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Fixing belief: Artificial preservatives

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Fixing Belief: Artificial Preservatives

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JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

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for the degree of

Master of Arts

School of Art and Art History

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I imagine at times a great & glorious coming home but it is barren of gilded banners and gluttonous feasts it is not a transcending or superseding of but a settling into, it is at once devoid of materialism but couched in material, in the terrible collision of our flesh and a momentary sedentariness that swerves into a great violence, it is not a culmination (unless every moment is seen as such) but a grand disaster, a terrible territory framed in a generosity that consumes identity, a coup d’état robbing narratives of their reigns, I imagine at times a great & glorious coming home waves of white picket fences and razor wire crash over cities, forests, and suburbia alike, reterritorializing unendingly, ceaselessly recomposing, colliding stratifications of sedimentation repeatedly recoding.
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Abstract

Research opened with inquiries into the state space of the self and various modalities of the construction of the self. Flawed research design led towards a loss of original focus, spaces opened accordingly. Early sculptural work looked towards a semantic flattening through flushing out and digitally manipulated photographic and video work investigated avenues of ocular-centric landscape construction. Photoshop CS5 and its Content Aware Fill tool were engaged as collaborator and animations ensued. Hesitant time-based sketches were developed to suggest work incomplete and instead took their place. Space-based sketches followed, using the multiple to thwart focus on parts and draw it towards the processes connecting them. Always provisional, and incomplete, the work looks towards the openness of the diagram instead of the rigid scripture of the plan.
I. Artificial preservatives

My earliest experiences with a rigorous artistic practice began with photography. The act of photographing someone is an intimate one and this intimacy drew me deeper into the act. This act of the captured gaze, the time spent developing the negatives and then the process, the warm orange light of the darkroom, a world suddenly manageable in size, projected at waist level in silver light. Here was a place that I could love people in a way that was not elsewhere acceptable, and where they would never flinch or turn away from my gaze. The silver surface, slowly soured, slipped sideways, became the sweet timeless lie we tell ourselves every moment of the day, I will never get old, I will never die, I can figure out all these problems, give all the love I have tomorrow or the day after. The frame of this practice was suddenly intolerably confining.
II. Fixing Belief

In such abstraction it is not a matter of architectures that refer back to their own rules of construction and nothing else. Rather it is a question of constructing free spaces of unregulation, undetermined by any prior plan, which so loosen an arrangement as to allow for sensations of something new, other affects, other precepts. It is a question of an operative abstraction working within an incomplete “virtual” architecture always to be invented anew. ¹

The suddenly manageable world I’d imagined artistic practice to provide in high school opened into the virtual with my introduction to thinkers like Deleuze and Guattari, Bruno Latour, John Rajchman, and Brian Massumi.

These ideas were further illuminated during my collaborative work with the art and architecture collective spurse. Spurse’s practice was shaped by ideas of problematizing and mediation, mapping and emergence.

The first spurse project I was heavily involved in was a collaboration with J. Morgan Puett in an abandoned Quaker meeting house in Abington, PA, just north of Philadelphia. *The Lost Meeting* began as an investigation of the historical schism between Hicksite and Orthodox Quakers that resulted in the building of the abandoned meeting house the project inhabited.

The schism resulted from a disagreement involving mediation, or how Friends were to access God. *The Lost Meeting* was converted into a pattern drafting studio and using vernacular Quaker culture from the time period of the schism a series of patterns
were created. These patterns were imagined as means of problematizing as opposed to solving problems. The patterns could be folded into an already existing problem to generate unexpected solutions.

The next project *The Public Table: Collective for the Finding of the Commons* used algorithms to interrupt foodways. A series of collecting walks, driven by algorithms, provided fodder for an algorithm that generated meals. A map became a recipe; a question an ingredient, the community brought everything else. All ingredients, from building materials to olives, were gleaned or donated. The restaurant was a tactical intervention, appearing for six weeks at a time in three cities: New Haven, CT; Bellows Falls, VT; Cambridge, MA.

After *The Public Table* I helped some friends open a more traditional restaurant, a project I have yet to fold neatly into my ‘art’ narrative.

Concurrent to this work, I was continuing my collaboration with J Morgan Puett and Mark Dion at Mildred’s Lane, a long-term experiment in large-scale project, research and event based practices with a living museum and an educational institution attached.
"I've been thinking about routine as art form, and what distinguishes it from other forms. One thing, it is not completely symbolic, that is, it is subject to shlup over into "real" action at any time (like cutting off finger joint and so forth). In a sense the whole Nazi movement was a great, humorless, evil routine on Hitler's part. Do you dig me? I am not sure I dig myself. And some pansy shit is going to start talking about living his art" 2

My decision to come to JMU as a graduate student began with two or three research ideas. The first was simple: I was going to be a studio artist and build all the ideas I had developed but not executed during my undergraduate studies. The second and third were more diffuse and focused on an (a)social practice, an attempt to explore the evolution of discipline during the industrial revolution and then implement what had been external forms of discipline into an internalized methodology of self control.

The second and third projects seemed simple enough in conception. Discover and actualize my personal kung fu, become my superself, manipulate discipline and self image in such a way that the existence or absence of freewill is irrelevant. But the starting point was infinitely distant. First, before slipping deeper into any kind of critical or philosophical inquiry into the nature of my goals, into the very idea of the ideal, it was necessary to choose a starting point, to generate a kind of fitness landscape upon which the current self could be mapped. Before this can be done the criteria for the landscape must be chosen. Before I can ask "What is progress?" I must determine: "Which progress
is most appealing?" from there I imagine it might be possible to begin a more serious
critical inquiry into the nature of that particular progress.

But before this step can be taken it is necessary to fill out several forms. Cognitive
forms are the most apparent. To tease out 'which progress' the nature and boundaries
between culture and self must be given some, at the very least, transient form. Attempts
to explore this terrain reveal further questions, each level of descent, ascent, traversal
reveals another nest of questions and the starting point moves further afield.

For this reason I chose to discard the authentic or the ideal. I can imagine the
authentic only as the name for that which is lost, which is no more. Instead of looking for
an ideal I imagined emulating the Western notion of expansion. Or, more precisely, goals
and desired landscapes were to be determined by difference, by an attempt to expand and
contract the boundaries of self and the construction of image based only on what has not
yet been a boundary or image before. An attempt will be made to define the self as the
thwarting of the self, guerrilla warfare of a sort. This is a stumbling kind of assault, as
sloppy as my life preceding this moment has been, I now set out to establish a disciplined
sort of sloppiness. This may be a futile gesture. But it should be recognized, I believe, as
no more or less futile than any other, and no more or less authentic.

As the following points of departure shall illustrate, I failed to execute any kind of
rigorous investigation into these notions.
"A thing has as many meanings as there are forces capable of seizing it" 3

Art lost its aura, at least the sticky mess bound in tradition, time and space, with the advent of mechanical reproduction. Hegel went so far as to suggest its “insipient demise”. I am uncertain about art, uncertain about a practice that unfolds in a teleological-less space, uncertain when I recognize all meaning as constructed, that every idea and every object binds historical threads with cultural memes into a writhing mess with a depth and breadth beyond any analysis.

It is from this uncertainty that my practice begins. With a recognition that every material, every gesture, begets countless associations. In my work I look to eradicate the illusion of permanence we have forced into form. The form is no more than the contact patch of the tire, the hand thrust in the river, an imagined solidity of forces. Even this text suffers the same illusions, a narrative can match up the illusion of the form’s solidity, can rob the object of its agency, with the self’s simple singleness.

Forms exist as temporal consciously constructed impressions of moving forces. In forms we find what can be held, what can be visually considered. Forms are placeholders for the movement of forces. 4

I am not interested in my materials, not as solid unchanging forms. I am interested in my materials as transient points of contact in a dialogue of forces. These dialogues, if a work is successful might occur at every level, the material, its connections, the semantic associations it demands and the story I tell about it. While my earlier collaborative work
explored the unfolding of forces as sets of cultural rules, habits, and branches of science, my most recent work has sought to explore the means by which forms can be used to deny themselves.

My earliest work in grad school, the *picketWheel*, sought to do this semantically. The picket wheel consists of two primer white rings 22 feet in circumference (a little over 7 feet in diameter) bound together, circumferences parallel, 20” apart by 49 almost evenly spaced white painted gothic French pickets. The two white rings are smaller than standard picket fence runners but have the right mass to be read correctly in circular form. The sculpture is a simple combination of two fairly universal objects with opposite meanings.

In “Art and Objecthood” Michael Fried suggests that the minimalists established objects with an absence of semantics, the materials, usually building materials, are stripped of their utility, which is their foremost semantic connection to the regime of signs that surround them, by being crafted into useless objects. The simplicity of form and lack of parts removes any possibility of a semantic of forms emerging within the piece itself. Further the human scale of the work encouraged an embodied interaction; Fried argues that the minimalists attempted to force the relational aspect of the work into the space between the object and the viewer.

In *picketWheel* I attempted to generate a semantic flatness through a reversal of this process, through a flushing out; while the work draws on certain formal aspects of minimalism (further using the sign of the fence to reduce the tendency of the viewer to read the horizontal pickets as components or parts), the density of possible interpretations
between the juxtaposition of the picket fence and the wheel looks to paralyze interpretation.

The picket fence is the unzipped and straightened double helix, the railroad track, poster child of manifest destiny and western expansion, father of universal time, turned on its side. The picket fence, the teeth of private property, the symbol of security. The wheel is the point of contact, the patch of friction, the core of plastic, wooden and metal teeth that turn against another, the symbol of mobility. But each of these symbols slips across its initial point of contact into its opposite. The picket fence as a symbol of private property is also a symbol of mobility, capital, money, the picket fence's twin, is property made more mobile than the wheel. Every force inherits more points of contact than we can imagine, and breeds even those points not made.

As an object and image I was fairly satisfied with the *picketWheel* and continue to use it as a recurring theme in my work. In making image-based works using the *picketWheel* as a subject I had two primary goals. The first simply imagined the *picketWheel* as a visceral branding of the artificiality of division, or categorization. The wheel, rolling, was constantly redefining its bounds, trading what was external for internal. However, this very idea highlights the supremacy of the visual, as the wheel acts as a visual frame, physically remaining empty as it rolls. The second goal was more diffuse, but emerged from an idea of branding, or ceaseless repetition of something until it becomes another feature of the visual landscape.

The first series of image-based investigations included four cycles, each progressively distant from the ‘original’. The first cycle of images show the *picketWheel* against various outdoor backdrops (figs. 1-3). The second cycle of images are each
generated from a single photograph from the first group. In these images the structure of the *picketWheel* begins to break down, whether through repetition of the wheel in its entirety, the *picketWheel*'s image placed in impossible spatial relationships, or displaced chunks floating improbably (fig. 4-6). In the third cycle the picture plane is composed of a multitude of images, each captured within the *picketWheel* and stitched together until they achieve modernism’s flatness: the frame disappears. (figs. 7-8) In the fourth cycle the *picketWheel* composes the landscape, repeated endlessly, the frame collapsing becomes the image (fig. 9).

I do not intend to prioritize any of these images, nor to link them to a specific scopic regime; it is the movement amongst these regimes that interests me. “‘What interests him’ is the movement of painting, the dramatic push of one vision to the next, even if the push is not forced to its conclusion…I have arrived at the point where the movement of my thought interests me more than my thought itself.”5 I am interested in the moments of unease that occur against Cartesian Perspectivalism and its disembodied construction of the gaze.6

In the early video work concerning the *picketWheel*, channels were heavily layered and edited into poetic movements across channels (fig. 10). However, this work failed to capture the informational density of television news graphic interludes, walls of security monitors, or even the imaginary construct that is falling down a YouTube hole. For this early work a redeployment of artistic tools was necessary, especially as I still lack the technical skills or equipment to compete with certain types of video production modalities. 7
I went back to the footage, originally shot with this layering technique in mind, and looked for simple moments, the kind of shots that occur between the important moments in a film. In some cases these simple shots are left alone, and the picket wheel just rolls across the screen. In others simple transition techniques, such as dissolve wipe, are used to manipulate the wheel’s movement and draw attention to the construction of the shot, the framing, timing and other aspects of video construction that fall so easily into the background of our awareness. These simple single-channel videos when viewed simultaneously begin to compose the branded world imagined earlier.

The next phase of image investigation lied in using a new feature of Adobe Photoshop to generate images. Photoshop CS5 comes with a feature for removing minor flaws in landscapes and filling empty areas of a photo that might result from things like stitched together panoramas. The strength of this feature lies in patterns and as such I wondered how it might resolve the figure-ground relationship in an image.

To generate these animations and still frames, a macro was established which slowly replaced the images with Content-Aware generated pixel organizations. Each of the still frames is then a single frame in a 24-frame animation.

The first animation, *eraseMultiply*, actually fell out of an assignment for a drawing class in which we had to erase a drawing completely. This act of erasure seemed more complete than the return to an empty sheet of paper, which would call attention to absence. To really conceptually eradicate an image, gradual erosion is a more effective technique than excision. In *eraseMultiply* a hesitant stasis is reached and the image cycles through mild variations leaving a couple triangles, some lines, and a kind of rectangular
blob. This may be a function of the macro, as I broke the image into columns and ran the Content Aware Fill in 14 sections (figs. 11-12).

In wheelErase I haven't yet run enough generations to see if stasis will occur, this may also be due to the breaking of the macro into 108 pieces, a grid this complex may preclude stasis from ever being reached (figs. 13-14). I’m still continuing this means of image generation and am not sure I’ve brought this branch of investigation to a point where I can make any conclusions beyond its ability to produce satisfying formalist imagery.

The next couple of videos I worked on led to the content of my MA Thesis show. With these animations I became interested in the possibility of sketching out, hastily and inexpensively, more complex installation or performance based project ideas. These videos are built in Adobe After Effects CS4, which allows for a compositionally based, non-linear video editing practice.

The first video, cloudStick, was made by photographing singular objects and then creating Photoshop landscapes or scrolls, that could be tugged across the screen, multiple layers interact, and objects are scaled to create the illusion of movement ‘away’ and ‘towards’ the screen.

In the next video DISCIPLINE, the performance I imagined as my MA thesis show was created by marrying found images with more Photoshopped materials. This video shows an animated me, legs flailing, move a projection screen and projector across a variety of landscapes which share aspects of both a discipline society imagined by Foucault and a control society described by Deleuze.
This movement into video and my unending technical problems with encoding and compressing videos made me want to work with physical materials again. This desire, and my failure to complete any of the three research goals I started graduate school with, led to my motivation to complete the objects I had started in graduate school, this is the work that appears in *Construct Decay*.

In *Construct Decay* the focus is on the connection between materials as much as the materials themselves. Beneath a schoolroom mounted pegboard on top of a folding table, spools, twigs, and tape. Plastic lacing, red & orange, taut round twigs, looped and pulled over s-hooks in straps wrapped 6 feet round concrete pillars. Orange mason’s line masquerades amongst the lace, at four corners catching the loose square, a zip tie tight at its center catches another mason’s line, invisible amongst the lacing’s excess at meeting hook. Paddles, poplar, too small for any easily acknowledged utility are caught in twist of plastic lace, piercing floating pegboard. Against the pillar’s other side, duct tape and gravity with pink and brown semi-circles and 2” tension clips hold man-made poplar twigs at various angles approaching vertical, the whole mess a haphazard scaffolding between the shower curtain, pulled taut and trimmed over a square. The projection unfurls a landscape, more vertical and dense, reminiscent of the scene before it. Hex netting, gummed with material accumulations, floats slowly between the scaffolding and window. (figs. 18-20)

*Construct Decay* is visible through storefront windows; during the day sunlight provides the only illumination, beyond a single fluorescent work light. The projections run from sunset to sunrise, caught against shower curtain, projection screen, Tyvek net,
and bits of column, windows, ceiling, and walls. The equation for entry is a combination of courage and coincidence.

Through the use of repeated components and a focus on points of connection, *Construct Decay* focuses on the importance of the movement between its parts. Always provisional, and incomplete, the installation looks towards the openness of the diagram instead of the rigid scripture of the plan.
Notes


4. “The processes taking place actually or potentially on all sides could be analyzed indefinitely in any direction. There is no end, no unity in the sense of a totality that would tie it all together in a logical knot. No unity but a region of clarity: tool meets wood. The meaning of an event can be rigorously analyzed, but never exhaustively, because it is the effect of an infinitely long process of selection determining that these two things, of all things, meet in this way at this place and time, in this world out of all possible worlds.” Brian Massumi *A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari*. MIT Press, 1992.


6. “The gaze of the painter arrests the flux of phenomena, contemplates the visual field from a vantage-point outside the mobility of duration, in an eternal moment of disclosed presence; while in the moment of the viewing, the viewing subject

7. This is something that merits further inquiry, how do we redeploy dated aesthetic tools and technologies in such a way that they might create critical discourse about contemporary production? This occurs in activist work with the use of pickets, banners, and other types of old fashioned protest materials, especially when blended with contemporary graphic design skill sets.
Appendix I: Gallery
figure 1: *untitled(picketWheel)*
figure 2: untitled(picketWheel)
figure 3: untitled (picketWheel)
figure 4: untitled (picketWheel)
figure 6: untitled (picketWheel)
figure 7: **untitled (picketWheel)**
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