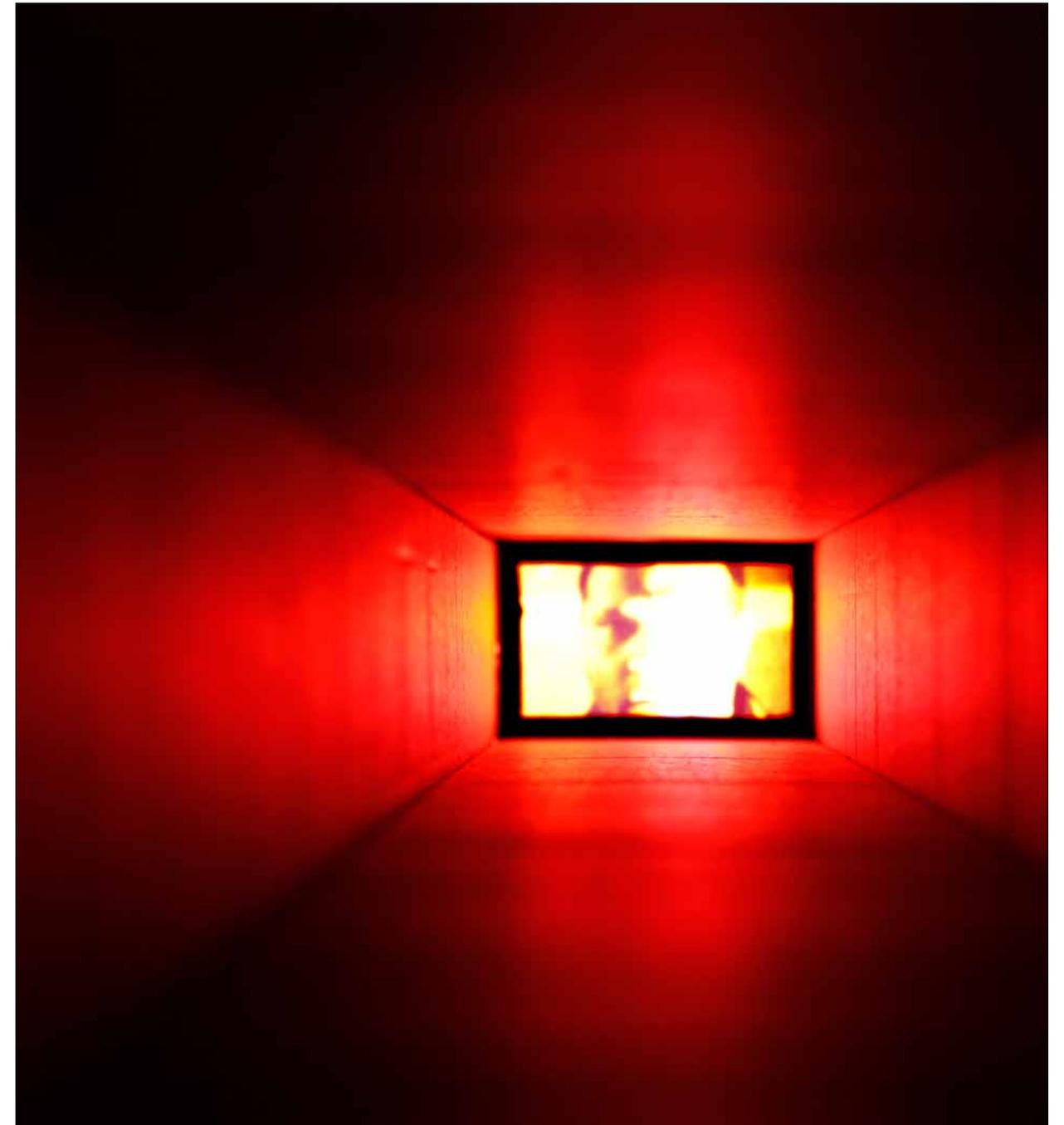


¹ Of course, if you can hold down a job *while* in grad school, you can maybe get both.

² This was officially a “Song a Day” for what amounted to the first day I posted the first song. It subsequently became a “Song a Week” and then a “Song a Month”, and then...well, I stopped. I ended up doing exclusively covers: “Somethin’ Hot” by the Afghan Whigs, “Some Things Last A Long Time” by Daniel Johnston, “Jane” (adapted from “James”) by Camera Obscura and “Under the Boardwalk” by The Drifters, along with unposted/unreleased/mostly crap versions of “Little Green” by Joni Mitchell, “Toledo” by Elvis Costello and Burt Bacharach and “Runaway” by Del Shannon. Again, trying to figure out how this was related to my thesis is aphasia-inducing. Let’s just move on.

One of the nice things about going to graduate school for something like the visual arts is the fact that if you successfully complete whatever program you’re in, you’re most likely going to have a lot of work to put into your portfolio, and, if you’re lucky, that work will be interesting and wonderful and more exciting than the client-related stuff that you would’ve accrued in the same period of time¹. And, along the way, you will have had a framework of assignments to guide you along the process of creating stuff. It’s nice to have assignments, because you can use them as a jumping-off point to explore what you’re interested in, rather than floating in the cosmos of limitless possibilities and directions. In the DMI program, you basically spend your first year doing assignments and developing a direction for your thesis and your second year conjuring up your own projects, ideally in the same conceptual galaxy to which you set off in the previous year.

And so when my second year began, I was on my own. One of our assignments in the Spring had been to generate a list of possible projects to work on in the fall, so we wouldn’t be floundering. For some reason, I missed or chose to ignore the part of the assignment that mentioned that these should be thesis-related projects. My list included everything from an HBO-funded, 50 episode filmed adaptation of *IJ* to recording a song a day and posting it on my thesis blog². In retrospect, I must have seemed out of my mind. But so the point is that I didn’t really have any tangible project ideas heading into my thesis year, which is to say that I didn’t have anything that I could say “right, let’s get down to business” and start working on. That



3

The 1996 adaptation of the 1966-73 television spy series, featuring a not-yet-publicly insane Tom Cruise as the main character, super-spy Ethan Hunt.

4

One of the perks of living where we do is that we get free *Direct TV*™ with abundant movie channels.



5

Which is supposed to be, and I suppose is to some extent, a classic *MacGuffin*, in that we, as the audience, never really understand or care what exactly the NOC list is.

is, until one lazy Friday evening in early September.

I was watching *Mission: Impossible*³ on one of the HBO channels⁴. I hadn't seen it in years, and it's one of those action films that will draw you in, even though you remember not quite liking it that much for reasons that seem vague and trivial. One thing that struck me about the film this time around was the amount of sequences that revolved around a timer or countdown to create suspense or tension within the story. When studying screenwriting as an undergraduate, I remember learning that this technique was, at best, sort of cheating, and, at worst, a tired cliché that people would make fun of you for using. But here it was, being used again and again, in the same \$80,000,000 movie. Probably the best example of the use in the movie is the semi-iconic scene in which Tom Cruise is being lowered from the ceiling of a white illuminated room that looks something like a cross between the set in the "Beyond Jupiter/Superman/Dinner" sequence in *2001: A Space Odyssey* and an IRS workstation. Anyway, Cruise is being lowered from the ceiling by his team, which includes Jean Reno as the French muscle and Ving Rhames, still riding the Marcellus Wallace, let's-cast-this-guy-in-everything wave, as a preternaturally talented and cool computer hacker named (of course) Luther. Cruise is trying to steal something called "The NOC list"⁵, and he has only like thirty seconds to get down from the vent in the ceiling and use the station before the schlubby middle-management-looking guy who they've slipped a vomit-inducing mickey returns from throwing up in the bathroom. And while there's a whole bunch of other factors ratcheting up the tension, like the fact that the temperature in the room can't go above a certain level, and that Cruise is sweating profusely, or that they must remain absolutely quiet, and that he can't touch the floor, the main thing that creates suspense is the time they have (or don't have) to get the list and get out of there. Ving Rhames even counts down the time into Cruise's earpiece. It's fairly ridiculous. But it's also extremely entertaining. I watched the rest of the movie and found myself strangely unsatisfied, as I had in all previous viewings.

The result of this viewing of *M:I* was that the repetition of the countdown as a narrative device became lodged in my head. While making dinner the next evening, I remember talking about it with my wife. Suddenly

an image came into my head: A man in a room with a timer, but with no context to what the timer was counting down: wouldn't this be great? This image basically came fully formed. The room would be bathed in red light. The man would be addressing the camera. He would be panicking that there was no time, but wouldn't mention anything specific about why there was no time, what he had to do, why it's a problem if he runs out of time, why he's there, etc. Telling my wife about this as it was coming into my head, I immediately, half-jokingly, said, "And the guy needs to be, like, Lou⁶. It should be Lou." We had a laugh about it and moved on to other topics and some more wine and food. Later that evening I had the sort of epiphany that follows an idea; I knew that this countdown/timer vision/idea would be the next project that I'd work on, and that it would be the first project I'd embark on sans assignment, theoretically tailor-made for my thesis.

I got in touch with Lou, who agreed to be a part of the project, reserved access to one of the squash courts⁷, checked out a theatrical light from the SIM department⁸, borrowed the *Canon 5D* camera from DMI, and set about shooting. I was able to wrangle a red gel for the theatrical light, thus giving me the red environment I had instantaneously decided was vital to the look of the piece. I created a digital clock-looking timer in *AfterEffects* that counted down from :29 to :00 and flashed when it got to zero. I projected this very large on the wall behind Lou. Basically the idea was to recreate what I had pictured in my head and to create a visually striking environment through minimal set design that could then be captured with the camera. Before we started shooting, Lou asked, "So is this like a Shatner thing?" I said, "Yes." That was about all the direction I had to give him.

Being the first "official" thesis-related project that I was producing and wanting to set out on the right bearing, I put a lot of thought into the form of the project, and how it might tie in with what I had proposed to do in the spring, which was to investigate⁹ the emotional response to media, specifically filmed entertainment. So, could this video of Lou, alone in a large room, fully saturated in red light, counting down the time from 29 to 0 and generally freaking out about it, create tension? If not, what kind of emotional response does it engender? And what would be the best way to

6

Lou Susi, DMI Class of 2011, founding member of the *CyberSurreal* movement, thespian, laughter-enthusiast, all-around muse.

7

Bizarre but fairly large white walled, high-ceilinged rooms in the absolute bowels of MassArt that are handy for staging installation work.

8

The SIM (Studio for Interrelated Media) department is basically like the fine arts version of the DMI program, only strangely well-funded, loaded seemingly to the gills with nice equipment, and standoffish to those not in the program. By taking the SIM class *Video Sculpture*, I had access to SIM equipment and perks, like the squash court.

9

To an extent.



present the video (and audio) in physical space?

I cut the footage into a :29 (or so) piece that could be looped and run ad infinitum, using quick, hard cuts, and repetition of shots to create a rhythm. I added a computer-generated voice to the soundtrack, counting down the numbers. I looped some of Lou's audio to add an atmosphere of sound collage and discontinuity to the *misé-en-scène*. The video was done.

I had a lucky coincidence in that one of my weekly assignments for *Video Sculpture* was to project *inside* an object. This happened to be the same week that I was editing the Lou footage, so I decided to use the "inside an object" assignment as an obstruction to see if I could make :29 work in that context.

I liked the idea that the video was taking this storytelling tool and distancing it both from a tangible narrative and from the viewer¹⁰. It felt right conceptually to make the viewer physically distanced from the piece. I procured a long¹¹ rectangular cardboard box and fabricated a small screen out of translucent vinyl, cardboard, and gaff tape, onto which I rear-projected the image. Thus, when you peered into the box, you saw basically a tunnel with the glowing red image of the video at the end of it. I decided to have the audio delivered to the viewer via headphones. This also creates a close/faraway contrast, and would serve to keep both the sound and the image contained, making the experience definitively "one person at a time". I thought about angling the box up off the ground, or hanging it at eye-level, so the viewer could just saunter up to and gaze into it, but decided against it; I liked the idea of the piece being on the floor, and that it required effort on the part of the viewer¹² to experience it. Keeping the image and the sound basically hidden from anyone but the person experiencing the piece creates a level of intrigue and mystery, or, at the very least, curiosity for those who haven't seen it. Also, in the context of a group show, especially one that features live performance and lasts for more than a couple of hours, which invariably means a lot of standing around, looped video, especially other work with sound, can become like wallpaper.

I've installed the :29 twice. The first time was at the *Provocative Objects*¹³ exhibition, and the form of the installation was as described above. I provided a carpet under the box and viewing area so people wouldn't have to

lay down on the concrete floor to experience the piece. Some people were drawn to the it and experienced it enthusiastically. Others were skeptical of the vulnerability implicit to experiencing it and stayed away. That's fine; those people never got to experience the piece. Instead, they had to rely on other people's descriptions or remembrances of what lay inside the box. Maybe that led them to have a deeper level of interest about the piece. Maybe it confirmed their assumptions that it wouldn't be worth their discomfort to lay down on the floor to experience it.

I installed :29 again as part of my thesis exhibition, *Ordinary Human Unhappiness*, on March 12, 2011 at the Doran Gallery. This time, it was surrounded by other video installation works that also examined cinematic conventions. In this context, I changed the format of the piece and made it two-channel. I mounted a large piece of muslin onto two strips of wood and mounted it onto a wall. Onto this canvas I projected a video of Lou that featured an extreme-close up of his face, peering directly into the camera. I took a five-second clip of him breathing heavily and looped it by reversing every other segment, which produced an eerie effect where there's something slightly "off" about what you're seeing, but you can't really pinpoint anything in particular or specific. The other channel was a 27" television which ran the original :29 loop that I had previously created for projection into the long box. Having the large canvas with Lou's visage mounted on the wall behind the television created an atmosphere somewhere between anxiety, creepiness, and focused intensity. He's watching you watching him.

Bill Viola once said that "the work is just the container for the idea, and the design of the container can change."¹⁴ Exploring the form in which :29 is presented allows the narrative convention of the timer to be examined from different angles and in distinct physical contexts. It definitely creates tension and anxiety in the "long box" format, but it can be argued that the physicality of the form is as responsible for the tension as the content of the video. In the *OHU*¹⁵ format, the video content itself is the focus, with the physicality of the image less dominant, allowing you to question whether the timer or countdown, in this context, creates tension or narrative. I know what people told me during and after the show. But if I mentioned it here, it would sort of be like telling someone what's in the long box on the floor.



10 Conceptually, in that if there's less specific content for the viewer to identify with and make sense of, there's more distance between the viewer and the work.

11 about eight feet, with the opening being approximately ten inches wide and six inches tall.

12 Fred Wolfink of the SIM Department, during one of my reviews, basically jumped ugly with me over the fact that the piece was not handicap accessible, he having been assaulted and injured in an absurdly violent and terrible incident, and was thus subsequently unable to experience the piece. I had no response to this, other than to silently note his indignation and remember that I had been to The Art Institute of Chicago twice, each visit occurring about ten years apart, and that both times the wing of the museum with Hopper's *Nighthawks* had been closed for renovations. I guess the point is: sometimes the circumstances of life are such that you just don't get to see stuff, and that's ok.

13 A group show orchestrated by Lou Susi and DMI Class of 2011 student David Tamés, featuring New Media art and design projects and live performances, loosely curated to the idea of the New Media Object as *provocateur*.

14 Interviewed in *Art in America*, March 1998, pg. 76. (It was a good interview).

15 This is how we'll refer to *Ordinary Human Unhappiness* from here on in.

But if I mentioned it here, it would sort of be like telling someone what's in the long box on the floor. Some things you just need to see for yourself, provided the gallery is open and the floor is clean and you've maybe seen an action movie or two.

NEXT PAGE: STILLS FROM :29 VIDEO.

