2019

Spaces In, Outside Of, and Between

Michelle Peterein
Virginia Commonwealth University

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ABSTRACT

Underlying Systems and Structures

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Using Reproduction as a Tool

Altered, Transformed, Reproduced

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Soften_Distort

An Emblem and a Myth

Repetition > Form > Code

An Action and a Form, a System and a Structure
A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Design, Visual Communication at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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I am discovering new approaches to research and design—new ways of thinking and making. My practice involves leveraging analog and digital techniques from many disciplines, but especially graphic design, craft/material studies, and sculpture.

I embrace reproduction and repetition as both tools and means to visualize what is often unseen, and to recognize not only what is made, but what supports making—from the straightforward and immediate to the complex and conceptual.
Connecting past experiences to present research interests

My professional experience working at an architecture and interior design firm before graduate school gave me insight into the methodology of these fields, and also allowed me to recognize the benefits of a cross-disciplinary approach to my own practice. This experience was influential, but I believe the knowledge I gained from restoring a one-hundred year old house has had the greatest impact on my research interests.

Working with my hands and with minimal tools, I removed layers of drywall, plaster, and lath. Each surface removed revealed another time and place. As I was working, I speculated on the people who occupied the space before me. I encountered drywall that was added in the mid 2000s. Unpainted, and like the house, it was abandoned along with five gallon buckets of paint and miscellaneous tools. Beneath it was another layer of drywall. The paint color suggested it was added in the late 1980s or early 1990s. Then there was a thin veneer added in the 1950s, possibly. And finally, the plaster and lath from the home’s original construction in 1915.

Once all the layers of drywall and plaster were removed, the wood framing was all that remained—the underlying structure that supported the house and the people who occupied it.

Before new drywall was attached to old framing, I was able to see the infrastructure supporting the home’s future functions including plumbing, electrical wiring, and HVAC systems.

I realized that it’s not enough for me to see and do. I want to understand the structure beneath, the system that makes it possible, and everything that surrounds it.

Reflecting on the McRee Avenue reconstruction, I am recognizing that many of my laborious actions were repetitive: shoveling plaster, pulling nails, cutting wood, grouting tile. Although the work was physically and mentally exhausting, it was also rewarding to be away from the computer screen and working with my hands. I realized that I felt a deep connection to my actions (large/small), the nature of the space (macro/micro), where I worked, and to the variety of materials (old/new) and tools (power/hand) that I interacted with.

Before graduate school, I believed restoring the McRee Avenue house was the most challenging thing I had done to date. I find it ironic that when connected to the system of time, both graduate school and the house reconstruction span the length of two years.
Graduate school has given me the time, support, and resources to focus on what I gain from the making process—to think about the process as being continuous rather than definitive. It has provided the space to be curious—to approach projects in an open, explorative way.

Through my research:
>> I am comparing what is seen and unseen, what is interior and exterior, what is hidden and what is revealed.
>> I am connecting the tools and materials that make them.

Thinking about time, support, and resources

>> I am recognizing a subject, system, and action that is significant to my practice.
>> I am embracing methods of display that reveal the individual and material characteristics of what I make.
>> I am thinking about the transformative potential of mass-produced materials.
>> I am questioning the separation between hand and machine.
>> I am translating digital information into physical objects.
>> I am considering the ways that unfettered forms can open up possibilities.

THE·MAKING·PROCESS

INTRODUCTION
As a speculative future column, Coilosphere (the reproduction), that includes characteristics of my practice, I am interested in how my research interests can be identified and expanded upon based on Debray’s established framework. If the figure of time for the logosphere is the circle; for the graphosphere, the line; for the videosphere, the point; then for the coilosphere, it is the spiral. The symbolic authority: the invisible; the legible; the visible; the tactile. The status of the individual: subject; citizen; consumer; maker. And the maxim for personal authority: “God told me;” “I read it;” “I saw it on TV;” “I made it.”

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In his 2007 essay, published in New Left Review number 46 and titled “Socialism: A Life Cycle,” Régis Debray compresses the history of the written word into 28 pages. Debray traces the development of collective thought and communication media. Near the end of the essay, Debray inserts a succinct table of three columns that charts the characteristics of three “spheres.” The Logosphere (the word) runs from the invention of writing to the advent of the printing press circa 1448; the Graphosphere (the book) runs from the Gutenberg press through the Enlightenment, to the worldwide protests of 1968; and the Videosphere (the screen) which runs from 1968 to present day.

Recognizing artists and designers who support my research interests

WHEN THE MACHINE TAKES OVER FOR THE HAND
Rafael Rozendaal developed Abstract Browsing, an extension for the Chrome browser that turns his computer into a tool to transform web pages into abstract compositions. Once captured, these digital forms are reproduced as large-scale Jacquard weavings. Human designed and machine optimized, pixels on a screen become stitches on a tapestry. I am interested in the software plugin as a tool for generating physical objects (Jacquard weavings) from digital information (webpages).

WHEN CONTAINERS FOR CONTENT BECOME CONTENT
In The Process of Design Cannibalization, Ines Cox removed all the content from online platforms so all that remained were the containers that housed the information. I am interested in how Cox shifted the focus from the content to the structures that organize and display the content.

WHEN WHAT IS MADE BECOMES ONE OF MANY—THE HAND BECOMES THE MACHINE
To produce Over Ten Thousand Individual Works, Allan McCollum copied hundreds of forms of everyday objects: bottle caps, paperweights, cat toys, a measuring spoon. Each individual work is a different combination of collected forms—no two are exactly the same. I am interested in the strategies of mass production to hand made objects as well as his system for creating thousands of unique forms.

USING REPRODUCTION TO VISUALIZE UNDERLYING STRUCTURES AND SUPPORT
Sol LeWitt’s wall drawings exist as simple instructions on a sheet of paper. Production is intended to be temporary, but repeatable. Wall Drawing #51 is comprised of hundreds of blue lines of varying length stretching from one architectural detail to another. Because it is constructed according to the conditions of the wall, it recognizes the unique architectural details of the space where it is implemented. I am interested in the concept behind Lewitt’s wall drawings. As a set of instructions that can be reproduced anywhere, at any time, without requiring Lewitt’s physical presence.

REFERENCES


AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

Tauba Auerbach makes objects that reveal her research interests in language, technology, and scientific phenomena. The ranges from painting and graphic design to weaving, photography, and digital technology. I am interested in Auerbach’s use of visual pattern and her approach to investigating systems, processes, and materials—both man-made and organic.

USING MASS-PRODUCED, MACHINE MADE OBJECTS OR MATERIALS FOR MAKING

Eva Hesse fully explored the transformative potential of the mass-produced materials she used for making. Accession I II consists of a five-sided, industrially fabricated exterior made of galvanized steel screens through which Hesse poked 3,670 short pieces of silver colored rubber tubing. I am interested in Hesse’s use of mass-produced materials. With Accession II Hesse created a contrast between the hard, geometric framing of the exterior and the repetitive, soft contents of the interior.

GRID AS A STRUCTURE

Howardena Pindell’s work employs texture, color, structures, and the process of making to call attention to political issues. Pindell adopted the grid as a structure for her drawings and paintings. I am interested in Pindell’s use of the grid, scale, repetition, and laborious processes. In a small work from 1974, Untitled #58, Pindell covered a hand-drawn grid with a mash-up of vellum scraps and hole-punched paper dots. The paper dots, too numerous to count, create a translucent surface of light and shadow.

EMBRACING THE IMPERFECT

Sheila Hicks: Weaving As Metaphor examines the small woven and wrought works artist Sheila Hicks has produced for the past fifty years. I am interested in this book not only as an example of Hicks’s use of weaving as a medium to communicate and visualize places and ideas, but also as an example of design decision that Irma Boom made that recognize the characteristics of the materials the book is made from.

TRANSLATING DIGITAL MESSAGES TO FIBER WORKS

Textile artist, Francesca Capone, explores the connections between weaving, writing, and text in her work. Writing in Threads consists of fifteen weavings Capone created as a response to e-mail correspondences. I am interested in Capone’s use of weaving to translate and reproduce language.
A GRAPHIC DESIGNER WHO THINKS LIKE AN ARCHITECT
Karl Nawrot incorporates handmade tools and devices into his design process. Nawrot views these tools as design objects in and of themselves. I am interested in the way Nawrot’s work blurs the line between design tools and what they create.

USING AVAILABLE TECHNOLOGY
The Xerox Book utilized unconventional modes of exhibition: it was part of an ongoing attempt by Seth Siegelaub to show work outside of the gallery setting. Siegelaub asked seven artists (Carl Andre, Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth, Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris, and Lawrence Weiner) to create 25 pages of work that responded to the photocopy format. I am interested in the Xerox Book for its intent to respond to the photocopier, that in 1968, was considered a new technology.

REPRODUCING SPACE AND MEMORY
For Rubbing/Loving, Suh covered every surface of his apartment with white paper which he then rubbed with colored pencil. I am interested in the way that Suh uses this technique to capture the physical details of his apartment—how memory of space can be reproduced.


Recognizing Support Structures
Support Structures is a collection of essays, images, and examples that recognize the importance of what gives support in production and cultural practice. I am interested in this book as it opens up my thinking about what a support structure is and can be.

Setting Rules and Conditions That Allow Systems to Create Outcomes
The Conditional Design Workbook invites readers to actively participate in playfully designed sets of rules that stimulate collaboration and lead to unpredictable outcomes. I am interested in this book because it offers an example of a rule-based approach to design and focus on process rather than the final product.

When the Exhibition Catalog Becomes the Exhibition
In Title of the Show, Julia Born reproduces the space of the book in the space of the gallery. I am interested in the shift from two-dimensional to three-dimensional. And the subversion of the gallery and exhibition relationship.


Born, Julia. Title of the Show. 2010.
I am exploring what is lost and gained through reproduction, especially, the time and labor of making and materials. Reproduction, installed in the fall of 2018, uses reproduction as a method to show what the original work can not.

The fiber works took many hours over several days to create. The time and labor of making was concealed and distorted in the print reproductions as the scans were done in seconds, and prints were done in minutes. By shifting scale and materials, textured surfaces became smooth, and three-dimensional objects became two-dimensional pixels on a screen before becoming ink on paper.

"Technical reproduction can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself."

Walter Benjamin, The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction
As you enter the space the facing posters show both the front and the back simultaneously, and the back of the posters reveal the underlying support structure needed to make the work.
Making connections between what is mass-produced by hand and what is mass-produced by machine.

In addition to the affordances of reproduction, I am also thinking about accessibility and what it means to use tools and materials that are readily available to me: pen and paper, hand and time.

» I am thinking about the significance of making by hand with materials that are made by machine.

» I am thinking about the significance of carrying out actions that I feel compelled to do again and again.

» From coiled ink on paper to coiled felt around cord.

Through the clothing that we wear, fiber and textiles provide all of us with a second skin, giving us protection, utility, and the ability to express ourselves.

» I am thinking about the significance of incorporating fiber processes and techniques into my practice.

» I am thinking about the significance of embracing the vulnerability and imperfection of the raw materials I use to make.
Leveraging chance and control by giving agency to systems, tools, and materials

Inspired by the Xerox Book, organized and published by Seth Siegelaub in 1968, in the fall of 2017, the first and second year graduate students created a similar publication, each contributing 25 pages. My section employed the photocopy format utilized in the Xerox Book. Along with the constraint to use only the photocopier, I also only used paper found on my desk—mostly test prints of patterns from another project and a stack of transparent laser print paper. From these tools and materials, a system emerged for printing my pages that built onto the previously printed page.

Pattern language replaces alphabetical characters with patterns. Control is imparted in the patterns I establish and chance is in the interaction the patterns have with one another when words are translated. To show how the system responds, I used the first names of my graduate school cohort. When the characters of our names were collapsed, new patterns and combinations of patterns emerged.

>> When working with constraints, the parameters I set become the underlying system and structure.
Sound Systems x 4 is the result of a generative system. Using a set of color codes and graphic patterns, I translated an audio recording of felt wrapping a fiber cord to create a series of printed posters.

For this work, I was interested in the visual patterns that could be created from sound, as well as the contrasts and similarities that the same sound sample could create.

By dividing the recording into increments of time and assigning a color coded system, the top of the sound for each increment determined the color code at the bottom. The color code was translated to graphic patterns. The graphic patterns generated the posters. The form and material changed completely from an audio file on my computer to a series of printed posters on the wall.
Text and Textiles is language translated to fiber coils. Alphabetical characters are reproduced as a band of colored thread. Control is imparted in a text I authored and chance is in the color combinations that the text generates. The text includes literal and figurative language that contributes to the form and meaning of the finished work.

cotton and cord.
wrap. wrap. wrap.
hands and mind.
wrap. wrap. wrap.
individual and community.
wrap. wrap. wrap.
Invisible Structures is an investigation of the unseen support structures in print design—meaning everything that supports making but isn't seen in the finished work.

By documenting the frameworks within InDesign that aren't typically included in the final, printed work, I am shifting the focus—the containers for the content become the content for the publication.
Using a mass-produced material to create an expanding body of work

I embraced multiple uses of a single material, a mass-produced plastic mesh canvas, to create a body of work that extends, collapses, distorts, and disrupts the grid.

As a “network of lines that cross each other to form a series of squares or rectangles,” I think about the grid as both a system and a structure.
In a 1979 paper titled “Grids,” Rosalind Krauss describes the grid as being ‘antinatural’ by saying “the grid is what art looks like when it turns its back on nature. In the flatness that results from its coordinates, the grid is the means of crowding out the dimensions of the real and replacing them with the lateral spread of a single surface.”²

Antinatural is a collection of letterforms created from removing sections of a plastic mesh canvas. For this work, I was interested in challenging the ‘flatness’ that Krauss refers to by building depth from the voids created when layering multiple letters.

Through reproduction, three-dimensional letterforms became two-dimensional pixels on a screen. Once in digital form, I created animations that moved through a series of letterform combinations.
Exploring the potential of the grid as both a malleable structure and an open system.

Soften_Distort explores the potential of the grid as a structure and a system. The work expands and collapses to disrupt the grid’s Cartesian order. It gives dimensionality to the flat grid plane and its malleability challenges the rigid, absolute structure of the grid. Moving from physical to digital space, it becomes a tool to generate future layouts.

Soften_Distort
Fall 2018
Black mesh and vector line drawings
36in x 48in
Overtaking, disrupting, and altering—many become one, small becomes large, rigid and hard becomes soft and flexible.

An Emblem and a Myth visualizes the conceptual connection of the grid to modernism and post modernism. It also builds on the idea of the grid as an "antinatural" being. The work overtakes, disrupts, and alters—many coils within the small grids become one large coil within the room. Rigid and hard materials converse with soft and flexible materials. The work also introduces ideas around mass production—materials that are mass-produced and mass-producing by hand.
I am connecting hand to machine, and labor to time. Like sunrise and sunset, time as a system is repetitive. Seconds repeat every minute, minutes repeat every hour, hours repeat everyday, and days repeat every year.

I am interested in the intersection of reproduction and the uniqueness of the art object—how strategies of mass production can be applied to hand-made objects.

I am interested in what it means to commit to making one single object many times over—how abundance can be used to communicate.

I am interested in showing the accessibility of time and materials—how the support of making can be visualized.

I am thinking about time as a spiral, a loop, a coil.
My coils are assembled through repetition, through form captured and reproduced, through a code carried out again and again.

They are connected to themselves, to each other, and to the space they occupy.

They are small and intimate—made by hand, made by the same hands.

They are material made of material; objects made of objects, texture made of texture; things made of things.

They are soft, malleable, and toylike.

They are responsive, adaptive, and flexible.

They are inclusive—without rank or hierarchy.

They are absent of color and open to interpretation.

They are an action, a form, a system, and a structure.

Following my fourth semester review, the quantity of coils increased—from 835 to 1,291. The method I used to display the coils also changed—the horizontal plane of a classroom table shifted to the vertical plane of a gallery wall.

Using t-pins as support structures, I attached the coils to the walls of The Anderson Gallery, using a pattern generated by an audio recording of making one of the coils, to establish a code that informed their arrangement on the wall.
Recognizing time, labor, and support

To further explore the connection between time and labor, and hand and machine, I attached all 1,291 felt coils without assistance. Each coil is unique and malleable, so it was important to me to have complete control of the way the coils interacted with the wall and each other.

As a way to acknowledge what provides support, throughout the installation process, I documented the tools I used. I also documented and translated the time I spent making. I estimated that each coil took 5 minutes to make, so $1,291 \times 5 = 6,455$ minutes divided by 60 minutes an hour $= 107.5$ hours divided by 24 hours a day $= 4.5$ days. This is equivalent to the amount of time I had to install in the Anderson Gallery (Monday - Friday at noon).
As my thesis exhibition was only part of my ongoing research interest, I wanted to embrace the idea of meaningful incompleteness—to suggest that the work is without a definitive beginning or end. The coils are made of felt and felt is made by rolling wool back and forth until it enmeshes, so potentially, felt can extend in all directions, without limit. I choose white felt because I believe the absence of color opens up interpretation.

It was also important to me that the method of display I chose for the coils celebrated their individual and material characteristics. By using t-pins, each of the coils was able to be molded into its own unique shape. The depth needed for the coils to create reproductions through the shadows they cast on the wall.

Revealing my intentions through form and material
THE COILOSPHERE AND BEYOND

Generating formal and conceptual divergences

Working with the form of the coil and the action of coiling has been generative for me. Each iteration of the coil has added layers of meaning and sparked new ideas for how the coils can be displayed.

I will continue to acknowledge that formal changes can alter and add to the way work is interpreted.

I will continue to leverage analog and digital techniques.

I will continue to investigate the ways technology and reproduction inform each other.

I will continue to expand upon the language and writing style I've developed through my thesis research.

I will continue to embrace nontraditional form making and innovative tool use.

I will continue to employ actions and techniques, and forms and materials that reveal underlying systems and structures.

The Xerox Book utilized unconventional modes of exhibition. It was part of an ongoing attempt by Seth Siegelaub to show work outside of the gallery setting. Siegelaub asked seven artists (Carl Andre, Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth, Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris, and Lawrence Weiner) to create 25 pages of work that responded to the photocopy format.

I am interested in the Xerox Book for its intent to respond to the photocopier, that in 1968, was considered a new technology.


Tauba Auerbach makes objects that explore language, technology, and scientific phenomena. The medium of her work ranges from painting and photography to weaving. I am interested in her approach to investigating systems, processes, and materials—both manmade and organic.


In The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, Walter Benjamin writes about the affordances of reproduction, and also makes the argument that the aura of work of art is lost through mechanical reproduction. I am interested in the areas of this text where Benjamin writes about artists using technology that is available to them, and what is lost and gained through reproduction.

Born, Julia. Title of the Show. 2009.

The space of the book becomes the space of the gallery. The space of the gallery becomes the space of the book. I am interested in this shift from two-dimensional to three-dimensional. And the subversion of the gallery and catalog relationship.


Textile artist, Francesca Capone, explores the connections between weaving, writing, and text in her work. Writing in Threads consists of fifteen weavings Capone created the work as a response to e-mail correspondences. I am interested in Capone’s use of weaving to translate and reproduce language.


Support Structures is a collection of essays, photos, and images, and examine the importance of what production and culture is represented in this book and can be.

Cox, Ines. The Process of Design Cannibalization. 2017. Design Cannibalization, In: The Process of Design. Ines Cox removed all content from online platforms, all that remained was the container, that housed the information. I am interested in how Cox shifted the focus from the content to organize and display the content.


Sheila Hicks: Weaving as Metaphor examines the small woven and wrought works artist Sheila Hicks has produced for the past fifty years. I am interested in this book not only as an example of Hicks’s use of weaving as a medium to communicate and visualize place, but also as an example of Irma Boom’s design decision to transform a bound publication into a sculptural object.


In the 2007 essay, “Socialism: A Life Cycle,” published in New Left Review number 46, Régis Debray compresses the history of the written word into 28 pages. Near the end of the essay, Debray inserts a succinct table of three characteristics of three ‘spheres.’ The Logosphere (the word), the Graphosphere (the book), and the Videosphere (the screen). Using the framework that Debray developed, I added a fourth column. I was interested in how my research interests would fit into this established communication system as a speculative future.
Sol LeWitt's wall drawings exist as simple lines. LeWitt Collection, Chester, Connecticut

Eva Hesse fully explored the transformational potential of materials she used. Hesse's works consisted of a five-fabricated exterior steel screens through which she poked 30,670 short pieces of silver colored rubber tubing. I am interested in mass-produced materials. With Accession II, Hesse created a contrast between framing the exterior and the repetitive, soft contents of the interior.

Howardena Pindell's work employs texture, color, structures, and the process of making to call attention to political issues. Pindell adopted the grid as a structure for her drawings and paintings. I am interested in the way that Suh uses the grid, scale, repetition, and devices into his design process. Nawrot views these tools as design objects in and of themselves. I am interested in Hesse's use of the grid as being "what art looks like when it turns its back on nature." I am interested in the rule based approach designed sets of rules and conditions that stimulate collaboration between participants and lead to unpredictable outcomes. I am interested in the concept behind Lewitt's wall drawings. As a set of instructions that can be reproduced anywhere, at any time, without Lewitt needing to be present. The Conditional Design Workbook invites readers to actively participate in playfully designed sets of rules and conditions that stimulate collaboration between participants and lead to unpredictable outcomes. I am interested in the rule based approach and focus on process over product that the Conditional Design Workbook promotes.


How McCollum questions the separation between hand and strategies of mass-produced objects.

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