Embody - Encode

Mary Catherine Brooks
Virginia Commonwealth University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd

Part of the Fine Arts Commons

© The Author

Downloaded from
https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/2480

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact libcompass@vcu.edu.
Embody-Encode

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

By:

Catherine Brooks

Bachelor of Arts in Printmaking
The Evergreen State College, 2001
Master of Fine Arts in Painting and Printmaking
Virginia Commonwealth University, 2011

Director: Holly Morrison, Chair, Associate Professor
Painting and Printmaking Department

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia

Catherine Brooks © 2011
All Rights Reserved May, 2011
For All of My Teachers
  Including:

  Tonia Baker
  Kathan Brown
  Dan Leahy
  Holly Morrison
  René Tazé
  Barbara Tisserat
  Audrey Vizzard
  Gregory Volk
Contents

1. Introduction: Arroyo Education
2. Illustrate: Tantric Semantics, Codes of Tongue and Eye
3. Embody: Southwestern Sublime and the Pragmatics of Place
4. Enact: Metaphysical Morphology
5. Engage: Relational Signals
6. Curriculum Vitae
7. Works Cited
Abstract

According to Walter Murch, sound designer, “The clearest example of encoded sound is speech. The clearest example of embodied sound is music.”¹ In image, object and performance I have been exploring the embodiment of the encoded through the graphic representation of symbols (illustrate), the manifestation of symbols through material construction (embody), the activation of symbolized meaning through performance (enact), and the dematerialization of form and democratic dispersal of information through shared experience (engage). This methodological approach aims to transform metaphysics into physical being as a mode for researching energetics and abstract communication by bringing theory into practice where it can be tested for truth.
Introduction: Arroyo Education

In 1981 the Bay Area Truth Consciousness Ashram closed and the disciples of Swami Amar Jyoti scattered to his other establishments in Michigan, Colorado and Arizona. My parents and I joined the caravan heading south to the Desert Ashram in my father’s hometown of Tucson, which became my own.

The city of Tucson, Arizona, established in a desert valley, is surrounded by five mountain ranges but its frontier does not form a pentagon. The surfaces of the mountains that contain the city expose striated patterns indicating that the valley once held water. Now, two dry riverbeds carve deep lines through the land and wait for monsoon rain. On the flat plain not much grows, but if you get stranded you can drain and drink moisture from the roots of a barrel cactus. Underfoot, in the sand, are artifacts of ancient civilizations: adobe walls, pottery shards and arrowheads. Natural and
anthropological histories, along with related residual energies are embedded in the land as evidenced in earth formations, relics and sociological attitudes.

The Tucson valley holds many codes, like a mouth, from where information comes forth. Bordering Mexico, Arizona is multilingual, having tongues in English, Spanish and Native dialects. Growing up immersed in the rhythm of foreign language, surrounded by information and without a key to decode meaning, I learned to interpret content through symbols and gestures of expression. This is how universal, regional or individual signs are born in which, for example, a red octagon means “stop” no matter what is written on its face, and wearing red to school can get you into trouble with those who uphold ghetto color protocol.

The patterns in the doings of the living leave impressions in space and become the cultural compost of the future. Architecture reshapes urban space and embodies the ideologies of the society that builds it. Ed Ruscha acted as an archeologist investigating his own era in his aerial photographs of parking lots, which read like geoglyphs. Through his lens the functional marks of modern infrastructure transform into symbols of American sprawl, made more poignant in their resemblance of the ancient Nazca Lines in Peru, which seem to be attempting communication with the cosmos.

*Parking Lot, Edward Ruscha (above)*
*Nazca Lines (below)*
Identifying, investigating and processing codes of communication—literal or abstract—found in speech, image and environment, so to extract possible meaning, is the main concern of my creative practice. I have developed a four-part methodology that begins with the literal analysis of found and invented symbols. Through the process of drawing I attempt to illustrate the power of an icon through shape and color. Next, I transform these graphics into human-scale objects with materials carefully chosen to translate intention into form. These items are made potent through repetitive actions and focused attention. Further, by incorporating these objects into performance, which is photographed, I activate the content of the symbol-forms. Lastly, the process dematerializes and regenerates by way of my instructions for interpretive movement, inspired by hatha yoga and aikido. These four stages act as steps towards importing found codes into the body, where meaning is processed through embodiment and action, so that understanding is made concrete through practice rather than speculation.

The specific language of symbols that I have been working with recently is the ancient Indian Vedic cosmological chakra system—a code of seven points with physical, emotional and energetic attributes—that aid practitioners in the investigation of the body’s relationship to the a classical eastern notion of the divine. Each chakra is represented by a symbol, color, emotion and element (among other associations) and the entire system stacks in prismatic order from red at the base of the spine, to violet at the crown of the head.
The Chakra system serves as a “metaphysical bridge between matter and consciousness.” The first chakra is represented by the color red and the earth element; it is located at the base of the spine, and determines our attitude towards survival. The second chakra is represented by the color orange and the water element; it is located in the lower abdomen and generates sexual emotions. The third chakra is represented by the color yellow and the fire element; it is housed in the solar plexus, the location of personal identity, ego and will power. The fourth chakra is at the heart center, represented by the color green, the air element and the emotion of love. In the throat is the fifth chakra, the center of communication; its element is sound and color is blue. Between the eyebrows is the third eye, the sixth chakra; the center of intuition and imagination, represented by the color indigo and the element of light. The seventh chakra is at the top of the head and is represented by the color violet and the element of consciousness.

In the works that I am presenting for the exhibition component of my MFA thesis, I have included five constructed objects to represent the first five chakras, and a performative photograph for the sixth chakra. The seventh chakra is immaterial consciousness and I am representing it through Art Moves, a four-day program of community movement sessions. Whether through instruction or individual inspiration, viewers and participants are invited to closely approach the objects, which are installed at the level of the body corresponding to the energetic point that each object is representing.
Illustrate: Tantric Semantics, Codes of Tongue and Eye

The primary organs of communication, the mouth and tongue, have symbolic counterparts in Hindu Tantra as yoni and lingam, representing female and male reproductive organs as well as divine counterparts, Shakti and Shiva. Tantric philosophy teacher, Douglas Brooks, identified this parallel in a lecture I attended at Yoga Kula in Berkeley, California in 2007. He stated that to speak a sacred mantra is like making love with the divine. This metaphor is an explicit example of my intention to transform literal information into subtle sensation, as well as the inverse of that transformation.

Legend: Portrait of Kali, the Goddess, the “Black One”; Anonymous: Tantric Painting, unspecified paint on found paper; 13 x 10.125”, Jaipur, Rajasthan, 2007
Mantra sound symbols are often contained within Tantric Hindu yantra drawings, which use primary geometry to represent deities, rather than anthropomorphic imagery. “The mantra-yantra complex is basically an equation that unites space, which in its gross form appears as shapes, and vibrations, which in their finite forms occur as the spoken or written word.”⁹ At the center of these drawings, typically is found, a bindu or small focal point, which represents the origin of creation, from where all existence has come forth. Within the dynamic composition of the yantra, seekers find “halting places, sites of rest and support where the seeker gains an awareness of the universe in its totality and discovers his inner identity with the single, immutable center as if the whole universe were condensed in him. Thus the symbols stimulate man to explore and reveal this center which is a link between himself and the cosmos.”¹⁰ According to scholar of Hindu
Tantric Art, Ajit Mookerjee, “each yantra makes visible the patterns of force that can be heard in the mantra sound-syllable, and each yantra reciprocally encodes its own unique power-pattern. Together, yantra-mantra may be said to build form, conserve form and finally to dissolve form.”

The transformation of language into image is initiated in the creation of icons and alphabetical characters, so it is logical for my investigation of abstract communication through visual art to begin with graphic symbol making. Compressed into the form of metaphysical symbols are vast amounts of information. These sacred symbols are formed with the intention that they will be studied and meditated upon by a practitioner interested in unfolding their meaning. Likewise, in my symbol drawings, I aim to illustrate the architecture of non-physical entities and energies, so that their properties are read graphically and have an applied function.

In the unique, hand-cut etching, Portrait of Kali, I’ve literally dissected the yoni symbol, which represents the divine feminine, and printed it in black to honor the Hindu goddess of death; these modifications illustrate a doorway or passage to something beyond the supposed end.

In What Glows Below I’ve combined my personal symbol for love (three centered green squares) with the profile of the yoni symbol (three entangled triangles); the combination represents the love of the goddess, which shines through and beyond form.
Abode is composed of many proofs that I arranged to build a shelter, which houses the merging of two squares. The color green is associated with the heart chakra, and the expanding square is my own symbol for love, an emotion which is stable and expansive.

The origin of the symbol I’ve used to represent the third eye and the source of vision and intuition in Through Your Eyes, is taken from Brigid’s knot and the legend of the Celtic goddess who wove this symbol from rushes while sitting by her father’s deathbed. The knot symbolizes the relationship between father and daughter, which is continuous and unbroken even beyond death. My modification turns knots into eyes—symbolizing similarities I have with my father, who is also an artist.

Portrait of Kali, (previous-top) aquatint with hand-cutting on paper, 10 x 10", 2010
What Glows Below, (previous-bottom) color aquatint on paper, 10 x 10", 2010
Abode, (top) color aquatint with collage and hand-coloring on paper, 11 x 16", 2010
Through Your Eyes, (bottom) watercolor on paper, 10 x 10", 2010
Yoni Berry, (next-top) wild berry juice on paper, 10 x 10", 2010
Fountain, (next-bottom), color aquatint with spit bite aquatint, 10 x 10", 2010
I have borrowed symbol systems from many sources including Celtic, Korean, Native American, and Indian traditions. In each case I restructure the icon to bring it closer to a personal narrative. The form and content of original symbols are carefully considered before they are appropriated and modified. Through drawing, I channel an idea through the hand, to bring it into visual form where the ideas can then develop further through iteration and revision.

Intaglio printmaking allows for the possibility of multiple proofs, which I draw over to help an idea evolve, rather than creating identical editions. The elaborate nature of printmaking, with its necessary reversal and the possibility of combining plates to create spontaneous formal relationships allows chance occurrence into my process so that each move is not entirely self directed, but participates with the unknown. Once an idea has come into the realm of the visual I respond further within a three-dimensional formation.
Embody: Southwestern Sublime and the Pragmatics of Place

The Navajo people, whose tribal land expands across the Four Corners region of the American Southwest, found divinity in nature and deities in the animals and insects that shared their territory. The essence of Navajo spirituality is expressed in the word **hózhó**, a term also used for creativity, which means to walk with beauty or to be in harmony with the greater world. This philosophy is expressed in the Navajo tradition of blanket weaving, which incorporates into their designs primary forms similar to the flat, square mesas and triangular peaks of their land. Central diamond shapes draw the viewer into their centers, like the bindus within yantras, attracting one’s focus into the interior of the composition so to immerse the viewer in the external reference, the landscape, which is considered sacred. When worn on the body, the form of the individual is surrounded and integrated into the space symbolized.
Agnes Martin’s drawings and paintings call to mind the flat, pale planes near where she lived in New Mexico, and the simple matrices of Navajo weaving as her delicate grids compress figure and ground into one, to communicate continuity between the two. This merging is an example of the embodiment of space, rather than a representation, which would depict separateness between subject and object.

Through her work Martin sought the pragmatics of beauty and discounted mystical mediation, which would seem hierarchical. She said, “I paint out of certain experiences not mystical. I paint without a representational object. I paint beauty without idealism, the new real beauty that needs very much to be considered by philosophers. I consider idealism, mysticism, and conventions interferences in occasions of beauty.”

My work comes out of a real, sensate experience rather than psychic as I attend to the subtle qualities of embodiment. Through abstraction I bring information from all of the senses into form in the creation of objects that trigger a kinesthetic response in addition to their visual power. The scale of each of these works and the level at which they are installed corresponds to the part of the body they are crafted to affect. By using natural
materials such as clay and silk, these works communicate through the skin, bridging the physical distance between the artwork and viewer.

In 2010, I returned to the Southwest to visit Donald Judd’s Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas. In the small deserted cattle ranching town, Judd converted an old military fort, and brought into permanent installation works of his own and his peers, with a specific focus on work that was made in response to the landscape surrounding Chinati. His 15 concrete cubes placed on an open field of dry grass articulate, through their mass, the flat and densely packed earth of the plane that they occupy.

Inside two converted artillery sheds, 100 aluminum cubes by Judd reflect the intense West Texas sunlight. Judd’s minimal but monumental gesture in the barren land of the West embodies, through form, the spirit of the American pioneer, motivated by awe and arrogance, to claim the vast frontier so to attain its limitless land and sky.

15 untitled works in concrete, (above) Donald Judd, 1980-1984
100 untitled works in mill aluminum, (below) Donald Judd, 1982-1986
Walking among Judd’s waist-high aluminum boxes inspired my painting *Marfa Mandala*, the piece that initiated the series *Embody-Encode*. While weaving through the solid, yet brilliant boxes, the surfaces of reflective metal appeared to replace our lower-bodies with light. I watched friends and strangers become disembodied as they walked behind the works, their upper torsos hovering like balloons over the sculptures. Whether Judd was conscious of this effect on the body, I am not sure, but it reminded me of a martial attack upon the abdomen and motivated me to make a painting to heal the core, center of vitality, the second chakra.

*Marfa Mandala*, acrylic on panel, 18 x 18”, 2010
What followed *Marfa Mandala* became a series of painting-objects addressing the chakra system. In each of these six works I’ve attempted to make the metaphysical concrete by choosing a form that articulates its potency, and by impressing into their fabric the energetic significance of the point they represent. *Fortuna* is a hand-dyed and hand-stitched green silk banner hung at heart center as a gesture of compassion.

*Fortuna*, hand-dyed and hand-stitched silk, 42 x 42”, 2011
Ancestor is a platform for elevating the heart and remembering one’s personal heritage. To form it, I dug red Virginia clay, then molded it by hand, then let it air-dry.

Threshold is a hand-dyed and hand-woven yellow silk rope, the length of my outstretched arms. Hung at diaphragm-level, it holds the place of my personal boundary.
At Chinati, I found myself enacting codes within Dan Flavin’s disorienting light installations. Interrupting connecting corridors between six U-shaped buildings, were asymmetrically structured chambers, blocked by slanted, complementary colored fluorescent bulbs. These works both allured me to enter the color beyond the obstructive bulbs and inhibited me from passing, stimulating simultaneous visual and physical senses of infinite and limited space. In *Encounter-Chinati* I acted spontaneously and attempted to mirror the bands of colored light by bending my body. The resulting photographic image shows an ecstatic figure interpreting codes of modern structure through the body, enacting a relationship between boundlessness and containment.

*Encounter-Chinati*, Digital C Print, 30 x 50” 2010
Contemporaries to Martin, Judd and Flavin were choreographers and dancers associated with the Judson Dance Theatre. In a church basement-turned stage, “the audience members were seated, without chairs, on the same floor plane as the dancers, creating a view of the dance that was more sculptural than pictorial. This was, as [Yvonne] Rainer noted, akin to the placement of contemporaneous Minimalist sculpture directly on the floor without a pedestal to lift it into the ‘esthetic’ sphere.”

“Judson artists shared an anarchic commitment to upending the governing concert dance. They distrusted physical virtuosity for its own sake and instead utilized tasks, chance, and everyday movement forms in an effort to bring dance closer to everyday life.”

A Judson founder, Trisha Brown, famous for early works involving harnessed dancers walking down the sides of buildings, along gallery walls or around the trunks of trees, has also continued a drawing practice throughout her career. Instead of using procedural scores to instruct her dancers, she used drawing “as a form of focused mental exercises, or to depict a continuity or accrual of movement. Beginning in her 1973 notebooks, Brown tried to fashion a corporal vocabulary, an alphabet out of simple shapes and lines. She ascribed gestures to letters, so that the resulting words could provide an entire phrase of movement.”

Trisha Brown’s drawings both catalog movement through diagram and index dance through gesture. This practice freely reveals the whole cycle of work including the structure of choreography in encoded line drawings; the enacted dance; and its record, evidenced in the trace of footwork in charcoal on paper.
In my practice I follow a similar trajectory from idea into drawing, through embodied objects into performance, then extend into community through instruction. Enacting *Threshold* by tightly tying the yellow silk rope around my body, a new work, *Boundary*, is born through action. The tension in my hands from gripping and pulling the rope around my waist makes clear an investment in the work and the authenticity of my experience. The energy, expressed through the body, communicated through my activated musculature, enacts the qualities of excessive solar plexus chakra: aggression, domination and control.²¹

By placing a mask, constructed on the basis of my drawings of Brigid’s knot, it is clear through material and interaction with the object, that *Brigid’s Mask* smothers verbal and aural communication but leaves space for vision and imagination. It also leaves opening for the excesses of third eye chakra: hallucination, delusion and obsession.²²
Garden Gag is an indexical print of a song performance, created by wrapping blueberries in a silk scarf, gagging myself and then humming a mantra dedicated to vocal communication.

In each case of enactment, a certain amount of faith is involved, but it is also a pragmatic move in that it validates the energy and intention invested in the object's creation. Although I don’t intend for the performative photographs to be didactic, I do hope that they communicate the potential of the objects in relationship to the body and therefore encourage body-awareness. My hope for these works is that they initiate sensitivity, a corporeal commencement of compassion, before the mind jumps into its categorical game of naming, which separates the individual from their experience.
Engage: Relational Signals

To borrow from Nicolas Bourriaud’s writing on social practice, “the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action.”

Lygia Clark and her Brazilian contemporaries made relational gestures in response to Modern utopian movements that were created for an archetypal citizen and therefore denied the actual diversity of individuality. Clark’s work relied on interaction with the body and community. Her masks and ritual-like performances, which blocked or confused the senses, were made with the paradoxical intention of liberating the participants.

Likewise, yoga postures and martial arts movements, which I include in my movement session, aim to free the body from bondage or attacks (which are often a condition of the mind) so to experience and extend the process of liberation. The paradox that freedom
comes from an understanding of interconnectedness is found in the teachings of the Japanese martial art, aikido, which translates to, “the way of unifying with life energy.” In each technique the objective is to blend with the opponent instead of separating through aggressive attack or avoidance.

To transform mystical notions into practical actions I lead community movement sessions in galleries, classrooms and studios where I direct participants through postures while blending yogic and art theories. In the four-day movement series, Art Moves, which took place during the Embody-Encode exhibition at VCU Anderson Gallery, I instructed martial movement for color. Participants were guided to represent certain charkas through repetitive movement and chants. When I asked the representatives of certain colors to attack each other the result was choreographed harmonies in sound and dance. One participant observed that the exercise made her feel that the group was one.

I believe that the studio, regardless of designated discipline, is a place for practicing living in an artful way. I define living in an artful way as being aesthetically conscious and socially active. The highest form of living in an artful way sometimes manifests in the form of teaching, often performed in the setting of institutions and academies, and resulting in the regeneration of aesthetic activity and social responsibility.

Art Moves, April 26-29, 2011
Curriculum Vitae

Catherine Brooks
T: 415-819-0928
E: mcatherinebrooks@yahoo.com
W: www.catherinebrooksprojects.com

Born

1979, San Francisco, CA

Education

2011
MFA: Painting and Printmaking
Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA

2001
BA: Printmaking
Evergreen State College, Olympia, WA

Professional Experience

Teaching

2011
Instructor-Digital Bookmaking, VCU Summer Study Abroad in Peru
Adjunct Instructor-Intermediate and Advanced Etching, VCU

2010
Teaching Assistant-Advanced Painting, VCU
Workshop Instructor, Centro Português de Serigrafia, Lisbon, Portugal
Workshop Instructor, Agua-Forte, Lisbon, Portugal
Workshop Instructor, University of Porto, Faculty of Fine Arts, Porto, Portugal
Workshop Instructor, Murtra Edicions, Barcelona, Spain
Workshop Instructor, Grafikens Hus, Stockholm, Sweden

2009
Workshop Instructor, Chico State University, Chico, CA

Printmaking

2011
Etching Studio Designer and Consultant, Virginia Commonwealth Univeristy, Doha, Qatar

2002-2009
Senior Master Printer, Crown Point Press, San Francisco, CA

2001
Letterpress Printer, Oblations Paper and Press, Portland, OR
Etching Apprentice, Atelier René Tazé, Paris, France
Lithography Apprentice, Atelier Fleur de Pierre, Paris, France
Lectures & Residencies

2011
Forum, 1708 Gallery, Richmond, VA
University of Richmond, Richmond, VA
Mary Baldwin College, Staunton, VA
2010
The Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, TX
2009
Scuola Internazionale di Grafica di Venizia, Venice, Italy
2008
Evergreen State College, Olympia, WA

Exhibitions & Performances

2011
Exit Strategy (Curated by Nigel Rolfe), White Box, New York, NY
1708 Forum Exhibition, Capitol One, Richmond, VA
Embody-Encode, Thesis Exhibition, VCU Anderson Gallery, Richmond, VA
2010
Witnesses (Performance with Nigel Rolfe), VCU FAB, Richmond, VA
We're All In This Together (Curated by Gregory Volk), VCU, Richmond, VA
Portfolios, Galeria dos Leões, Porto, Portugal
M.C.K.C.B., FAB Gallery, Richmond, VA
Six Significant Landscapes, Galleria il Sotoportego, Venice, Italy
Summer Solstice, Page Bond Gallery, Richmond, VA
666666 Darth Gray, The Summit, Richmond, VA
Hood Rich, Hexagon, Baltimore, MA
2009
Collections, FAB Gallery, Richmond, VA
Horvarth Bugariu e Collettiva, Istituto Romeno di Cultura, Venice, Italy
2008
Sacred Geometry of the Temporal Form (Performance with Ascended Master), Triple Base Gallery, San Francisco, CA
Mantic Gifts of Dismemberment and Renewal (Performance with Ascended Master), Catherine Clark Gallery, San Francisco, CA
2005
Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue (solo exhibition), Sub Rosa Gallery, San Francisco, CA
Mademoiselle, Sub Rosa Gallery, San Francisco, CA
Bo’s Art, Adobe Bookstore Gallery, San Francisco, CA
After Hours, Crown Point Press Annex, San Francisco, CA

Awards

2010
E.I. Kirkland Scholarship
VCU Arts Graduate Travel Grant, Philadelphia, PA
VCU Graduate Teaching Assistantship
2009
VCU Graduate Teaching Assistantship
Bibliography

2010
Six Significant Landscapes, catalog essays by Bradford Manderfield and Molly Scheu

Publications

La Fabrique des Icebergs
A French Cultural Journal, Issue 4, 2010
Contributing Writer

Magical Secrets about Line Etching & Engraving, the Step-by-Step Art of Incised Lines
Crown Point Press, 2007
Author

Spark-William T. Wiley at Crown Point Press
KQED Public Broadcast Television, 2007

Hamburger Eyes
Photography Zine, Issues 5 and 6
Contributing Photographer

Other Skills

Yoga Instructor, RYT 200
Works Cited

1 Walter Murch, DENSE CLARITY - CLEAR DENSITY, Transom Review, 2005, transom.org, 
5 Anodea Judith, Eastern Body Western Mind, Psychology and the Chakra System as a Path to the Self, Celestial Arts, 2004, page 2 
9 Mandhu Khanna, Yantra, The cosmic Symbol of Unity, Thames and Hudson, 1979, page 34 
10 Mandhu Khanna, Yantra, The cosmic Symbol of Unity, Thames and Hudson, 1979, page 10 
11 Ajit Mookerjee, Yantra, The cosmic Symbol of Unity, Thames and Hudson, 1979, page 6 
19 Peter Eleey, Trisha Brown: So That The Audience Does Not Know Whether I Have Stopped Dancing, Walker Art Canter, 2008 page 21 
20 Anodea Judith, Eastern Body Western Mind, Psychology and the Chakra System as a Path to the Self, Celestial Arts, 2004, page 167 
21 Anodea Judith, Eastern Body Western Mind, Psychology and the Chakra System as a Path to the Self, Celestial Arts, 2004, page 339 
23 Lycia Clark, http://nano.blacki.info/post/ 
24 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aikido