Remembering to Look Down: A Thing not a Thesis

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Remembering to Look Down:
A Thing not A Thesis

A thing submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Masters of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By

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Bachelor of Fine Arts, Alfred University 2004

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Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, VA
May 2013
ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This intense time has brought me in contact with some of the most fantastic people that I have ever met. Although I won’t mention everyone directly please know that you all added to the amazing arena that is VCU Arts.

I want to thank first my truly brilliant, dedicated, and supportive parents; for them I am truly blessed.

The five incredible individuals of my class, Nick, Hannah, Tim, Ben, and Slinko, you are all dear to me and have forever changed my life.

I want to extend gratitude to each member of the VCU sculpture faculty who brought an array of unique outlooks, approaches, methods, enthusiasm, and dedication to the table, creating a rich environment that continually pushed me to make and grow.

The creative energy and ongoing life changing ongoing conversation that has happened with Ashley has been truly eye opening. I am forever grateful for her understanding, inspiration and companionship.

Last but not least I want to express my gratitude to my friend and mentor Wayne Higby. Without his support and belief in me I would not be where I am today. His wisdom and thoughtful commentary will continue to impact my work and me.
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ABSTRACT

Remembering to Look Down: A Thing not a Thesis

By George Ian McMahon, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Sculpture + Extended Media as Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2013

Major Director: Carlton Newton

Thoughts on magic, spectacle, arena, material, materiality, marrow, invincibility, repetition, performance, sculpture, time, decay, temporality, tools, marks, gestures, writing, coaxing, site, stage, architecture, and movement.
1. Preamble

1.1 What follows in this document is an attempt to use the written word to shed light on my work and to organize my meandering thoughts. My fear, perhaps unwarranted, is that this document will close off a potential conversation with the work. I feel that this act of dissecting a body of work through the written word is much more for the artist/maker than it is for the reader; it is a tool for extracting ideas that lay imbedded within. Ironically it is a tool I constantly feel ill-equipped to use. Although over time it becomes easier to handle, it always feels awkward, the wrong tool for the job. With that said, I hope that this document can take form for you, morphing to a shape that fits along side your current thoughts about my work.

1.1.1 The artist finds a way behind words, concepts and rational explanations in his/her repeated search for an innocent re-encounter with the world. (Pallasmaa *The Thinking Hand* 127)

1.2 I ask that you read this document only after you have had a chance to experience my work in person, not in documentation but
in the flesh. If this is not the case, I would ask that you refrain from moving any further. Put this document back where you found it and hold off until you have a chance to experience the work in the form that it was intended. It would truly be a shame to coax you into formulating an opinion about the work that is not formed from experiencing it on your own.

1.2.1 I certainly believe that you can explain a work away. The doubt, anxiety, and frustration that a viewer might feel, in confronting a work and then carrying that confrontation home with them, could be the stimulus that would bring him back not to the same experience but to another experience of the work. Certitude and specificity might just smother any potential for individual fantasy in learning to enjoy works of art. We all grow up with works of art, and I think we grow up with them quite privately. We don’t really need that private fantasy we have about particular objects—whether in memory or in anticipation of seeing them again—restructured for us.  

(Serra 107)

1.3 Try not to allow this document to shut down your own thought process. The space between my text and your thoughts is a collaborative one, a place where our ideas meet and move forward.
1.4 Take the time to digest your thoughts about my work before proceeding. Only once you have your thoughts and ideas grounded should we attempt to collaborate on this endeavor.

1.5 My work is in constant flux, moving simultaneously toward and away from my ideas. I am always attempting to take the work closer to these concepts/directions, however, I truly doubt they will ever reach all that I am attempting. If I begin to develop a language about my work that feels too formulaic it is at this point that it truly scares me. If by some obscure chance I come to a point where I believe that I have reached that place, a place where I can use language to define my work, I will be done making.

1.5.1 It is a mistake for a sculptor or a painter to speak or write very often about his work. It releases tension needed for his work. By trying to express his aims with rounded-off logical exactness, he can easily become a theorist whose actual work is only a caged-in exposition of conceptions evolved in terms of logic and words. (Moore 62)

1.6 Given what was said directly above under no circumstances should this document be considered conclusive. It is a base to build upon, a document that will morph with time, developing along side the work.

1.7 My work is always ahead of me.
2. Introduction

2.1 I love making.

2.2 Just because I use this particular verb to describe how I feel about making it should not equate to being easy or always positive. It is a place for me to begin, a stage I continually come back to. This short but complex statement exists within the core of all my work.

2.3 A pivotal moment for me was when I became aware that my enthusiasm, energy, and excitement were contagious.

2.3.1 What means the most to me is that for some reason I have been blessed (and I know how rare that is, and how quixotic) to be able to make things that sometimes have meaning to somebody else. (Truitt 157)

Alfred, NY

I had a body of work in front of me, the work and I staring at one another blankly, nothing reverberating between us. This work had somehow come out of a place I didn’t recognize, a place somewhere outside of me. The work, although made, was devoid of making. This was unsettling. A question came as I looked at what was in front of me: how can I expect anyone else to be excited or interested in this work if deep down within I am not there myself? With this awareness in mind I began to observe the surrounding studios, my peers, and their practices, this question continuing to resonate. The task at hand was trying to find a way to
return to my stage, to my core. I began to look back, dredging up past ideas that were discarded along the way. Too complex, too difficult, too unknown, too technical, too risky, too new, too uncharted; I tapped into this list, forming an idea that I could not know it in its entirety but within which an unknown journey resided. The piece that resulted was the beginning of an understanding, a moment in which both the work and I found a voice.

2.4 If the excitement and energy in a work or idea can block out the doubt then I have unequivocally tapped into something embodied within me.

2.5 The more I make and learn, the more doubt I have. The more doubt I have the more I want to make.

2.5.1 We work in the dark—we do what we can—we give what we can. Doubt is our passion and passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art. (James 122)
3. Marrow/ Invincibility

3.1 In sign language there is a sign, a colloquial way of saying something “is in you” / “from the marrow”: dominant hand, palm facing the floor, in a “C” position, is brought downward towards the lower abdomen. In a firm gesture, fingers tight together, the hand and fingers give a short but stout tap on or near the hipbone, done repeatedly for emphasis. This sign has stuck with me. First, because it is a pleasurable action, the more gusto to the gesture the better. Second, this visceral motion has the ability to be what it represents, a remarkable form of language. In observing this gesture without knowledge of sign language we can intuit its meaning.

3.2 Apollo Robbins, a magician and performer made this comment:

“Normally, when I’m not performing or stealing, I second guess myself, I have doubts....But when I get in that mode I’m invincible.” (Qtd. in Green 40) This invincibility relates directly to the concept “from the marrow”. Engulfed in a moment we act through body memory, making moves with all of our senses acting in space. What is produced in these moments I come back to reflect on later, turning them over to view from different vantage points, but certainly not stopping them in their midst. Until that moment passes, I stay on.
3.2.1 A tension between conscious intentions and unconscious drives is necessary for a work in order to open up the emotional participation of the observer. (Pallasmaa, *Eyes of the Skin* 29)

3.3 Although these moments are out of our direct control, an idea for a piece, in conjunction with its parameters, is an attempt to corral a space for things to happen.

3.3.1 The work should not be made with anyone else in mind. The ideal person for the work forms as the work takes shape. In creation the hope is that the work finds an audience not that an audience is found and the work made. (Pallasmaa *The Thinking Hand* 125)

3.4 Work, be it beyond expectation or full of flaws, which stems from this place, I can stand beside.

3.5 Construction evolves as performance: part script, part improvisation, and part serendipity. A finished piece is intended as a record, not a chronological history or a screenplay, but a synthesis of actions. A budding idea becomes a physically and mentally demanding work. This flight of investigations fosters an
environment in which these unforeseen preoccupations and actualizations become embedded within the final outcome. A journey resides in the challenge of each new work; the rough script begins a conversation with materials and space, evoking a tacit response.

3.5.1 As the work interacts with the body of the observer, the experience mirrors the bodily sensations of the maker. (Pallasmaa *Eyes of the skin* 67)

3.6 Challenges that develop with a given work are critical, opening avenues leading to new skills, tactics, and research. With each piece, a new set of physical, formal, technical and conceptual obstacles require a true commitment to the idea. The scale and scope of my work continues to push the boundaries of what I can handle. The work keeps working me, forcing an awareness and interaction which in turn constantly makes me ask what I am attempting, and why. These challenges produce spectacular moments that otherwise would lay dormant.

3.7 Once an idea takes over it must be made no matter how absurd and daunting the emerging path to completion appears.

3.7.1 No one should be scared off by the work involved. After all, I do not even have an assistant, and the hard core of the team
will consist of about sixteen people. If the same film were
being produced in Hollywood, they would not get by with
fewer than 250. (Herzog 115)

Pittsburg, PA
My routine consisted of working until four or five in the morning, climbing in my truck and attempting to get an hour of sleep and warming my badly damaged hands. The old brick building was a constant forty degrees regardless of the outside temperature. This, in combination with handling 6,000 lbs. of clay, is not the best conditioner for skin. After the quick hour of “sleep” I would move the truck outside before the warehouse employees arrived for work (I wasn’t supposed to be sleeping there). I imagine that I looked pretty rough as I sauntered into the diner down the street, every morning arriving just as they unlocked the door. Those three scrambled eggs with spinach and cheddar, a side of dry rye and coffee were the highlight, well, and of course, the bathroom. This became the way that I would make work, each time the circumstances would change slightly but the overall activity taking the same absurd path to completion. The desire to make each work became all that mattered to me. Each project’s conditions were a unique terrain that wore me down to practically nothing. No matter what I had endured, the work would pull me back in for more.
4. Performative

4.1 To borrow from the title of Matthew Goulish’s fantastic book, I think about my sculptures as existing in *Proximity to Performance*. Each sculpture is a residue of performance, a record of movement in a space between man and material. A space, like a set of ramps or a tennis court, becomes a type of stage; like an athlete in their element, implicit memory takes over, through which grace, skill and style communicate with space.

4.1.2 Merriam-Webster definition of performative: (adj) Being related to an expression that serves to effect a transaction or that constitutes the performance of the specified act by virtue of its utterance.

4.2 Although this performance is not presented directly, the material nuances become the signifiers, left to seep out of the sculpture. The work, sandwiched between construction and deconstruction relies directly on the actions imbedded in these two processes.

Los Angeles, CA

My friend Marc went on tour with Lady GaGa, in charge of one of the many stage props that make up her show. He sent me a picture of thirty-seven, 53-foot tractor-trailers that hold all of her gear, stages, and props. Each show unfolds
from this entourage of vehicles, a mad house of people scrambling around, working through the night and next day to make the evening performance possible. Her performance, in relation to the set up, is a moment, a glorious moment to some, but for all that work the action of the event is just a fleeting two hours. This is the reason I have always been entranced by the collaboration of a circus.

4.3 A work is constructed by me; I am the actor-my presence in the making of a piece imparts materiality and is its authenticity.

4.4 There is an amazing moment of clarity that arises out of failure. At their extreme, conceptual and physical failures articulate themselves the most clearly and provide grounds to decipher. Pushing an idea/material to the breaking point makes it susceptible to moments of unpredictability followed by clarity.

Richmond, VA
Standing in the rubble of a sculpture 24 hrs. before an opening was, at that moment, not a place I would have thought I would want to revisit. As I continued to stack thin varied lengths of arched cast plaster components into the mold, a form that I had only envisioned in my head began to appear in front of me. Hundreds of these components, which were to be suspended between two columns using plaster to adhere them together, started to resemble a bramble/birds nest or a ship’s hull split lengthwise. My excitement was high, sensing how the work was starting to operate within the space. The show opening
being the next day, I was feverishly working to finish. With all the components in place and plaster poured in to secure them, it was time to remove the mold. I slowly started to deconstruct the wood/foam supports, a process that I had not anticipated to be so difficult. Once half of it was dismantled it started to become clear that the piece was not capable of supporting its own weight. Unable to fully comprehend the consequences, due to the terror of realizing it might not hold, I continued to slowly de-mold, the creaking and cracking of the piece reverberating through the whole space. The drama of the event put me on stage, everyone watching as the work, as well as myself unraveled, ending in a bellowing crash as the last leg of the mold was pulled out and the 600 pounds of plaster came crashing to the floor. I was only able to salvage the skeleton of what had been in place. Coming back in the next day to clean up the destruction, I attempted to reassemble something for the exhibition. I was not terribly excited by the physical result at the time but the show went on and most people investigated the piece unaware of its imagined life. It took a while to get over the initial reaction of failure; failure at that moment manifested as negative, the piece that I had intended did not exist. I was inadequate at building. With time to reflect, I came to see that work as a triumph, a characteristic of my practice and my mindset. It would have been a failure to have had the idea for the piece and not to have built it because it was too complex and involved to make. Settling on a piece for the exhibition that didn’t mean as much to me, not commanding a dialog in a way I felt the space demanded, would in the long run have placed me in a much harder situation to come to terms with. The form that it took in the end was not at all
what I had intended or envisioned but imbedded in it was everything I had to give it.

4.5 Many actions can be talked about in terms of the performative, for me it has become a language that feels appropriate to commandeer when talking about aspects of my sculpture. The actions and rigorous forms of construction that my sculptures involve are paramount to me as a maker. The result of this performance becomes a lingering moment, encapsulated in a physical object. Left to be discovered, these moments unfold haphazardly rather than chronologically and directly relate back to the performance of making.

4.6 Space, whether in the studio or at the site of a specific installation, becomes a stage upon which I respond to the architecture. On this stage my actions are recorded through the material. I see the use of my tools like a set used in live theater. They are the props behind the performance, vital to the work’s potency, but not the work in themselves. Harnessing the energy, exploration, and action of performance is a core aspect of my practice.

4.7 Acting upon space by continually deploying and exploring new material techniques and concepts fosters unpredictable moments.
5. Material/Repetition

5.1 When I find material I tend to latch on to it. I have come to the realization that once I add a material to the roster, it is there for life.

Alfred, NY

Although I had used clay for a number of years, having been enticed by the many qualities of this material, there was a moment at which I was hit with how truly spectacular and profound it is. A simple action came to mind; I wanted to throw clay at the wall, this then formed itself into an idea for a sculpture. I wanted a mass of clay to float on the wall, a form generated by the action of throwing clay into a mold. I had material knowledge of clay, I had been handling it for years, but this was uncharted territory. After planning and developing the methods and tools needed to construct this sculpture, the shape I decided on was a 4’x4’x1’ square, the evening came in which the actions were to be performed. I mounted an armature built of wood, metal, and screws to the wall. My idea was that the clay would cling onto this structure, allowing its heavy mass to defy gravity without revealing the underlying support. I built a reinforced wooden open-faced box and secured to it the wall around the armature forming a perimeter mold. That evening I wheeled 1,000 lbs. of clay into the room and began hurling it into the mold. It was a slow exhausting process taking most of the evening. As I moved through the material the wall began to shudder with each throw causing
me to wonder it would hold up with the added weight. By the early morning hours the mold was fully filled and I used a wooden scraper to pull off the excess clay spilling over its edge. The mold was unscrewed and the four sides pried off exposing the formed wet clay mass. In exhausted awe I slumped down against the opposite wall, shocked at the monolith of wet clay floating in front of me, more spectacular than I ever imagined. Two weeks of planning and building, one night of pure physical grunt work, led to this moment, steeped in exhaustion, where this material I knew so well had taken on new meaning. This sculpture was beyond me. Clay expanded exponentially that early morning, full of potential that I would forever be eager to tap into.

5.2 My relationship with a material is one of collaboration. Each player pushing and pulling in different directions in hope of finding a balance, a place where the material wants to be, where it truly speaks its own language. Like Brancusi, I too feel that my working process is attempting to egg the material on, to awaken what already lies imbedded within it.

5.2.1 Besides...you cannot make what you want to make, but what the material permits you to make...Each material has its own life.... That is, we must not try and make materials speak our language, we must go with them to the point where others will understand their language. (Constantin Brancusi qtd. in Shanes 106)
5.3 My works are temporary interventions that change preconceived notions of permanence, permanence of place and permanence of art. In highlighting the fragility of material as well its inherent and inevitable demise our sense of time and commodity shift. What is typically obtainable, sound, and precious, becomes the opposite.

5.4 An idea casts a shadow. Once out from under that shadow the work can be made. When the work is made it in turn casts a new shadow. When out from under that new shadow understanding is formed.

5.5 I get deeply involved with specific materials. Once a relationship begins a long process of exploration follows. Other materials are used in a work but my intent is to bring one material to the forefront with each piece.

5.6 Materials I gravitate toward are typically already imbedded in our knowledge. From early on in life air, earth, gravity, and architecture demand our interaction. Our understanding of them builds through physical experience before the influence of outside explanation, before language. In working with these materials I attempt to conjure the experiential memories ingrained within us, deflecting the natural instinct to take in only with the eye and instead entice all the senses to respond.

5.6.1 When Brancusi carved, the content seemed to reside within the material rather than exist as façade decoration. The
selection of material determines the aesthetic possibilities and limitations. (Serra 31)

5.7 Can anything be repeated? Does repetition exist?

5.8 I tend to think about repetition in relation to a spiral. This path circles around but never returns back to the same point, moving upward along the curve, much like ascending a spiral staircase. My work operates on this spiral but not at a constant speed. Like a Slinky made of elastic the spiral can both stretch and accordion, extending and compressing at different intervals, causing a shift in the length of time it takes to move along that path. After a work is made I move away from it on this path, at times what feels like very far away, but eventually I find myself spiraled back above a past work. A moment arrives when, in the process of making or completing a new piece, I am provoked to remember to look down at the traversed path underneath me. A vertical line can be drawn down through the spiral, intersecting the curved path at parallel points, located above one another in the continuous form. My focus shifts to a previous piece located years in the past but surprisingly extremely close in relation to the newest piece. I am perplexed and awed that it took so many moves to make such a subtle shift. I may seem like I am making the same thing over and over, but each time it and I have changed, making what may appears repetitive anything but.
5.9  The manor in which I use materials in relation to a space causes the sculptures to be temporary. This however does not mean that they are necessarily impermanent. If the sculptures were left alone they would last as long as architecture. These sculptures, built into a specific location are one-time works. The effort and time to create each work is invested in this singular moment. To be moved means to be destroyed, never to take that exact form again.

5.10  Construction tends to be laborious, often involving many similar actions and movements in an attempt to propel material into a heightened form. Each material I choose tends to lead me to moments of struggle and physical pain. It is these actions, although not always immediately apparent, that I am constantly trying to deploy in a sculpture. I think of my sculpture as a moment of rest after an elaborate performance.

5.11  My choice to repeatedly use the same material stems from the fact that these materials do not provide immediate answers. It is only through repetitive use that I am able to begin to handle them in ways that I feel are building a language. If each work consisted of a new material I would be doing both the material and the work injustice.

5.11.1. Each material has it’s own life, and one cannot without punishment destroy a living material to make a dumb senseless thing. (Constantin Brancusi qtd. in Shanes 106)
5.12 My large-scale works are not just physical sculptural objects; they are installations that reshape the atmosphere of the space in which they reside. They are interruptions of architecture. Using materials that are typically employed in an architectural context, while referencing an architectonic language, each piece sets out to simultaneously challenge our notions of constructed space as well as highlight the absurdity and magnificence of construction.

5.13 Each piece is an attempt to command space. The sculpture becomes the focal point of the room, causing a shift of attention from a typical exploration of a location. Over time we have come to understand the constructs of architectural space, the wall, the stairs, the floor, the ceiling and how those things operate. Visual language takes over; we identify these specifics as things that we know, causing us to ignore the differences and shifts between them. Residing within this landscape my work disrupts the usual momentum. These works transform the routine and subconscious relationship between people, space, and time by developing responses that challenge our senses and disrupt the familiar. Demanding the body’s attention the work pulls us from the vernacular of the space, eventually returning us back into that space with a different array of senses awakened.
6. Perception, Imagery and The Physical

6.1 I want my work to be explored by the participant inhabiting its site, encountering it and the space in which it resided in order to attempt a dialogue. An image of the work can act as a placeholder or teaser but in no way is it an adequate medium. The photographing of a sculpture allows too many avenues of interpretation and manipulation. First the perspective is chosen by the photographer, then altered by the digital screen, then taken and cropped and repositioned/ reconstituted by the next author, each time interrupted and influenced by the settings that accompany it.

6.1.1 The definition of a digital object is based on assumptions of what aspects of it will turn out to be important. It will be a flat, mute nothing if you ask something of it that exceeds those expectations... A physical object, on the other hand, will be fully rich and fully real whatever you do to it. It will respond to any experiment a scientist can conceive. What makes something fully real is that it is impossible to represent it to completion. (Lanier 134)

6.2 We are a culture that is dominated by the visual. This is not a new occurrence; perhaps this shift began when we moved from a reliance on spoken word to a reliance on written, from vocal to
visual. It has, however, been expanding rapidly with the intensified integration of technology in everyday life. This dominant use of sight relates directly to the increasing separation between the self and the tangible world; our other senses grounding and connecting us to the world while vision separates us from it as Juhani Pallasmaa suggests in *The Eyes of The Skin* (Pallasmaa 25). We must demand an experience of the actual by forcing ourselves out of this remote way of perceiving. We must demand a different type of attention.

6.2.1 A physical oil painting cannot convey an image created in another medium; it is impossible to make an oil painting look just like an ink drawing, for instance, or vice versa. But a digital image of sufficient resolution can capture any kind of perceivable image- or at least that’s how you’ll think of it if you believe in bits too much. (Lanier 133)

6.3 An experience is indeterminate, shifting and developing long after the moment of its origin.

Richmond, VA

There is a work by Wolfgang Laib called *Milkstone*. While in a conversation with another artist we began talking about an exhibition we both saw on separate occasions at the MOMA. I mentioned Laib’s piece, thrilled to have been able to
see the work in person. At first she could not recall this particular piece in the show, however after describing its location and placement a faint recollection came back to her. I went on to talk more specifically about the work, a thick marble slab the top surface of which is sanded down creating a subtle depression. The depression is filled with milk, making the marble slab appear solid. Within her experience of the show, this aspect of the work was, until our conversation, lost to her. The slab of marble on the floor had read as just that, it’s subtlety lost within some of the more robust works of the show. Through my animated description of that work, her experience within the museum had transformed. It now sat in a new space, forever changed by how I had described it. It’s ethos was left for us to build upon.

6.4 My work is not intended to posture itself against the image or the digital spectrum. The amount of information available on a global scale is remarkable, a truly invaluable resource and medium, however, I feel it is critical to disrupt our involvement with it in order to be able to reexamine its role and best use in our current culture. By attempting to interrupt our daily relationship to the image I can break the loop, probing a new angle of inquiry.

6.5 My sculptures are not any more real than anything else around them, they compile aspects of the real in order to ground someone back into the space, awakening senses that lay dormant.
6.5.1 We live in a world ruled by fictions of every kind—mass-merchandizing, advertising, politics conducted as a branch of advertising... It is now less and less necessary for the writer to invent the fictional content of his novel. The fiction is already there. The writer’s task is to invent the reality.

(Ballard introduction)
7. Singular Spectacle/ Spectacular Singularity

7.1 At a time when so much is available at any given moment, the bombardment of images and information become staggering. At its worst it becomes a distraction that is almost paralyzing. I find attempting to provoke a broad platform for experiencing a work without providing the viewer with an immediate tangible reference becomes a necessary challenge. With only one object demanding your attention the everyday rules of engagement are confronted. Attempting to compete for attention and contemplation with a singular sculpture amidst the noise of information and images is a method of delivery with in which I am continually interested in working.

7.1.1 ...instead of inviting a sensory intimacy, contemporary works of art frequently signal a distancing rejection of sensuous curiosity and pleasure. These works of art speak to the intellect and to the conceptualizing capacities instead of addressing the senses and the undifferentiated embodied responses. The ceaseless bombardment of unrelated imagery leads only to a gradual emptying of images of their emotional content. (Pallasmaa *Eyes of the Skin* 34)
7.2 In clearing the stage and presenting a singular work the typical or illustrative relationship with a work is stifled. With those avenues sidelined one must turn to themselves to investigate the sculpture and their experience within the architecture.

7.3 Each sculpture is constructed to demand attention, a presence articulated through the space in which it resides. Enhanced by nuances directly generated by its location as well as by the feat of construction, a sense of spectacle is evinced.

7.4 The definition spectacle often alludes to the idea of something being presented to sight or view, eye catching. The presence of a sculpture is an arena for formal structure, an alignment of visual elements that incite closer investigation. These formal decisions become the initial magnetic charge, leading the body into conversation with the work.

7.5 Each sculpture juggles material, form, and magic, working to conjure a monumental moment of wonder.

7.6 The work I typically create embraces architectural space/scale. In attempting each construction the work comes up against an array of unforeseen hurdles to navigate through and overcome. These moments in construction lead the work to unexpected results; the piece has a life of its own.
7.6.1 As always we need to break our own rules, to leave space for X quantities, to invite the audience inside. (Goulish 15)

7.7 These works are more than physical sculptural objects; they are attempts to reshape the atmosphere within the space that they inhabit. The nature of how the material comes to reside within a site becomes the focus of this intervention. My works are designed to reveal and accentuate aspects of the site, an entry into questioning the space in which they exist, uncloaking aspects of architecture that, due to habitual exposure, become invisible and overlooked.

7.8 My works disrupt the familiar.
Section II

Then Perhaps Never

8.1 The following is a walk through of three works I am currently contemplating. Articulating what these projects entail, and how they will function, is a way to approach the work from a new perspective.

8.2 I consider much of my past work to have functioned in the realm of “projects” however these particular pieces bring the term into a more expansive arena. The scope and breath of each piece is on a scale that demands a more rigorous level of research, funding, and commitment, and involves multiple collaborative elements.

Quiver

Four times a day, a sculpture will be energized through an absurd performance.

A helicopter will fly to the site of the sculpture, hovering above a large circular base, 30 feet in diameter, the sides of which curve upward forming a wind collection basin. Sewn nylon material is attached to the curved outer rim of the basin and connected to a smaller raised ring of steel installed on the interior. The force of air from the turning blades of the helicopter is thrust downward into
the center of the sculpture and diverted back upward by the curve of
the rim, filling the nylon form with air. The inflation of the nylon
forms a vaulted bloom above.

The growing low rumble of the helicopter as it approaches is the
first seduction, intuitively alerting the senses to the pending
spectacle. The billowing arched circular form, as it inflates, rises up
toward the helicopter’s skids, standing poised a few feet beneath.
For a duration of ten minutes the helicopter hovers above the
voluptuous, quivering sculpture, accentuated under the whirling
motor. As the performance ends the helicopter rises and departs
from the inflated form, leaving it to gradually loose air and
delicately deflate into a heap on the base. The event, recorded
through physical memory, travels on through the words and
gestures of its audience. The billowing mass of material remains at
rest, a peculiar, curious, indeterminate object, wilted until its
subsequent act.
A 15-yard rear loading garbage truck is the mold, jig, form, extruder, an all-encompassing multi tool, a mechanism for staging an array of actions.

We are all quite familiar with this piece of industrial machinery; it is well engrained into our culture, though in most cases through a circuitous interaction. This mundane tool, designed specifically for tasks of collecting, compressing and transporting waste from an array of locations to the landfill, also happens to possess the ability to make extraordinary sculptures.

I want to use the hydraulic mechanics, standard within a rear loading garbage truck, to pack clay into the posterior cavity. The back flaps scoop up clay thrown into the hopper, dragging, scraping, and compressing it into a form. Once the cavity has been packed completely full of clay, the back hatch hinges upward, exposing the end of the interior mass. A hydraulic sliding wall system, typically used to empty the load of garbage, will act as the plunge, extruding the packed form out of truck onto a metal plinth. This 20-ton brick of clay resting upon the plinth and truck will be left to view.

Before packing the truck a decorative pattern will be printed to its interior walls. As the clay is packed into the truck, this pattern will be pushed, morphed, compressed, and distorted, highlighting the
action and detailing the clays movement against this interior surface. The squashed and mangled pattern becomes a record of movement upon a stoic monolith on the edge of motile. This residue is an incarnation of a performance. Within a collaboration of clay, truck, and driver, the material is spatially transformed but at its core not altered. In the end the inherent materiality is roused by action, an intuitive language that others can understand.

This piece is a transformation of material as well as of perceptual identification, of understanding, and of a mundane tool. The sculpture, no doubt, will be a massive and dense form. This is one of the elements that I hope to highlight, but more important are the marks and evidence of action produced by the journey of material as it is compressed within the machine. The meandering path the clay takes as it is dragged and propelled into a form will become embodied within its extruded shape.
I want to create a drawing using the wind generated by the turning blades of a helicopter. The sheer volume of air that is moved by the operation of this remarkable machine is astounding.

A pond or small body of water becomes the canvas upon which marks are made with air.

Using a combination of wood and steel I want to create a large stencil. A simple bolting system of interchangeable components can be attached to the square armature in different configurations allowing a limited array of shapes and patterns to be generated with this tool. Four steel cables, each attached to the corners of the armature, come to meet above the center of the stencil, producing, when taught, a visual outline resembling a pyramid, the point of intersection reaching 20 feet above the stencil’s flat plane. The cables are bolted together and a steel harness is then clamped and bolted to the mass of cables. This harness is used to attach the stencil to the midsection of the belly of the helicopter. The helicopter lifts off, raising slowly until the slack in the cables is taught, lifting the stencil off the ground, to center itself 20 feet directly below.

On a calm day the body of water lays still, a glassy surface completely undisturbed by natural wind. The helicopter with stencil hanging parallel to the water slowly descends until the displaced
wind begins to mark the surface, the water rippling from the directional force. Wind moves freely through the open areas of the stencil while the flat wooden sections deflect the oncoming wind. The moments when the wind first hits the water become the drawing, the pattern crisp on the fresh surface before the ripples overtake the rest of the pond.

Two small squares will be removed from the stencil and replaced with sheets of clear plexiglass. Cameras will be mounted to the stencil positioned above the windows to capture images of this drawing. The final result of this complex series of events is filtered into a singular gesture, a printed photograph of the pattern generated on the water.

9.1 Finishing a piece is as important as getting started. My work is not finished until it is removed from the space in which it resides. Given the nature of the materials used and the ways that they extended into the site, to remove it is to destroy it. The sculpture itself is a way of pointing to its end, signaling that it awaits this last move, to be erased from the stage.

9.2 As pieces that intend to highlight this temporal aspect, the sculptures sandwich themselves between these two acts of a performance. They are poised at moment after the crescendo of making, left to be pondered in direct relation to these acts of creation and destruction.

9.3 Like the architecture that houses the work the sculptures do not last. Although their deterioration and demise occur at different rates each piece works to focus in on this inevitable fragility and ephemerality. This attribute is in all that is man-made.

9.4 It seems fitting to talk about finishing a work while simultaneously attempting to bring this document to a point of closure. John McPhee talks about finishing in his *New Yorker* essay on “Structure”: “When am I done? I just know. I’m lucky that way. What I know is that I can’t do any better; someone else might do better, but that’s all I can do, so I call it done.” (McPhee 55) This makes sense to me, although I think I would add, until someone
else or I come back and do it better. At a certain point finishing a work is the only way in which I can move forward. I am not one to go back and rework a sculpture that I’ve decided is completed. Advancing new ideas, attempting to improve on them, happens with reflection and in turn with new work.

9.5 Only when finished with a piece do I have the room to move around it and converse with what has accumulated. During construction everything is close but with time and distance a work comes into clearer view. This allows reflection upon what transpired during the making and the reality of an idea within space.

9.5.1 It is peaceful to sit here in the morning sun and know that my sculptures are finished. Whatever happens now cannot change what has already happened to me in having made them or to them having been made. (Truitt 143)

9.6 Again turning to McPhee’s “Structure” article “To lack confidence at the outset seems rational to me. It doesn’t matter that something you’ve done before worked out well. Your last piece is never going to write the next one for you.” (McPhee 46) Just because I have finished before does not mean I will have the confidence to figure it out again. Often this lapse in confidence begins to creep in near the moment close to destruction of my sculptures. I have an instant of
reluctance in tearing a work down when, in the midst of destroying it, I fear perhaps I will never be able to do better
WORKS CITED


