

# whitewall

CONTEMPORARY ART AND LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE

## R. Luke DuBois

By Lily Alexander | March 6, 2009 . 11:03 pm



R. Luke DuBois in front of *Hindsight is Always 20/20*

R. Luke DuBois's installation, *Hindsight is Always 20/20*, was chosen for the entryway to PULSE NY, 2009. Luke, who is clearly brilliant, has a PhD in music composition from Columbia University; is an Assistant Professor at the Brooklyn Experimental Media Center, part of NYU's Polytechnic Institute; and works as composer, performer, computer programmer, and visual artist. All of these talents are used to explore a variety of cultural information, resulting in multi-layered works which challenge and engage the viewer. The complexity of his work is evidenced in the length of time we discussed just the one installation for this show. Therefore, the interview will be organized into two parts. This first will focus on the installation for Pulse, while the second engages with Luke's larger body of work, as well as his thoughts on the separation of the various arts.

Interview: Part 1- R. Luke DuBois

### **WHITEWALL:** Tell me about your installation for PULSE NY?

**R. LUKE DUBOIS:** The piece is called *Hindsight is Always 20/20*. It is made up of 43 large light boxes. On them are eye charts, like those you see when you go to the doctor. Only instead of letters they have words. And there is one eye chart for every president of the United States. The words come from their State of the Union addresses. So, on the chart, in the place of the largest letter at the top is the word they used the most. For example, George Bush's first word is "terror," and Ronald Reagan's is "deficit."

**WW:** Yes, when I was looking at them it was fascinating because the largest word at the top of each chart seems to characterize each different president so well.

**RLDB:** I got all this information at the University of California, Santa Barbara. They have something called the American Presidency Project that records the whole paper trail of the American presidency. I basically rolled up there in 2006 and announced myself as their first Artist in Residence. I annoyed them for around two weeks to gather information. I didn't really know what I was looking for...But then I was watching CNN and James Carvel, a Clinton advisor, was going on about something in reference to the Bush administration and he kept using the word "vision." He said something like, "The problem with the president is he had no vision!" And I thought that he had a point. A good president needs vision. And the way you test vision is with an eye chart so I decided to make an eye chart! It ended up being metaphorically appropriate. The State of the Union address is actually a constitutionally mandated piece of political theater. It is really about power relationships, because in the United States, Congress is sovereign. I thought it was an interesting thing to rip on, since in the last few years we've had one, who some might say, was an imperial president. So I thought I'd do this in reaction to that.

**“A good president needs vision...so I decided to make an eye chart!”**

**WW: How does this piece fit in with your larger body of work?**

**RLDB:** Well, I'm interested in American culture and how we deal with information. One of the things that I really groove on is that we are, as a country, obsessed with cultural candidity, or the idea that something must be the best: the best song, the Academy Awards for Best Picture, or American Idol. Everything is about winning, getting to the top.

**WW: It is actually quite strange, as it doesn't allow for the true variety of people and points of view that actually exist within our country.**

**RLDB:** Exactly. And the philosophies by which these lists, or these canons are formed are often incredibly anti-democratic. To get the top song, you need the support of several multi-national corporations. And we don't vote for that song. And the State of the Union address is the president addressing the people. The words the president chooses make these rhetorical snapshots of the time period that are reflective of the mediascape, and the intrusion of the media on politics.

**WW: How did you actually go through the speeches and capture the words that each president used the most?**

**RLDB:** I wrote a crazy computer program. It starts by taking the number of letters in an eye chart, then goes through the speeches making lists of the most common words. I came up with a number of rules, so that every word on each chart would be unique. Whoever says it the most gets the word. It throws out all the words that are really common like "United States."