These myths share a common thread, a sacrificial organism sustaining life and literally holding together or cradling civilization. While creating and maintaining an environment for the existence of vast amounts of organisms can be considered a compassionate act, there also is the possibility for the manufactured environment to become an executive device for management and control. How would the citizens of the Iroquois nations know if their sacred

turtle were in fact, a dictator, governing, implementing its tyrannical, unsolicited will upon the grateful populace on its back? Atlas could very well be an agent of oppression from a foreign environment, not the Earth's, creating a system over the Greeks to keep them occupied and distracted. All the while the Greeks praised and thanked him for holding up their Earth. Atlas himself could have been averting their attention from real existence, the one that plays out on *his* reality.

Atlas can be interpreted as dictator, legislators as wardens, and martyrs as liars. What if the lawmakers responsible to the citizens of our planet chose roles as sinister as these? What if we were kept from realizing or experiencing our universe to its fullest potential because powerful directors decided we should not know about it? *Is There Life?* proposes the existence of extraterrestrial life and the withholding of that knowledge from the majority of people on earth. Extraterrestrial existence and the plan to shelter the American public from that knowledge are meticulously detailed in Lt. Colonel Phillip J. Corso's account, *The Day After Roswell*. Lt. Colonel Corso was directly involved in what many refer to as a cover up of the existence of extraterrestrial intelligence, but his view on that particular disinformation is that the army was protecting the American public from a reality they could not manage or survive. This type of protection can be metaphorically comparable to the actions of the strategic, sacrificial organisms in the Native American, pre-Hindu, or Greek mythologies.

*Is There Life?* Is a system where one dominating organism is responsible for the support, survival and environment of an entire population of other creatures. The dominant organism lies beneath the surface of the landscape and it is gigantic compared to the multitude of creatures it is responsible for. Its pale, sickly skin seems to have rotted away, exposing skeletal vertebrae and spine. Its legs also seem void of flesh and show jawbones and teeth where familiar joints for knees and ankles should be. A relatively plump body contrasts its wasted demeanor, and the viewer can discern different parts that seem to imply torso, abdomen, and thorax. What appear to be ankles are bound to long, thin wooden prosthetics by old, dirty fabric. And, the creature itself seems to be gangly, moving with an awkward, off balance gait. A metal harness, tied to its back by the same type of fabric connecting its prosthetics, supports a bright blue landscape dominated by hills and mountains, simultaneously suggestive of geography and architecture.

Deformed frogs, without front legs, inhabit the landscape. The mutant frogs huddle together, helpless, pathetic and seemingly unaware of anything below the surface of their terrain. Are they being

held captive? Or, has the organism on the bottom taken pity and sheltered them from a life they could never comprehend or survive, much like the turtle of Iroquois myth? Disseminating knowledge and withholding it from the populous gives rise to notions that are analogous to the descriptions of Lt. Colonel Corso and to the Greek, Indian, and Native American myths. As the viewer investigates the composition, they must negotiate with the two sets of organisms and ultimately decide with which way of life they empathize.

A nurturing system is represented in the wall piece, *On the Other Side Things Grow*. Visually, this is the most explicit statement of the definitive quality of systems among the compositions. Silicon sacs hang above a drawer that is mounted perpendicularly to a wall. Connecting the sacs to the drawer are clear tubes. A blue liquid flows through these tubes that causes grass to grow out of one side of the drawer, mimicking the flow of fluid from intravenous bags during medical procedures. While the liquid keeps the grass alive, the moisture will eventually wear and stress the wooden drawer and cause it to disintegrate.

As the viewer traces the lines of the liquid from the sacs, through the tubes, and down the individual blades of grass, they are literally watching the grass grow. However, continually watering the grass has a separate, seemingly destructive effect on the drawer other than saturating it with water. As the grass soaks up water, moisture from the roots causes mold to grow on the side of the drawer that opposes the grass. There is a drawing on this second surface that is continually altered by the constant growth and death of the mold seeping through. Where the grass is perceived as healthy and clean, the mold is seen as dirty, toxic, and unhealthy, yet, in *On the Other Side Things Grow* the two contradictory organisms survive side by side under the same system.

While intravenous treatment is generally a temporary life saving mechanism for human beings, the external sacs in *On the Other Side Things Grow* function more as a permanent life support system. This is a system that is keeping an organism alive in an environment that is not conducive to, or natural to, its survival. Like an astronaut wearing a space suit, a diver with a breathing apparatus, or more subtly, a person at the beach wearing sunscreen, the grass needs the sacs and their life-blood liquid to survive in the environment of the gallery. What exactly is the purpose of the irrigation system? Is it to keep the grass alive or continually manipulate the drawing? What is the relationship between the grass and the mold; is it a healthy, symbiotic compromise or is it a parasite detrimental to one side? The agency responsible for this

system is propelled by a desire that is foreign to the desire of the viewer. Answers to these and other questions might never be available before the drawer and the object eventually die.

A life support system is represented more unambiguously in the installation *Nineveh*. *Nineveh* is a landscape of suspended fields of grass that cover approximately twenty square feet and are hung from the ceiling at sixty-two inches from the floor of the gallery. Two paths are cut through the fields, roughly marking out an “x,” that offer four different corridors that allow the audience to travel through. The corridors are incredibly narrow, varying from sixteen to twenty-six inches in width. As a person moves through the passageways, the width of the spaces they are navigating changes, creating potential conflict.

Nineveh was a civilization located on the banks of the Tigris River in ancient Assyria. Both in the Bible and Hellenistic Greek writing, Nineveh is depicted as a powerful and feared nation. Nineveh is also the name of a province in Iraq. Iraq’s Nineveh is populated by mostly Sunni Arabs, but enjoys a very diverse minority of Kurds, Assyrian Christians, and other religions. Nineveh’s diverse minority, and its oil producing center of Mosul, formulates a province with incredible influence in the legislative process of the Iraqi Parliament. Nineveh has found a way to unite its many peoples so that they can compete in the legislative contest.

The narrowing corridors cause the viewer to fluctuate between feelings of anxiety and weariness to a much more potent claustrophobia, allegorical to the apprehension some cultural groups might feel when forced to live beside and among other societies whose culture drastically differ. As the amount of traffic through the corridors increases, people begin to run in to each other as the girth of the corridors does not allow for people to maneuver around one another as they travel through the installation. People must occasionally respond to the abrupt encounter with a stranger and decide how they will proceed through *Nineveh* and find a way out of the installation. The cooperation necessitated by *Nineveh* constructs metaphorical action that simulates the cooperation between the citizens of present day *Nineveh*.

Nurturing systems, administrative systems, life support systems, and nutritional systems all are represented in the exhibition, and all become parts of a larger system, the exhibition itself. Similarities run through each piece of the exhibition, but there is an undefined thread running through all of the work, connecting it for the viewer. Influence from story, myth, and critical thought are implicit in the influence of each represented system. But, paradoxes placed in the visual manifestation of the systems (the open

sores on the spoons of *Together In the Darkness*, or the mold literally poisoning the viewer in *On the Other Side Things Grow*) are the only easily attainable correlation between the four pieces of the exhibition. The paradoxes present a glass ceiling of sorts, preventing the audience members from understanding why these particular objects and relationships have been assembled into a group. Challenging the audience in this manner is an intentional device from the agency (the person who designed the systems – me) responsible for the intent behind each system. As the viewer experiences what it is like for governing systems to conflict with individual ideas and needs, they are embodying the governing circumstances people all across the planet have to live through.

## WORKS CITED

Aoyama, Shundo. *Zen Seeds: Reflections of a Female Priest*. Tokyo: Kosei Publishing Company 1991.

Corso, Phillip J. *The Day After Roswell*. New York: Pocket Books, 1997.

## VITA

Born in 1981, Ezra Kellerman grew up in various parts of Kentucky. In 2004, he received his Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Kentucky, Lexington. He has spent time living and working in England, and has traveled Europe and the United States. His work has been featured in group and solo shows nationally and internationally. He will receive his Master of Fine Arts degree in sculpture from Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, at the Summer Commencement, August, 2008.