

2008 Interview Transcript
R. Luke DuBois at the Weisman Art Museum

1. How did *Hindsight Is Always 20/20* come about?

The inspiration for the piece was the upcoming presidential election. In the Fall of 2006 I was thinking about doing my next series of artwork about the election, or at least American electoral politics. The provisional title for the show was "Politics as Usual", and I wanted to do something on the information space surrounding political discourse in our country; to create some work involving text. My previous show had been really media-heavy; lots of films, music, and photographs, but nothing really looking at words. So I stumbled across the website for "The American Presidency Project", which is a research institute at the University of California, Santa Barbara. It was started in 1999, and aspires to host the entire paper-trail of the American presidency going all the way back to George Washington; all the speeches given, all the bills signed, etc. It just sort of fell into my lap, honestly, and I got really excited.

I looked through the research materials available on the site, and I found that they'd put the complete State of the Union Addresses online, as well as some useful background information on the context in which these addresses were delivered... and I started running a few tests on the addresses. Just counting words, looking for patterns, that sort of thing... and I was looking for a way to visualize the language each president used in his State of the Union speeches. Eye charts just seemed to fit, because political rhetoric in general, and those speeches in particular, tend to be judged by history based on their "vision" - at least, in hindsight. Hence, the title of the piece.

2. Can you explain the process that you used to make the series?

Basically it's a pretty easy process to make the charts. First you take each president's State of the Union Addresses and stick them all together. Different presidents have different number of speeches; Harding only gave two; F.D.R. gave twelve, for example. Then you add up all the words for each president's state of the union addresses and sort them. So you end up with a big list from the most common to the least common word. Then you find the top 66 words for each president; I wanted 66, because there are 66 letters in a Snellen eye chart. Then you cancel all the words in those lists that appear in the 'majority' of the charts, shifting new words into the top 66 as words are cancelled. You repeat this process until all the words are reasonably rare. This flushes out words like 'the' and 'American'. If a word still appears in more than one president's chart, you give it to the president who uses it the most often, and remove it from the other presidents' lists, shifting in new words at the bottom of the list again. You repeat this until all the words are unique.

3. How does this work relate to your work as a composer?

I think of everything I do as music, and so I tend to work compositionally. A speech is a lot like a piece of music. And when we analyze music we spend a lot of time trying to reduce what's going on to what's really important; we do things like harmonic analysis to look at the notes as chords, and we clump melodies together as phrases, and try to deal with everything as sort of a hierarchy of information. We analyze language in the same way... and so I wanted to try to create a reduced score for each presidency. When you listen to music, you take away certain key moments, and the rest sort of washes into the background. I wanted to try to find the key words for these speeches, to capture the zeitgeist, or the essential political rhetoric, of each presidency.

4. What are you hoping people will bring away from this work?

When you look at the eye charts, there are a few lessons to be learned. One is that our history is very much encoded in these addresses, and as literature it's an amazing progression, if you look at how the vocabulary has changed over the past two-and-a-quarter centuries. At the same time,

there's something really significant about the state of the union address as an institution. As the essay chart says, it's our only constitutionally-mandated piece of political theater. The constitution demands that the president report to congress on a regular basis. This is because congress is the sovereign body of the United States; in a very specific constitutional way, Nancy Pelosi is George W. Bush's boss... if she gets enough of her colleagues behind her, she can fire him. He can't touch her... and the state of the union is an embodiment of that power relationship. It's the presidents annual homework; his report to who's really in charge of the country... the people, through their democratically-elected representatives in congress. We tend to forget that these days.

5. What most surprised you about the research for and results of this project?

When I was making this piece, I really didn't expect it to be this effective at showing so much about our history. I always thought (like most Americans probably do) that the State of the Union Address was kind of a political puff piece... you lay out a few agenda items, say a few nice things about some people in the balcony, and acknowledge all the accomplishments of the last year. An important speech, but nothing compared to, say, a speech at a political convention, or an inaugural address, or an address to the nation given in the time of a disaster, or anything like that. The media tends to downplay them. But what was stunning is that they really reflect a lot about the time in which they were given, even from the very beginning. And it's an amazing mix of historical terms that we might expect (Lincoln saying 'emancipation', or George W. Bush saying 'terror'), to things that are more about government itself (Jefferson talking about 'limits'). Then there are these amazing rhetorical anomalies: L.B.J.'s #1 word is 'tonight' because he had to give the first speech on live prime-time television; or Nixon saying 'truly', which is an interesting piece of rhetorical irony. It also shows our preoccupations at the time; Reagan talked a lot about economics, the postwar presidents focused on foreign policy. It was pretty surprising.

6. Can you talk about the different forms the project has taken (light boxes, letter press prints)? Why these media? Can you share your thoughts on what each has done for the project?

Hindsight is Always 20/20 comes in three different versions. There is a set of 43 light boxes that stand six and a half feet tall, and five feet wide. There is the set of letter-press prints that you see here. And then there's a book of smaller prints that you can flip through. I wanted to do the light boxes for two reasons: one, because eye charts were often made on light boxes; and two, I wanted to be able to show the charts in a public art context outdoors. The letterpress prints are intended for museums and galleries. The books are for collectors to look through. I'm really fond of the letterpress prints because I think the technology is amazing and gives a real body to the text. There's a physical dent in the paper; there are very slight imperfections. It looks like the kind of thing you'd want such important words impressed on. It's also nice to have them at a few different scales so that they can be shown in a lot of different contexts, because I think *Hindsight* is quite accessible for a work of contemporary art. I hope that anyone with even a cursory understanding of American history, or an interest in our politics, will take an interest in it.

7. You have worked with lists in other projects (videos, etc.). What interests you about the list?

Hindsight is essentially a series of lists, and a lot of my artwork involves lists, or taxonomies, or organization, in some way. I have obsessive-compulsive disorder, and I tend to live my life through organization. As a culture overall, we're obsessed with lists, and figuring out the top ten of one thing, or looking back at the best of each year for something else. American culture is competitive in that way, as it deserves to be as a meritocracy. But I often think that the words we use, and use often, tell us a lot about ourselves, so I thought it was interesting to make a list of vocabulary words for our presidents, just to see what it says about them, and about the time in which they were in office.

8. What are your thoughts on art's relation to politics?

Hindsight was a tricky piece for me, because I refused to editorialize beyond writing a few words about the point of the State of the Union Address, as I understood it. I really want the words to speak for themselves, and I think they do. Political art is difficult, because if you don't do your homework, you can end up hurting the cause you're advocating for... but artists have a very important role, not just as society's muse, providing inspiration and beauty, but also as society's conscience, asking questions about who we are, what we stand for, why we make the choices we make in our lives. Art is at its best when its activist; when you're actually taking what you believe and forcing people to engage with it. *Hindsight* isn't really about the past; it's not a journalistic exercise. I think if you look at the eye charts you'll see the progress we've made in our political discourse, and you can make your own decision on where we're heading.