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Reconstructing a Science Fiction Autobiography

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Reconstructing a Science Fiction Autobiography

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University

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Abstract

RECONSTRUCTING A SCIENCE FICTION AUTOBIOGRAPHY

By Jason Rood, MFA

This is a collection of essays revolving around concepts pertinent to my current visual arts practice, centering on a deconstruction of personal narrative mythologies. What is generated is a web of connection that spans Narrative Modes, Science Fiction, the use of Lines and Drawing, the Digital and Space and Time. Through this interweaving of topics, I am beginning the process of rebuilding the structure of a personal story for the future.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2015

Director: Hope Ginsburg, Associate Professor, Painting and Printmaking
Introduction

My artistic practice is primarily composed of loosely narrative, figurative drawing. In my current body of work, these drawings explore the overarching stories from my past. Over the last several years, I have been going through a process of deconstructing my identity. In doing so, I am determining what narratives, myths, and beliefs I choose to carry with me going forward. Drawing these past narrative constructions of identity has served as a tool to process my doubt and reconstruction.

A story is made up of three main components: a place, a duration of time, and characters. Space-Time is integral for the composition of narrative; as our location changes our experience of time changes with it. If we take a book, for instance, the reader is experiencing space and time in several ways. There is first the progression of the gaze. The reader’s eyes start in the upper left and progress line by line; the time and space of the story are moving forward. Second, the viewer has a disruption of his or her own spatial-temporal experience; he is both present in his living room and also in the place and time of the story he is reading about. The issue of space and time in regard to the narrative potential of my artwork has always seemed a little peculiar. The static image, unlike a book, can be taken in all at once. If the viewer can consume an entire narrative almost instantly, it loses the potency of a temporal progression. Much of my recent work attempts to find avenues of the temporal in the mostly static narrative image.
I am also beginning explore the narratives that are being constructed through new mediums within technology. Specifically, I have been examining the connections of space and time through concepts of the Internet, digital images, and cyborgs. Technology blurs understanding of location through the shared existence between the physical space that we inhabit and the non-space of the Internet. The Internet also distorts time, in that most images experienced on a screen or device are void of fixed temporality. Images on the Internet are bound to the temporality of the individual uploading it or accessing. Digital images however lack the same physicality that other people, places or things bound to space and time have. As we become more integrated with the Internet and technology through the use of companion devices we engage as cyborgs, which is becoming the future of the human narrative.
Line Making/Drawing

• A shell found in Java bears markings that date back 500,000 years, likely made by Homo erectus (precursor species to Homo Sapiens). This is the oldest recorded drawing found and dated (Callaway, 2014).

• Engravings in rocks located in present day South Africa date back 100,000 years. These are the oldest found markings made by Homo sapiens and therefore the oldest drawing made by humans (Callaway, 2014).

• Cave painting across the world are common, starting around 40,000 years ago (Callaway, 2014).

• Cuneiform becomes one of the first structured writing systems transforming from a pictorially based system to an alphabet from approximately 35,000 BCE to 4,000 BCE (Adkins, 2003).

The making of marks or lines is embedded in our identity as human beings, extending to a lineage that goes far beyond recorded history. Drawing is a commonly shared language, perhaps the most direct form of communication. Lines carry emotions, concepts, identities and personalities. They can exist in many different forms: a mark made by a tool on a surface, a path through the woods, threads of fabric, the theoretical line of a mathematical equation, a lineage or path through history, and a gesture, which is a line traced by the body through the air (Ingold, 2007). A drawing is the act of marking time and memory. Drawing is durational. It is the remnant and history of the movement of the human body through space. At the same time, this visualized history of movement is also the marker of individual memory. It transcribes what we take in through our senses and
puts it back into the world. Through the act of drawing, our minds act as filters or intermediaries (Sauer, 2009).

Drawing is a medium of possibility and direct translation. It is a tool to visualize and construct things that are not possible within the confines of the world around us. It is a conduit between the fuzzy and vague experience of our own imaginations and the tangibility of our present experiences (Sauer, 2009). Drawing acts as an intermediary between what is and what could be. It is in this way that drawing’s ability to tap into the necessity of imagination mirrors that of science fiction’s impulse to envision the future.

Drawing filters experiences that otherwise would be locked into a space and time. This could be a document of physical movement, like Richard Long’s “A Line Made by Walking” (1967). A line can also be theoretical as in Sol LeWitt’s drawings, which visually describe the idea of a line through mathematical precision. A line can also be a record of removal as in Robert Rauschenberg’s ‘Erased de Kooning’ (1953).

Marks and lines also help to contextualize history and time. Without the act of mark making as a tool, time is conceived only within the concept of the moment, since there is not a way to track the concept of time without a mark. The mark allows the prolonged concept of time to exist as it records days, months, years and stories of the past (Ingold, 2007). This marking of prolonged time also creates the concept of a personal line, or lineage. We are able to record who we are and what we were thinking at the time we produce each drawn line.

My own drawing lineage begins with Warner Brothers cartoons, comic books and coloring books. My current influences may be more sophisticated but these first aesthetic directions serve as the basis for my aesthetic preferences. Comics may be the most interesting element of these early influences because I was never really allowed to read them growing up. Yet I coveted them, which led to the desire to make drawings beyond the normal doodlings of childhood. I generated my own, creating characters with elaborate backstories and convoluted plots.

From there it was a natural leap for me to be most influenced by contemporary artists making figurative drawings. The work of Raymond Pettibon, Sigmar Polke, Mike Kelley, Marcel Dzama, Kara Walker, Neo Rauch and Jim Shaw is
Jim Shaw, "Valley of Kings, Utopian Landscape 1," 1988
inevitably connected to the kind of work I am aesthetically inclined to produce. They all in some way are in conversation with the aesthetics of comics of the past, using the tool of comic book line as a means of investigating the narrative content of their cultures.

This period, and the artists it produced, has moved drawing away from being a precursory activity. Instead, drawing can now be viewed as ‘projective’, a phrase borrowed from Yves-Alain Bois. Laura Hoptman calls projective drawing “the kind of autonomous drawing that is attached less to a process than to a finished product, that describes a specific object or state of mind, that maps a specific experience, that tells a particular story” (as cited in Rattemeyer, 2013, p.10). This is where I place my drawings, as images that are done not in a moment or a quick gesture but that are a long engagement with looking, thinking and acting.

Projective drawing also creates more opportunity for lines to carry the emotions and identity of the author. The line plays a prominent role within my own art making practice. Each line is like a fingerprint that shows my emotional state. Short, choppy lines denote anxiety while careful, precise lines display great care for the subject matter (Sauer, 2009). A line becomes a character or an avatar for me, the author of the story that unfolds on the page.

Through his very romantic notion of drawing, Michael Newman describes the activity as being inherently tied to loss. “Drawing with each stroke, re-enacts desire and loss. Its particular mode of being lies between the withdrawal of the trace in the mark and the presence of the idea it prefigures” (Dexter, 2005, Vitamin D, 7). I find the idea that drawing has a built-in ability to show loss compelling as I have been
shedding my own past narratives. Within my drawings, figures and actions fade into the background, becoming faint and almost memory like while objects and locations are more concrete in their rendering. To draw in this manner is an act of fighting between a letting go and a clinging to that mirrors my experience of the stories I am trying to convey.
Narratology

Narratives and stories are the combination of an identity and environment explored over time. Most of the time, these stories follow the structure of a linear narrative. This is a controlled structure in which an author lays out the plot (or sequence) for the reader and is followed in a forward-moving timeline. Film, novels, and comics follow this pattern of a set string of moments given to the audience.

These linear narratives can also be divided into subthemes. Narratives, according to Frye’s Anatomy of Criticism, typically fall into four categories (1957). He aligns these categories with the four seasons. There are spring myths consisting of comedies, summer myths about utopian fantasy, tragic fall myths, and winter myths of a dystopian nature. Frye see myths and human storytelling as reflecting the cyclical nature of life, birth to death and each category as reflecting a stop along the way.

Another type of narrative structure is a fragmented or complex story. Fragmented and complex narratives have emerged under Postmodern criticism of modern grand narratives (Heise, 1997). The questioning of the monomyth (Campbell, 1949), the hero's journey/adventure story, the totalitarian utopia amongst other formulaic historic narrative formats leads to a re-envisioning of narrative structure.
The component of chance is pivotal to the fragmented narrative. Beat poets use this method when cutting up and randomly rearranging strings of previously written poems. The format of the monomyth can even be subjected to the chance of the reader through a ‘choose your own adventure’ story where a series of options are provided to be selected in a string of reader-led cause and effect events.

Within film, which struggles to escape a linear narrative structure, the director can give the sense of disjointedness or fragmented time with which the narrative is engaged. This occurs when events circle back on themselves, moments from the future happen before the present, flashbacks from the past inform us of the
important character progressions. These methods work to keep the viewer confused in order to disrupt familiarity.

Most visual artists who create narrative art fall into the category of a fragmented narrative structure. Images are fragments of a bigger world and story arc that exist in isolated sections. Only the viewer’s knowledge of cultural cues informs him [or her] of the content of each segment. Artists such as Amy Cutler, Marcel Dzama, Jockum Nordstrom, Kara Walker and Neo Rauch leave their work loosely connected to narrative by suggesting it without providing much direct guidance to the viewer.

Neo Rauch’s paintings use images taken from other figurative and narrative images. He then pieces them together in his paintings in a formalist manner to create a disjointed and fragmented narrative. The work of Dzama, Cutler, Nordstrom and Walker utilizes visual components taken from illustration and comics that are tied to the idea of narrative visualization. In either case, these artists are creating fragments of a whole, a larger ongoing world at which each images hints.
Many of my drawings exist in a similar fashion as parts of a yet unrealized whole. They create fractions of a world with much left open or blank, hinting at the kind of world and experience that is involved in each moment displayed. The drawings also reveal themselves over time like a linear narrative. Images drawn lightly in value hide themselves from view until the viewer traverses space and time, revealing layers of information not visible from further away. This creates the same
sensation that would occur while reading, as the viewer’s eyes progress over the written world, tracing the story over time. Likewise, the drawings activate this sensation through the viewer’s movement.

Another way that my work incorporates narrative is similar to the concept of pulp and fan fiction, which operates at a macro scale. Pulp fiction is thus called because of its printing on cheap “pulpy” paper (Sturgis, 2012). This is an economic choice that was tied in with quick turnover, uncomplicated storylines and a fast paced publication schedule. Much of the history of science fiction is based on a history of appropriation and repetition of narrative structures. Pulp and fan fiction were keystones in the golden age of science fiction from the 1930s-50s. Fan magazines and publications took many existing characters and expanded upon them to lead to a rich and vast fan base that supported the growing genre of science fiction (Sturgis, 2012).

At the time, the work of writer H.P. Lovecraft was the most widely appropriated and expounded upon. This generated an interesting tension. As an author he was never well known or compensated and was, in fact, ripped off by many authors. However the fan fiction that came out of his work was also what made him known to a much broader public (Sturgis, 2012). Within pulp fiction itself, many authors would retell the same stories over and over again with subtle changes. The format of publishing cheap and fast books meant it was very possible that the reader of volume six may have only read volume one and four.

As large format, progressing narratives became impracticable for both readership and publication; it became more prudent to duplicate tropes and
character progressions so that each story became its own independent fragment of a
supposed meta-narrative. Similarly we see this in the realm of Hollywood media in
the frequency with which there are remakes of previously released movies or
sequels/prequels. A director brings his or her own vision to a rehashed story,
remolding it and tweaking the previous version.

Fan Fiction and the structure of pulp fiction is similar to another sub-genre of
science fiction, that of alternate history or alternate universes. Within the realm of
alternate history, authors explore how our past or present might be different if
other choices or events had occurred. Each of these takes an existing story and uses
it as an expounding point of departure for personal speculation. This reveals an
autobiographical element of personal taste and brings personal experience to
another’s story.

In my work this is reflected within a series of drawings about an
autobiographical pseudo self, a self in an alternate universe in which different
decisions were made or different environmental conditions exist. These drawings
are the act of making manifest these possible selves, which is similar to the act of
writing “autobiographical fan fiction”. This allows the exploration of speculative
outcomes related to what could have been or what I would have wanted to be.
Demythification

Myths are defined by Alan Dundes as sacred narratives that define how and why we humans behave as we do (1984). I think myths are commonly perceived as absent from truth or a naive interpretation of how the world is understood. My understanding of the world was hugely influenced by being raised in a conservative Christian home, watching lots of sci-fi/action movies, being discouraged from acting or thinking as a sexual being, and growing up in a very polite Midwestern town. I have spent much of the past few years personally unraveling and questioning the mythologies that were an inherent part of my experience. I currently have a strange and strained relationship with these worldview-constructing ideas. This relationship involves both the romantic desire to believe while simultaneously experiencing a great amount of distrust in the validity of these myths.

I now find the monomyths of my childhood, which I remain attracted to, dissolving around me. The Monomyth as described by Joseph Campbell in his book “The Hero with a Thousand Faces” is the hero’s journey, the path from ordinary life to salvation of a place or people (1949). The monomyth of the messianic Judeo-Christianity of my childhood and young adulthood, which is such a part of who I am, is now the source of confusion and skepticism. Other monomyths like the space opera, westerns, epic fantasy, which I adored, now seem hollow. They are narratives that I cling to even though I sense their ridiculousness in the limited, narrow and idealized portrayal of the human experience.

These familiar and beloved narratives are not just dissolving, they are also being displaced. This undermining and displacing of my own historical narratives,
the myths I have been told, the stories I have learned to be true, and the skills I have acquired, are linked to greater exposure and to conflicting information. My scientific
understanding tells me that older modes of describing how the world came into being are not based in a reality. Exposure to different cultures and ways of contemplating the world has also made me question the narrow narrative of my upbringing and experience.

Two other artists that have forged this path of deconstructing their adolescence are Jim Shaw and Mike Kelley. Both artists are from Michigan, as I am. They both grew up in religious homes and later used this experience as fodder for their work. Shaw’s series My Mirage (1986-91) tracks the story of his alter ego and avatar Billy. Here Shaw uses the language of comics and a large dose of pastiche and irony to confront the common Westernized story of fall and redemption. Billy finds religion after long periods of debauchery, sex and drugs. More recently Shaw has taken this engagement with the concept of religion further by creating his own. The Pseudo-Religion of Oism, which is loosely based on Mormon and Scientologist beliefs, parodies and explores the function and use of religion and cult-like structures (Danby, 2006). Mike Kelley’s “Educational Complex” (1995) is part of a lengthy engagement the artist has had with institutions involved in his early education. This sculpture shows each of the school buildings that Kelley attended in addition to his childhood home (Miller, 2015). The carved foam structure has large sections of the buildings missing, accounting for areas of which Kelley has no personal memory. This project, along with the artifacts it’s often exhibited with, starts to unravel Kelley’s past and certain indoctrinations.
This engagement and deconstruction of the mythologies those artists were exposed to in their childhood was something I never fully understood until recently. Perhaps my sustained appreciation for my own upbringing creates a difference in goals. Where Kelley and Shaw seek to disentangle and distance themselves from the myths of their childhood, I am aiming to deconstruct and re-engage with what is left of these stories. It is important to me to reconstruct out of what has been deconstructed, to give myself a place to stand even if the position is constantly shifting and being revised.
Kelley and Shaw’s use of irony also doesn’t suit me or the message I am interested in. Irony has been one of the main languages in modern and contemporary art but I still feel connected to the romantic notions of larger myths of religion, heroism and new worlds to discover, even if they are extremely problematic. Irony is too depressing and cynical; to re-interject or cling to some semblance of romanticism reintroduces hope and provides a chance to envision new future possibilities.
Science Fiction/Fantasy

Science fiction is taking the improbable and proposing it as possible. Fredric Jameson defines science fiction as, “the exploration of all the constraints thrown up by history itself – the web of counter finalities and anti-dialectics which human production has itself produced” (2005, p. 66). For Jameson, science fiction is a genre wrapped in historicism: it is a present time projected into the future. Science fiction is always in conversation with its present context. Fantasy, which is a related genre, is different from science fiction in that it is locked into a romanticism of a past place that never really existed.

Fantasy takes an idealized sense of the past, yet never lets go of its anti-historic perspective (Jameson, 2005). It ignores the problems and nuances of actual history. It sets up moral and political structures that do not exist because they are
overly simplified. It reassures us by imagining a place and time in which we were better and solutions were simpler and more straightforward. Conversely, science fiction wants to be linked to the now in a way that calls attention to present cultural or societal preoccupations while providing us with the imagination to look beyond them.

Science fiction utilizes the familiarity of the now to help us project and envision a new reality. There are two key factors that support this, namely places and ideas. In science fiction new places are known as neology, new ideas are known as the novum. Neologism, or the creation of new worlds, engages the creator and consumer in an act of projection or prediction. The author makes guesses based on future (or past) directions of societies. This generates the polarity found in science fiction between the temporal sense of the new and the now. This play between the familiar and imaginary is inevitable because of our rootedness in both what is and what has been. Even though these ‘new worlds’ lack a history for the reader/viewer they are inevitably tied to our own history and understanding of the world we currently inhabit (Csicsery-Ronay, 2008).

Science fiction has always had an obsession with neology or the ‘Alien’ world. The concept of an alien or foreign world didn’t start with Thomas Moore’s ‘Utopia’ (1516), but it is often considered one of the earliest science fiction related texts. In ‘Utopia’, the protagonist Raphael travels to a paradise-like island civilization that is vastly different from the medieval context in which it was written. Through this device Moore is able to reflect in a subtle way the pitfalls of current civilizations by projecting something new, and perhaps impossible. Whether with the Moon people
of early nineteenth century writing or a near dystopian society within contemporary young adult fiction, such as the Hunger Games series, science fiction continues to circle back to these themes.

The other main focus of science fiction is the implementation of novum or new ideas, things, and technologies. The Novum is a concept generated by Darko Suvin in his book ‘Metamorphoses of Science Fiction’ (Csicsery-Ronay, 2008). It exists as the central trope and novelty of science fiction. This primarily manifests itself as a new piece of technology like a ray gun, anti-gravitational devices, spaceships, and time machines. The Novum, like Neology, is tethered to reality, namely to science. In this sense it is at the root purpose of true science fiction, which is to advance ideas of science (Csicsery-Ronay, 2008).

The elements presented that are novum must be scientifically possible; in this way science fiction differs from magic or fantasy (Jameson, 2005). Magic is the mysterious and natural, a divine like power. The novum, on the other hand, is derived from the power and inventions of human production. It acts as an “intermediary, dialectical moment that brings renewed energy into history with each appearance” (Csicsery-Ronay, 2008). The goal is to create critical reflection on the inadequacies of history and the ideological mythologies of the present (Csicsery-Ronay, 2008). Because it utilizes current scientific theories or speculations to project what could be possible in the future, the novum needs the present in order to imagine the new.

Both neology and the novum are predicated on the act of imagination, the ability to envision something different from our current place and time. This is an
ability that seems lost in an a-temporal Postmodernity in which we constantly recycle the past back into the present. We have a desperate craving for new technologies, products, and consumer goods but much of what is new is just a minor re-mastering of a past iteration. The concept of the new has been co-opted and disenfranchised. This a-temporal and a-historic contemporary moment prevents us from casting our imaginations into the vast possibilities of a better future. Fredric Jameson sees this as the failing of a postmodern global capitalist machine in which we can sooner imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism (Jameson, 2005).

The transition from Modernism to Postmodernism in the late 1960s coincided with the decline of the last golden age of science fiction. When this occurred, visions of the future turned inward, critiquing the past and present. Our fiction stopped dreaming up “tricorders” and hovercraft and started looking at our dystopian present and post-human condition. Society is preoccupied by the present: global warming, repeating wars, terror attacks are the constant state of a news media that escalates fear (Gomel, 2010). As a result there exists a depression and lack of hope for the future. Between the constant critique leveled by Postmodernity and the perpetual state of fear, our cultural narratives have swung into dystopic territory. Imagining the future has been on hold.

In her essay ‘Making worlds in Art and Science Fiction’, Dr. Amelia Barikin proposes that the act of neology or world building is a key part of contemporary art (2013). She states that one of the main links between science fiction and current modes of art production is that “at its core, art is both a conduit for world-making
and a mode of thought” and that art “is motivated by an ongoing acknowledgment that the sensible world –the world in which one lives and breathes– is mutable, and as such can be changed.” (Barikin, 2013) Both art and science fiction exist in the tension between limitless imagination and relation to and being a part of the real world.

One artist who creates work with this tension is Chris Hipkiss. Hipkiss makes drawings that envision a deeply depressing post-Fordist future run by corporations and industrial complexes. Human beings are thrust into the background and are miniscule in comparison to vast industrial machines. In a more utopian vein is the work of Robert Smithson. Smithson, who had a strong affinity for science fiction literature, makes work that deals with issues of transportation, the sublime, temporality, and terraforming (Saxon, 2013). Tom Sach’s Space Program
(2007) may not be science fiction in the way that we think of the genre but is closer to its original intent than one might expect. His elaborate recreation of the lunar landing in a gallery captures a do-it-yourself fanaticism that brings wonder and joy back to an event that has lost much of its potency. To fictionalize one of the major scientific feats of the past century is, in fact, an act of science fiction in the most literal sense. While exploring the past, Sacks’ work may help envision another future.

In my own work I’m not interested in the grand envisioning of new worlds or new technologies. Instead, my work is about deconstructing the old or, if we relate it to Jameson’s work, romanticizing the past. This deconstruction also allows for more possibilities of reconstruction, with which I hope to push forward with a stronger sense of the Novum and a better sense of how to imagine new possibilities for what my work can look like in the future.
Time

Time: we can measure its passage be we are still not sure what it is. We use it to structure events into past, present and future. Though it can be perceived as nebulous, we often think of it as linear. Time is colonized by the order we place on it. We judge time to be moving either by our own passage through it, or the movement of time around us. Our minds constantly shift between our past iterations of self that are built upon one another, like ancient cities built on more ancient ones. We use this layering of the past to understand and project the future. We make guesses that eventually lead to realities.

There are two types of time: Kiros and Kronos. Kronos is the perception of time that is constant. Kronos is logical, based on measurements. Kronos is setting up a 3:00pm coffee date with a friend and both parties showing up at the same place at the same time (Rushkoff, 2013). Artist On Kawara’s “Date Paintings” are markings of Kronos, each painting is a reference to the time and place of the paintings. Much of Kawara’s practice engages with a clinical and set sense of time and distancing time from its emotional components. Kiros is the time of the moment, emotional timing. It is our personal sense of when it is the right moment to act, to do, to be. Kiros is knowing the ‘right’ moment to ask someone out on a date (Rushkoff, 2013). Kiros demonstrates that our perception of time can be personal and subjective.
The subjectivity of the perception of time is what I am interested in. I find the different ways that we each perceive or interact with time and the cultural forces that shape our views of time fascinating. In psychology, this is known as the field of time perception. We have internal body clocks that sync us with the event happening in our environment. This clock can be sped up or slowed down based on
the information our senses are receiving. Fast pulsing lights or audio can accelerate our sense of time. A conversation with someone talking at a slower cadence can make time feel as though it is dragging on. Time is constantly being altered by our surroundings and the stimuli produced in them.

In my drawings I have been exploring how to bring these altered time perceptions to a static image. The process of viewing any image has a temporal component to it. However, in order to alter the viewer’s personal perception of time, the image must be slowly revealed to the viewer. To do this I am adopting several strategies in my work. One strategy is constructing the images so that they require
the physical movement of the viewer by having parts of the image not revealed upon first sight. The totality of the image cannot be taken in all at once and therefore must require the viewer to spend time engaging with it.

Another strategy is that of expectation of duration. Long events of nothing followed by short moments of importance is actually how most of human life is constructed but this is not necessarily so within an art viewing context. In an art context, viewers typically move quickly through a space, spending little time with each piece. In order to break this pattern I am utilizing kinetic animations that occur after long periods of static. It is not important for the viewer to experience the entirety of the animation. Instead my hope is that as they occasionally catch these active moments in passing and feel as though much could have been missed.
Space/Place

The creative world is populated with spaces and places that don’t actually exist. These geographies of the impossible are realms that are associated with places or states of being that can never fully occur. Some of these places cannot exist because they are too perfect, while others are too destructive. We always exist on a spectrum somewhere between two of these places. I am interested in the everyday space that exists between these utopias and dystopias.

Utopia, meaning no place, is commonly thought of as a perfect place (Seed, 2011). Utopias don’t exist and could never really exist. As Fredric Jameson states, all attempts at utopia are failures (2005). However, this doesn’t mean that they
shouldn’t be imagined. The desire for utopia, or the utopian impulse, functions to reclaim an imagination of what the future could be, not to obtain it but to progress closer towards a better place or society. Thomas More’s “Utopia” and Henery Neilville’s “The Isle of the Pines” lay the groundwork for our contemporary understanding of Utopian literary models. In these stories the physical locations of these civilizations are removed by distance from mainland Europe as a way to plausibly explain their existence (Bruce, 1999). These first prominent Utopic stories where both critiques of the political systems of early modern Europe and exposed the inherent impossibility of a Utopian society (Bruce, 1999). In the last 40 years Utopian stories have not been written with great frequency. One major projection of near Utopian societies is the Star Trek franchise. Set several hundred years into the future, earth has emerged from devastating wars and Dystopic societies to create a unified world without want, whose main goal is pure exploration of the galaxy and betterment of the self. Star Trek was created by Gene Roddenberry in the 1960s and was as much a critique of his moment in time as it was a hope for a better future (Csicsery-Ronay, 2008).
Dystopias make up another popular subset of science fiction that reveals perceptions about our present state of affairs. Dystopia is often likened to the antithesis of Utopia (Seed, 2011). It is a place that is unpleasant or oppressive to its inhabitants. The movie Blade Runner was one of the first films to create and embody a Dystopic future. The dark, bleak, rainy, future Los Angeles serves as the backdrop for a world run by corporations. Humans and machines are nearly indistinguishable from each other (Seed, 2011). This setting plays to our fears of the future, which are really reflective of present fears we have about the direction of society.

Spaces are interlinked through temporal events. In science space and time influence each other tremendously, hence the concept of space-time. The apocalypse is the end of time, the ‘end times’. It puts an end to history, or at least a moment in
history. It is a destination, the end point in a line. It is the craving of Postmodernity. Derrida called it the “delirium of destination” (Gomel, 2010, p. 120). The apocalypse is a two-fold system of destruction and renewal. The apocalypse results in the separation between space and time (Gomel, 2010). It is the transition point in between two types of spaces. Within the Christian tradition, it is an event in time that leads to the transition from the fallen earth of our experience to the perfect reborn new earth. In Hollywood disaster films the natural apocalypse seems to always bring about the dystopian future where humans barely scratch out a living in their new foreboding landscape. Apocalyptic has the ability to bring about either Dystopia or Utopia (Gomel, 2010).

Most stories of Utopia, Dystopia and Apocalypse are told on a grand or macro scale. These stories tackle grand political and imperial intrigue. Small groups of underdogs fight against the oppressive regime or pockets of civilizations that have undergone a transformation far in the past to become a paradise on earth. These have been addressed and confronted at length within both writing and art. Recently, my work has undertaken the exploration of what a microcosm of these Utopias, Dystopias, and Apocalyptic places and spaces could be.

The concept of micro-Utopia can be found within Nicolas Bourriaud’s theory of relational aesthetics (Laurberg, 2012). His focus is on that of a Utopia of personal interaction. Mary Mattingly takes this concept and places emphasis on a potential post human and postproduction society. Her works consider where the objects that she owns are coming from and how to engage with the excess of things present in our society. In 2014 Mattingly launched “WetLand” a sculptural public space and
floating garden boat. This project explores how we as humans can adapt to climate change and envision tiny “ecotopias” in urban environments. In 2008 Steven Lambert and Jacques Servin of the Yes Men along with 30 plus writers and over a 1000 volunteers produced and distributed “The New York Times Special Edition”. This work was a projection of positive news events set 9 months into the future. The news articles contained the hopes and dreams of a better tomorrow and subverted the typically dystopian tone of the American news cycle. In my own practice, instead of attempting to manifest these principles in a tangible way I prefer to take Jameson’s model of utilizing the imagination as an exercise of thought rather than as a thing to be fully realized.

Utilizing small drawings I seek to derive a series of micro utopias, dystopias and apocalypses. The drawings start out as a thought of reinventing my past to uncover my perfect past, the past where I make all of the right decisions or create my most perfect self. But this past inevitably decays when manifested on the page. It swings from this personal dystopia into utopia before settling somewhere in between. A strange middle ground is created in which nothing is completely wrong or right.

Some of the drawings take a more autobiographical approach and venture into describing possible alternate universes, or in which I might exist. that I might exist in. An alternate universe, based on multiverse theory, is one of an infinite number of universes in which different decisions were made that changed the outcome of an event. This results in the possible creation of a universe that resembles ours but is slightly different.
One visualization of these alternate universes is created through the repeated use of a couch in my parents’ house. This was our living room couch growing up and then moved to the basement when I was a teenager. This couch has acted as a metaphor or an avatar for my past self. It has been mythologized and memorialized in my memory as something it probably never really was. The facts of what happened and the events that transpired there are not really important. What I have made the events out to be or what I can project onto the couch itself is more truthful and interesting. What remains of this couch is the memory of a place that was witness to who I was and who I became. It is the backdrop to my personal baggage, stories, and truths.
Digital Dualism

It is commonly accepted that an artwork has two lives: the life of the work in a physical space and its doppelganger, the jpeg, which is commonly found on the Internet. I am interested in how this digital, data, and networked information are both absent of a physical place while still being linked to a specific space. The concept of Digital Dualism suggests that there is a separation between the physical world and the digital world (Jurgenson, 2011). The two realms are independent from each other and we essentially have two existences, one physical and one digital.

The Internet is a non-place (no-place, utopia) in that its physical locality is constantly in flux and dependent on access from a real place in our universe/reality. Most of the images I have made are built for viewing in a physical space, losing much of their strength when converted to digital format. I am exploring how my work can be adapted to be tethered to both a place and a non-place and how to engage the viewer with this work.

The place of a digital image is based on the location of our access point. Screens give us a portal into another reality, one that is dependent on matter (servers, hard drives, devices, etc.). To use a device to access an image is to become a cyborg, a hybrid between an organism and a machine. Donna Haraway the author of the Cyborg Manifesto describes cybernetic machines as companion species to humanity and proposes that our close tie to them has transformed us into cyborgs (1985). This is a contrast to the idea of Digital Dualism, which sees a clear distinction between the digital/virtual and us. The way that we as humans move
between the digital and physical is becoming more and more seamless and the rate with which we move between these two worlds is becoming more natural at an ever-increasing rate.

The work I am currently exploring attempts to engage viewers as cyborgs by creating visual prompts to link to a digital space. Instead of a drawing or an image existing in the physical space of the gallery, it is accessed through technology such as a weblink, companion device, or digital scanner. Each image is created to take advantage of the unique viewing structure of the interactive screen. The viewer must pan or scroll through the image to view the entirety of it. The viewer becomes complicit in a cyborg activity by having to interface with a device in order to fully experience the work.
There is a displacement that occurs in becoming a cyborg. There can be confusion and an undercutting of belief. I have experienced this in my own life because of the growth of the Internet and its shared trajectory with my upbringing. The world I grew up in was localized and specialized, a place that was easily defensible from outside information. The Internet allows new information to circumvent the walls of a physical community, generating slow erosion of localized myths through the introduction of other myths and paths of thought. Science and evolution chip away at narrowly defined faith systems, heroes become villains. Ideological views are shown to have drawbacks from which you could otherwise isolate yourself. There is erosion and displacement of the security in knowing ‘the truth’, as your original history of myths comes into conflict with new ones.

Ideas and information available on the Internet are constantly being updated, displacing older content. Therefore, we don’t always have a concept of what the time frame for information is or will be. Information has a starting point: when the physical world generates content that becomes translated into a digital language. After being created we don’t know how long that digital artifact will exist. We understand the degradation or obsolescence of a physical object, image, or a life, but our concept of time and decay doesn’t seamlessly apply to the digital. Digital artifacts may never decay which is difficult to comprehend because of our finite sense of and access to time.

As a result, many images that are produced that may not ever be seen. Some images have very short lives in the digital sphere. For example, there is surveillance footage that is benign, and written over to leave more space for images that could be
important in the future. While other images may be latched onto as having particular interest to a moment in culture, spreading out through the network of the Internet, generating multiples of themselves, proliferating clones. Some of these iterations may mutate over time, creating versions that are distinct yet similar to what came before.

Artist Oliver Laric’s video pieces, Versions from 2010 and 2012 address the history of the use and reuse of images that we commonly associate with the Internet era. Everything within the piece is an appropriation, from the juxtaposed images to the transcript of the accompanying narration. The images demonstrate how widespread the use and reuse of similar tropes, scenes, and actions throughout media are. One use of an image begets the following use in a similar but slightly different circumstance, thereby moving the needle on what an image (or video) means ever so slightly. Through its further appropriation, the meaning slowly changes and expands.

Much of my own work is a constant back and forth between the digital and the physical. I am constantly scanning both the world and the Internet for images. These images are filtered, combined and collaged and are projected onto paper and traced. Each drawing becomes a transcription or a trace of the digital space into the physical space. Lately there has been more of an emphasis on the movement back and forth between these two spaces in the way I make images. Drawn images are scanned and traced and then printed and then scanned again. The drawings in this mode attempt to find a home or a resting space. Does the image fit best in a physical state or a digital state?
As these images reproduce and are shared, it becomes increasingly more difficult to find or trace a point of origin. An image eventually becomes lost or dispossessed; it becomes a wandering, transient image-object. Conversely, when in a physical location, an image is locked into a closed loop between the viewer and the object. The viewer is viewing the same image that will always be there. Several video animations that I have been producing involve revisiting a moment or an event repeatedly. Another iteration of this concept is using a flatbed scanner as a transporter between worlds. Content that is generated in a specific location moves to a web host, which becomes one of an infinite number of images that exist on the Internet.
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