VISIBLE LANGUAGE 42.1

SPECIAL ISSUE

AFTER THE GRAVE: LANGUAGE AND MATERIALITY IN CONTEMPORARY ART

GUEST EDITORS

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AFTER THE GRAVE:

LANGUAGE AND MATERIALITY

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VISIBLE LANGUAGE 42.1

ARMSTRONG AND MAHON, 4-13

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IN CONTEMPORARY ART

Abstract

The introductory essay highlights a double sense of the word *grave* which is brought together in this issue as a means of getting at an aesthetic and a material zeitgeist: the prevalent feeling is that our current cultural moment harbors material and virtual means of artistic and written iteration that are in profound states of transition. The introduction to this issue focuses on intersections between written language and material sign, text and image, and on the links between the histories of specific art medias that speak to notions of passage and a *passage-beyond*. Commenting on the major essays in the issue and their respective engagements with art and text in light of shifting materialities, the introduction also situates a series of "artist's projects" in relation to the themes of the project.

Beginning with the Grave

The word *grave* in the title of this issue proposes a double sense. It reminds us of the idea of death, a place for human remains, and by implication, of a marker of death. The word invokes another form of marking, one historically associated with print technology: the grave, or *gravure*, an incised or carved out mark in a printing matrix. Thus the term, most readily associated with our mortal passing, also infers notions of reproducibility.

The double sense of the word *grave* is brought together in this issue as a means of getting at an aesthetic and a materialist zeitgeist: the prevalent feeling that our current cultural moment, which appears defined by inescapable states of transition, harbors material and virtual means of iteration that are also profoundly transitory. Technologically, culturally and artistically we exist within a cultural frame where reproducibility is our inheritance and also an albatross: it weighs us down and nudges us, both when its relevant technologies are in use and when they are in decline. Arguably, the concept of reproducibility itself is a reminder of the interest in our age in looking back and looking forward simultaneously — again and again and again.

From art to the grave...and after: this is like a riddle or the beginning of a ghost story. With a list of relevant obituaries too long to announce (...of art, of the book, of print: at the hand of mass media, the internet, the digital...), it is difficult not to argue that we are, indeed, working as artists, designers and thinkers in the context of an "afterlife." But: from art to the grave...and after? The order of our aforementioned trajectory may be incorrect. Perhaps art does not end in the grave but proceeds *from* it, rising phoenix-like; Christ-like; vampire-like to live again.

The Persistence of Art

Contemporary art and design are, in an era of mass culture and digital ascendancy, undergoing an explosion with respect to conventional boundaries and traditional parameters. In light of this, Gianni Vattimo sees our current relationship with the ostensible "death of art" as not leading merely to dissolution into forms of mass media, kitsch or ultimate silence, but rather toward that which is to be *healed* (in the Heideggerian sense of *Verwindung*). Thus, art in the digital age has, in a strange way, been *returned* to us. But a question may be posed based on an implied reversal of this idea which asks why, in an all-pervasive and competitive mass visual culture, *we keep returning to art* — not as witnesses to its death but in an awareness of its persistent life. In doing so, we find art ready, as Vattimo tells us, not to be discarded like an "old, worn-out garment" but to be *exhibited*, "... bear[ing] on its face the traces and passage of time."[1]

The lines of the visage we admire or contemplate are, we know, the result of time and insist on the necessity that we consider in tandem the materiality of art itself

and the tangle of language. Material, for our purposes, is a fundamentally temporal thing. Marked by degrees of solidity and fluidity, sensorally embodied, functioning as a commodity or a resource — or 'standing in reserve' — the materiality of art begs scrutiny. And, regarding language, the very thing that makes it possible to hold, memorialize or retain it via art is the thing that also invests it with a vulnerability to corruption; to erasure, loss and decay. *After the Grave* takes up a concern with the 'double pull' of materiality and of language in art, and, ostensibly, with the complex means by which culture speaks and is silent, offers and withholds, albeit with an insistent often physical presence.

Reminding ourselves that language is a form of ever-present *social* material, capable of communication and of forging allegiances and of mutely retreating from the local square or the world wide web, is to bring to bear the limits of its circulation across cultural boundaries. In a globalizing context, language as a socio-cultural material is subject to acts of translation and mistranslation that allow it to be pressed into service, or to *dis*service. Sometimes as a medium of social exchange, language holds infinite promise and yet proves its own inadequacy as a tool, like a still-legible sign on an abandoned store. The social language of art and its myriad vehicles for expression is a subject of study in this issue as well.

Art Intersecting and Displacing Language

> The physical fact of language — uttered, inscribed, marked or frozen in front of our faces in the cold light of bitter days — reminds us that there is no communication without the phatic exchange of substances.[2] Johanna Drucker

> ... writing is language *displaced* from the mode of immediate gesture or speech to the mode of the momento — something like the sea shells and the driftwood and the footprints on the beach. Writing is leftovers...[3] Robert Bringhurst

Theorist Johanna Drucker, whose incisive writing on the art of the book and on language

as a material of communication and art, reminds us in the foregoing that language is by nature, an *exchangeable material*. Poet and design theorist Robert Bringhurst complements Drucker by arguing that the exchange of language is inevitably a means to displacement. In the visual arts there has been significant recent work demonstrating a preoccupation with language, particularly at the intersection of the visual and graphical, showing us the readiness within language of a momentum directed toward *displacement*. In such discursive work, the world is framed and unframed according to the material and metaphoric possibilities *inherent* in language and its trajectories. The writings and works of Robert Smithson serve as reference points for these ideas in that language in the artist's work becomes a 'heap' made of both print and minerals. For Smithson it is difficult and even pointless to separate the print from the matter, in light of the common phrase 'printed matter.' In his hands language is a thing "to be looked at and/or [a thing] to be read" and, further, "language operates between literal and metaphoric signification."[4] For Smithson there is little distinction between art, language and the industrial extraction and circulation of material goods. Each similarly belongs to an expanded concept of *displacement*, where a primary substance is shaped, formed, moved around, deposited and discarded; holding signification and laying in waste or in reserve.

It is important to remind ourselves at this juncture that a significant if common feature of both art and writing over the last one hundred years has been the collapsing of the distance between image and text. In visual art, we see this activity in early Cubist collages and later in the skittering calligraphies upon Cy Twombly's giant canvasses. Images that move toward text and back appear paradigmatically in the seminal works of the Lettrists and within concrete visual poetics as well. Artist Blair Brennan in his essay included in this issue inhabits the voice of the *artist-poet*, reminding us simply, that "Words are things."

It is difficult, though sometimes necessary, to separate the mark from its materiality, the inscription from the ground. Yet to emphasize the distinctions between the word and the material and thereby allow the edges and limits of visual and textual language forms to bounce off each other requires a certain trust in the resilience of art and language. If we forget the inherent materiality of language, we forget the dynamic, physical weight it bears upon us. Such a form of amnesia might also make us forget that

language is not a purely human, cultural construction, an instrument of our will, but that it also belongs to the non-human realm of the material and the physical. Language does not, therefore, transcend the physical world, with its material resistances and impermanences, but is a condition of it, immanently shaped by it. So, ultimately, the de-centering of the human subject in regard to language occurs when the material itself rears up as a form of resistance to signification, and thus becomes simply unintelligible.

Contemporary artists are particularly intent, it seems, to draw attention to the potential brokenness of language and to the aspects that contribute to its *inability* to foster communication. American artist, Glen Ligon, in his epic text paintings entitled *Black Like Me* (1992), allows his stenciled written lines of apparent self-disclosure to become obliterated as the text becomes thickened with excess black pigment. In the works of Chinese artist Xu Bing, *The Book from the Sky* (1987-91) and *Square Word Calligraphy* (2001), both written about in this issue, ironic strategies relating to calligraphy, printing and translation form the basis for cultural projects that astound the viewer with their ability to visually engage while producing a sense of pervasive cultural and linguistic mystification.

Printed, Filmic and Cross-Cultural

This issue of *Visible Language* capitalizes on intersections between written language and material sign, text and image, and on the links between the histories of specific art medias that speak to notions of passage and a *passage-beyond*. David Scott Armstrong's essay, "Sfumato: or Print: Like A Vanishing Point Grown Over By Its Picture Plane," presents a series of linked ruminations on the function of print and the art of printmaking in an increasingly digital age. Situating his arguments in relation to the theories of Walter Benjamin and other twentieth century modernists, Armstrong's discussion is wide-ranging and occasionally rather elastic. As a writer, he looks backwards and forwards at the same time to remind us that the paradigms to which our contemporary reproduction technologies adhere are rooted in earlier, albeit equally sophisticated frameworks.

The encodings and transgressions of language and cultural and material objects within the realm of social and globalized exchanges is explored in Patrick Mahon's essay "Xu Bing, Ed Pien and Gu Xiong: Lost and Found in Translation." Focusing on the contemporary painting and graphic practices of three Asian-born artists now living in

North America, Mahon shows how the material inscriptions of language are born out of culturally specific negotiations of present and past, homeland and the site of displacement. Importantly, it is the cultural arena of art that enables such cross-cultural translations to be negotiated and to offer unfolding 'readings.'

Tess Takahashi's essay "After the Death of Film: Writing the Natural World in the Digital Age," articulates the complex narrative that leads from analogue to digital film/video and demonstrates the important historical reflexivity that motivates some of the most compelling experimental film today. Offering an incisive analysis of the materiality of film with respect to some of its discursive 'languages,' Takahashi infers that significant parallels exist between the world of time-based image production and the history and context for an analysis of the graphic image arts. Takahashi's essay reminds us not only that film and video have histories that 'loop' back upon themselves, but also offers a productive context for thinking through the opportunities that the shifts in the materials and languages of art may propose.

Artist's Projects

With the many notions concerning language and materiality buoying up a sense of possibility, the co-editors invited a selection of artist's to contribute writings, art works or both, to a series of artist project pages for the issue. The artist's works and writing in these pages span a range of interests and approaches, yet can be seen as united in their address to ideas concerning the challenge to link language and materiality in the contemporary moment. Seen here is a collection of artist's works that take up a concern for the physical act of marking, for writing and recording, whether by way of machine or hand. Others display an interest in the pertinent relationships between present and past, between pre-existing cultural forms or conventions concerning cultural expression and language and their subsequent 'reframing' as contemporary art, as critique and as dialogue.

The conflation of text and image is an apt one in this context and is beautifully albeit incisively handled in the complementary page spreads by artist Jeannie Thib. In her work, Thib draws upon a historical selection of decorative textile patterns, selecting and reducing elements to arrive at a set of signs/glyphs. Making use of the conventions of images as a field and text as figures, she also discloses something about the arbitrariness of

linguistic signs.

Both Blair Brennan and Joscelyn Gardner highlight language and the implements whereby it was sometimes painfully inscribed upon a 'body' through references to cultural and historical violence and ownership. Blair Brennan's work redeploys the activity of branding in light of its direct relation to rural raising and marking of cattle. The artist describes his own reluctant membership within a 'heritage' culture, yet finds in it a conflicted if far-reaching mythology. So, for Brennan, it is not just the word alone that carries power, but the act of its inscription that denotes its transformative potential.

Joscelyn Gardner, on the other hand, is compelled to confront her own complicit heritage by examining her white Creole family history, the roots of which go back to 17th century Barbadian plantation slavery. In her carefully described lithographs, we observe language used as a 'tool' of control, ownership and appropriation. Utilizing a hand-made printing approach, Gardner engraves physical marks into her lithographic stones and thereby inscribes a troubled historical/cultural reality within a stirring though delicate work.

Whereas Brennan appears to use the 'brand' as a reflexive ethnographic critique, artist Barbara Balfour utilizes the discipline of cursive handwriting as a means to invent a critical 'field' that describes the self as a set of contradictions. Here the artist has set herself to the task of repetitive writing, insisting on a machine-like accuracy that operates in ironic contradistinction to the work's seeming invitation to a 'close encounter' with the subjectivity of the artist; based on the use of language as a paradigmatic means to self-disclosure.

David Merritt and Patrick Mahon each deal in their individual practices with notions of circulation via carefully drawn graphic works. David Merritt's work focuses on the circulation of language through what he calls an 'inverted logic' of both the visual and aural. His drawings of song titles, which have been culled from their gathering places in the 'boneyards' of music industry web sites, reveal an intended collapsing together of a number of orders: drawing and writing, inscription and performance, gathering and dispersal.

The circulation of both language and cultural goods from one cultural site to another is also taken up in the work of Patrick Mahon. Yet in Mahon's work the focus is on the symbolic function of money as a shifting cross-cultural site of value, transaction and

exchange. The determination of value, whether government issued (printed/minted), or as cultural object (art) — as well as the intersecting of differing cultural means of exchange — is addressed in his *Drawn like Money* Series.

David Scott Armstrong's *(After Turner)* is based on ideas that literalize 'circulation' in a film-like sequence resulting from the artist's invention of a machine that references an apocryphal story of one of J.M.W. Turner's researches as an artist. Armstrong's extravagant lateral engagement of art history, print technologies and allusions to moving image productions yields a project that models some key questions concerning the past and future of print technology in a compelling way.

Micah Lexier's six-page spread of *Revelations* announce themselves as a page-sized 'apocalypse.' If we look at these left hand/right hand markings as an essentially additive equation: 1+1 (for how do you truly subtract an inscribed mark?), the sum is not *two* but *zero*, and we are left with the paradox at the heart of material language. Always more — or less — than the sum of their parts (statement and cancellation), they remain present in the world as absences.

Conclusion

Is it possible to subtract a materially inscribed mark from its context, from itself? Material language takes place within a field of inscriptions, exchanges and erasures, forever repeating itself — and also always differing from itself. It traces a path between itself and other, between form and formlessness, ultimately offering itself as a site of negotiation and transition between the receiver of language and the world. After the Grave explores the relationship between marking and visual/graphical language in the works of theorists and contemporary artists, focusing on the physical/material means by which artworks function communicatively. Within the essays to follow in this issue, and in the written and visual works included, language operates as both material and metaphor: a *grave* that marks what has come before and what will follow after.

ENDNOTES

1

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SFUMATO OR, PRINT: LIKE A VANISHING POINT GROWN OVER BY ITS PICTURE PLANE

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VISIBLE LANGUAGE 42.1

ARMSTRONG, 14-27

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Abstract

In turning toward that which has fallen out of use, one approaches the threshold between presence and passing; between knowing and forgetting. It is the *place*, perhaps the unexpected *pause*, where language and loss meet. This essay speculates on

the particular apparatus of print, the making and unmaking of its medium in a time of technological transition, and endeavors to locate its *place* within a congested space of language, memory and the outmoded. The conceit of *Sfumato* announced in the title of this essay and carried throughout echoes such considerations about what it means to make print now. It brings forward an apparatus historically inscribed, a tool, or armature from which images are composed, yet one subject to time and its corrosive atmosphere. Neither to be discarded and forgotten, nor blindly used as an instrument of utility, but rather brought forward through the contingencies of time as a material and metaphoric occurrence.

> ... decaying vestiges of books. They had long since dropped to pieces, and every semblance of print had left them. ...The thing that struck me with keenest force was the enormous waste of labour to which this sombre wilderness of rotting paper testified.

H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine: An Invention,*

> The fog which obscures the beginnings of photography is not quite as thick as that which envelops the beginnings of printing.

Walter Benjamin, *A Short History of Photography*

> Everything is vanishing here.
>
> (Sinnott, the photographer)
>
> No!...Not vanished. Here. Now.
>
> (Dawe, the palaeontologist)

Robert Kroetsch, *Badlands*

Let's begin with a cliché: All things turn to dust. Surely we have heard it, or its varied repetitions cast from the same sobering matrix, and yet its familiarity and frequent use render it no less true. The phrase itself speaks to the impermanence of things, to loss, even humility, (a "thinning of self" as one poet has phrased it).[1] It is true enough indeed, like all clichés I suspect, a material fact of entropy and erosion. It is the way the world goes. But perhaps true is not the right word for what a cliché is. Perhaps useful is more appropriate; useful and familiar, like a tool. A cliché is picked up like a tool and used in its familiarity to perform its task, to get its point across, efficiently

and with economy. And yet if tools, words and such technologies were nothing more than instruments of our will, they would inevitably become vacant specters when we put them down. Their decline then to the status of the overused and outmoded would render their utility as dust, like "coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer coins," as Nietzsche figured it.[2] This is language becoming unlike itself.

All things turn to dust. Even the printed page, as our unnamed time traveler tells us. Ink and paper are translated into a language of dust. And what of the common multitude of everyday currencies (words, tools, ideas), these things circulate within language, but now drift beyond their conventional familiarity and utility? Once residing in language, giving it shape and body, they now skirt the edges of language and interest. Are they, in spite of themselves, consigned to withdraw further into obscurity; lost to the hyper-speed and disposability of our present experience? As Don McKay reminds us, even when Nietzsche is describing the illusory ground on which truth and language are established, he reaches for the very language he doubts, in the form of his own metaphoric coinage, to make his point.[3] It is in such vulnerable moments, notes McKay, that we are unwittingly *reminded* of the "apparatus," the "rickety tool" of language "working away at an impossible task."

This essay speculates on the particular apparatus of print, the making and unmaking of the medium in a time of technological transition, and endeavors to locate its *place* within a congested space of language, memory and the outmoded. The conceit of *Sfumato,* announced in the title of this essay and carried throughout, echoes my thinking about what it means to make print now. It brings forward an apparatus historically inscribed, a tool, or armature from which images are composed, yet one subject to time and its corrosive atmosphere. Neither to be discarded and forgotten, nor blindly used as an instrument of utility, but rather brought forward through the contingencies of time as a material and metaphoric occurrence. In turning toward that which has fallen out of use, one approaches the threshold between presence and passing; between knowing and forgetting. It is the *place*, perhaps the unexpected *pause,* where language and loss meet.

There is little question about the degree in which the printed word and image have proliferated within the realm of human communication over the last half millennium. The predominance of *the book* within the cultural history of the West serves as a kind of gravitational center at which the ambitious flights and follies of human knowledge have found a nesting place. And it is the various means of reproduction, print technologies, which have facilitated the mobilization and dispersal of this knowledge: projecting words and images outward across an expanding geographical and cultural terrain. Now, somewhere between the pull toward the vanishing point of the past, and the multiple distractions of an over-mediated

and all pervasive information culture, sits the book, the imprinted page, in all its various forms—both complicit and at odds with the world of our making. Our cultural landscape is settled with the tracings of paper and ink.[4]

The proliferation of printing and other reproduction technologies has bestowed upon the 21st Century a vast accumulation of *stuff*—significant, ephemeral, undecided. It is by proxy of these reproduction technologies that we have inherited a packrat ethic: allowing a swell of stuff to pile at our feet; accumulating a wreckage of the past. So, blindly, like Walter Benjamin's angel of history, we are propelled toward what is ahead. Yet the question as to what we must do with all of that past stuff is ours; how do we make sense of it and where do we place it amidst the priorities of the present? The 'fog,' with which Benjamin begins "A Short History of Photography," invokes a climate of reproducibility, and the difficulty in gaining a critical proximity to the past in a present so consumed by its own "accelerated pace of development." This unrelenting accumulation of reproducible "stuff" speaks to a decidedly conflicted relationship between the present and past, between the proliferation of technology and its obsolescence—a conflicted stance very much felt, perhaps even amplified in our present moment of instantly consumable information. The insistence on the ever 'new' renders its predecessor as old, past and outmoded. It is this very notion of the congested atmosphere of modernity that Benjamin articulates in his photography essay in relation to the more critical and conflicted notion of the *aura*.[5] Here, the aura not only suggests "[a] strange web of time and space: the unique appearance of a distance, however close at hand," but it expresses the very impulse of a rapidly advancing modernity to clear itself of the "sticky atmosphere" of the past. It wants to "...suck the aura from reality like water from a sinking ship."

For Benjamin the aura is a 'long exposure' to time and space, a patina that grows into its surroundings—but also more wearily grows a layer of dust like a tired, hackneyed cliché. It is a house to be swept clean, waiting empty for its new tenant. Yet the aura, like the inevitability of dust, is not to be so easily swept aside, but rather lingers as a residue and remainder, settling around the edges of reproducibility.

Georges Didi-Huberman sees the aura in Benjamin's larger oeuvre as a "response to a transhistorical and profoundly dialectical experience."[6] Less like a death (of the aura) than an agent of its own *decline,* (its 'falling away,' but not its disappearance) he sees the aura as allowing a *slipping underneath* the work of art. For Didi-Huberman, the aura constitutes itself not through human will alone or by the authority of that which *imposes* itself upon, but is made, unconsciously; *supposed* from underneath the distractible, disposable 'stuff' of our time like the involuntary reflex of material memory, or, in a curious turn, like an act of respiration. It is "the air that surrounds us as a subtle, moving, absolute place...and makes us breathe." This breathing space of the aura (an 'appearance of distance') is possible for Didi-Huberman by a bringing forward of the presence of human labor and of the contingency of time in the form

of the trace (defined by Benjamin as the "apparition of a proximity"). This "auratic trace" occurs where appearance and apparition, and distance and proximity are brought together. In this sense, the aura can be seen as the 'air,' the movement of contingent stuff—histories, associations, corrosions—that settles and circulates as an 'other presence' around the work of art. This supposed 'other presence' of the aura can be seen in the individual works of two Canadian artists: Blair Brennan and Janet Cardiff. In Brennan's 1996 work, Perish Like the Word, (reproduced on page 80 of issue) the incantation "ABRACADABRA" is branded from heated, hand forged irons directly into the wall in the overall form of an inverted pyramid (with the full word forming the top line, then each subsequent line decreasing by one letter with the single letter 'A' at the bottom vertex). Leaving not only a scorched combination of magic letters and an auratic trail of sooty smoke on the wall, the branding irons themselves are arranged on the floor below the branded trace to give physical weight and labor to the burnt, smoky apparition. The traces of smoke, released and recorded around each individual letter during the formative moment when the hot iron contacted the cool wall, seem to suspend the 'utterance' at a point between forming and perishing. The smoke is extra-linguistic matter, in excess of the word, the way breath escapes around words as they are spoken.

In her installation, To Touch, (1993) Janet Cardiff positions in the middle of a large room an old wooden table. It resembles something like a worktable, heavy, crude and presumably marked and weathered by a history of use and time. Spot-lit by the room's only light and attended by a simple directive given us upon entering the gallery space, one is compelled toward the table, to lean against it, to touch and run one's hands over its varied surface. Upon touching the table one begins to hear voices emanating from a series of speakers that line the room's darkened perimeter. They tell stories, both intimate and banal; their sounds overlap and interrupt each other, floating around various parts of the room and corresponding to the measure of physical contact with the table. They accumulate, filling the room with a murmuring noise.

These physical acts of touching and imprinting make the viewer acutely aware of both their own presence and the 'other presence' of a previously inscribed material event. Didi-Huberman calls this encounter with both the 'now' and the 'then' of a work of art, a 'dialectic of place,' a so-called thickening of the air, 'making us touch depth.' The depth we are brought to is not one within an illusory space but in an embodied place: a place of history, association and material contingency. It is a depth and not a surface that we touch, for it is a decidedly temporal experience, marking a duration inscribed on and beyond its surface. It is the disembodied voices that linger and disappear around an object in Cardiff's work. Brennan's branding irons (repeatable matrices) could leave their traces elsewhere, (any surface could become a receptive ground), for these implements are not tied to a place, nor do they transcend the need for one, but their impressions make a place, or rather summon a place from elsewhere, making it

a transitory site of convergence, compression and release. This creates a 'depth of place,' a felt dilation which focuses material presence; it is also a provisional one which posits an eventual erasure and dispersal. As a temporal appearing and disappearing act of sorts, the aura is conjured up in our very presence, while leaving us wondering about the seeming impossibility of it all.

> **Just as the art of the Greeks was geared toward lasting, so the art of the present is geared toward becoming worn out.**[7]

Walter Benjamin, *Theory of Distraction*

Perishability is the mode of our times. And yet, perhaps for the sake of maintaining a cohesive sense of identity or for fear of losing it, the *perishable* also has a type of safety net that trails in its wake, gathering up, sorting and sifting through this jettisoned stuff. The capacity for remembrance, whether via human memory or with memory devices, is part of our own enmeshed hardwiring. We throw away so that we can remember, or, is it that because we remember, we can throw away? It seems so perfectly 'Newtonian' in its equilibrium; where every action produces an equal yet opposite reaction. It seems a perfect equation of spent energy saved — if it were not for the sense that the growing world of spent matter has gotten the better of us.

> **The feeling for the inert has a special significance in our age, in which the obverse of the capitalist drive to produce ever more new objects is a growing mountain of useless waste, used cars, out of date computers etc, like the famous resting place for old aircraft in the Mojave desert. ... Nature and industrialized civilization overlap, but in a common decay: a civilization in decay is being reclaimed, not by an idealized, harmonious Nature but by nature which is itself in a state of decomposition.**[8]

Slavoj Zizek, *Not a desire to have him...*

The foregoing is from Slavoj Žižek; it bears noting for a couple of reasons. It speaks of the obverse of (over) production being the *inert,* linked by a 'common decay,' which, as Žižek goes on to describe, is a form of delay or waiting.

The other thing to note? How the sentence hinges on the word *like.* One can almost imagine the writer in mid thought, after initially laying out the idea and a supporting list of examples, pausing in a slight or broad moment of inertia, searching for the thing that will stretch the thought a little further. What is it to be *like* something? *Like* is a point of comparison—'*this* is like *that*'—a form of linguistic reach. But when do we reach for it? In those paused moments when the thing we are attempting to describe, or the very thought itself, seems somehow incomplete, too obscure or inert to hold its own. We reach out with this comparative 'like' when we are confronted with 'un-likeness,' when the things of the world and of our attention no longer bear easy or immediate resemblance. Yet, it is not just the *like* that captures the interest here, but that which immediately precedes it: the beginning of a list followed by an inference of its continuation—*et cetera.*

Let me retrace the arc of this rhetorical passage from the beginning: it starts with the presentation of the idea of inertia and a "growing mountain of waste," continues on with its own growing list (…*etc*, and so on…), then takes what seems an imaginative leap beyond descriptive inertia toward something akin to a lively poetic image. It traces the path of entropy, where things fall apart under the force of their own cumulative weight, yet endeavoring in that very pause to find a restoration of language.

The relevance of this arc is in how we might consider our current preoccupation with technological growth and entropy and how the medium of print might fit into this framework. Print technologies experienced something of a explosion in the art of the 1960's, a period where the idea of technology itself, and its links to an increased industrialization, reproducibility and mass culture, were met with an ambivalent mix of both optimism and resistance. Pamela M. Lee explores that decade's ambivalence, focusing on art and technology and a profound reformulation of our relationship to time. She sees in the art of this period, (and one can easily speculate how it extends into our current time as well), a preoccupation with time, describing a future bound to technological recursiveness, enacting a repeated cycle of "novelty and obsolescence, innovation and outmodedness."[9] Caught in this endless repetition, the avant-garde faces its own crisis where its forward advance is brought to a standstill—becoming stuck in both time and in its own contradiction, without recourse to transcend it. Time and experience become increasingly compressed to the fleeting, perfunctory 'everyday,' to the particularities of the moment always repeating, never ceasing. It is a crisis of being unable to transcend the moment.

The notion of "medium" in art has similarly undergone a radical shift in thinking, bearing the effects of a far reaching criticality toward the inheritance of past categorical conventions, and its opening toward time and novelty. "A medium," notes Charles Bernstein, "is an 'in-between' in which you go from one place to another, but also the material of that in-between-ness."[10] Conceived as such, a medium is on the one hand a vehicle: a means by which something is carried, represented or recorded. It relies on the efficiency and usefulness it may have for a user in order to travel. A medium is a tool, marked by the ability to produce a *likeness* of something, rendering the material fact of the work transparent. With a likeness one is less aware of the work's physical material properties (ink on paper, paint on canvas, projected light on screen), than of the subject matter (a landscape, still life or portrait). On the other hand, to produce an *unlikeness* is to make visible the material fact of the work, such that it does not look like anything other than its own unique appearance. A tool's utility may be based on the promise of transcending the fact of its materiality, yet there is a way in which contingency and temporal undoing reasserts material's 'other presence' back into the mix.[11]

Where does the medium of print fit into this art and technology nexus, and its recursive state of inertia? Scanning the decades since the so-called 'print boom' in 1960's art, we may no doubt think

most prominently of Warhol. But perhaps, reaching further back, the 18th century Italian artist Giovanni Battista Piranesi might be invoked here with his intricately crafted engravings of the architectural ruins of ancient Rome. Rendered through an 'architecture' of engraved lines, dots and dashes, these prints describe a past world of structures falling and collapsing in upon themselves, yet opening toward something beyond the order of architecture—toward a long exposure to weather, erosion and time. Haunted by its former utility, this represented architecture returns to an elemental state: it becomes a pile of matter, speaking not of utility, but as an index of its once inscribed use. Piranesi's prints take the ruins of Rome as their subject, but are not themselves ruins. Warhol's, on the other hand, are just that: their very surfaces bear the traces of a faulty medium collapsing under the weight of its repetitions. While distinguished by this difference, both artists present an essential aspect of print in relation to material inertia: print, it seems, is forever becoming *unlike* itself.

Jumping forward, the printed paper stacks of artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres, with their potential for endless renewal and dispersal, evoke another sense of loss and restoration through both the technical and social apparatus of print reproducibility. In works such as *Untitled (The End)* and *Untitled (Blue Mirror)* we find both an authoritative self-sameness fortified as sculptural mass, and a quiet self-effacement in being "spread out into a thousand small instances."[12] As a monolithic form, a focal point made up of an unlimited edition of prints placed in a gallery space, the work constitutes a *site* that is continually refilled and emptied out, or displaced as people are welcome to take a print away from the stack. The relatively stable body of the stack sheds its paper like layers of skin. The manner in which these mute prints (they are characteristically 'empty,' covered by a single flat color, or a simple border that frames a blank expanse of paper) yield to circumstance makes their emptiness fill with the minutia of everyday particularity. (What happens to these prints after they leave the stack is an open question.) From their origins as mass-produced likenesses, made to be disseminated and displaced, (as in the case of any edition), they grow into their new surroundings. Whether treated as art or 'common' ephemera, they acquire new contexts: becoming unique *un-likenesses*. (Consider here Leonardo Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, a work enshrined by its auratic uniqueness, but also one of the most reproduced works in Western art. As such, it has become a ready site for *growing* both a moustache, and an aura of *un-likeness*).

Print is most commonly understood, as a tool and a technology, with the intent and purpose of reproducing, storing, disseminating and communicating. It is to a large extent 'known' for being a kind of supporting player, a mechanical apparatus placed *under* in order to reproduce other words, other images, other media. When compared with different, sometimes seemingly related media in contemporary art, such as photography, film and digital media, and of course, painting, there is a notable lack of critical, evocative writing on print as an art form. This produces a muteness that further underscores its present, yet hidden status. Unconsciously sensed, broadly

implicated, but rarely stated or foregrounded, print, in many ways, still lingers underneath photography's historical black veil on the *other* side, at the *backside* of the camera. And at this moment, its language and currency is perhaps being digitally devoured, like the worm which poet Irving Layton says must sing "for an hour in the throat of a robin."[13]

Yet print does not belong exclusively to the realm of human intention and utility, as simple textual and graphical composition. It instead bears the weight of language, facilitates it, repeats it and collapses, breaks apart under it. Reproducibility begets reproducibility… begets dust. In time, print settles (*de*composes) into its surroundings to become a trace of its former self, an *after presence* that illuminates its own obscured absence. As such, the print as a trace of its own mode of production does not so much 'speak' by means of graphical reproducible language, as it now operates to disturb its seeming utility, uttering out of the residue beneath the flood of language. Not just an aid to memory, it haunts memory. Lingering uncertainly, *after the fact*. Like a fossil formed under the pressure of time, the printed trace is a hollowed shell, an indicator of the body's passing elsewhere. The body of print, subject to its own overproduction, overuse and dissolution, is itself over-printed by pressure, erosion and time. Becoming a trace of a trace of an *other*.

After ruminating here upon several notions concerning print, language and material inertia, I wish to make a broad assertion: *language is restored by disclosing its materiality, by maintaining an irresolvable tension between its promise of transcendence with respect to making meaning, and the fact of its being unmade in time. In other words—language is invigorated by its mortality: a ceaseless process of making and unmaking itself.*

What of the *missing body of print*—has it not always been the case? A material residue; a physical, yet vulnerable trace left behind—deposited in the wake of our own passing through the world? With the assumed authority of a fact, the act of imprinting speaks emphatically, 'I am here', in a manner that assures its immersion in a present reality and relationship to physical things, but also, almost immediately, speaks the uncertain and lingering 'I no longer am.' Here, between identity and oblivion, is the transitional space that print marks: a terrain perhaps similar to that which consumes the body and language of A.M. Klein's "outmoded" poet, the "nth Adam" of the modern world, who now forgotten…

> **makes of his status as zero a rich garland,**
> **a halo of his anonymity,**
> **and lives alone, and in his secret shines like phosphorus. At the bottom of the sea.**[14]

Indeed, this is the hollowed-out dwelling at the heart of the print. An image of auratic decay, a sublimity, settling anonymous and under pressure, "[a]t the bottom of the sea."

Robert Kroetsch writes that "[to] reveal all is to end the story. To conceal all is to fail to begin the story." The very possibility of delineating beginnings from ends, or as quoted at the beginning of this essay, that which has 'vanished' from that which is 'here, now,' is rendered even more difficult in such reflexive, recursive times. Yet the question of where the historical print begins and whether its end is within our sights is a question for the history books. It is not my question to ask here. The more critical question, from my perspective, has to do with both the specific and transformative possibility of a medium, its making and unmaking through material and metaphoric contingency. Elsewhere, Kroetsch has written about beginnings and ends, or what he calls "the dream of origins," in relation to the prairie region of Canada, the small town and the farm as "...not merely places, [but] remembered places."[15] These "imagined real places" are places to be reinvented, retold, beginning again after the story has ended.

One such place for me is the site of my grandparent's homestead and its surrounding area in the Canadian prairie region of southwest Saskatchewan (just west of the city of Swift Current). The place itself is a very real site of economic, generational and geological change—mapped, carved and deposited into the landscape. But it is also a site of memory and erasure populated by those rusted, faded and weathered deposits of stuff often found half buried by topsoil drift and the overgrowth of prairie grasses left untilled by human need. It is a site reclaimed, in spite of its ultimate foreignness, by its surroundings. In these places of randomly clustered piles found in and around the quonset; 'the dump' at the edge of coulee; and the 'old kitchen,' one could find things half-lost to the past, half-familiar, yet strangely *other*. The used up, no longer needed, but nonetheless still kept stuff, particular to the plot of land that cradled it, offered it a familial proximity, yet set at a distance from the lived experiences of my grandparents.

The 'old kitchen' was the only part of the original farmhouse that was saved from demolition in the mid 1970's after the new house was built a mere stone's throw away. In place of the leveled old house and the old kitchen, which was eventually moved over by the quonset and raised up on railroad ties, now stands a yard light affixed atop a telephone pole surrounded by a flower garden (the site became affectionately named 'the graveyard'). Viewed from its exterior, this old kitchen, which could not have been any more than eight feet squared in its detached state, now resembled a simple storage shed. A remnant itself as well as a shelter for the housing of smaller remnants—things not good enough for the garage or basement, yet too good for the dump (enamel washbasins, steamer trunks, kerosene lantern)—the old kitchen was itself the very same as the stuff that it contained.

Robert Smithson, in *A Sedimentation of the Mind* and in other texts, sees language itself as a form of material deposit and displacement. He brings to bear on language, art and its comparative industrialized landscape, its own material vulnerability, buried under the sediment of time and disuse.

> **The names of minerals and the minerals themselves do not differ from each other, because at the bottom of both the material and the print is the beginning of an abysmal number of fissures.... Look at any *word* long enough and you will see it open up into a series of faults, into a terrain of particles each containing its own void. This discomforting language of fragmentation offers no easy gestalt solution; the certainties of didactic discourse are hurled into the erosion of the poetic principle. Poetry being forever lost must submit to its own vacuity; it is somehow a product of exhaustion rather than creation. Poetry is always a dying language but never a dead language.**[16]

The farm 'dump,' located in a hollow between two small hills at the top edge of the coulee, takes the form of poetic clusters; *fissures* and *fragments* of a past always dying but never dead. An aggregate mix of exhausted machinery and parts, tangles of cleared brush, barbed wire, fence posts, tires and piled deposits of smoothed stones (ploughed up from adjacent fields) embedded and buried in the grass and dirt: this is the 'poetic principle' to which print also attends. It operates at the edges of utility.

To acknowledge that our language is exhausted, and to do it in the act of using it is a quieting yet also lively undertaking. Print, as a kind of material memory, indicates "a dying language but never a dead language," one that has fallen under the pressure of time. Prints are dust. They are the residue of an abiding presence. The potential for such a view heightens our critical awareness of the vulnerability of our language. How does our technological reach within the world resist reducing the world to the form of our grip? I am interested in the cultural span of print, in particular because it seems that now, due to its present material vulnerability, its imprinting offer us less a *fixing* of the world than a tracing of its passage. In this regard, we might find the liminal traces of print embedded throughout our cultural landscape as a kind of *momento mori*—drawing us into awareness through the rumblings of its own uncertainty: where its dust reveals more than what language can hold. So we endeavor to locate ourselves through language, in a time and place troubled by displacement, deposit and erosion. Like the path of a retreating glacier: collecting, accumulating and transporting stuff picked up along the way, language leaves in its wake erratics that settle and grow into their new surroundings. (Perhaps this is not so unlike Da Vinci's *The Last Supper* in Milan, where the 'long exposure' of these fugitive materials to time and the effects of atmosphere's invasive touch, seem perpetually in excess of the restorative measures aimed at rescuing the painting from the further degradation of its own material).

The sense of speed inferred by the once ubiquitous, now quite forgotten phrase 'the information super-highway' can be considered in two ways: most obviously, the high traffic and rapid transit of information, but also the rapid movement of the phrase itself toward the status of cliché—tired, hackneyed and overused. The new road (or highway) is metaphorically built upon the old. The 'road,' as a metaphor for the accumulation and transmission of knowledge, serves as the common ground of understanding—an old cliché upon which the construction and understandability of the new becomes possible.

In 1993 my grandparents sold their homestead and surrounding land and moved to the city of Swift Current about 14 kilometers east of their farm. There are two ways of driving into town from their farm: there is the new, divided, four-lane blacktop #1 highway (a section of the main road artery of the Trans-Canada Highway), and there is the old, narrow, gravel-top '#1 highway.' The 'old #1' is still maintained to some degree and is still used for local travel. The new #1 is used for local travel as well, for going to and from town, but it is mainly used as a way for travelers to quickly pass through the town—the destination always being *some place else*. If the new #1 is now *noisy* with traffic, with use, the old #1 is comparatively quiet. Yet, this distinction can also be turned around on itself: the old road, although now peripheral (or more appropriate to the metaphor: out of earshot), has become noisy, due in part to its disuse. It has become a source of background noise: car travel on this 'washboard' road kicks up dust and gravel—its surface is easily dispersed. The new road is built for efficiency, for clear and unobstructed travel. Its smooth and uniform black surface differentiates itself from the landscape; local noise is reduced for the sake of quick passage. In relation to this, the old road is becoming increasingly noisy; becoming overgrown and weathered. The fields that border the road are beginning to encroach upon its edges.

There are at least two possible futures for this road: in time it will increasingly become a part of the landscape—reclaimed; or it will be developed, 'appropriated' as a suburban street. In the first scenario, like so many other prairie roads, it will act as a trace of travel, a memory of passage, yet will be no longer used as such. In the second scenario the road will lead through the suburbs—toward comfortable and leisurely detachment. When a road is no longer an efficient road but has become part of the landscape, travel is not so much denied as it is less determined by purpose. The old road is no longer used for efficient travel—to go quickly from point A to point B. It can still be used for travel, but for a meandering, slow travel. This is travel with a loss of differentiation. When the boundaries that direct intention are not maintained through upkeep, one travels through a dusty, bumpy field of noise. Travel becomes less directional, less about traversing space and more about inhabiting a place (settling, perhaps, like dust).

What happens to the old road of print after the new 'superhighway' has diverted traffic? What happens to the old print road when it is no longer a road of efficiency and clarity? A tool may disappear in the familiar act of being used as a naturalized

extension of the body, then surface again, to become visible: self-conscious with its slips, errors and accidents, eventually entering into an awareness of the body's otherness; its mortality. What happens to outmoded technology, a de-familiarized technology, when its utility is no longer assumed? Is it reformulated, reconstructed within the shell of the new (using strategies of appropriation and postmodern pastiche and irony)? Does it go from being a main route to a side road? Is this old road left only for local travel and for Sunday drives? The new road is built for efficiency, speed and commerce: merchandise is the *message* carried along this path. Its lines are hard, clean and smooth: the channel is kept clean and clear. Obstructions (traffic) and disturbances (holes, weathering and erosion) are monitored to plan for continuous upgrading, countering loss and inefficiency. The old road becomes increasingly difficult for efficient travel. Travel on this road becomes both more particular (local) and less differentiated (dispersed). It is a route of digression away from the center of activity. The road becomes a trace among a multitude of barely traceable others, among many contingent paths. Like a vanishing point grown over by its picture plane, in time the road becomes a field.

ENDNOTES

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2

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3

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12

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XU BING, ED PIEN AND GU XIONG: LOST AND FOUND IN TRANSLATION

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Abstract

The works of contemporary artists Xu Bing, Ed Pien and Gu Xiong are involved in bringing to light some of the factors inherent in social, cultural and linguistic translation. In doing so, each artist is also engaged in the nuanced activity of moving between historical and contemporary aesthetic strategies in order to interrogate the way meaning is produced through materials-based iterations, against a backdrop of public culture. This essay situates the works of Xu Bing, Ed Pien and Gu Xiong in relation to each artist's own respective practice which has spanned more than twenty years. Concentrating specifically on projects where the artists mobilize Western-influenced art methodologies and refer to traditional Chinese/Asian art styles, the essay makes canny revelations about the nature of communication, and on linguistic and material translation, in contemporary culture in the globalizing world.

Prologue

On any given day, a journey on public transit through an urban center in North America offers encounters that require acts of social reading and engagements with social translation. Young hipsters, bearing tattoos, wear get-ups that could become ready fodder for a treatise on the semiotics of self-presentation. And citizens from differing generations and ethnic backgrounds manifest signs of their cultures on their bodies and through their speech so that before our eyes the city bus becomes a theater of social understanding and misunderstanding at once.

In one such recent circumstance that I encountered, a literal reading of what was written on the body of another passenger became a cipher for the complexities of linguistic and cultural translation in the globalized world. A young woman was wearing a seemingly fashionable t-shirt that bore a glittering slogan: "Your smile my happy." Very likely, the girl was aware of the generalized fashion codes to which her t-shirt subscribed, but was possibly less cognizant of the nuances of the textual code—written English—that had been used to mark the garment. In that instance, I speculated on the background that might have brought the young woman and the ill-phrased t-shirt together, (was she an immigrant whose knowledge of English did not allow her full understanding of what the slogan meant?); and on the route of language and culture that had contrived to generate

the text, (had the shirt been produced in a place where the phrasing would be unreadable to most people?).

Whatever the specific answers to the foregoing questions, the determinants of meaning made according to and despite acts of translation are subjects of necessary interrogation at this historical juncture. Thus, the works of the artists under consideration in the following essay are germane, for not only do they present an art audience with representations made by producers from non-Western racial and ethnic backgrounds cognizant of the westernized frameworks that often colonize the globalized context, but they each display the traces of their own ethnic cultural lineages in ways that beg scrutiny. And, like the 'malapropism' on the t-shirt aforementioned, the works of the artists under discussion here can be shown to *say* and also to *not say* what they mean.

Three Asian-born Artists

The works of Xu Bing, Ed Pien and Gu Xiong share in the fascinating and often entertaining work of bringing to light some of the factors inherent in social, cultural and linguistic translation. In doing so, each artist is also involved in the nuanced activity of moving between historical and contemporary aesthetic strategies in order to interrogate the way meaning is produced through materials-based iterations against a backdrop of public culture. It is beyond the scope of this essay to fully situate the works of Xu Bing, Ed Pien and Gu Xiong within the broad expanses of their own respective practices—each of which has spanned more than twenty years—so instead the essay presents but a sampling from the oeuvres of these important contemporary artists.

Xu Bing and Gu Xiong are both originally from Mainland China and now live primarily in North America (Xu Bing in New York and Gu Xiong in Vancouver); Ed Pien is from Taiwan and was raised in Canada. All three of the artists mobilize Western-influenced art methodologies and refer to traditional Chinese/Asian art styles to make canny revelations about the nature of communication and thus to comment on linguistic and material translation in contemporary life.

Backgrounds

Xu Bing was born in Chongqing in 1955, eleven years before the Cultural Revolution. The son of intellectuals, he grew up amidst a literate class—his father was the chairman of the History Department at Beijing University—and he excelled at careful and beautiful traditional writing. As a young man Xu Bing received early recognition for his abilities as a writer capable of doing blackboard newsletters and producing 'big character posters.' But Xu Bing also became aware at an early age that his father was subject to persecution—branded as a political reactionary within some of those same kinds of posters, during the early days of the Revolution.[1] So, along with developing considerable command and control of visual texts, Xu Bing was exposed

to the power of the visible word to control and oppress his father during his early life. As will be discussed later, this combination of mastery and critical insight informed his unorthodox works, typified by their insistent political and social impact.

Gu Xiong was also born in Chongqing in 1953, but whereas Xu Bing moved to a larger city soon after his birth (to Beijing, prior to the Cultural Revolution), Gu Xiong remained in the comparatively isolated mountain city birthplace for his early years. After the period of relocation to the countryside during the revolution, Gu Xiong returned to study at the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute. Upon graduating with an MFA, Gu Xiong was hired to teach as a professor at the Institute. However, his initial years of academic prestige were followed by a period as an artist-in-residence in Banff, Canada, during which his early impressions and assumptions about Western cultural life were formed. These ideas were both confirmed and painfully challenged for Gu Xiong upon emigrating to Canada—where he was soon found working as a busboy in the cafeteria at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. Like Xu Bing, Gu Xiong's lived experiences intersected with his aesthetic choices to ultimately inform his work. Often that work reflects upon the material surroundings of his Chinese upbringing in ways that show his background to be both familiar and distinct in relation to the trappings of his adopted Western home.

Ed Pien was born in 1958 in Taiwan and emigrated with his family to Canada eleven years later. At the same time that Xu Bing and Gu Xiong were on the verge of a period of 'exile' in rural China, Pien experienced, in the late '60s, another form of alienation and displacement—amidst a life that may have held the *promise* of the sorts of liberal freedoms Chairman Mao was preaching against in China. Raised during his middle years in London, Ontario, Pien eventually followed the route of many North American artists and sought training in university art programs that later was supplemented by residencies and research periods in Europe and Asia. Therefore, his complex history as a child in Asia; his status as a member of a minority in the West; and experience as an art student of 'the world' would eventually come to inform a non-documentary practice that owes something to Asian painting and drawing traditions, and something further to Western historical imagery.[2] Yet memories of his early childhood in Taiwan and recollections of life as an adolescent in Canada also clearly coalesce in works by Pien in images that are disturbing and beautiful.

Critical and Theoretical Strategies

Writer Tila Kellman, in the essay on the work of Ed Pien entitled, "In the Realm of Others and My Self," draws attention to the practice of writing in Asian cultures as it intersects with pictorial expression:

> **In Asian cultures that use ideograms in order to write, people use**

many of the same brush strokes to write and to paint. Not surprisingly, calligraphy in these cultures is a prestigious art form. In the West, in contrast, painting or drawing and writing are systematically separate. Pien's loose brush technique instantly recalls formalized Asian usage, but parodies the latter by rejecting formalized execution and proceeding as subconscious play.[3]

Kellman's explanation, which acknowledges some of the scholarship on the relationships between Asian text and image traditions, draws attention to a significant quality in the art of Ed Pien that is echoed in the works of the other artists. All three invoke traditional means and methods but do so with a sense of irony and play that partially belies the intentions of the original practice. Nevertheless—and perhaps unlike some Western artists who parody the strategies of their forebears—Xu Bing, Gu Xiong and Ed Pien each display a deftness with material practice that resists accusations that they are merely invested in a critique or dismissal of the earlier approaches. Indeed, each demonstrates a reflexive commitment to the 'tradition' in order to situate his works outside the mainstream of both post-modern Western practice (which is often typified by the pastiches of the 1980s), and also conventional Chinese/Asian art history. Instead the artists locate themselves within a global terrain where past and present operate in dialogue—as do East and West.

Multiple theories that encourage a consideration of the function of *translation* in reading visual works come readily to mind as we consider the three artists in question, especially with regard to the manner whereby their works speak to potential divisions and fusions amidst diverse contexts in the globalized world. Perhaps the most significant of these ideas on translation concerns the fact that viewers bring to a work the predetermined visual and linguistic frameworks that inform colloquial readings in everyday life, and these come to influence interpretations of unfamiliar 'languages.' So, an engagement with Xu Bing's work assumes certain forms of textual recognition but anticipates a ready skepticism with respect to the ultimate linguistic legibility of his iterations. Gu Xiong, by comparison, in his Socialist Realist inspired images, speaks visually in rather 'plain language, yet the works operate according to the logic of the euphemism such that they represent the generalized object they describe and invoke it as an index of culture simultaneously: signifier, signified and its 'other' coalesce. Ed Pien's work relies less on linguistically oriented translation structures and instead advances a materialist syntax over-determined by language-based operations. His brush drawings thus rely on their lineage as meta-linguistic iterations while undercutting the ostensible codifications to which their antecedents point.

From the standpoint of recent art history, it should be noted here that the tensions and opportunities for conceptual practitioners to engage

Figure 1 Gu Xiong. 1985. Snoring, woodcut; by permission of the artist

with the written word through visual experimentation were significantly extended in Chinese contemporary art in the period following the Cultural Revolution. Because so many artists had been surrounded by propaganda texts when they were young, many of them eventually set about negotiating the validity of large-scale text-based works as forms of artistic expression. Wenda Gu wrote poster-sized characters devoid of context in the mid-1980's, and made monumental paintings based on a single 'character' by altering and combining existing characters.[4] Such works displayed language as a visible site of expression, both social and aesthetic. And it is at such a nexus, and in light of the productive "troubling" of meaning-making materials and strategies—including translation—that we may effectively engage the works of the artists at hand.

Xu Bing and Gu Xiong: Woodcuts

As has been discussed in other texts on the artists,[5] in the 1970s Gu Xiong and Xu Bing were both sent to remote areas of China as laborers in accordance with the re-education policies

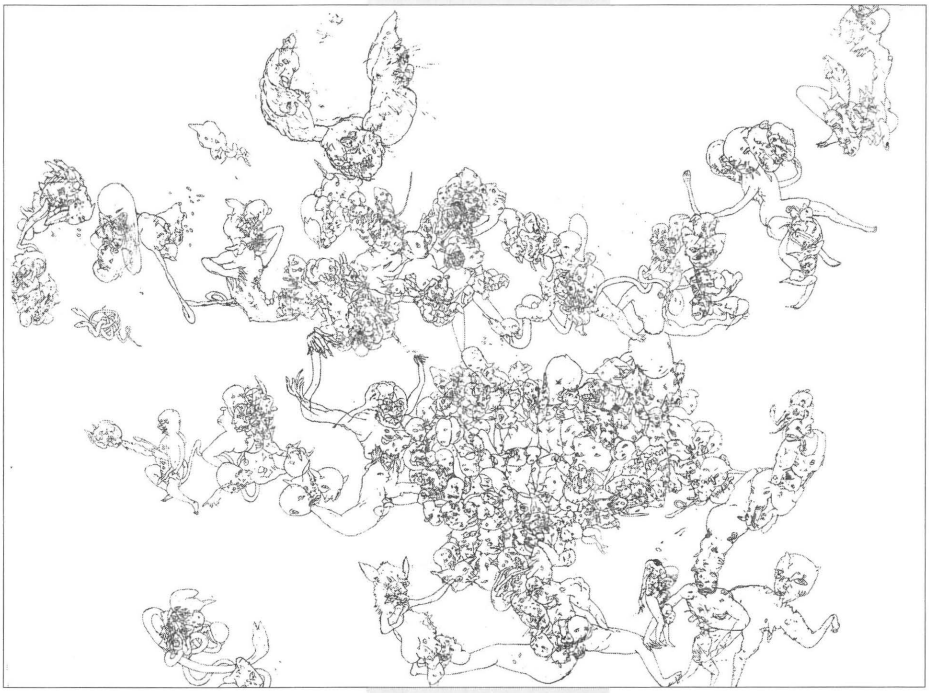

Figure 2 Ed Pien. 2007. The Creation of the World, ink on paper; by permission of the artist

established by Chairman Mao in 1968 as part of the Cultural Revolution. During their time at those enforced postings, both artists recorded their experiences visually within numerous individual drawings and sketchbooks. Those images later became source materials for art works produced during Fine Arts studies that followed their respective periods laboring in the rural countryside. Interestingly, Gu Xiong and Xu Bing had no direct knowledge of one another in the 70's, (this would come later when they met in 1981, and would be reinforced at the time of the important *China/Avant Garde Art Show* in Beijing in 1989), but each artist experienced a similar pattern of artistic development that included producing woodcuts according to the classical Chinese tradition. In both *Woodblock Print* (1985) by Xu Bing, and *Snoring* (1985) (*figure 1*) by Gu Xiong, there is evidence of careful control over the hand-cutting and printing of wood matrix. Each work bears a graphic style that, while mannered according to a traditional formal syntax, foretells sensibilities that recur in the later less conventional works by each artist. With Xu Bing, the agitated graphic marks that describe a birds-eye view of rich fields also hint at the fields of text that will later typify the astounding, *Book from the Sky* (1987-91). Gu Xiong's woodcut work shows a more boldly contrasting graphic approach that will later be used to powerful

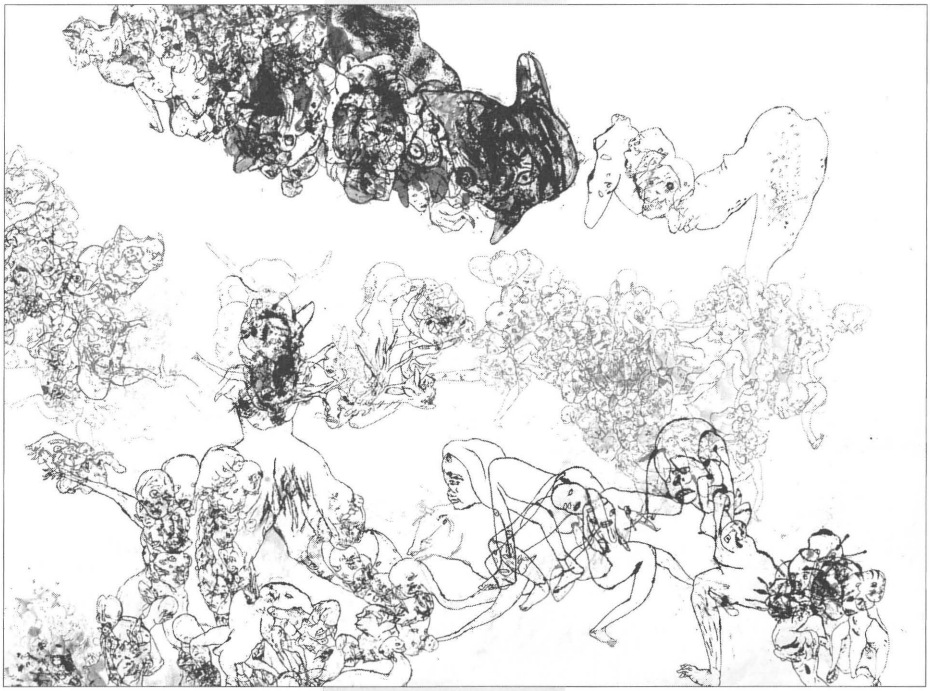

Figure 3 Ed Pien. 2007. New Conjuror, ink on paper; by permission of the artist

effect in paintings based on the *Barricade of Bicycles* (1990) installations for which he became known throughout Canada and abroad after he emigrated from China in 1989.

Ed Pien: Ink Drawings

In the brush and ink drawings of Ed Pien a re-working of the tradition of brush painting and references to ghost paintings and to hell scrolls intersect to invent a remarkable and fresh pictorial expression. Beginning in the 1990s, Pien experimented with small-scale drawings of invented faces using ink. He developed these by drawing on layered rice paper, allowing the traces of one drawing to seep through the paper to create a 'ghost' on the next—which would then inspire the drawing that was to come after it. This method shows a compelling hybrid of Eastern and Western approaches. Dedicated to 'mastering' an artistic form through repetition, Pien engaged with 'chance' and with the unplanned image as a means to bringing the as-yet-unseen into being.

In more recent ink drawings that are both larger in scale and more visually complex, Pien has extended the layer-drawing approach within the expanse of the work to develop a pictorial syntax that, while it is indebted to Asian traditions, is exceedingly contemporary in sensibility and intent. In *The Creation of the World* (2007) (*figure*

Figure 4 **Xu Bing. 2001.** Square Word Calligraphy: Quotations from Chairman Mao, ink on paper (detail); by permission of Xu Bing Studio

Figure 5 Xu Bing. 1994-1996. Square Word Calligraphy Classroom; by permission of Xu Bing Studio

2), repeated and ostensibly multiplying figures, at once perverse and complex, appear to be reproducing themselves with cancerous fervor; there is the faint sense here that they do so both at the hand of the artist and of their own volition. Similarly, in *New Conjuror* (2007) (*figure 3*) figures of extravagant form tumble over and out of one another, their interconnectedness inferring the sense that the *story* and its pictorial telling is a massive web from which a singular truth might never be unraveled. Like a joined-up, run-on sentence, the work's calligraphic excess seems the visual equivalent of a cacophonous though remarkably articulate din.

Unlike some of Xu Bing and Gu Xiong's earliest projects, Ed Pien's earlier works seem less invested in adhering closely to the dictates of tradition. Yet, like those artists, his motivation regarding much of his oeuvre appears rooted in an attempt to invoke a historical standard and to demonstrate a mastery of it—*and* to conceptually unmake that approach in the service of an invested critical undertaking. Pien's ink drawings are marvels of 'craftsmanship,' yet their potential to disturb the 'master,' with all that that implies, is inarguable.

Xu Bing—Book from the Sky and Square Word Calligraphy

Two significant projects by Xu Bing may be considered in light of questions of translation such as those invoked earlier in this essay. One is the mammoth *Book from the Sky* installation. That piece, originally consisting

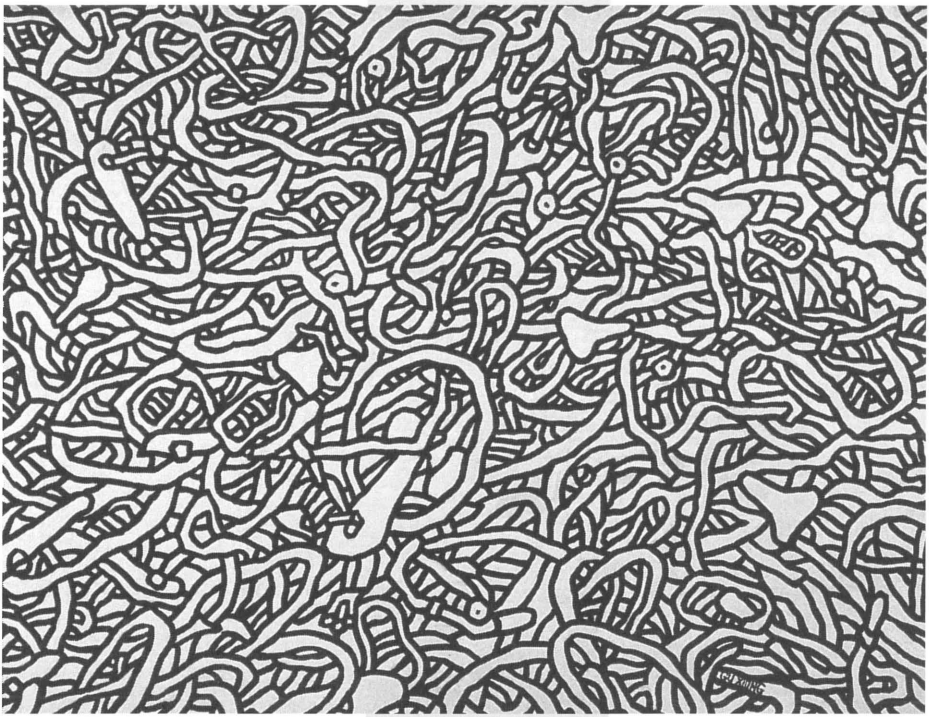

Figure 6 Gu Xiong. 1995. Crushed Bicycles, oil on canvas; by permission of the artist

of several 80-foot-long scrolls that swag across a gallery ceiling, a wall covered with contemporary Chinese newspapers and a floor filled with traditional hand-bound books, is important on many counts. Its deployment of 4000 hand-carved though meaningless characters resembling Chinese text that the artist made over a period of several years in the late '80s guarantees the work's currency within the wider cultural debates of the contemporary intellectual world.[6] Further, it is important for the mixture of extreme effort to produce the work, and its conceptual absurdity (the text is, after all, completely meaningless), which made it the subject of hostile criticism by Chinese authorities when first shown in 1988. As such, it contributed in important ways to debates on cultural modernism in China. The ambitious work not only brought Xu Bing to international attention, but also established his thinking regarding the nature of generating meaning through textual language. With *Book from the Sky*, a grand public statement using books and scrolls for their associations with knowledge and authority is undercut to become preposterous, even as it is a vast and astounding spectacle.

Xu Bing's engagement with the visible and conceptual characteristics of writ-

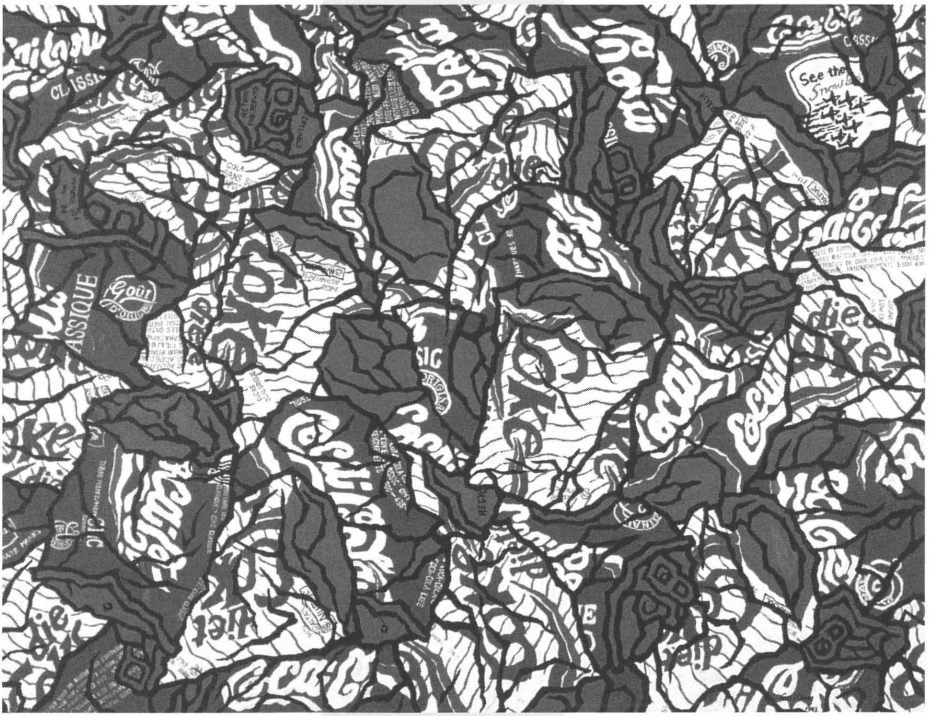

Figure 7 Gu Xiong. 1994. Crushed Coca-cola Cans, oil on canvas; by permission of the artist

ten language acquires irony and offers a source of humor and playfulness in the Square Word Calligraphy pieces he began producing in 1994. Two large-scale scroll works, *Square Word Calligraphy: Quotations from Chairman Mao* (2001) appear at first to be comprised of Chinese characters (*figure 4*). Closer inspection reveals that, instead, the works are covered with glyphs made of brush-drawn letters from the Latin alphabet contrived to resemble Chinese. A reader of English who encounters the pieces moves from the initial assumption of being 'shut out' by the work to an attitude of being drawn into a game of deciphering, as if decoding stylized anagrams. So Mao's dogmatic treatises on Communist doctrine gradually become readable, and inevitably seem both more sinister and more absurd than one might have initially thought. In an inversion of apparent linguistic and cultural priority, a reader of Chinese finds the scrolls illegible and is ultimately relieved of the necessity to engage with the history and meanings to which the pieces refer.

The accompanying *Square World Calligraphy Classroom* (1994-96) allows viewers a further opportunity to access the meaning—and meaninglessness—of the calligraphy project. This installation, outfitted with purpose-built

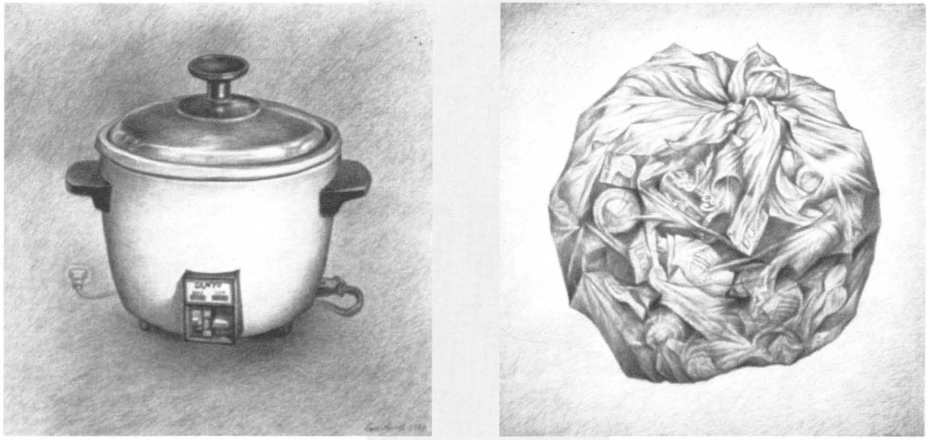

Figure 8 Gu Xiong. 1995. Here, There, Everywhere (detail), charcoal on canvas; by permission of the artist

desks and accompanied by instruction manuals, red-line tracing books and an instructional video, beckons viewers to insert themselves into the activity of calligraphy production. The work's participatory quality furthers the possibility for one to understand the calligraphy project as historical in its inferences, and also as something very much of the 'present' in its dynamism and malleability. Therefore, by entering into this project of Xu Bing, one comes to think about aspects of language and translation through avenues that are conceptually open and expansive (*figure 5*).

Gu Xiong – Barricade of Bicycles and Here, There and Everywhere

A particularly significant installation work by Gu Xiong which is important to this discussion is the *Barricade of Bicycles*, made by the artist immediately following his emigration to Canada in 1989 after the Tiananmen Square incident. Many will recall the horrifying images of that historical event in China, in which protesting students, with a barricade of their own bicycles, were crushed by military tanks in a show of brutal force. As a homage and creative response to the occurrence, in 1990 Gu Xiong constructed a gallery installation that replicated the massive original barricade,[7] utilizing hundreds of bicycles donated by members of the public. Following from that Gu Xiong created several important 'crushed bicycles' paintings using a stark black and white graphic approach. The works are at once abstractly beautiful in their strong reminiscence of traditional woodcuts, while still exhibiting intense evocations of violence. As such, they function as aesthetically engaging yet highly charged critiques. A later painted work, *Crushed Bicycles* (1995) (*figure 6*) has a quiet insistence whereby the legibility of bicycle forms comes slowly but forcefully into view.

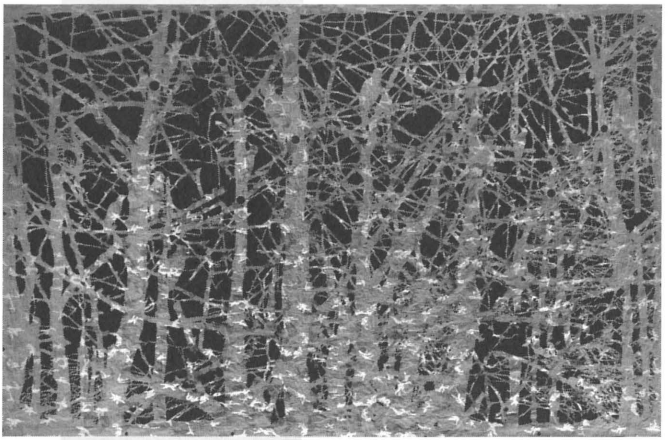

Figure 9 Ed Pien. 2007. Noise in the Forest, cut tarpaulin; by permission of the artist

A similar sensibility characterizes *Crushed Coca-Cola Cans* (1994) (*figure 7*). In these other works, the artist further utilizes his critical means to visually record the detritus of Western consumer society in a series of paintings that are pictorially compelling and also function as forceful yet playful commentaries. Indeed, Gu Xiong's biography enters into the works in that they are intended to refer to his experience of feeling 'crushed' when, as a new immigrant, he took a job as a busboy in the cafeteria at the University of British Columbia.

A sprawling installation of sixteen drawings by Gu Xiong, taken from an even larger project from 1995 entitled *Here, There, Everywhere* is accompanied by texts written by the artist that provide narrative points of entry so that viewers may connect with some highly compelling moments from his early immigrant experience. The titles of the drawings include *Rice Cooker, A Red-haired Girl* and *A Friend Forever*, (*see examples figure 8*) and hint at the sorts of incidents and the particularities that typify an introductory experience in a new and unfamiliar culture. The drawings are rendered carefully in charcoal on canvas using a Socialist Realist-influenced style; that sensibility, which is normally associated with didacticism and indoctrination, is here used surprisingly to communicate about the confusing yet often ephemeral aspects of an individual immigrant's story. It is notable that despite the effect of the extended text accompaniments, the images take on a character that invests them with the qualities of signs or symbols. So, with this body of images and through their accompanying narratives, the artist has invented a set of richly layered 'texts' that provide insights into a significant period of his life, done in a manner that is instantaneous but also unfolds slowly and in a narratively compelling manner.

Ed Pien – The Papercuts

Chinese paper-cuts can be dated to the northern and southern Dynasties (A.D. 385-581); their history is almost as long as the history of paper, also an invention of the Chinese in the Han Dynasty. Similar to needlepoint in the Victorian Era, the art of paper-cuts was the purview of women. The subject matter varied from domestic scenes to flowers, decorative patterning and religious symbolism. As diverse as the subject matter, so too was the use of these delicate sheets of paper; they were used to decorate women's hair, they were hung in windows, given as gifts, used as patterns for shoe embroidery or buried with the dead.[8]

Ed Pien's large paper cuts are, according to the artist's own admission, intended to retreat from associations with domestic craft, and they succeed at this at least partly on the basis of their intentional use of scale. Beginning in about 2005, the artist made what might appear to be an intuitively understandable shift in his work; moving from the production of ink drawings to the extravagantly scaled and detailed cut paper pieces. Based on fantastical forms within the natural world and making reference to floral terrain gone wild, the paper cuts extend the practice of the artist beyond that of taking an approach that is insistently additive, to one that is almost perversely subtractive. In doing so, the works appear to further his commitment to graphical language as capable of both subtlety and spectacle, and here do so in a manner whereby the pictorial form and the material object are fully integrated. The 'figure' has become the object; the ground for the picture is the gallery wall—or, by implication, the world. Through this shift of means that does not essentially diverge from earlier intentions, the artist has realized an approach that is deeply connected to an everyday Chinese craft practice while being fully rooted in the contemporary art of the present. The papercuts are as timely and complex as any number of important contemporary works that employ graphical sensibilities (think of Julie Mehrtu's astounding painting/drawing works), but are also indebted to an historical Chinese approach. So their engagement with the potential 'now' and 'then' of art is complete.

The recent exhibition, *Ed Pien: Tangled Garden*, at Canada House in London, UK, was a significant display of a number of Pien's most ambitious paper-cuts. Produced on ink-stained Shoji paper or on store-bought tarpaulin material, the works envelop the viewer—as have several of Pien's drawing installations including *In the Realm of Others*—yet they manage to retain a lightness and a quality of simplified craftsmanship that harkens to their everyday, historical antecedents. *Noise in the Forest* (*2007*) (*figure 9*), presents a legible image of birds set among a tangle of elongated branches cut into a tarpaulin, yet a quality of subtle menace prevails—and is reinforced

by the presence of occasional red or blue dots that the artist has painted at random amidst the birds and branches. The dots appear as canny references to preoccupations with flatness with which Modernist paintings from the West are so often associated. But they also act to remind us of targets or the crosshairs one might see through the site on a rifle. Further, they play against the artificial yet seemingly organic design of the camouflage pattern on the tarp in a way that insists on a remarkable integration of figure and ground, subject and object—and the *found* and the *fabricated*. Pien displays other equally compelling works in cut-paper, many of them stretching over more than ten feet horizontally. In each, historical craft and the methodologies of a contemporary-minded conceptually driven artist intersects to produce a compelling object.

Conclusion

The works of the artists presented here invite us to engage in acts of reading visual and textual signs and as such demand we consider the complex and varied nature of what it is to *mean* in culture—and also to speculate concerning the materials of our meaning-making enterprises. Through the works of the three artists, Xu Bing, Gu Xiong and Ed Pien, we come to understand something both more intense and more subtle about the mechanisms that foster our connections and disconnections within culture, especially amidst increasing globalization. Such understanding is invaluable given that our encounters with one another are, though sometimes brief, compelling and continuous.

ENDNOTES

1
Erickson, Britta. 2001. *Words without Meaning, Meaning without Words: The Art of Xu Bing*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, p. 16.

2
Kellman, Tila. 2006. *Ed Pien: In a Realm of Others*. : Lethbridge, AL: The Southern Alberta Art Gallery, p.43.

3
Kellman, *Ed Pien*, p. 44.

4
Erickson, Britta. 2005. *On the Edge: Contemporary Chinese Artists Encounter the West*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, p. 19.

5
See Erickson, 2001, *Words without Meaning* and John O'Brian, 1999 in *Gu Xiong: The River*. Victoria, BC: The Art Gallery of Greater Victoria.

6
Xu Bing's work has been discussed extensively, in relation to writings on language and culture by Derrida and Foucault. In 2000, the Albany Public Library organized *Book-Ends: Imag'in'ing the Book – the Work of Xu Bing*. A public discussion between Derrida and Xu Bing was held in conjunction with the exhibition.

7
One of the works, *Enclosure III*, was produced at Open Studio Gallery, Victoria, B.C., using approximately 300 donated bicycles.

8
Jansma, Linda. 2006. *Ed Pien: In a Realm of Others*. Lethbridge, AL: The Southern Alberta Art Gallery, p. 36.

AFTER THE DEATH OF FILM: WRITING THE NATURAL WORLD IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Abstract

This essay argues that the North American cinematic avant-garde's interest in celluloid film's materiality goes to the heart of our culture's current anxiety about the digital ability to seamlessly transcode, endlessly reproduce and recklessly disseminate images of all stripes. It traces the ways in which celluloid film's capacity for registering the marks made by the artist's hand, natural elements and accidents function as writing in the work of filmmakers Greta Snider, David Gatten, Lynn Kirby among others.

At first glance, the current cinematic avant-garde's interest in film's specificity might appear to be no more than a last reach for artistic legitimacy in the postmodern digital age. Perhaps nostalgia for a simplistic modernism is to be expected. However, we might be surprised by the cinematic avant-garde's present investment in celluloid film: its indexical, documentary guarantee. This means that what often looks like a return to formalist abstraction actually co-exists with questions about what those light flecks and scratches reveal: the filmstrip's origin, the conditions of its exposure and its travels through the world. Such material mark-making functions as a kind of writing, in which abstract images come to stand for the hands, sun, rivers, ground and weather that made those marks. The current cinematic avant-garde's interest in celluloid's materiality goes to the heart of our culture's current anxiety about the digital ability to seamlessly transcode, endlessly reproduce and recklessly disseminate images of all stripes. Under present conditions, celluloid film's indexical image, unlike digital information, can be touched, cut, held up to the light and observed by the naked eye. Film's comparatively material status also harkens back to earlier assurances, in which a painter's touch produces an impression of artistic presence or a photographer gives witness to an image's capture.

In today's digital world, indexical celluloid film speaks differently from the address offered by paper, video, television and digital documents. The term 'medium' now gestures toward the expanded discursive and political field in which any material document appears. This means that however initially abstract and illegible the image we see may appear, celluloid film's flecks, blurs and scratches can be made to invoke, not only a general sense of how time and history wear upon the image, but the specific material conditions and emotions evoked by the particular context of its production, travels through the world and association with the artist. These larger meanings of the abstract image emerge through extra-textual information, which is offered in the form of program notes, artist's statements, curatorial choices, historical notes, interviews, anecdotes and gossip. Perhaps, such notes often suggest, the shapeless colors and signs of wear we see can tell stories and call up histories. Such information makes otherwise illegible marks function as a form of evidence. At the turn of the 21st century, avant-garde cinema's turn to the expanded discursive field that film inhabits points to the impossibility of representing critical historical, political and cultural events through the iconic image alone.

This essay brings together two contemporary discussions about the status of celluloid in the digital age, which in recent years have increasingly overlapped. In the first, filmmakers, critics and curators wondered if the digital threatened film with obsolescence, even 'death.' These concerns are encapsulated most clearly in a 2001 *October* roundtable, in which participants worried about the digital's effect on the future of celluloid film in an already shaky postmodern avant-garde. In the same breath, however, they noted the resurgence of avant-garde films tackling the question of film's medium specificity. They also noted the proliferation of avant-garde film festivals in cities like New York, Toronto, Berlin, London, San Francisco, Chicago, Austin and elsewhere. Likewise, experimental film programming has risen visibly in major museums like the Whitney, MoMA, the Tate Modern, Mass MoCA and the Walker. Observing that film's material qualities (its light, its projection, its screen, its grain, its celluloid and its flicker) were once again central to the cinematic avant-garde, the roundtable expressed concern that this interest in filmic specificity felt more old-garde than cutting edge. Rather than concentrate on the status of a cinematic avant-garde revival fuelled by the repetition of formalist, medium-specific gestures, we should ask what historical and cultural shifts such a return reveals—namely whether current interest in film's specificity now raises questions usually associated with documentary film. How does an image come to be? And do the specific character-

istics of the medium impact the image's guarantee?

This brings us to the second conversation, in which documentary theorists, critics and filmmakers have worried about the digital's effect on documentary's long-standing claim to tell the truth through images. Some wonder if the malleable digital image undermines the veracity of photography's indexical claim. Others insist that such a guarantee never existed. Recently, documentary's footing has also been shaken by an influx of animation, abstraction and speculation, in what has been called "new experimental non-fiction." Such work has shown in both documentary venues and avant-garde exhibition sites like Pacific Film Archive, Images Festival and Ann Arbor Film Festival. The art world has also taken note of this turn to experimental documentary, with recent shows at Mass MoCA, the Australian Center for the Moving Image, ZKM and, most famously, Documenta 11. According to *Art in America*, "with over 600 hours of video" Documenta 11 sought "to define the role of art in a post-colonial, globally-connected world." Critic Eleanor Hartley makes the role of moving image work explicit: to define not only the role of art, but also the shifting role of a subject citizen in an uncertain world. If documentary brings a human stake to the art world, disruptive, postmodern experimental techniques raise questions about the image's guarantee. With so much at issue, how can we trust what we see? Is the image a reliable witness?

The two discussions described above come together in their considerations of film's specificity in a supposedly post-medium, digital age. They mark a struggle over the relevance of celluloid film that intertwines with a larger ongoing cultural conversation, which has spanned the arts and humanities, the academy and the art world. This conversation continues to ask what we make of the modernist avant-garde in the wake of postmodernity. It asks what we do with artistic vision after the death of the author. It questions the place of "truth" after the fall of grand narratives. And, it questions the importance of bodies in an age of subjects, texts and computer code. Conversations about celluloid film's more material status in the age of the digital point to an on-going theoretical instability in contemporary discourse: what is the status of presence in relation to writing? Of speech in relation to the written mark? In response, I argue that we can learn something germane to the larger conversation about how we know the world by focusing on the site where the cinematic avant-garde rubs up against documentary: namely where film confronts the digital.

Current questions about the relation of celluloid film to digital media has roots in the history of the way we understand a photographic process

that repeatedly grounds itself in our experience of the natural world and the representation of that world. In *Burning with Desire*, Geoffrey Batchen writes that at the birth of photography in the 1830s, the first photographers actively questioned the way their images came to be: did nature imprint herself on the filmic plate or did the film capture nature? At the time, such a question pointed to larger epistemological struggles over the relationship of nature to technology, and in turn, to the way knowledge was constructed. Today, the question of how the image is produced is still with us, pointing toward ambivalences about how media negotiate nature and technology, presence and representation and security and contingency. In the context of the proliferation of digital media, North American avant-garde filmmakers actively interrogate the specific nature of film through their representations of the natural world.

Visual amusements like the stereoscope, as Jonathan Crary has suggested, accustomed the observer of the 19th century to a new kind of vision, one in which subjects negotiated a swiftly changing and vertiginous technological landscape. Writing on pre-photographic and proto-cinematic image making emphasizes the importance of the natural 'view,' the common content of the panorama was a natural vista; viewers of early actualities commonly commented on the movement of waves and leaves; the stereoscope invited views onto the natural world, far-off lands and their peoples and pornographic scenes. The natural world was never then (nor is it now) simply one of many kinds of content available. Rather, images of trees, waves and flowers have long served as a sign of presence in counterpoint to the quickly changing technologies through which we view them.[1]

On the one hand, these artists' cinematic imaging of the natural world's flowers, trees, streams and skies in conjunction with do-it-yourself filmmaking techniques seems to yearn for an earlier, simpler time. On the other hand, the very same work investigates the technological conditions under which we experience the world today. Is film a medium closer to the natural world than the digital? And if so, does celluloid film allow nature to "speak" more directly? Nature has long operated as a significant theme within the history of North American avant-garde filmmaking, as in the work of Marie Menkin, Stan Brakhage and Peter Hutton, to mention just a few.[2] For the cinematic avant-garde, the digital malleability, mobility, and capacity to mimic film's iconic legibility, has turned film into a distinctly physical medium whose celluloid's capacity to record direct contact with both filmmaker and the natural world of streams, sand, wind and earth has rendered its representations more secure. In the context of the digital's extreme mobility and seamless

malleability, the question of how an image comes to be centers on the always insecure relation between representation and referent: what is the story of the image's capture and how do we read it?[3]

The Expansion of Photographic Indexicality: Away from Iconic Resemblance

According to Charles Sanders Pierce, the indexical nature of the medium of film refers to its ability to point to whatever is put in front of the camera. It implies a guarantee of presence; the object or person captured was indeed "there then," in Roland Barthes' words. Indexicality suggests a direct and tangible link between a worldly referent and the image caught on film through the literal touch of light that bounces off the object and hits the receptive medium. This is the indexical link to the world that is often nostalgically described as lost by the digital. When a digital apparatus captures an image, light is mediated when its levels and intensities are translated into ones and zeros to be recorded for later recall by the digital apparatus. That link may also be lost when an existing photographic image is read by a computer and translated into binary code. For the current cinematic avant-garde, it is less film's ability to produce recognizable iconic images of the natural world indexically that is emphasized, than its ability to physically record the influence of the material world on its celluloid body.

Still, one might ask why film's indexicality would be of any concern to the contemporary filmic avant-garde, a genre in which there is no legal stake in what is imaged, no narrative stake, often no clear emotional stake (as there is in the home movie or family photo's connection to a specific time, place or individual), and in which images are often so abstract as to be unreadable. Within the world of avant-garde film, the abstract image has often been strongly connected to the inner life of the filmmaker. Film's photographic index has been tied more to the guarantee of artistic presence than to that of the object or event depicted. Thus, in conjunction with the loss of the indexical guarantee, the digital can be said to displace, or render insecure, the artist's eye, and by extension the idea of the singularity of artistic vision. If the photographic apparatus can capture an image as an index of presence, then logically it implies the presence of the image's author. The phrase, 'I took that picture,' both centers authorial presence and elides the work done by the machine. The mere existence of easily manipulatable digital technology threatens not only the stability of the photographic index, but the centrality of the guiding, artistic eye.

Rather than emphasize what is seen from behind the camera's viewfinder, an image that resembles the world, contemporary discourse on avant-garde film often emphasizes what

the filmmaker has done to the film's celluloid base: not just its emulsion, but its ability to take color, be glued, cut, scraped, xeroxed and taped. Filmmakers chemically develop raw film stock by hand rather than send it to a lab to be processed. They paint and scratch intricate forms on individual frames rather than use a camera to capture an image. They incorporate found footage and rescued objects from thrift stores and garbage cans rather than download them from computer databases. Many personally carry reels of film to projector performances and put them through a series of intricate ministrations rather than rely on the 'automaticity' of projection. Through reference to processes such as these, filmmakers describe celluloid film's technological specificity as open to the physical manipulation of its mechanisms. Here the definition of the indexical mark is extended to mean other kinds of unique presence, individual vision and personal touch than that captured by light's initial imprint on emulsion. In the digital age, attention to film's material specificity suggests a secure relationship between the hand of the artist and the image. Such marks function like a signature, as symbols of authentication.

In this context, the importance of iconic resemblance to an object or view of the world, falls away. In "Toward a Home-Made Cinema," Robert Schaller suggests that contemporary avant-garde filmmaking should strive to move away from not only the use of film developing services, but other corporately produced materials like Kodak film and professionally-ground lenses. "In an art so manifestly questioning and irreverent" as avant-garde filmmaking, Schaller writes, "we must not be content to acquire the very material foundation of our work from a company who proclaimed from its outset in 1889, 'You push the button, we do the rest?'" This slogan, he continues, sounds "like a capitulation to a commercial machine that casts a shadow over the integrity of all that passes through it."[4] Schaller suggests that filmmakers use home-made emulsion and eschew materials that promise a reliable surface for capturing iconic, representational images.

Most of the films considered in this essay eliminate iconic photographic resemblance in favor of abstraction in order to emphasize film's more direct capacity for registering marks made by both the artist and the world he or she inhabits. While not true of every work, films such as these imply a distrust of realist resemblance. They suggest that what makes the medium of film specific is not its capacity to make a likeness, to produce movement or to be edited; after all, video and digital technology can make moving images just as well and edit them more seamlessly. What makes film a specific medium at the turn of the 21st century is its material physical nature: its transparent or opaque celluloid, its

capacity for chemical development, its relationship to the projector and its ability to be cut, often within the frame. What makes film's movement specific is that it is composed of static images presented one at a time at twenty-four frames per second rather than the constant flow of electronic energy in video and the digital media. Today, film's celluloid base signifies as a body that can be touched by the hand and whose image can be observed when held up to the light. As such, an understanding of film's tactility and ability to communicate evidence of artistic intervention operates as a supplement to knowledge accessed by vision. Evidence of the filmmaker's touch is thus not only a mark of authorship but functions as a guarantee of the authenticity of the image viewed.[5] In conjunction with marks produced by the natural world, such marks seek to communicate physical contiguity and presence between the three: world, artist, medium.

Nostalgia for a World Less Regulated:

Many avant-garde filmmakers working today explicitly connect their use of celluloid film and chemical hand-processing techniques with utopian desires for a less-regulated world. Within filmic avant-garde discourse in the past ten years, the medium of film has been associated increasingly with the past as a site of the personal, artisanal, hands-on, material, resistant, individual, local, small-scale and the collective. In resisting the threat of the digital, many filmmakers associate celluloid film with resistance to a life controlled by the corporate, Hollywood, automatic, industrial, impersonal nature of mainstream media conglomerates and the ideologies they convey. What is striking in much contemporary avant-garde film discourse is the recurrence of themes associated with presence, singularity and naturalness figured in terms of the medium of film's physical reaction to human touch (painting, scratching, contact with bodily fluids), the movement of time (oxidization, decay, the unrecoverable loss of the image and of whole films) and the natural elements (weather, earth and water). The contingencies associated with film's material properties provide 'evidence' for the existence of a less-regulated past and the possibility of a life beyond the confines of contemporary media culture. Within the cinematic avant-garde, the artisanal has come to function as a site of utopian freedom from the automatic, ahistorical, depersonalized, dematerialized processes currently associated with digital technology.

This nostalgia for an imagined closer relationship to the world recalls Walter Benjamin's much-cited essay on the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. The qualities currently assigned to digital technology (its loss of secure indexical connection to the objects

it images, its ephemerality, ubiquity, automaticity and capacity for mixture) have imbued the medium of film with qualities associated with unique physical presence, immediacy, singularity and stability — qualities associated with what Benjamin called the "auratic." That we are considering the reinscription of the aura in avant-garde filmmaking practice may seem odd given that Benjamin traced the aura's demise to the impact of film and photography in the famous Artwork Essay of 1935, and even stranger given that Benjamin used the cinema in the age of mechanical reproduction as the exemplar of a medium which had none of the auratic qualities of the unique work-of-art.[6] For Benjamin, film was inherently reproducible as opposed to singular, eminently circulatable as opposed to rooted in a specific place, viewed en masse as opposed to contemplated by a lone viewer, and formally dynamic as opposed to offering a mute, immobile presence. Finally, for Benjamin, film constituted a common entertainment, far afield in pedigree and spectator practices from the "work-of-art."[7]

That people are asking what happens to the aura in the age of the digital should not surprise us, for as Benjamin says, the aura has a way of returning even as it is proclaimed lost, past, dead.[8] Like the photograph in Benjamin's day, the contemporary avant-garde film's aura is propped up on its appeal to authorship.[9]

Although Benjamin might see this as a 'regressive' attempt to hang on to the traditional auratic qualities of the work-of-art, an artist's inclination to reassert avant-garde film's 'cult value' is in fact a complex response to the effects of the digital on film.

These imagined qualities associated with celluloid film's material specificity may seem to reflect a regressive response to rapidly changing technologies of the image—revealing a desire to keep the collapsing binary between film and digital media intact. However, many of the films produced in this artisanal mode engage in thoughtful investigation of the limits of authorship, film's status as art, how images are characterized and the possibility for auratic pleasure. Likewise, most filmmakers are aware that there is no, and possibly never has been, unmediated relationship to the natural world through film.

In *Change Mummified*, Philip Rosen suggests that the metaphor of 'colonization' characterizes the digital's capacity for incorporation in terms of the way it "spreads, infiltrates, overwhelms, and conquers all other media."[10] However, like the colonizing force, the digital depends on the sustained difference of the products of earlier 'regimes' of media in the form of the material photograph, videotape and filmstrip. Indeed, as opposed to being translated and absorbed completely into the digital, it is clear that some films retain their

difference and medium specificity despite, or perhaps because of, film's contemporary figuration as obsolete. The metaphor of imperialism and the resistance of difference in the digital's particular mixture of 'old and new' can be seen in the fervor that animates those filmmakers working in film for its potential as an aesthetic and political practice that resists the digital's ubiquity and uncritical use.

A number of individuals and groups have worked to spread the practice among artists new to film and established avant-garde filmmakers alike. In a manifesto whose tone recalls that of Jonas Mekas for the New American Cinema, the Independent Imaging Retreat declares: "A New Generation of filmmakers have emerged, willing to forego the predictability and standardization of industrial processes in favor of direct control of their materials, motivated by a combination of necessity and curiosity."[11] Also known as the Film Farm, the Independent Imaging Retreat (now in its eleventh year) articulates the belief that knowledge of filmmaking practices will allow artists to take control of the basic means of film production. That knowledge offers freedom from the restriction and high prices of professional film developing labs.

Founded by filmmakers Philip Hoffman and the late Marian McMahon "to encourage a direct, hands-on approach to filmmaking that is far removed from the costly, hierarchical and inaccessible industrial model," this annual week-long summer retreat in rural Mount Forest, Ontario describes itself as part of a little-recognized international movement of filmmakers. As such, those associated with the retreat see themselves as playing a role in the North American development and dissemination of 'the basic skills and knowledge' of filmmaking process. Similar work can be seen in the Parisian "labos," Richard Reeves and the Ottawa-based Quickdraw Animation Society and Devon Damonte's Crackpot-Crafters, to name just a few. DaMonte (2003) writes, "Suddenly cells of strange obsessive anarchist film scratchers and painters are omnipresent. It's a ding-dang DIY (do-it-yourself) thumpin' revolution in your town and across the globe."

If the cinematic avant-garde once sought to develop a new language of film through montage, it now seeks film's essential qualities and grounds its resistance at the site of film's medium specificity.[12] That resistance is implicated in celluloid's materiality, suggesting that this kind of filmmaking is something anyone can do, takes no special equipment (not even necessarily a camera) and requires no great capacity for artistic vision. It is, in the words of the Independent Imaging Retreat, a 'process-oriented practice.' Rather than emphasize artistic results or the revolutionary potential of spectatorship, present discourse

Figure 1 **Philip Hoffman 2001**, 'What these ashes wanted'

within the filmic avant-garde focuses on the means of production, the artist as worker and the film itself as a site of transformation. Many contemporary filmmakers direct their political practice toward the making of film (contact between artist and celluloid). An avant-garde filmmakers' shift away from a politics based on spectatorship suggests a focusing inward to the very act of filmmaking and away from the resulting image. The projected image rarely stands alone. It must be read as part of a larger conversation already begun in the production process.

Control, Contingency and the Natural World

Of the range of physical processes applied to film, chemical hand-processing acts as allegory for current societal ambivalence about the filmmaker's relation to the image—and by extension, ambivalence about the effect individuals can have on our world. This can be seen in artists' discourse on chemical hand-processing techniques in the production of abstract images. At times it is nostalgic for a secure relation between referent and image; at other times it actively undoes security.

The chemical hand-processing of film sets up a series of planned and felicitous accidents in the chemical developing process where filmmakers either 'do-it-themselves' or 'do-it-wrong' in order to achieve effects impossible to produce through the supposed reliability of commercial laboratory development process. By changing the temperature or ratios of developing fluid, adding unexpected liquids like Coca-Cola, or fiddling with developing times, a filmmaker can either end up with nothing—a blank reel—or she may uncover a combination of beautiful, solarized, mottled ghosts and hard shapes that can never be produced in exactly that way again. Here the unique and un-repeatable combines with the intricate practice of editing bits of film together by hand that today seems to imbue auratic qualities to many chemically hand-processed films. Presence and singularity are supposedly confirmed through the contingencies associated with the development process.

Film's description as different from the digital because of its capacity to capture the unpredictable contingencies of chemical hand processing thus lends to its perception as beautiful. Much of this work incorporates imperfections like scratches, dust and odd coloration to produce a beauty that relies on contingency rather than studied perfection. Such activities appear to re-inscribe auratic qualities by re-centering authorship and calling attention to the indexical marks of the filmmaker's presence at the site of the inscription or development. However, even so, both 'authorship' and 'indexicality' are diffused and destabilized. Hand processing film unsettles the camera's actions of capture, the emulsion-covered celluloid's development process and the film's projection as automatic. Hand processing always implies that the marks made by these processes arise out of complex interactions between human being, chemistry and machine.

Filmmakers sometime describe hand-processed films as collaborations between the filmmaker and the specific properties of the celluloid and its emulsion in reaction to changes in chemistry and light. For example, in order to produce *Cinder,* San Francisco-based filmmaker Luis Recoder recalls stuffing a three-minute reel of unexposed black-and-white sound film into a developing canister to see what would come of the accidental points at which the film touched and scratched itself. What it produced is three minutes of unedited jagged, rich blackness and bright light, the patterns of which marked the soundtrack and produced a film that looks and sounds like an homage to Peter Kubelka's *Arnulf Rainer.*[13] However, even in its movement between light and dark, *Cinder* is not a flicker film; it does not explore the relationship between light and dark based on a mathematical system of editing,

as does Kubelka's 1960 film. Rather, *Cinder* is more aptly described as the un-manipulated record of the contingencies of the film's interaction with filmmaker, chemistry and 'itself.' Here there is a combination of the idea of film presenting its essence and the intervention of the filmmaker as bringing it forth through the mystery of development. That Recoder projects the original reversal print (rather than a copy made from an internegative) further emphasizes the film's capacity to index a history of contingency, as the scratches that accumulate through multiple passes through a projector add to the film's status as one-of-a-kind.

Likewise, filmmaker Jenny Perlin emphasizes the current importance ascribed to the celluloid image's ability to record contingency. "The final result of hand processing," she writes, often comes "from my own carelessness—the beautiful colors appeared because of my hasty processing. The chemicals continued to do their work long after I called it a day."[14] The quality of contingency assigned to indexes of the filmmaker's presence are very like those associated with the photographic index. However, rather than capturing whatever accidents occur at the moment of the camera's flash, celluloid film captures the duration of chemical development stopped at a point ultimately determined by the filmmaker, regardless of lapses in attention. Perlin asserts that "hand processing allows me to get down and dirty with the celluloid, shoving ribbons of the stuff into a bucket of chemicals, treating the film as what it is—a bunch of plastic. The miracle then comes when the chemistry reveals what the light recorded on the film's surface."[15] Rather than the single moment of exposure associated with the click of the camera's button, the extended period of time the film spends interacting with chemical developers marks duration, or slow time, as a specific quality of film. In Perlin's description, the film's industrial identity as a "bunch of plastic" to be treated roughly operates in tension with the 'miracle' of chemistry and light that produce layers of 'beautiful colors.' Here, the filmmaker's 'carelessness,' her openness to the possibility and potential of the contingent, characterizes the process of many current avant-garde filmmakers. Celluloid became this artist's medium of choice because of its physicality and ability to capture the contingencies of temporal duration.

Hand processing has come to be seen as a technique that reveals film's specificity as a medium that is both more 'precise' and 'spontaneous' than the digital.[16] Like Perlin, filmmaker and hand-processor Ken Paul Rosenthal expresses reverence for the possibilities and limitations associated with making film by hand—and a nostalgia for a past world. "I'm not a Luddite," Rosenthal insists to one interviewer. "But I am a purist. I may not always like the

limitations of my 'low-to-no-tech' methods, but I certainly appreciate them because the obstacles always create new ways of seeing." Rosenthal also points to the intimacy of the relationship to celluloid engendered by hand processing and editing. "Working with video circumvents a more intimate frame-by-frame relationship to the medium, as well as oneself," he writes. "The nature of one's tools invariably affects the character of one's images—images that are ultimately a reflection of you." While these images do not iconically image the filmmaker, they supposedly 'reflect' his relationship to the world. "So for me," Rosenthal continues, "the issue is not simply image quality, but quality of life."[17] Evident here is an active resistance to the contemporary corporate world of film production and development that ties chemical hand processing to an ethical and aesthetic stance. For Perlin and Rosenthal, whose comments appear on their personal websites, the digital is a channel for communication with other likeminded filmmakers. Digital media operate like a billboard or telephone—a conduit—but not a medium for making art.

If the manner in which images are produced is 'ultimately a reflection of you,' then it makes sense that many artisanal filmmakers use their own bodily fluids to develop film. The rhetoric of 'giving birth' is often employed implicitly, even explicitly, as in Louise Bourque's *Jours en fleurs* (Canada, 2003), made from iconic images of flowers on celluloid subsequently submerged in menstrual blood.[18] Likewise, Rosenthal claims to have knowledge of filmmakers who have used coffee and semen as film developers to quicken exposed film in the 'womb' of the developing tank. In the same vein, he once "stuffed film into a mason jar with cooked wild berries and set it before a southern facing window for an entire year so that it would get sun most of the day," [19] in a practice that points to the desire for the slow, organic, natural, human and handmade.[20]

Films developed in these ways can be read as attempting to make the production of film into a natural bodily process, in the tradition of writers and poets of all persuasions who have embraced the metaphor of gestation and childbirth to describe the creative process of writing. In a section of "Antidote to a Virtual World" entitled "A Womb with a View," Rosenthal writes: "Hand processing gives you a womb of your own… And nothing, I mean NOTHING, beats the first view of a newborn image damp with birth bath cradled in a frameline crib. You'll be manically giddy and passing out cigars!!" [21] Hyperbolic as Rosenthal's exclamations are, they suggest the deep sense of embodied connection described in relation to the material medium of film. That film's embodied materiality is naturalized, feminized and connected to a sense

of home is not surprising, given that film is now being figured as a more primitive, present medium of communication than the digital.

Collaboration with Nature

In a practice that invokes the contingencies associated with time and space of the natural world, some avant-garde filmmakers call upon the forces of nature to interact with and leave their marks on the material body of film. The quantitative effects of weather on the filmed iconic image often allude to film's ability to mark the passage of historical time rather than simple, natural presence. This can be seen in films such as in Jürgen Reble's *Zillertal* (Germany, 1999) in which an old movie trailer was hung in the trees of the filmmaker's garden for months as he coated it with various chemicals.[22] Likewise, Brian Frye's *Oona's Veil* (US, 2001) reveals images of Charlie Chaplin's wife that had been left sitting out on a fire escape exposed to the weather for weeks. As such, it evokes both the decades of time past since the initial exposure of her image through marks produced by the film's exposure to the elements. Mark Street's film *Guiding Fictions* (US, 2002), uses buried film footage of scenes captured on forest walks begun in his backyard, a practice that attempts to inscribe the presence of that yard. In Louise Bourque's *Self Portrait Post Mortem* (Canada, 2002), she buried footage of herself taken from her early work in the backyard of her family home.[23] Bourque describes this film as "An unearthed time capsule consisting of footage of the maker's youthful self—an 'exquisite corpse' with nature as collaborator." Here, we see a curious tension between natural presence and historical time, and between artistic intention and the unpredictability of nature, in films whose "imperfections" physically tie them to a specific place and a quantifiable duration of time in which accidents were bound to occur. The natural world, very often the ground itself, serves as a site for the gestation and development of celluloid. The image of burial and resurrection suggests that while film is fast becoming a dead medium, it can rise again in a different, elevated form.

To call on nature as a "collaborator" in making a film suggests that the elements have a will and something to say. The last part of this essay looks at three current examples of avant-garde filmmakers' use of celluloid film as a way of making nature speak: 1) the collectively produced "Quarry Movie," two versions of David Gatten's "What the Water Said"(1997, 2006) and Lynn Kirby's *Golden Gate Bridge Exposure: Poised for Parabolas.*

The collectively produced *Quarry Movie* unrolls as a series of faded, sometimes blurry, scratched shots of an outdoor scene full of red earth and green vegetation, not

necessarily recognizable as a quarry. However, in the artists' collective narrativization of the film's production, one learns that ten filmmakers shot footage that they buried and submerged in various locations in and around the quarry for a period of weeks before chemically hand-processing the reels and editing them together.[24] As producer Greta Snider writes, "This movie began as an attempt to document a place... not only its image as lensed, but its weather, its soil, and its toxins." Like other films in this mode, *Quarry Movie* operates as an attempt to mark the film's image with other elements present in the material space where the footage was taken; "the film documents this place outside of the camera."[25] Snider implies that the photographic representation of the quarry alone does not produce an adequate representation. The quarry must also be referenced through the elements that constitute it: dirt, water, toxins and weather.

On one level, *Quarry Movie* makes an environmental argument that seeks to reference the physical environmental damage the quarry has inflicted on the area, a damage that is difficult to see in the film's iconic image alone. Where this damage can be observed, notes to the film suggest, is in its scratches and faded color, which were produced by the chemical interaction of "leached metals in this exhausted quarry pit's waters" in conjunction with the chemistry used to develop the film. Snider writes that the surviving natural "organisms in the water and the soil made their marks on" the film and the water's movement resulted in the celluloid's 'physical erosion.' Of course, without this narrative, provided through the film's notes or the personal narration of the filmmakers who participated in its production, these marks on the film are unreadable in this way. It is merely faded film.

The desire to invoke the physical space of the quarry (its iconic image) through the overlay of other indexes of physical proximity operates by way of the simultaneous invocation and dispersion of authorship. They disavow the spectator's process of reading the film in favor of a desire for presence. "The idea," Snider writes, "was not to use techniques to achieve a 'look,' but rather to achieve a *presence*, and then see what it looks like" [my emphasis]. The assumption is that the time the celluloid has spent in contact with the quarry has imbued it with the presence of the place. That contact is more important than the resulting image and 'what it looks like.' Furthermore, there is an attempt to clear space for 'presence' through the film's diffusion of authorship. The use of material generated by ten filmmakers eliminates the assumption of personal artistry or artistic vision behind the camera and attempts to allow the quarry to be encountered as an unmediated 'presence.'[26] However, this presence

is achieved through a disavowal of the marks made by the natural elements of the quarry—water, chemicals, organisms—as writing.

The filmmaking practices described above suggest a connection between film and nature that invokes Benjamin's description of the auratic in its 'original' state, before mechanical reproduction. "If, while resting on a summer afternoon," Benjamin writes, "you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you." It is then that "you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch," whose shadow leaves its cool mark on your body.[27] Like Peirce's example of the index of the wind indicated by the weathervane, which may also be felt (and confirmed) on the observer's cheek, Benjamin suggests a scenario in which one encounters the 'aura' in a context where there is bodily evidence of the wind's direction, warmth and humidity on that 'summer's day' as one reads the indexical mark of its presence in the shadow or through the weather vane. If what constitutes an auratic experience shifts according to historical conditions, the experience of aura appears to be fundamentally dependent on presence and 'singularity.' However, current avant-garde work on film also points to the aura as having a temporality that locates it as an experience past, and therefore no longer accessible except through memory and reading.

Unlike the weather vane, Pierce's second example of indexicality, the trace of human presence left behind by the footprint, is a sign that suggests a gap in time between the person who left the mark and the one who sees it later. Here the reading is not necessarily accompanied by the bodily presence of the one who made the mark, who left the warm spot on the park bench, who produced the dirty dish left on the table of the café, who smudged the glass of the subway window. It is an indexical mark that needs to be *read* because of the gap in time that separates the maker of the mark and the one who interprets it. In this context, these films suggest that what constitutes auratic experience has shifted, that it is determined both by distance and the gap between the time of marking and the time of its subsequent interpretation. "What constitutes aura, actually?" Benjamin asks in "A Small History of Photography." It is "a strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close the object may be."[28] The conditions that produce the 'imaginary' status of the filmic signifier, film's ability to show what is not actually there, are now, ironically, figured in terms of the distinctively embodied nature of celluloid.

David Gatten's *What the Water Said, 1-3* (US, 1998) (*figure 2*) and *What the Water Said, 4-6* (US, 2006) allegorize the fact that the action

that produced the marks a spectator sees is located in the past.[29] In this work, Gatten submerged various stocks of film in the Atlantic Ocean off the North Carolina coast. Some reels spent time in a lobster trap to be worked by the movement of sand and water. The filmmaker spun others out into the surf, one end tied around a wrist or ankle, so they could be reeled in later like fishing line. In at least one instance, the film broke free and was given up for lost. However, over the next several days the filmmaker's father meticulously collected hundreds of celluloid bits and pieces, which gradually washed up on shore. This allowed the filmmaker to puzzle them back together into a three-minute reel.

The two films, each comprised of three mini-films, vary according to changing weather conditions, underwater obstacles encountered and the length of time spent underwater. Their look also changes according to the film stock used and the celluloid's state at the time of its submergence (developed or undeveloped, new or expired). While Gatten used similar techniques in making the two films, each captures the contingencies of the time and space of their production. In some places, these processes produce a faded, purpled, scratched filmstrip. In others, we see only a series of discontinuous vertical scratches and dense hatchings. Others, using color film, which had been processed before submergence, reveal a kaleidescope of turquoise, cyan, magenta, black and white light. In both films, titles function as captions in the form of dates, times and durations of submergence preceding each segment of film, narration that conditions our reading of the 'image.' The two films also include quotations from a number of texts about the ocean that influence spectatorial reception of those images: Edgar Allen Poe's "Descent into the Maelström," Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Fernando Pessoa's *The Sea Monster* and Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. All suggest tales of rough water, sea monsters and lost men.

In Gatten's two versions of *What the Water Said,* the indexical marks made on the body of the celluloid strip are figured both as "writing" and as materially present. The image on screen shuttles between telling us 'what it said' and allowing the water's marks on the indexical medium of film to 'speak' for themselves. While the immediacy of Benjamin's original auratic experience with nature is invoked in the idea that the sea can be said to talk to the artist through the medium of film, it is an immediacy that draws attention to the absence of its referent (the ocean is far from the darkened screening room) and thus to the image's status as writing. The water can 'speak' to the viewer because film's indexicality allows the water to write upon it and subsequently communicate the ocean's temperature, light and density (throughout

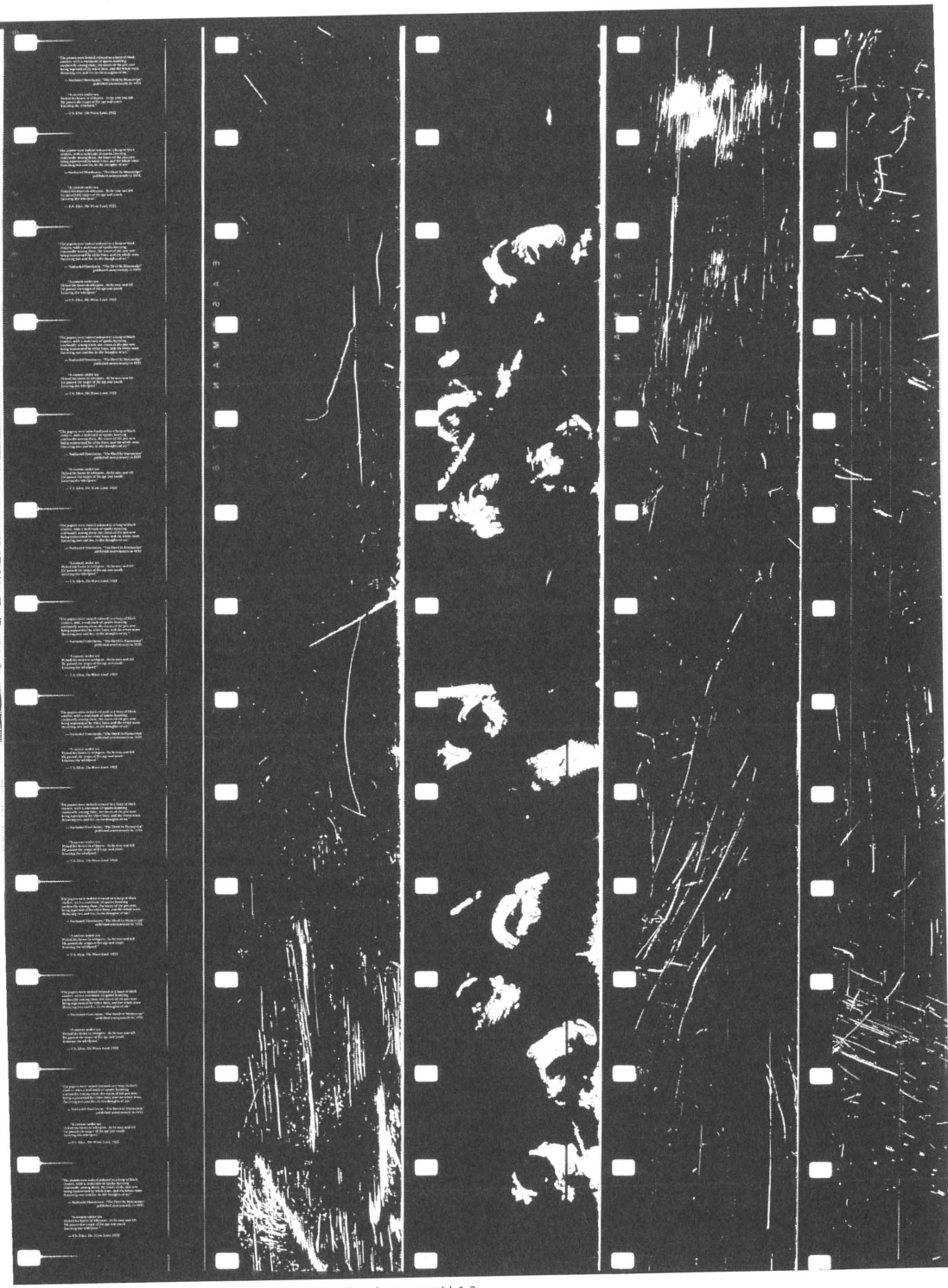


Figure 2 **David Gatten 1997-1998**, What the water said, 1-3

the duration of its submergence) to the spectator at the time of its projection. Here film's indexicality is marked as a guarantee of presence in the face of the digital's loss of the indexical bond. However, that indexicality is also marked as insufficient, for the film image 'needs' the supplement of narrative—the stories provided by both program notes and the filmmaker himself—to guarantee its meaning. Ultimately, for films like those described here, the multiple and overlapping discursive practices intended to supplement the link between image, referent and artist can actually work to destabilize that guarantee. Too much insistence raises doubt.

The idea that film can be submerged or buried emphasizes its density and materiality in comparison to the supposed body-less-ness of the digital; for a filmmaker to work on celluloid today is always a conscious choice. However, implicit in these practices is anxiety over film's status as an 'imaginary signifier,' what Christian Metz described in the 1970s as film's ability to communicate what is long dead, no longer present or simply located at a spatial remove—and the spectator's negotiation of the image's simultaneous presence and absence.[30] Today, this anxiety about the status of the filmic image accompanies an investment in the material body of the filmic medium as something capable of producing indexical evidence of the site of the image's capture, as somehow less imaginary and decidedly more concrete than that produced by the digital.

Such films simultaneously invoke the artist's authorship as a guarantee of the film's status as art and diffuse the importance of the artist. While the narrativization of the artist's collaboration with nature invokes the physical presence of the filmmaker in relation to the reel of film as he or she digs, buries, submerges and exposes it (thus affirming the filmmaker as physically necessary to the art-making process), as with chemical hand processing, the artist lacks direct control over the images produced and can only hope for the best. *What the Water Said* further diffuses authorship in the sense that it is made in collaboration *with* the water.[31] Here the filmmaker presents a document, as opposed to a personal expression, in the sense that his primary activity lies in framing and presenting the results of the natural processes that have worked on the body of the film. Thus, the artist is figured ambivalently—both as a guarantee of artistic value and meaning (as his vision provides a way to ascribe intentional meaning to otherwise unreadable marks) and as an uncertain presence, dependent on the workings of chance. Likewise, the film's image is also figured ambivalently, as needing various supplements to confirm its existence. The iconic image is not enough; neither is the index.

Conclusion

Lynne Kirby complicates this argument about the relationship of celluloid film to digital media in the poetically abstract *Golden Gate Bridge Exposure: Poised for Parabolas* (US, 2004) (*figures 3, 4 and 5*). Rather than looking to celluloid as a medium that can allow nature to write its own history, Kirby's film invokes the complicated means by which we make and interpret the meaning of images in a complex world. The first movement of *Golden Gate Bridge Exposure* rhythmically presents a range of grays, blues and reds, the idiosyncrasies of hand-processing, scratches and other artifacts, gradually translated into solid blocks of digital color, but no recognizable referential forms of the bridge, sky or water below. However, the work's dedication to the dead, whether suicidal, murdered or accidentally fallen, gives its colored traces of the touch of available light an eerie gravity. The subtitle, *Poised for Parabolas*, evokes the jumper poised at the edge of a suspension bridge for a jump, which in the natural world approximates the shape of a parabola.[32] But just as the contingencies of the real world (air, gravity, weather) change the trajectory of what is otherwise a pure mathematical shape, so the viewer must be poised to adapt to leaps of meaning.

Golden Gate Bridge Exposure is one of Kirby's *Latent Light Excavation Series, 2003 – Present,* in which the artist exposes color celluloid film to the available light of an emotionally or historically resonant physical space without the use of either camera or lens. This practice, rejecting iconic representation, thus aptly captures the impossibility of adequately representing the emotional history of such a space, even as *Golden Gate Bridge Exposure*'s title and program notes invoke a connection between the site's light, the exposed celluloid and the digital image the spectator receives. After having the film developed, Kirby transfers its image using a digital transfer machine in collaboration with a technician, in single, improvised sessions.[33] At this time, Kirby chooses the tone of the transfer's colors from her memory of the site's blues, greens and reds, rather than the color captured by her exposure. The blues chosen for *Golden Gate Bridge Exposure* recall the hues of the California sky and the darker, greyer water below. Rather than the kind of direct mark making discussed in *Quarry Movie*, the marks and colors of *Golden Gate Bridge Exposure* raise questions about the gaps between the original celluloid exposure and its final digital organization.

For Kirby, the image and colors chosen become "a jumping off point for thinking about history" and the image's relationship to the history it references. For her, the 70-year history of the bridge is evoked through blacks, whites and sepia, colors that suggest Kirby's interest

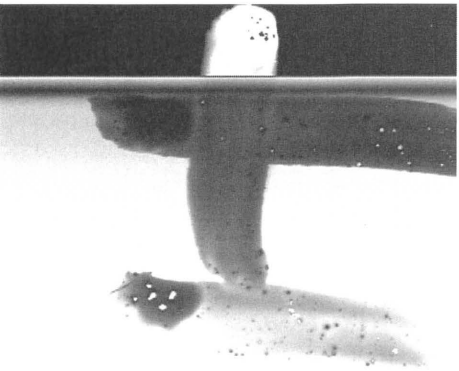


Figure 3 Lynn Marie Kirby 2004, Golden Gate Bridge Exposure: Poised for Parabolas

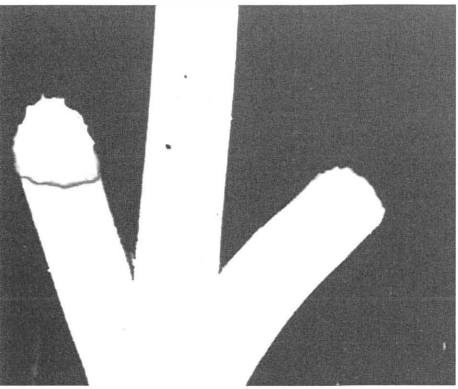


Figure 4 Lynn Marie Kirby 2004, Golden Gate Bridge Exposure: Poised for Parabolas

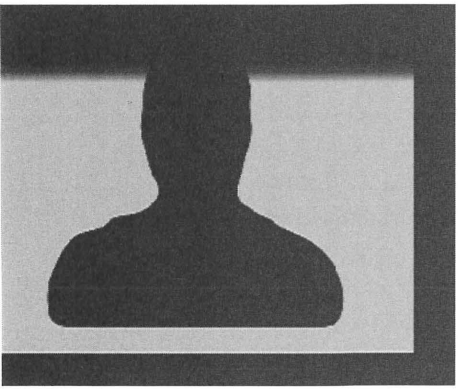


Figure 5 Lynn Marie Kirby 2004, Golden Gate Bridge Exposure: Poised for Parabolas

in early film with its black and white and toned images. The film, she says, meditates on the whole "history of the bridge." The piece also meditates on another current technological crossing—from celluloid film to digital media—as the latest in a history of crossings in which emergent and residual technologies intermingle.

If the jumpers invoked in *Golden Gate Bridge Exposures'* dedication are jumping to their deaths, the piece asks its viewer to make a number of cognitive leaps: from the abstract digital images presented in the film, to the celluloid it references, to the site of its exposure, to the light present in the space of Golden Gate park. The piece also asks the reader to make a number of metaphorical leaps: from blocks of color, scribbled arrows, blurs of movement, rhythms, the phrases that comprise the title, to a bridge's history of uneventful, every day crossings punctuated by mostly unseen plunges into the water below, and, by extension, death. Language gives us functional, everyday crossings as well as poetic leaps. And, like abstraction, language produces barriers that require us to take other paths to meaning or that may derail us completely.

For a piece that contains no images of indexical resemblance to worldly objects or places, *Golden Gate Bridge Exposure* produces its

own form of poetic writing. While transferring her exposed, chemically hand-processed film, Kirby adjusts the speed at which the film is transferred to a digital format. Running the film slowly gives the program time to reproduce individual segments of celluloid in clear detail, capturing images of dust, fiber and scratches. Slow movement isolates and presents individual 'frames' of exposed film in rhythms reminiscent of those produced by an optical printer. Running the film more quickly through the transfer machine allows only hints of visual information to be caught, producing distortions that combine celluloid's look with the digital's abstracted interpretation. Running the transfer quicker still produces a stack of horizontal lines as the image blurs by the digital reader. Kirby describes the transfer machine as allowing her to go 'backwards and forwards in time,' a movement she also asks of her viewer, who must make temporal and metaphorical leaps in order to construct *Golden Gate Bridge Exposure*'s meaning.[34]

Here the movement of the film captured by the digital program references many different kinds of time, speed and ways of knowing the world. The horizontal lines and blurs suggest the speed of individual bodies falling. Thirty seconds into the work and then again, close to the end of the film, hand-written letters and symbols inked on clear leader shuffle by. Arrows pointing up and down from the film's leader reference the materiality of the celluloid on which the light was captured. They also invoke various forms of directional movement suggested by this particular bridge; not just across, but up and down to the water. About two minutes into the film, a figure that suggests a man's head and torso appears in the middle of the frame, and reappears in different color combinations of figure and ground, upside-down and right-side up, intermittently over the course of the next two minutes. Kirby says she discovered this figure inside the digital transfer machine, one of a number of simple symbols editors often use as markers. Kirby immediately recognized her jumper as this figure who exists only inside the machine. An electronic phantom, this iconic figure reads clearly and literally to a first time viewer. It reads as a marker of human presence, offering something for the viewer to latch on to and connect to the place evoked by the work's title.

Towards the end of *Golden Gate Bridge Exposure*, the shifting palette of blues, reds, grays, blacks and whites, are pierced by a surprising orangey-yellow. While one may not be sure about what happened or what this color shift means, something has changed. For Kirby, the Deluezian 'virtual' suggests "another way of seeing" that connects to a different way of thinking. The virtual, she says, can "open up another way of being present to something."

When looking at the *Latent Light Series*, one has to 'go inside and remember history,' the history the image claims to invoke.

In an age when the digital has truncated the automatic belief in any image's connection to a worldly referent, and an account of the ways in which images have been manipulated is only rarely available, the story of a contemporary avant-garde film's making has become important not only to its value as art, but to its value as a truthful representation. The narratives and language circulating around them in the form of the interview, artist statements, program notes, websites and the proliferation of bits of gossip, have become an important extension of the film's text. This discursive apparatus harnesses the filmmaker's presence and interpretive authority to the spectator's interpretative work attempting to read moving images that are often so abstract as to be nearly illegible. That the image implies its origin is important, but the story of how a film was made (while always of interest in the culture of the cinematic avant-garde) has re-emerged as a crucial supplement in judging a film's value not only as a work of art, but as a crucial site in the cultural revaluing of film as an image-making technology.[35] Such practices work to redefine what celluloid film can communicate by examining the relationship between artistic control over the medium of film and film's openness to the contingencies of production, development, editing and projetion.

ENDNOTES

1
See Jonathan Crary, Jonathan. 1990. *Techniques of the Observer*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

2
The natural world has been explored by the cinematic avant-garde using a variety of filmic techniques including extended duration (James Benning's *Thirteen Skies*, Larry Gottheim's *Fogline*, Peter Hutton's entire oeuvre), adhesion of natural materials (Brakhage's *Mothlight* and *Garden of Earthly Delights*), photograms (Isabella Pruska-Oldenhoff's *Song of the Firefly*), single-shot editing (Rose Lowder's *Bouquets*), camera movement and editing combined with found footage (Julie Murray's *I began to wish*), etc. See also Scott MacDonald, Scott. 2001. *The Garden in the Machine*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

3
While the answers provided by recent theorists of photography (John Tagg, Alan Sekula, Victor Burgin, Geoffrey Batchen) have turned away from the medium to Foucauldian discourse analysis, the answer offered by the cinematic avant-garde returns to medium specificity.

4
From www.kenpaulrosenthal.com/writings.htm (accessed January 12, 2004).

5
See Marks, Laura U. 2002. *Touch Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press and 2000. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

6
In the Artwork essay, Benjamin suggested that photography and film as modes of mechanical reproduction were chang-

ing the nature of all art through the proliferation of copies that brought once inaccessible works of art closer to the masses. Such a proliferation worked to destroy aura, which he characterized as a beneficial process akin to "pumping water from a sinking ship" of culture. Benjamin, Walter. Work of Art. In Arendt, Hannah, editor. 1969. *Illuminations.* New York, NY: Schocken Books.

7

Notably, avant-garde film is a branch of artisanal filmmaking practice that sees itself closer to the world of art than that of the industrial world of entertainment.

8

Those who invoke Benjamin's Artwork essay include: Hans Magnus Enzenberger's Constituents of a Theory of the Media (1970), Bill Nichols' The Work of Culture in the Age of Cybernetic Systems, Kevin Robins' The Virtual Unconscious in Postphotography, Roy Ascott's Photography at the Interface, Raymond Bellour's The Double Helix, Erkki Huhtamo's From Kaleidescomaniac to Cybernerd: Notes Toward an Archaeology of Media, all in Druckrey, Timothy, editor. 1996. *Electronic Culture: Technology and Visual Representation.* New York, NY: Aperture and Manovich, Lev. 2001. *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge. MA: MIT Press.

9

Benjamin, Work of Art, p. 244.

10

Rosen, Philip. 2001. *Change Mummified.* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, p. 322.

11

Unpublished document. Significantly, many of the now well-known filmmakers who currently work using these methods have taken part in the Independent Imaging Retreat, many returning year after year for the sense of community and to trade techniques with other filmmakers.

12

This resistance to automaticity does not specifically reference the ideological confines of classical Hollywood narrative film, as it often was in the 1960s and 1970s for groups as disparate as the British Structural/Materialist filmmakers, the New American Cinema Group and iconoclasts like Stan Brakhage (who in the 1960s retreated from New York City to the relative isolation of rural Colorado). Rather, the contemporary avant-garde is more apt to figure resistance to the technology of the digital as opposed to political ideology or to Hollywood specifically.

13

Arnulf Rainer (Austria, 1960).

14

Perlin's *Lost Treasures* (US, 1999) deals with the recent deaths of three women in the filmmaker' life through the imaging of photographs taken from a book devoted to the memorialization of European buildings lost during the bombings of World War II. I quote Perlin at some length because of the way she ties together questions of nostalgia, loss, indexicality, chance and her own interaction with the celluloid's materiality in the act of chemical hand processing. Perlin, Jenny. "Jenny Perlin," *Animations* http://www.ps1.org/cut/animations/install/perlin.html (accessed September 22, 2005).

15

Perlin, "Jenny Perlin," *Animations.*

16

"Precise spontaneity is the only way of hitting the mark." See James Broughton in Rosenthal, Ken Paul. Antidote for a Virtual World: Hand Processing Motion Picture Film. *Ken Paul Rosenthal.* www.kenpaulrosenthal.com/writings.htm (accessed September 22, 2005).

17

The quotation continues, "There's room for video and traditional film technologies to exist side by side." See interview between Melanie Ansley and Ken Paul Rosenthal. The Organic Film. *Ken Paul Rosenthal.* www.kenpaulrosenthal.com/writings.htm (accessed September 22, 2005).

18

"A symphony of nature told in a shower of golden colors that reveal a microcosm of cellular structures. Film emulsion transfigured by incubation in menstrual blood." Note by Marc Webber, 2003 London Film Festival. http://www.lff.rlff.com/films_details.php?FilmID=135 (accessed October 5, 2005).

19

The quotation continues, "I've left film to rot in a compost pile of seaweed to the point where white maggots were crawling in and out of the sprocket holes. To the dismay of my new roommates, I had a jar of film and urine on the porch for several months that made the emulsion bubble up." These writings, along with essays by filmmakers Brian Frye, Robert Schaller and Scott Stark, are available on Rosenthal's website, cited above. As such, they comprise an important assemblage of articulate theoretical writings by artists on the medium of film in the early years of the 21st century.

20

The titles of Rosenthal's essays articulate his desires and values, but also raise questions about the place he assigns the medium of film: Antidote for a Virtual World: Hand Processing Motion Picture Film, Shot of Solitude: Hand (and Heart) Processing on the Film Farm and The Organic Film.

21

Ken Paul Rosenthal, "Shot of Solitude: Hand (and Heart) Processing on the Film Farm." http://www.kenpaulrosenthal.com/writings.htm#hand (accessed September 22, 2005)

22

"An old trailer had been in the trees of a garden for months. Now and then it was coated with various chemicals. Through chemical disintegration and weathering the old plot of the film resolved to a great extent. Colors emerged from black and white. Black areas transformed into mountainous regions." Views from the Avant-Garde Program Notes, 1999. http://www.filmlinc.com/archive/nyff/avantgarde99.htm (accessed October 5, 2005).

23

"Upon examining the footage five years later she found that the material contained images of herself captured during the making of her first film. That discovery seemed handed over like a gift and prompted the making of this film, a metaphysical pas-de-deux in which decay undermines the image and in the process engenders a transmutation." See Big Balagan II 50th Show! *Balagan Experimental Film & Video Series* http://www.coolidge.org/balagan/big_fall2002.html (accessed September 22, 2005).

24

The collaborating filmmakers are: Nathan Corbin, Michael Ginsburg, Gretchen Hogue, Shin Homma, Shannon Insana, Lisa Krist, Mary Molina, Max Rubinstein, Greta Snider and Tony Stone. The producer is Greta Snider and the editor is Shannon Insana.

25

Views from the Avant-Garde. www.filmlinc.com/archive/nyff/avantgarde99.htm (accessed May 10, 2005).

26

Views from the Avant-Garde. At the same time, the interaction of the bodies of those ten filmmakers with the film in the space of the quarry serves to anchor the image.

27

Benjamin, The Work of Art, pp. 222-3.

28

Benjamin, A Small History of Photography, p. 250.

29

For an excellent formal breakdown of Gatten's *What the Water Said*, see MacDonald, *The Garden in the Machine*.

30

Metz, Christian. 1975. *The Imaginary Signifier*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

31

Or, as in the case of *Quarry Movie*, with both the quarry *and* ten other filmmakers. Or, as with *Oona's Veil,* with both the natural element of wind and rain *and* the filmmaker who shot the original black and white footage of Charlie Chaplin's wife.

32

The cables of a suspension bridge also approximate the shape of parabolas. "Parabola," Wikipedia http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parabola (accessed August 31, 2007).

33

For an overview of Kirby's work, see Michael Sicinski, Michael. 2006. Incremental: The Paragon Example of Lynn Marie Kirby. *Cinema Scope*, Spring issue 26, pp. 38-42.

34

Phone conversation with the artist, Tuesday August 28, 2007. All subsequent quotations are from this conversation.

35

What is thus desired is the guarantee of the presence of the work of art "in time and space, its unique existence at the place it happens to be" through its history. Benjamin, Work of Art, p. 220.

ARTIST'S PROJECTS

VISIBLE LANGUAGE 42.1
VARIOUS, 70-108

RHODE ISLAND SCHOOL OF DESIGN
PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND 02903

Abstract

This section is comprised of a grouping of writings, art works, or a combination of both, in a series of artist project pages. The eight artists included here present a broad range of interests and approaches, yet can be seen as related in their address to ideas concerning the challenge to link language and materiality in the contemporary moment. Seen here is a collection of artist's works that take up a concern for the physical act of marking, by way of the machine or hand, whether for writing or recording. Other aspects of the works display an interest in the pertinent relationships between present and past, and between pre-existing cultural forms or conventions concerning cultural expression and language—and in their subsequent "reframing" as contemporary art, as critique and as dialogue.

"IMAGE" AND "TEXT"

JEANNIE THIB

The 'image' on the first two pages is a Victorian allover design. The 'text' on the following pages is comprised of elements—decorative flourishes and stylized natural forms—extracted from that design and arranged on a grid. The glyphic quality of the isolated fragments in the 'text' ties them to language and to their rootedness as a sign. This work, presented here as a page spread, is based on *Divide* (2001-2005), an installation of 125 pinned black felt elements installed most recently on a 12' x 52' wall.

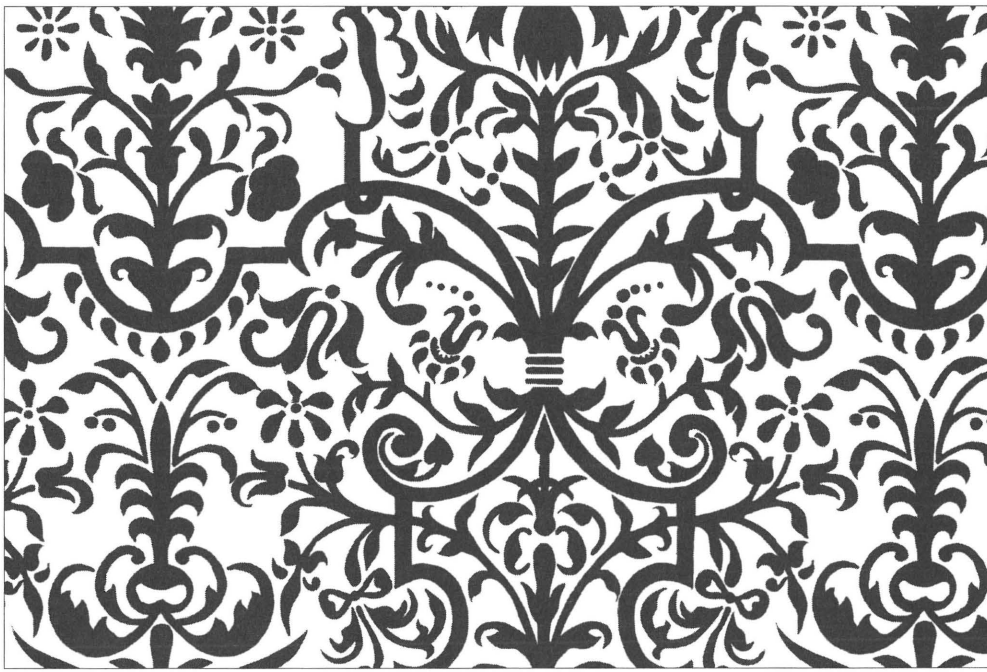
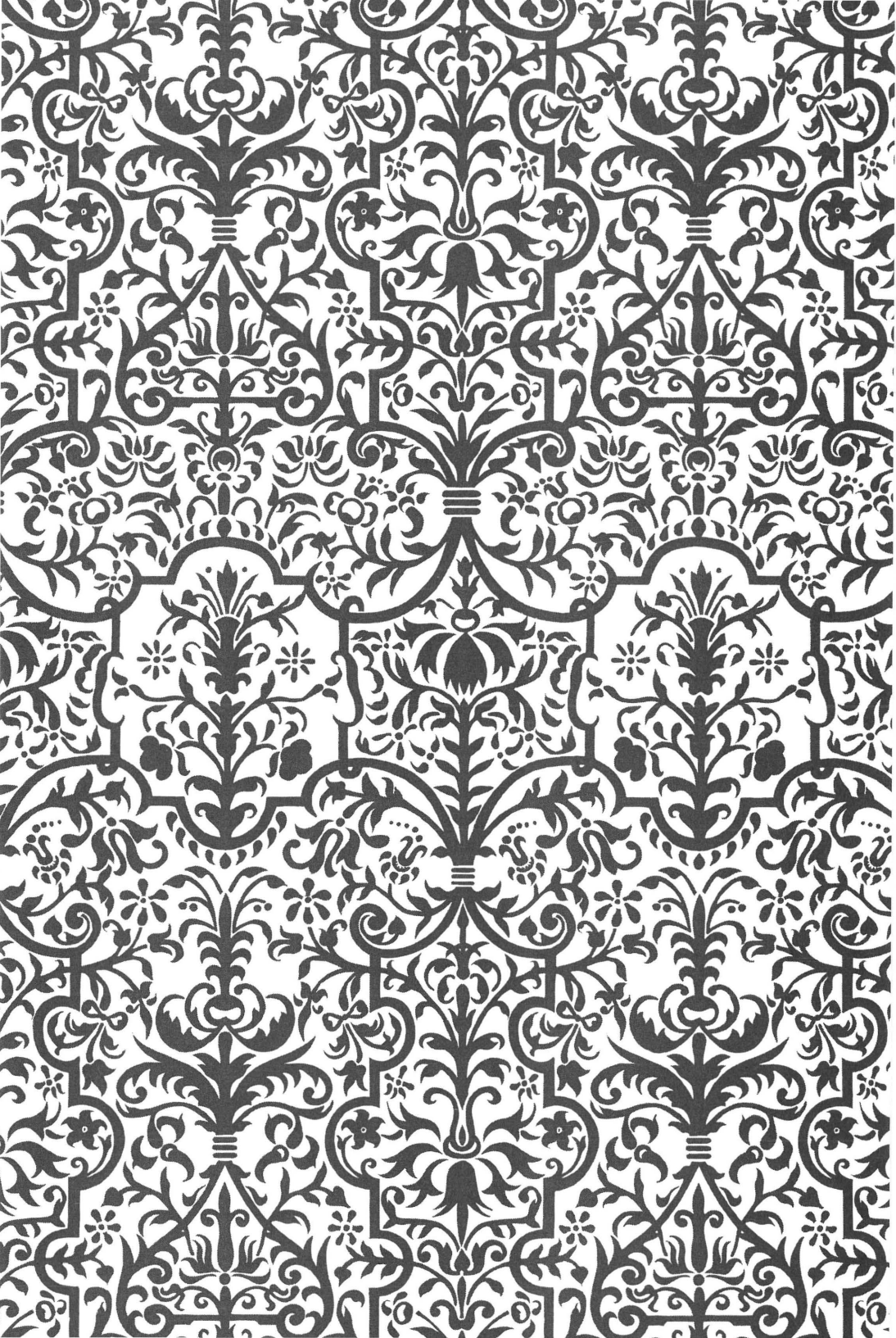
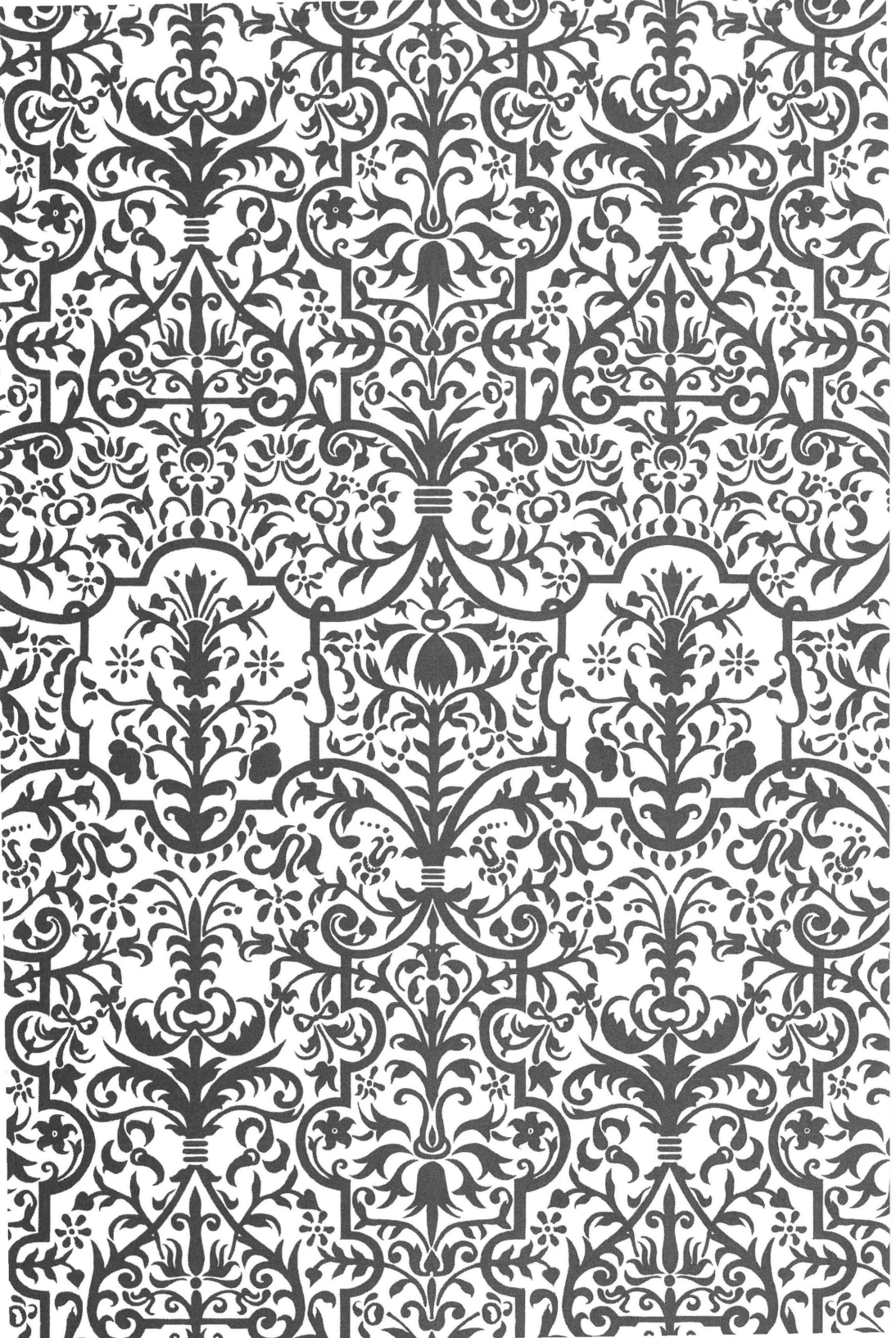


Figure 1 Jeannie Thib 2008. Image (detail). next pages Image, subsequent pages Text. All are a special artist's project for *Visible Language.*





ONLY A SUDDEN FLAMING WORD

BLAIR BRENNAN

"Words are things"; so says the Judge, in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*. In the grip of McCarthy's sanguinary tale a reader might look for solace. "It is only a story and these are only words," one might say for reassurance but McCarthy has already doused that bridge with kerosene. "Words are things. The words he is in possession of he cannot be deprived of. Their authority transcends his ignorance of their meaning."[1] It does not matter if we were once ignorant of this fact; words are things.

McCarthy's book is about blood and time and the west. The mythic west remains a potent symbol, a complicated hybrid of history, weather, geography and popular culture. During its recent centenary, my home city celebrated with pancake breakfasts, fireworks displays and a festive cattle drive through the downtown core of Edmonton, "the northernmost North American city with a metropolitan population over one million."[2] Like much of the Canadian and American west, my home city and province, is a place where more than 100 years of Hollywood hard-sell (remember, The Great Train Robbery was made in 1903) collides with a legacy of working farm and ranch families who, like everyone here, have been effected by successive waves of oil based boom and bust economy.

It never occurred to me that I might make art about this place. I'm not a landscape painter. I'm not interested in geography or weather and only slightly curious about history. I am, however, fascinated by myth (including the mythic west), magic, ritual and language. To some extent, these interests have been consolidated in a recurring feature of my text-based art—steel branding irons and the marks they make. In construction, my implements are similar to functional livestock brands. However, separated from the seasonal ritual of farm and ranch, branding becomes highly symbolic. It is writing that combines repetitive ritual acts (heating and branding) with primal elements: fire, steel and 'skin' (leather, rawhide, clothing, books, drawings, photographs and the occasional art gallery wall).

The branded text includes initials, acronyms, magic spells, curses (both kinds), palindromes, punch lines, other marks of symbolic import—word-things, both grave and ridiculously glib with power that extends beyond any literal reading of the text. A branded mark on leather or rawhide looks like crispy bacon. Blood flowed and organs once pumped and beat on the other side of this support, a guarantee that any

story written on this 'page' will contain blood, time and something of the mythic west. Even when looking at burnt paint on gallery walls or the burnt paper of a drawing or book, it is not hard to imagine that the canvas for this mark could have been alive and kicking (perhaps even human). Branding irons, and the marks they leave, create a palpable uneasiness that is distinctly different than that of any other written word.

I might aspire to noble thoughts, like Yeats idea that "Earth herself may be only a sudden flaming word,"[3] but the truth about language and me lies in less reputable literature (though Yeats might still approve), a lurid occult book called *The Evil Eye*. "There is abundant evidence in all lands of the value attached to certain words, usually written, though they may be merely uttered, to keep off evil from, or to bring good to the user."[4] Cattlemen, who lived here before me, may have shared my belief in apotropaic words. In *Cattle Brands and Cow Hides*, Hortense Warner Ward suggests that prehistoric magical inscriptions became marks of ownership. To this day, Ward explains, stock brands are a combination of rudimentary legal protection and psychic defense,[5] putting into words my intuition that forged steel branding irons are a sort of magic wand.

Writers, more frequently than visual artists, have been allies in my exploration of the magical function of language. McCarthy and Yeats (as mentioned), William Blake, Dylan Thomas, T.S. Elliot, powerful southern writers like Flannery O'Connor, Harry Crews, and the irreverent Beats have been important resources for my own word-work. William S. Burrough's writing and his use of Brion Gysin's cut-up technique have been especially influential.[6] Burroughs writing and visual art have been described as an attempt to disrupt the 'controlling structure'[7] and 'restrictive logic of language.'[8] This seems a noble aspiration and one that I hope might be advanced with a kind of irreversible and apocalyptic word-magic where words are made of fire and steel and written on the skin.

ENDNOTES

1 McCarthy, Cormac. 1992. *Blood Meridian*. New York, NY: Vantage International, p. 85.
2 Wikipedia online encyclopaedia, s.v. "Edmonton." http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edmonton (accessed June 20, 2007).
3 William Butler Yeats. In Finneran, Richard J., editor. 1997. *The Yeats Reader: A Portable Compendium of Poetry, Drama, and Prose*. New York,NY: Scribner, p. 23.
4 Elworthy, Frederick Thomas. 1989. *The Evil Eye: An Account of this Ancient and Widespread Superstition*. New York, NY: Bell Publishing Company, p. 400.
5 Ward, Hortense Warner. 1953. *Cattle Brands and Cow Hides*. Dallas, TX: The Story Book Press, p. 3-4.
6 Though born in Britain, Brion Gysin spent his childhood and early adolescence in Edmonton. Little information has been published on Gysin. For those interested, I highly recommend: Geiger, John. 2005. *Nothing is True Everything is Permitted The Life of Brion Gysin*. New York, NY: Disinformation, or Kuri, José Férez, editor. 2003. *Brion Gysin Tuning in to the Multimedia Age*. London, UK: Thames & Hudson Ltd.
7 Luce, Mark. 1996. Burroughs' Impact Universal. *Lawrence Journal-World*, Sunday July 21. http://falcon.cc.ukans.edu/~luce/wsb7.html (accessed January 12, 1999).
8 Luce, Mark. 1997. El Hombre Visible. *Kansas Alumni Magazine*, no. 1. http://falcon.cc.ukans.edu/~luce/nova1.html (accessed January 12, 1999).

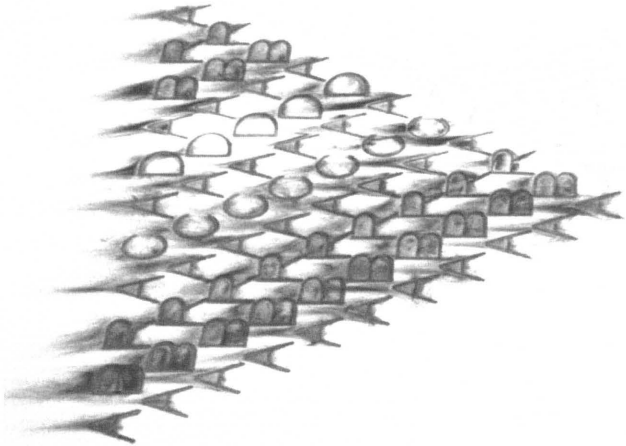
Figure 1 **Blair Brennan 1998,** *Get rich. Sleep 'til noon. And Fuck em all!* , Branded rawhide (cow hide), steel branding irons and chair Dimensions: variable , Collection of the Glenbow Museum, Calgary, Alberta , Photo Credit: Ron Marsh, Glenbow Museum

AEC
FTW

Figure 2 Blair Brennan 1996, *Perish Like the Word*

Text branded on wall, steel branding irons, steel box, propane bottle and torch, canvas bag, fire bricks and various small tools,

Dimensions: variable , Collection of the Art Gallery of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Photo Credit: Blair Brennan



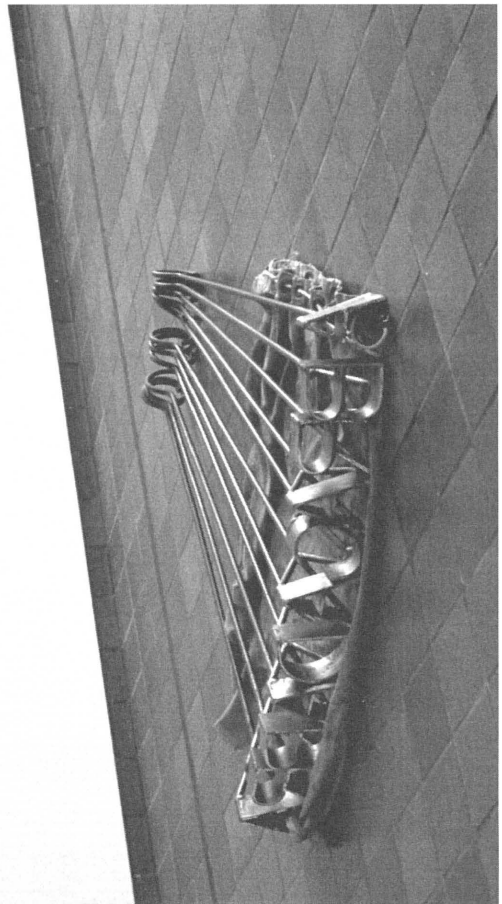
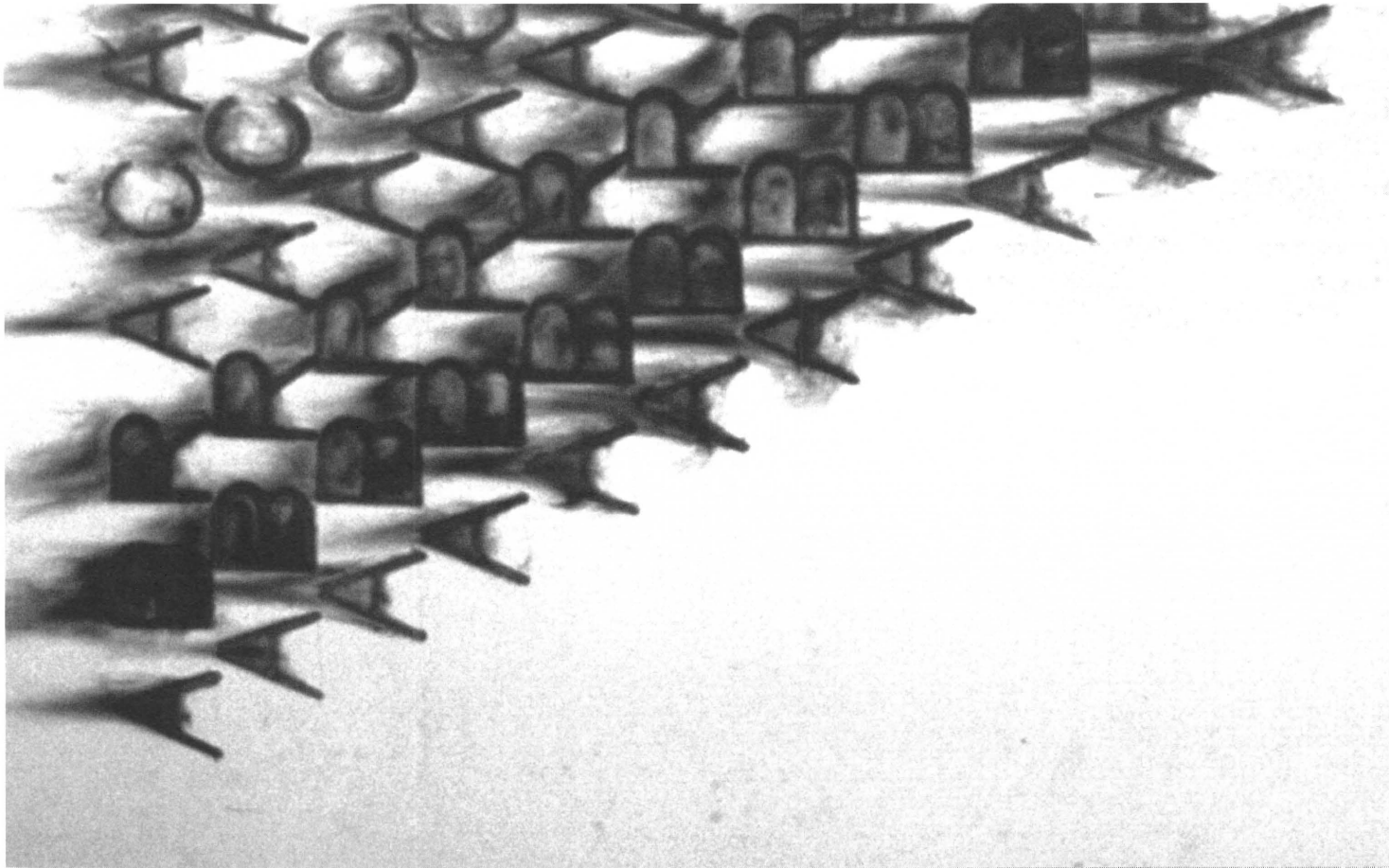


Figure 3 Blair Brennan 1996, *Perish Like the Word* (detail)

Text branded on wall, steel branding irons, steel box, propane bottle and torch, canvas bag, fire bricks and various small tools,

Dimensions: variable , Collection of the Art Gallery of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta,, Photo Credit: Blair Brennan



SUBVERTING A CARIBBEAN 'NATURAL' HISTORY

JOSCELYN GARDNER

... unsettling brittle pages from the past... probing between stiff lines of official text to divulge unspeakable narratives concealed within... liberating ghostly traces of Creole women whose lives have been reduced to mere footnotes in the recording of an oppressive colonial plantation history...

Using illustrated publications, prints and artifacts found in Caribbean museum collections as a source for examining social narratives on 18th century Caribbean plantations, my lithographic prints probe the construction of female Creole identity from a postcolonial feminist perspective. By subverting methods of documentation used by artists and writers to record Atlantic culture, my work points to the colonial construction of this identity as Other and asserts a space for the multiple female subjectivities not recognized in the 'official' (male) historical canon.

In *Plantation Poker: the Merkin Stories*, a multi-panel suite of black and white stone lithographs on frosted mylar (2004), I juxtapose line engraved drawings of female pubic triangles with italicized text to form a visual statement (15ft wide) framed by red quotation marks and a culminating red full-stop. The text reproduces personal diary entries made by Thomas Thistlewood, a plantation overseer living in Jamaica between 1750 and 1786, who shamelessly recorded his countless sexual encounters with dependent female slaves in over 10,000 pages of manuscript containing detailed accounts and descriptions of daily events that took place on his Jamaican sugar estate.

Playing on the pubic triangle as a symbolic site of female sexual exploitation during slavery, *Plantation Poker* critiques 18th century documentation strategies commonly used to inscribe 'difference' on colonial bodies and identities through both metaphor and irony. Alluding to the practice of classification and cataloguing that was typical of ethnographical publications during this period in which 'curious' objects (often imagined by the artist) were illustrated laid out as inert specimens for examination alongside texts that described them, these emblematic images evoke illustrations characteristic of publications such as Hans Sloane's *Natural History of Jamaica* (1707). Intricate Afro-centric hairstyles are woven into each individually displayed pubic triangle together with tools of torture used during plantation slavery (whips, spurs, shackles). Viewed alongside Thistlewood's words (some in Latin) which matter-of-

factly record precise details of each act of sexual violation, these carefully engraved 'curiosities' create an ambiguity of meaning between image and text that mimics a similar strategy found in the illustrated natural histories. Kay Dian Kriz has noted that the disjunction between illustrations of natural specimens (flora and fauna) or human artifacts, and the written descriptions of them found in natural histories, often functioned to maintain a sense of mystery so that no fixed meaning could be established. Such illustrated 'marvels' embodied both the fears and desires aroused by the strangeness of a new world and the authors of both image and text were charged with the problem of presenting 'difference' to excite curiosity while maintaining a fine balance between the known and the unknown.[1] Here, these printed works replicate peculiar imagined objects that destabilize the recorded facts displayed beside them.

These prints also draw on the symbolic function of wigs worn by European men in the 18th century to signify social order by suggesting hair decoration as a form of self-empowerment. Ironically, the *merkin* ("counterfeit hair for a woman's privy parts") became fashionable in 18th century Britain because of the prevalence of syphilis, the cure for which caused hair loss. Analogous to the beard, the merkin was literally a 'pubic wig' that I now reclaim to speak to the invisible and unrepresentable aspects of Creole women's daily lives. The painstakingly braided hairstyles and suggestively phallic placement of the implements of torture illustrated on each triangle serve to empower the imagined female body. The (male) text collides with this visualization of female power to undermine 18th century semiotic systems and counter the inscription of 'natural' mastery over the (black) female slave body. The semi-pornographic implications of the pubic triangle as fetish for scopophilic consumption also reference illustrations of slave torture found in abolitionist literature such as Stedman's *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition* (1790) where tortured semi-undressed black bodies reveal the horrors of slavery while simultaneously titillating the reader.[2]

The elegant script and stylized images in my work veil the repulsiveness of the painful history they both trace and subvert. By referencing printed work that functioned to confirm particular forms of (constructed) knowledge, I question the depravity of the colonial plantation system through the private words of one of its male protagonists and leave the viewer to ponder the wider implications of a colonial discourse which supported the violent subordination of enslaved peoples as a 'natural' right of white (male) privilege.

ENDNOTES

1 Kriz, Kay Dian. 2003. Curiosities, commodities and transplanted bodies in Hans Sloane's *Voyage to … Jamaica*. In Quilley, Geoff and Kay Dian Kriz, editors. *An Economy of Colour: Visual Culture and the Atlantic World, 1660-1830*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, pp. 85-105.

2 Wood, Marcus. 2003. John Gabriel Stedman, William Blake, Francesco Bartolozzi and empathetic pornography in the *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*.Quilley, Geoff and Kay Dian Kriz, editors. *An Economy of Colour: Visual Culture and the Atlantic World, 1660-1830*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, pp. 129-149.

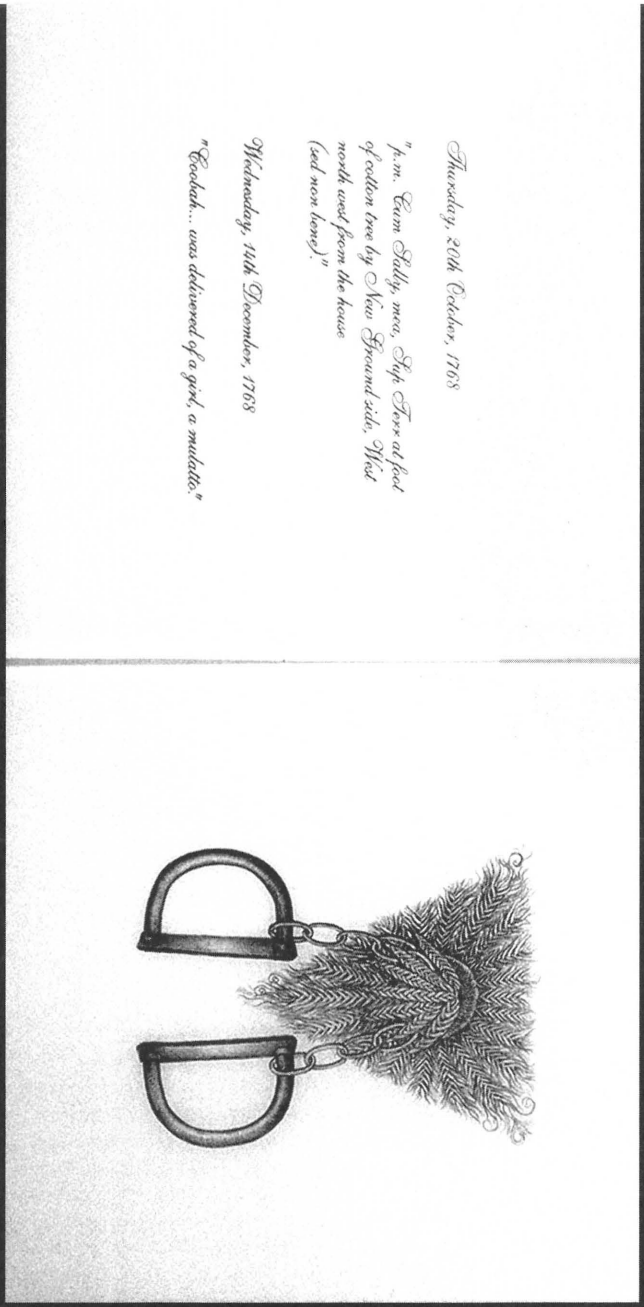
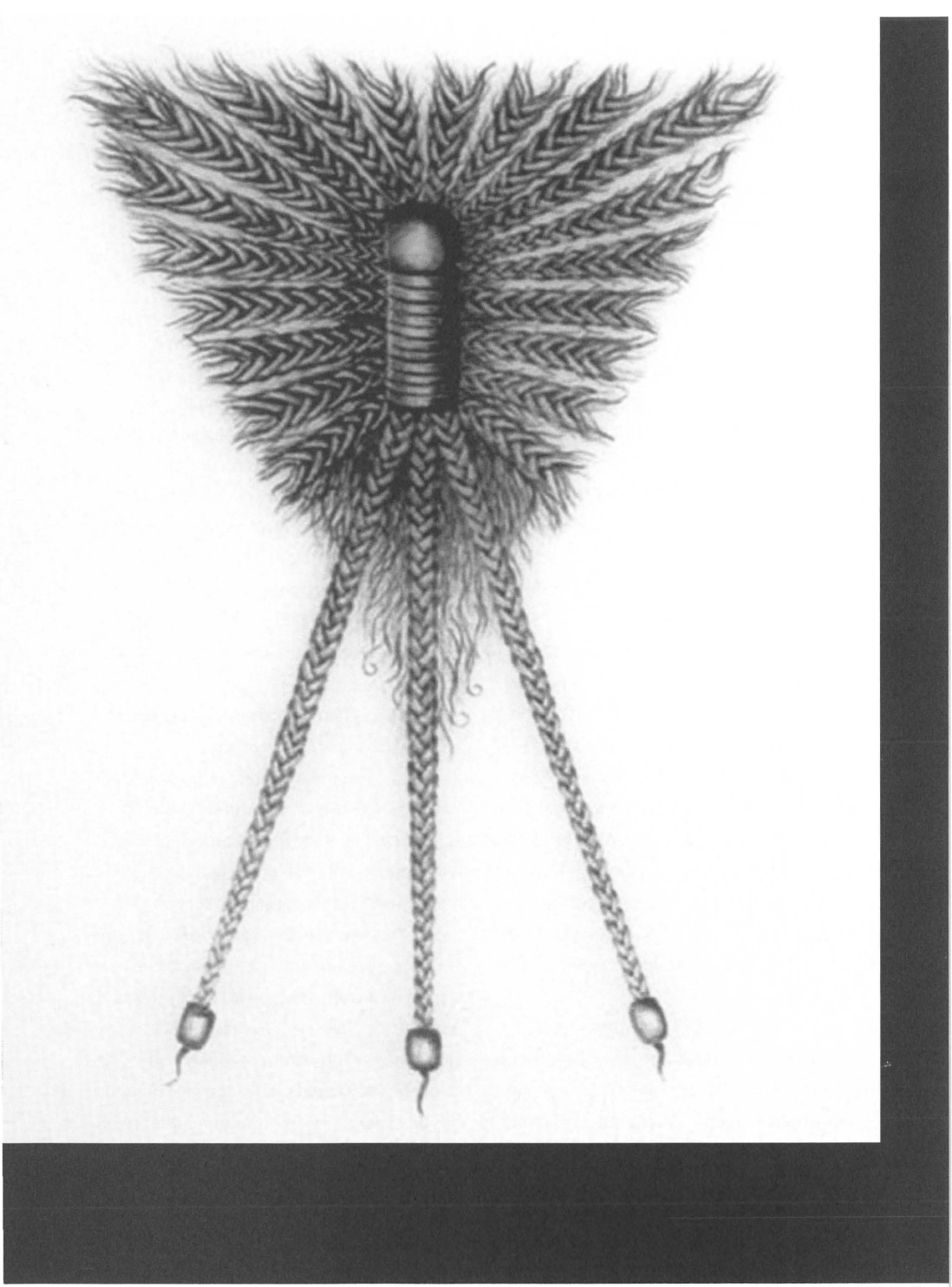


Figure 1 Joscelyn Gardner 2004 ,
Detail from Plantation Poker: the Merkin Stories
Lithograph/vinyl on frosted mylar, 15' x 3'2" (16 panels at 18" x 18", 9 panels at 18" x 6") , Photo Credit: John Tamblyn

Figure 2 Joscelyn Gardner 2004,
Detail from Plantation Poker: the Merkin Stories
Lithograph/vinyl on frosted mylar, 15' x 3'2" (16 panels at 18" x 18", 9 panels at 18" x 6") , Photo Credit: John Tamblyn



A WRITER'S MANUAL

BARBARA BALFOUR

Textual quotation and stylistic mimicry, in addition to my own writing, recur throughout my art production. In making words visible, I have used my handwriting—transcribed manually or printed by hand, as well as computer fonts—printed commercially or in a newspaper. My text-based artwork is made public, literally, by these instances of publishing.

I have employed quotation to reference the writings of others: witnesses to the appearance of a feral girl (*Wild Child*, 1991) and pain theorists (*Pain Index*, 1991), as well as Freud and Kristeva (*melancholia & melanomata*, 1996). Similar to a medieval scribe, I have copied and re-presented these texts, yet my handwriting appears in various guises: as three styles of calligraphy hand-printed in lithography, cursive script in pen on index cards and my 'personal' software font.

Wary of handwriting being commonly upheld as a signifier of authenticity and truth, I tamper with this convention. I try not to encourage accepted notions of the 'hand' in opposition to the machine, whether typewriter, computer or press. Jacques Derrida offers this rebuttal to reductive thought:

> But when we write "by hand" we are not in the time before technology; there is already instrumentality, regular reproduction, mechanical iterability. So it is not legitimate to contrast writing by hand and "mechanical" writing, like a pre-technological craft as opposed to technology. And then on the other side what we call "typed" writing is also "manual."[1]

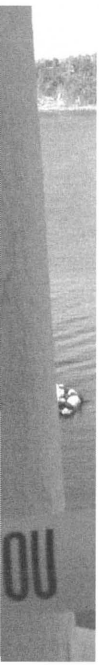
There is clearly no simplified manual to follow in this regard.

Some of my projects engender an inscribed form of call and response. In *21 Questions* (1992), my rhetorical queries were published anonymously, in weekly installments, in the personals section of a free newspaper. Throughout the twenty-one week project, and much to my surprise, I regularly received responses to questions such as: 'Do you ever have regrets?' and 'Do you trust me?' In another project involving audience participation, I made available copies of a bilingual *Proust Questionnaire* (1999) in an installation referencing Marcel Proust's cork-lined bedroom/writing room.

In deliberate acts of emulation, I have mimicked the style and language of certain mass-produced products. At

first glance, one could mistake my sewing pattern for the real thing (*Loofa-Suit*, 1992). Instructions carry the illusion a step further, although any attempt to sew a jumpsuit out of sections of dried squash would prove difficult. Confronted with lengths of caution tape strung between traffic delineators or barricading a path, a law-abiding citizen might instinctively be inclined to obey the imperative warning: "DANGER – I THINK I AM FALLING IN LOVE WITH YOU." But is this admonition as straightforward as it seems?

In *100 Things That Make Me Happy* (2004), I transcribed one hundred items from a non-hierarchical list as an *aide-mémoire* in my quest for contentment. Subsequently printed on post-it notes, the handwritten 'things' have taken two forms: a casual cluster hang displayed on a wall and an edition of reconstituted stacks of notes. In both cases, the ink might prove to have a longer shelf life than the paper it is printed on.



In other text-based work, I have taken to repeating myself willfully. In *QWERTY works for me* (2004), I was inspired by the fortuitous discovery that I am able to type my given name using only my left hand. Making reference to the specificity of my name (holding in abeyance the knowledge that others exist with the very same name) and the given format of the anachronistic computer keyboard (as if it were designed for me, which it was not), I typed my name, over and over, on sixteen pages of corrasable (correctable and erasable) typewriting paper. Consciously ignoring the software program's attempts to correct my errors, I found this repetitive process, in spite of my cramped fingers, to be anything but boring.

The theme of repetition and difference returns in my recent prints, as in the form of floating iterations of the word 'dread' hovering over a heavier mass composed of the recurrent word 'regret' (*Living in the Present*, 2006). In *Low Self-Esteem* (2006), against seemingly unrelenting waves of this term, isolated terms such as 'equanimity' and 'cautious optimism' offer relief. Recurring mantras in *Limbo* (2007) and *to the nth degree* (2007) suggest a way to conjure up unimaginable, unfathomable concepts. In *Love is the Warp (Guilt is the Weft)*, from 2006, the interwoven word-structure acts as a formal analogy for co-dependency, particularly in relationships with loved ones. In surveying my work, I am beginning to worry that I am repeating myself too much. I also know that repetition never really ends up being the same.

ENDNOTES

1 Jacques Derrida. 2001. The Word Processor. In Derrida, Jacques. 2005. *Paper Machine*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, p.20.

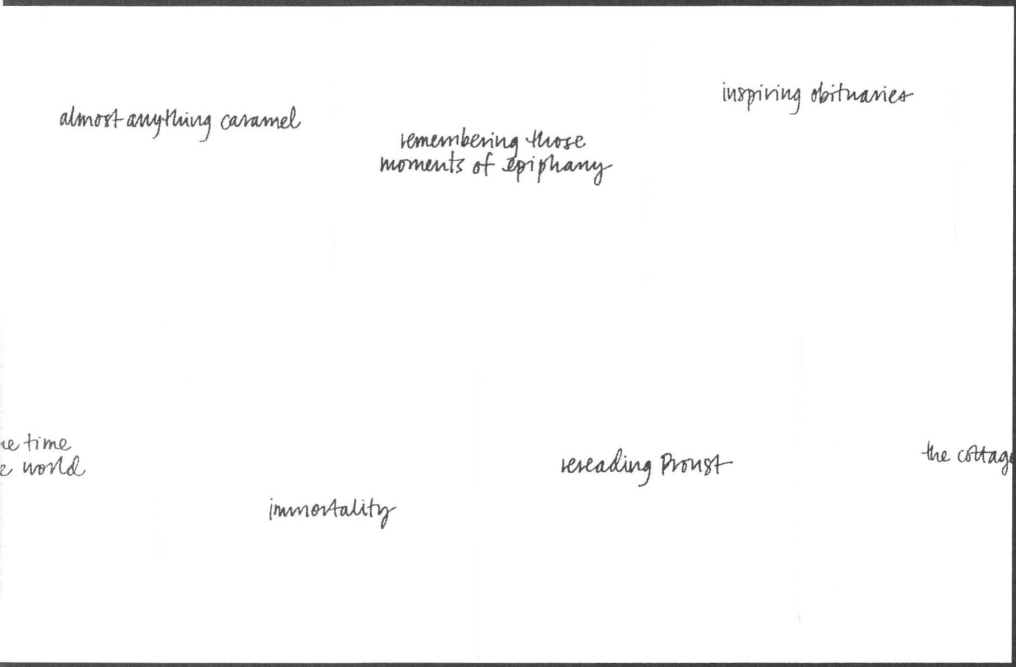


Figure 1 Barbara Balfour 2004, Detail from 100 Things That Make Me Happy
Lithography on post-it notes, 3" square (each), Photo Credit: Mike Stevens

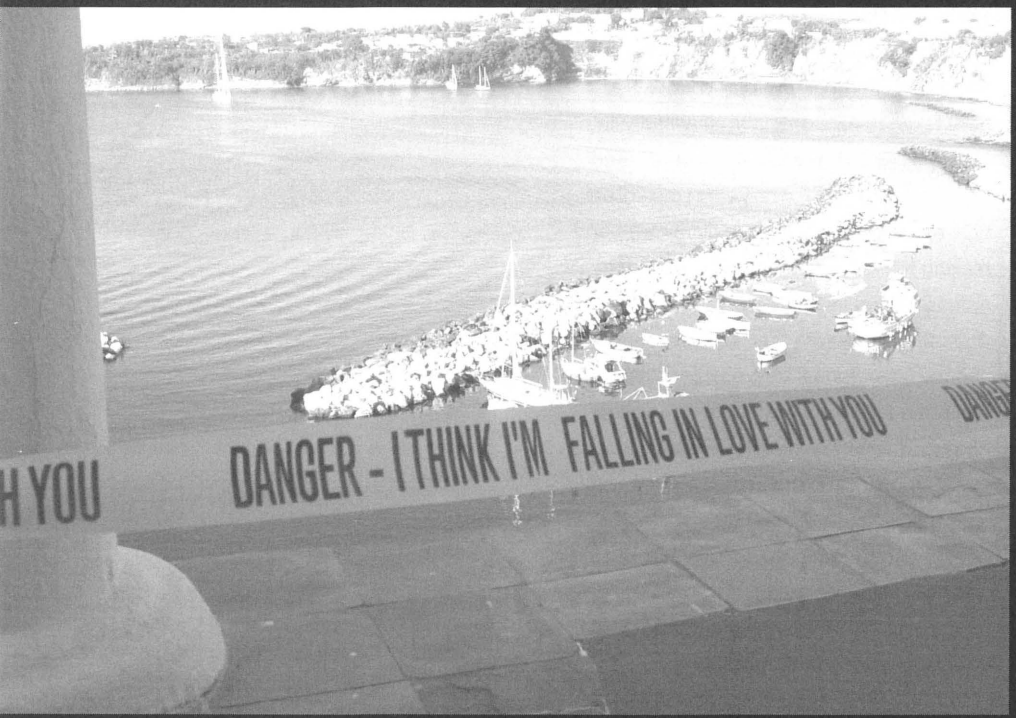


Figure 2 Barbara Balfour 2004, Installation view of DANGER
Biodegradable caution tape, 3" high and variable length, Photo Credit: Barbara Balfour

Figure 3 Barbara Balfour 2006, Detail from preparatory vellums for Love is the Warp (Guilt is the Weft)
Ink on vellum, 26" x 20", Photo Credit: Mike Stevens

ALLMUSIC ASPIRES TO THE CONDITION OF IMAGE

DAVID MERRITT

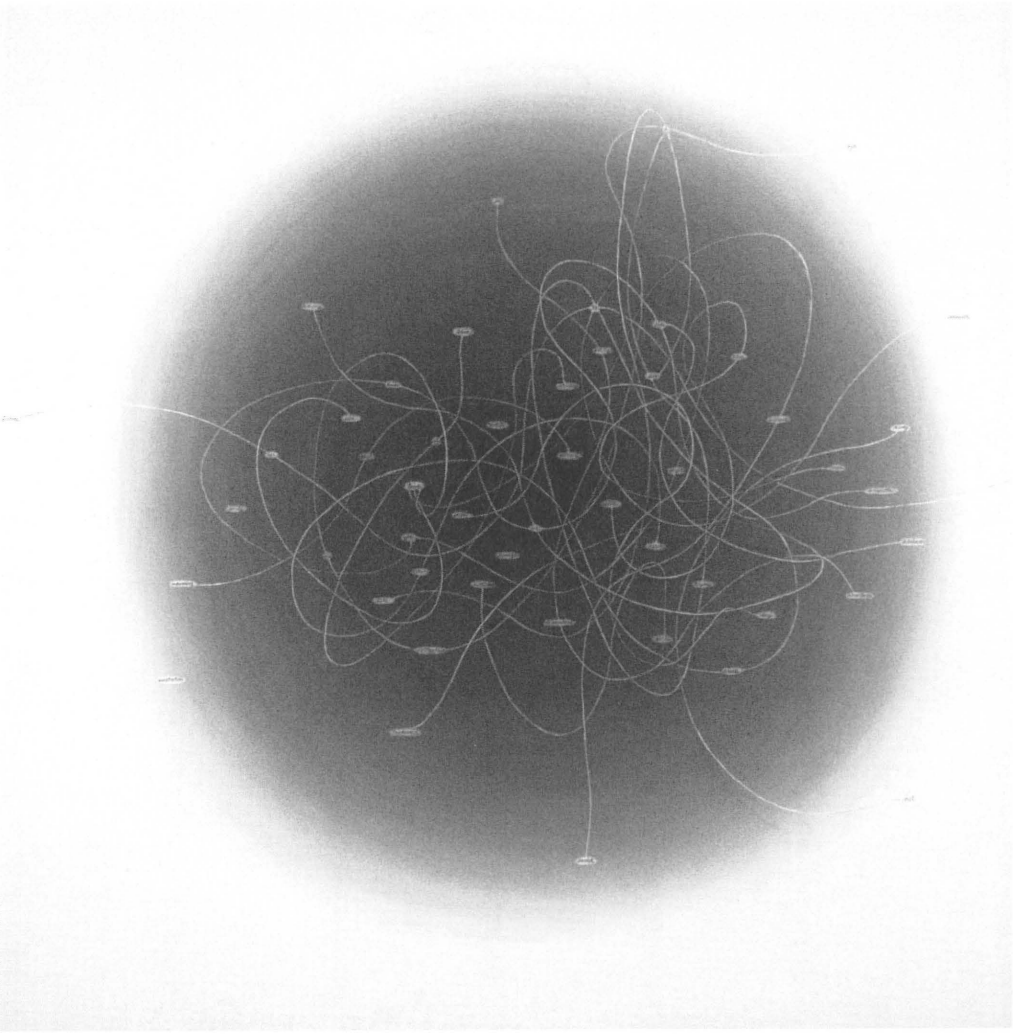
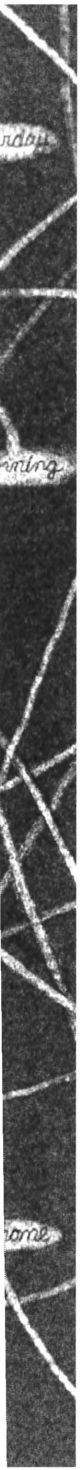


Figure 1 David Merritt 2007, gary, Graphite on paper, 34" x 46"



I am interested in embodied aspects of the visual, particularly its material and performative possibilities. A good part of my work is drawing based.

I approach drawing less as a historically determined medium than as a temporalized material practice. As such I see drawing as an open-ended endeavor that both visually and physically manifests properties of duration: through the blind excursions of line, the cumulative deposits of markmaking and the precarious suspension of both in a space of potential erasure. And distinct from more explicitly time-based technologies, drawing exercises duration through its materiality—as negligible or spare as that may be. Indeed it is in this somewhat frail materiality, as much as the various actions which mark it, that drawing takes up its place in time, and offers us a physical (and imaginary) place in its fictions.

A frequent tactic of my drawing work has been to conflate the visual with the aural. This has involved pursuing a rather inverted logic that treats the image less as a thing than as a perceptual event (akin to speech 'disappearing in the event of its appearance') and sound less as an event than as substance (in the Lucretian sense of 'all sound is body'). Following this approach, I try to take up both drawing and writing, as much as viewing and reading, as essentially transformative activities of tracing.

The most systematic and internalized link between the aural and the visual in everyday life is probably to be found in language. Phonological alphabets work in charging a specific set of more or less arbitrary marks with visually inscribing a more or less arbitrary set of sounds we make with our bodies. Our ability to act within and between these two very different systems is only possible by virtue of our own inscription into a common linguistic system, however incomplete or errant that may be. Musical notation systems also function in complicating the act of inscription with that of performance. Though mechanical audio recording is also frequently described as inscribing sound, it is one that appears to assume a more reified and retrospective form. Recorded song titles can be seen as located at the crossroads of these various systems, as linguistic fragments relating to a kind of triple inscription of the aural—phonetically, musically and mechanically.

In the past, I have been drawing song titles. Essentially this project involves gleaning the contemporary boneyards of popular music charts, particularly databases of the music industry (such as Allmusic, Rhapsody, etc). Working through these sources, the drawings usually begin with an impulse to trace the collective thoughts found accumulating around a commonplace theme, such as those completing the phrases 'me and my,' 'on my mind' or 'love machine.' The thematic of these drawings are also chosen to playfully inflect the ambiguous intimacies of both language and the recorded music the titles serve to index. For example, they are often organized around song titles stemming from linguistic shifters like 'you' and 'me' or 'here' and 'now.' Still other drawings in this project have been assembled from the collapsed orders of industry 'best of' lists—such as "BMI Top 100 Airplay Songs of the 20th Century," or the "Top 11 Heartbreak Songs of All Time." As visually re-mapped in the drawings, the song titles are broken up and dispersed in such a way as to open onto new, non-linear, neighborhoods of interpretation.

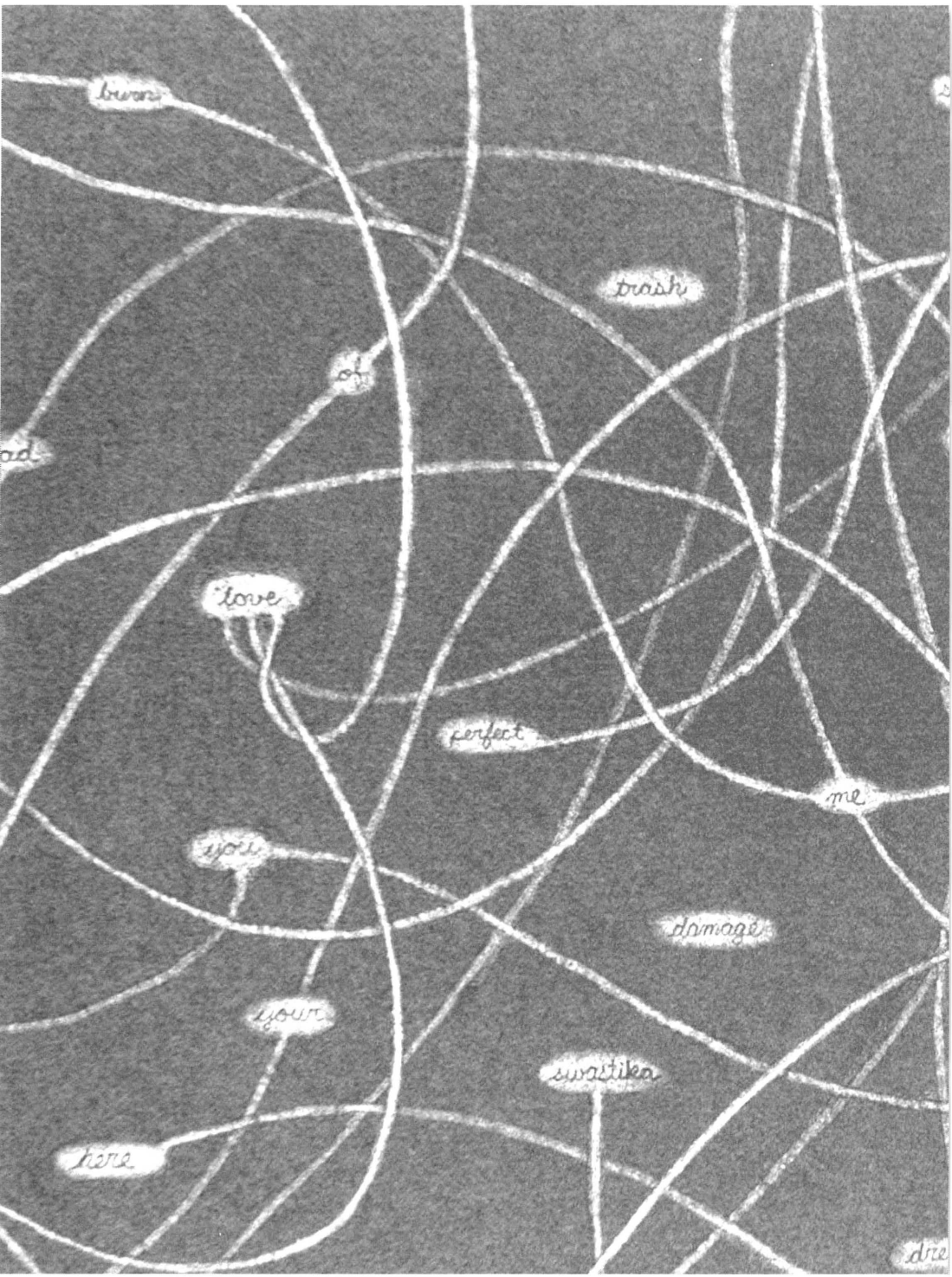
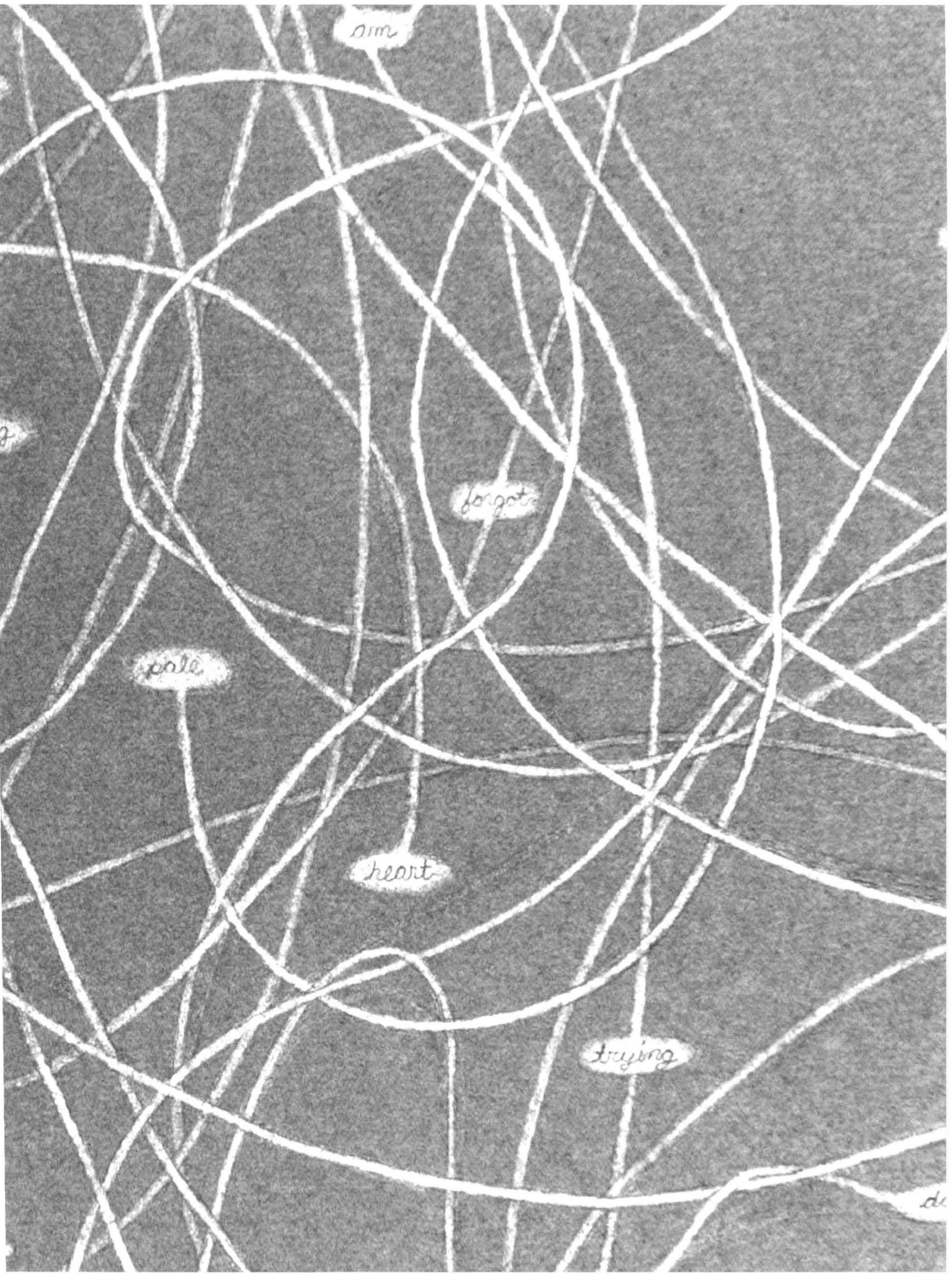


Figure 2 **David Merritt 2007,** gary (detail), Graphite on paper, 34" x 46"


aim
forget
pole
heart
trying

PATRICK MAHON

EXCERPTS FROM THE *DRAWN LIKE MONEY* SERIES

The *Drawn Like Money Series* is a group of drawings, made with pen and ink, based on my own photographic images of the Canadian Arctic. The works are intended to resemble the conventional engraved syntax found on paper currency. *Drawn Like Money,* which was occasioned by a collaborative project entitled *Art and Cold Cash*, is excerpted here to demonstrate my interest in representations of landscape and wildlife through visual rubrics that have come to confer notions of economic value upon pictorial representations.

Art and Cold Cash is an art project connecting contemporary art and discourses surrounding money with the development of works in video and drawing by a five-member artists' collective. Jack Butler, Sheila Butler and I are contemporary Canadian artists who have lived and worked in the Canadian North. Beginning in 2004, we undertook an artistic collaboration with writer, Ruby Arngna'naaq, and artist, William Noah. Those two Inuit members of the *Art and Cold Cash* Collective lived through the change from barter economy to capitalism in Baker Lake, Nunavut, Canada. So, the experience and knowledge of Arngna'naaq and Noah are linked with the perspectives of Jack Butler, Sheila Butler and myself. A key factor in this project is the history of twentieth century Canadian art as concurrent with the relatively recent introduction of capitalist exchange in the Canadian Arctic. As a creative response to the historical conditions around which it is centered, the project is committed to collective art making and analysis as culturally necessary and creatively expansive at this time of increasing globalization.

Specific to the *Drawn Like Money Series* was the idea that nationhood in Canada has in part been forged in relationship to images of the land, including those painted by artists and illustrators whose works were modeled on a British idea of landscape; by the paintings of the Group of Seven; and with regard to other such representations displayed on paper money since the mid-twentieth century and earlier. Images of the land have been used to promote Canadian nationalism in a number of ways, including, as Emily Gilbert has shown, by "drawing upon the kinds of natural images that have long fed the Canadian imagination." [1] Thus the circulation and flow of currency bearing landscapes in Canada has historically been a means to encourage within the minds and hearts of citizens involved in daily capitalist exchange nationalist sentiments

tied to representations of the land. And such representations have also been used to promote an idea of Canada as uniquely allied with notions of wilderness and 'the north' outside the country's borders.

An engraved image entitled "Eskimos Hunting by Ice Floes" from 1974, shown on the back of the Canadian two dollar bill, appears intended to further the promotion of Canadian nationalism. Utilizing an ostensibly 'natural' icon, the traditional northern aboriginal hunt was elided with landscape as an authenticating representation of Canada. While such images from the Canadian North have historically been included within the scope of nationalist iconography, the contemporary moment demands a reflection on the 'canon' of such a body of images—and a creative critique of the 1974 two dollar bill image specifically. Furthermore, the state of the environment and the attendant impact on Indigenous Peoples demands a consideration of how representations such as those on national currency are historically constituted and ultimately traded upon. A key question which circulates around this topic is: How do the markers of 'authentic' Canadian-ness shown on currencies come to be exchanged in daily life, and what is the 'cost' to those who are, or to what is, shown?

Figure 1 **Patrick Mahon 2006,** Detail from Drawn Like Money #5
Ink on Vellum, 30" x 44" (each), Photo Credit: Kim Clarke Photography

Endnotes

1 See Gilbert, Emily and Eric Helleiner, editors. 1999. *Nation-states and money: the past, present and future of national currencies*. London, UK: Routledge.

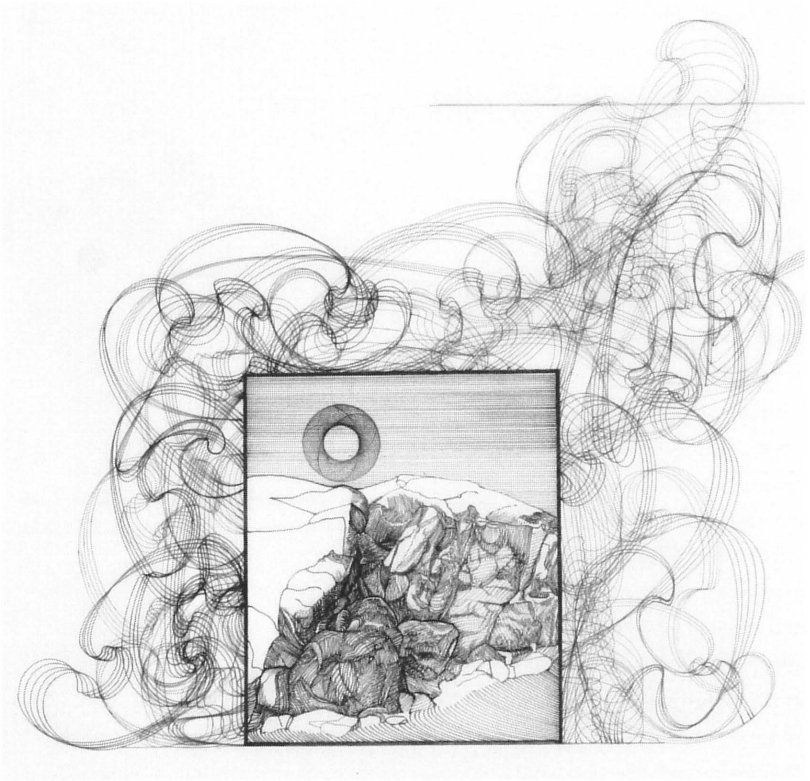


Figure 2 Patrick Mahon 2006, Detail from Drawn Like Money #4
Ink on Vellum, 30" x 44", Photo Credit: Kim Clarke Photography

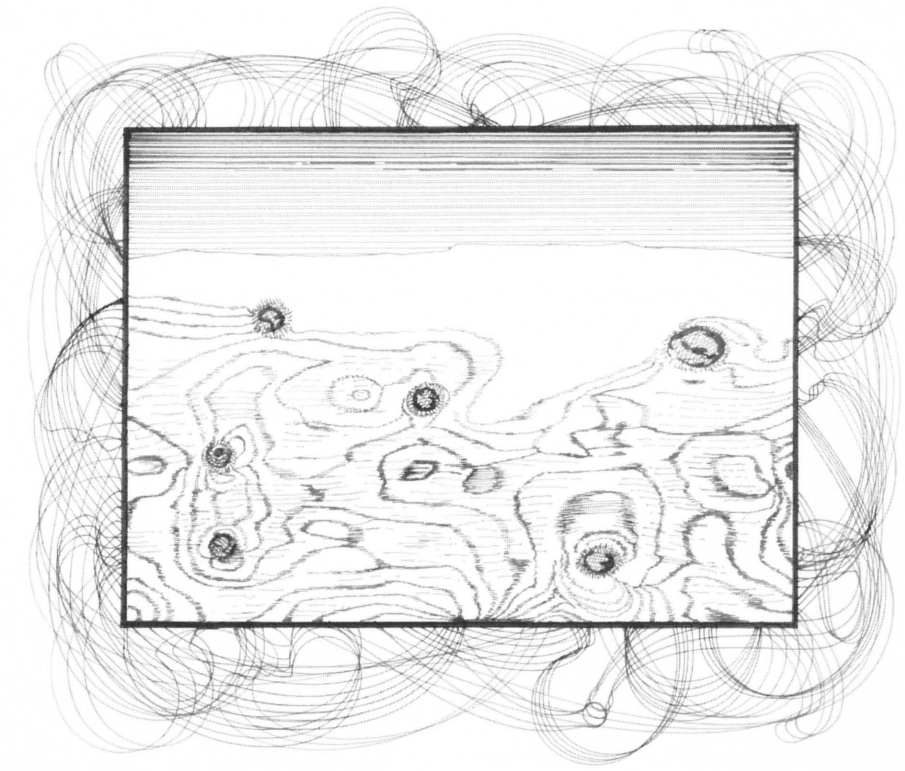


Figure 3 Patrick Mahon 2006, Details from Drawn Like Money Study #2
Ink on Vellum, 30" x 44" (each), Photo Credit: Kim Clarke Photography

TURNING, TURNER, TURNED

DAVID SCOTT ARMSTRONG

> **Entering and exiting, that is what makes the image: appearing and disappearing. Not first representing, but first being or making a time…the time [*temps*] of making or taking an image, the time of time itself, which opens the eyes.**
>
> **Jean-Luc Nancy,** *The Ground of the Image*

Much of my work is concerned with the idea of *passage*—the spatial and temporal index at the heart of the image. Images always come from some place else, almost any place really. They present themselves before us, now; whether fleeting or lingering with our look, yet what the image presents to us is an opening. We may stand here but we see elsewhere.

The images that make up the work *(After Turner)* glance off an *image* and an *anecdote* supplied by another artist, J.M.W. Turner. In his apocryphal account of the genesis of the painting "Snow-Storm" (which accompanied an engraved print reproduction after the painting) the artist tells of being 'lashed' to the mast of a steamer ship in order to see first hand the effects of a storm at sea. This sequence of prints *re*-produces, by affixing a camera to the spinning cylinder of a printing press and opening the iris for progressively long to short exposures, a circular (vortex-like) encounter between the architecture of the machine and the disorientating effects of 'weather.'

In my own photo based prints weather is not so much captured as it is created through an opening to time—and the condition of *exposure*. What interests me in this relationship between reproducibility and weather, or the disorientation and dissolution of pictorial space, is how the repeatable image, turning in on itself, is revealed at its most vulnerable, tenuous (illusory) point. At that point between: appearing and disappearing. The image is created in the unfolding, contingent act of looking.

I see my art practice as engaging such transitional moments. Moments caught between the apparatus (processes, framing, craft) and its other (disruption, entropy and residue). Thinking through my work, marked as it is by a chronic interest in print based

media, I fold together traces of print, photography and filmic serial structure, into an encounter between technology and material dissolution, posing questions about the fundamental relationship between presentness and past-ness, language and materiality.

What is a medium? A confluence of the past and present? Less, a fixed set of processes and material determinations (although why reinvent the wheel?). A medium is a whirlpool. Like the whirlpool of water that forms in any common sink when the plug is pulled, a medium is a system of self-organization. For it both conserves energy in forming a 'whirl,' yet it is only sustained by both an external source feed such as the tap, or by the volume of water in the sink and the release of excess energy through the drain. The self-organizing yet dynamic whirl occurs in the middle, between what comes in and what goes out, a gathering and a release of energy.

Turner later wrote about his experience, saying, "I did not expect to escape, but felt bound to record it if I did." Putting aside for the moment the disputed historical veracity of this scenario, I can't help but imagine the impossibility, under such conditions, of keeping one's eyes so resolutely open, trained to the task of seeing, of exposing oneself so fully to the elements. I can only suspect that the majority of the four hours the artist was affixed to the ship's mast were spent with his eyes closed, shielded from the driving wind, snow and water. Looking is made up of such degrees of exposure and repose: openings and closings. We see what is there before us, but also after us: *after* images (where the image that opens before us is that which is seen when one closes one's eyes) or, what is left of the image upon exiting the scene.

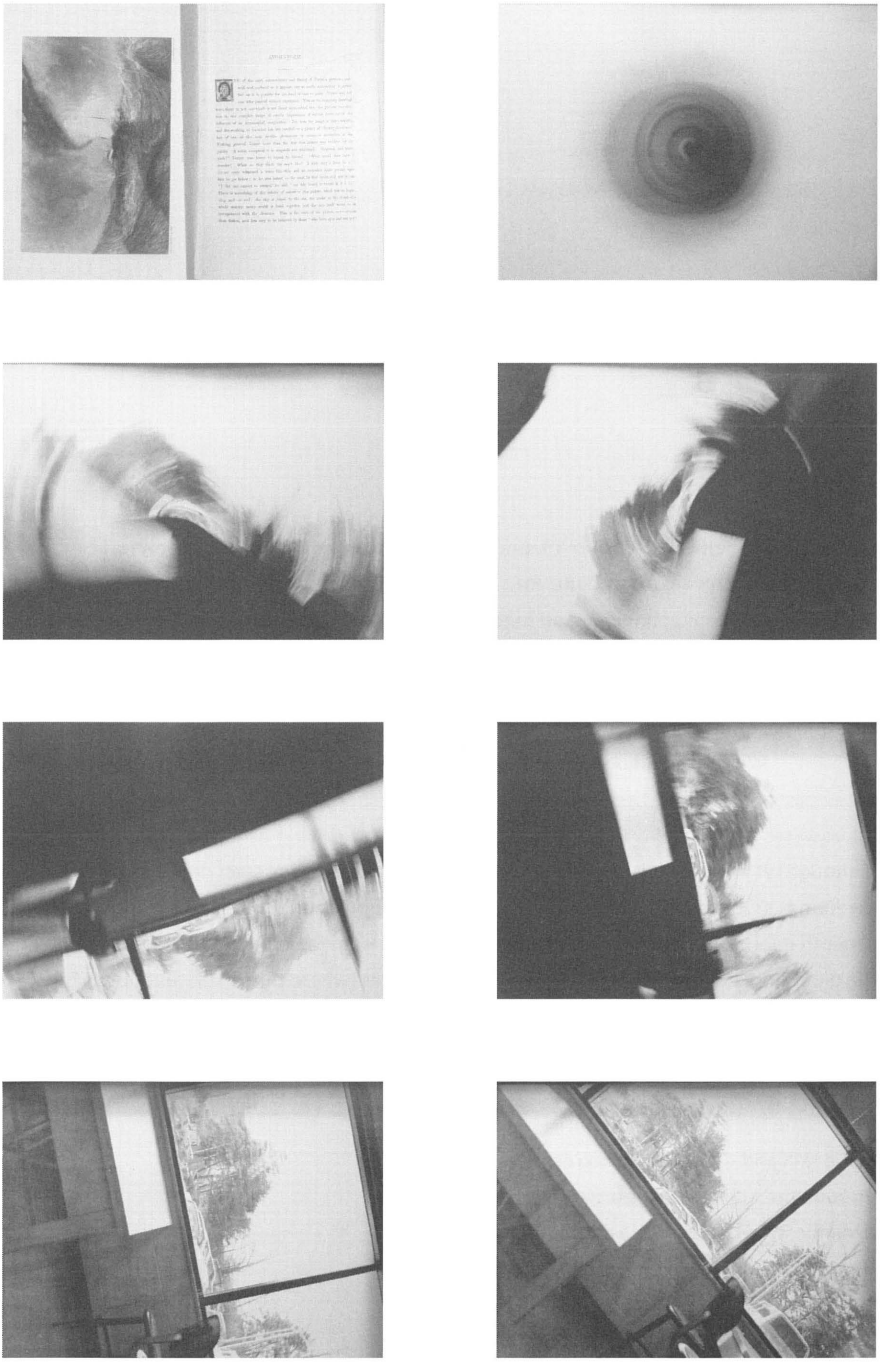
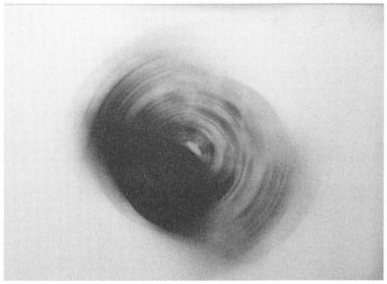
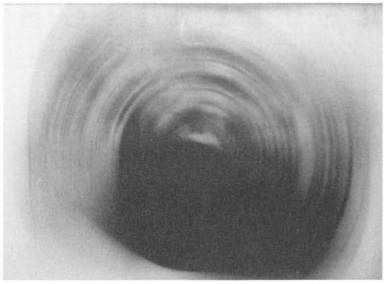
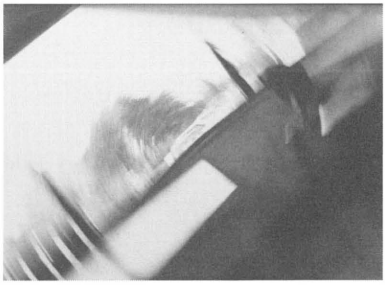
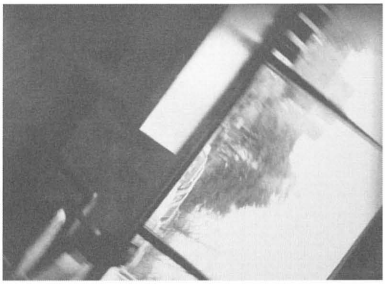
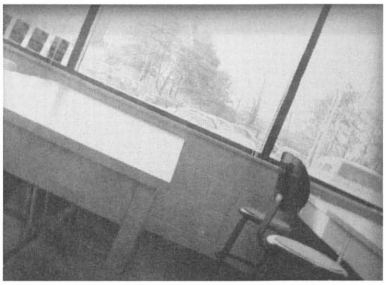
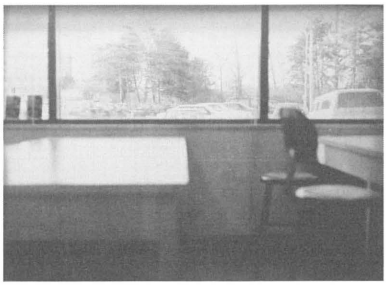


Figure 1 David Scott Armstrong 1999/ 2007(After Turner), Photolithography, chine collé on rag paper. An installation sequence of 16 prints, 23 x 31" (each), Photo Credit: David Scott Armstrong



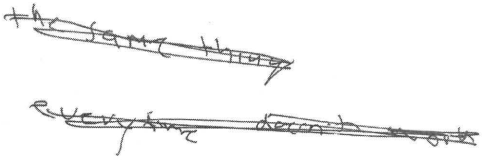




REVELATION SERIES

MICAH LEXIER

These are the first 23 works in the *Revelation* series and each exists as a laser-cut steel, wall-mounted sculpture. Each image is the result of a private ritual in which a phrase is revealed to me. Each phrase is written with my left hand and later obscured with my right. The marks both join the letters together and make the revelation harder to decipher.

Lives & Works [Revelation 1], 2006



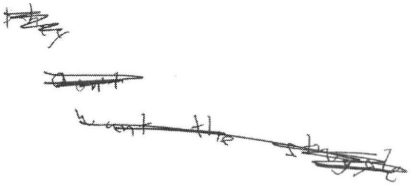
Lives & Works [Revelation 2], 2006

Lives & Works [Revelation 3], 2006

Lives & Works [Revelation 4], 2006

Lives & Works [Revelation 5], 2006

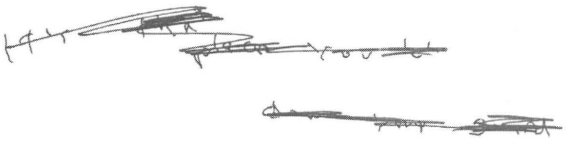
Lives & Works [Revelation 6], 2006



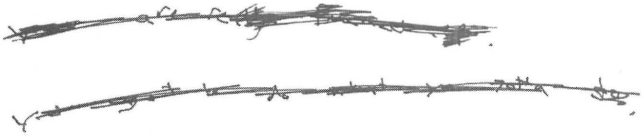
Lives & Works [Revelation 7], 2006

Lives & Works [Revelation 8], 2006

Lives & Works [Revelation 9], 2006



Lives & Works [Revelation 10], 2006



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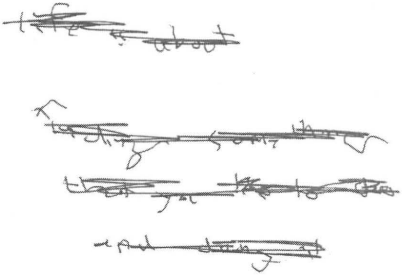

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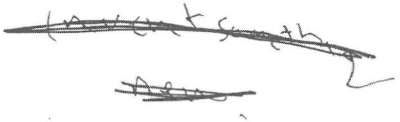

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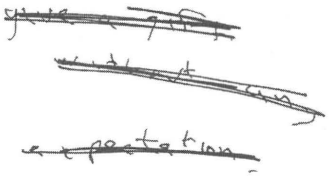
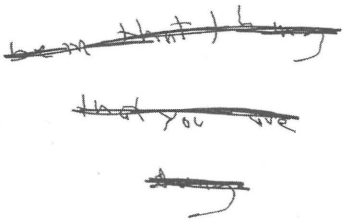


Lives & Works [Revelation 14], 2006

Lives & Works [Revelation 15], 2006



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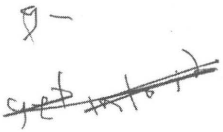

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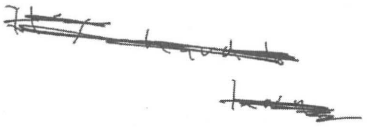

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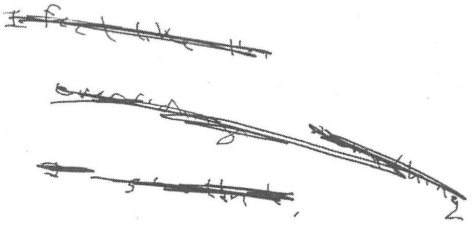

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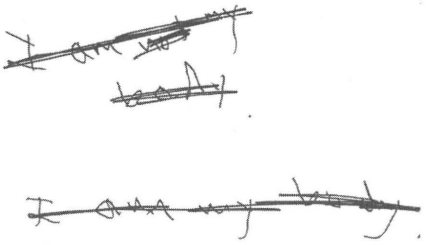

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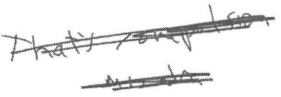

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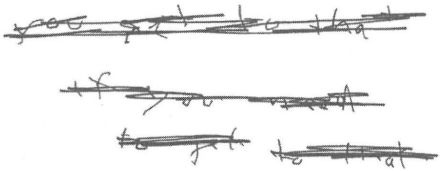

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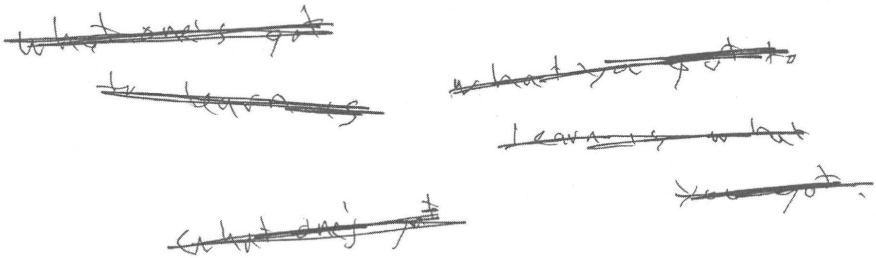
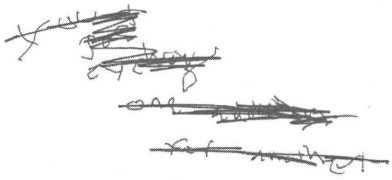


Lives & Works [Revelation 23], 2006



DAVID SCOTT ARMSTRONG grew up in both Saskatchewan and Alberta, and is currently based in Toronto. His studio practice involves the exploration of reproducibility, time and entropy through an ongoing interest in print media. His work, which has been exhibited nationally and internationally, explores broader questions regarding perception and threshold through print, bookwork, moving image projection and installation. He previously taught at the University of Western Ontario and in 2003 joined the Faculty of Fine Arts at York University, where he is an Assistant Professor and currently Head of the Print Media Area.

BARBARA BALFOUR is an Associate Professor in the Print Media Area, Department of Visual Arts, York University, Toronto. In addition to solo and group exhibitions, her artwork is included in the international print survey Printmaking on the Edge. Her writing appears in Technologies of Intuition and in Pro Forma: language/text/visual art.

BLAIR BRENNAN combines his art and writing practice from his home in Edmonton, Alberta. He contributes writing to various Canadian arts and cultural publications and his sculpture, installation work, collaborative performance art, book works and works on paper have been exhibited nationally in numerous group and solo exhibitions.

JOSCELYN GARDNER was born in Barbados to a family that lived on the island since the 17th century. She explores her (white) Creole identity through multi-media installations and printmaking. Since 1994, she has exhibited internationally (including the Sao Paulo Biennial) and currently works as an artist between Canada and the Caribbean.

MICAH LEXIER is a Canadian artist presently living in New York who has a deep interest in counting and numbers. He has had 85

solo exhibitions, participated in over 150 group exhibitions and produced a dozen public commissions. In addition, he co-edited the anthology Sound By Artists, is the visual arts editor of Bloom magazine and is an active curator.

PATRICK MAHON is a Canadian artist and writer, and is current Chair of the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Western Ontario, in London. Patrick Mahon's work focuses on issues related to print culture, historical and contemporary aesthetics and on post-colonialism. Recently, Mahon was part of a collective of artists working in the Canadian Arctic on a research/creation project entitled Art and Cold Cash. Mahon has exhibited widely in Canada and internationally and has worked as an independent curator on several national touring group exhibitions. In Toronto, he is represented by the Leo Kamen Gallery.

DAVID MERRITT works in the areas of drawing and installation. His work has been exhibited in venues across Canada as well as abroad, including the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Textile Museum of Canada and TENT CBK, Rotterdam. In Toronto, his work is represented by Jessica Bradley Art and Projects.

TESS TAKAHASHI is a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow in Cinema Studies at Oberlin College where she is revising her dissertation, Impure Film: Medium Specificity and the North American Avant-Garde Cinema (1965-2005), for publication.

JEANNIE THIB was born in North Bay, Ontario, studied at York University and has exhibited internationally. Her sculptures and paper works investigate contemporary issues through the vehicle of historical ornament. She has created several permanent public artworks and is included in the National Gallery of Canada and The Washington DC Convention Center collections.

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