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Waveform Analogy, Experimentation, and Optimism

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

by

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Abstract

WAVEFORM ANALOGY, EXPERIMENTATION, AND OPTIMISM

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

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2014

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This paper offers a contextualization of my art practice, within particular trends in contemporary art and its discourse. It traces an expressed interest in networked objects, and the indeterminacy of meaning in art; from researched examples and texts, through specific expressions of these ideas in my thesis art exhibition. The paper then outlines key areas of practical interest to the experimental viability of my art practice. The paper goes on to explore the relationships between indeterminacy, experimentation, and creativity in the arts; within the context of an original thought experiment that draws an analogy between topics in physics and the human mind. Non-rational art ideas are lauded for their uniquely explorative potential within this conjectural model. Optimism, and a will to think experimentally, are offered as the abiding principles of my art practice; as well as being universal tools that all human beings can depend upon.

PREFACE

My work deals with symbols, signs, language forms, geometries, images, formal resonances, associative thought-relationships, similarities and differences; and the development of a multitude of possible meanings and relationships among these attributes through means of improvisation, translation and the phenomenon of emergence.

There is playfulness in my work, which results from my sense of pleasure in being an artist and being alive; as well as in wondering at the mysteries of the universe, and of my own mind.

I have a generally optimistic attitude about life on earth and about the direction that humanity is headed: i.e. the idea of progress. I believe in it. I will make an argument to justify this attitude.

I identify myself as an artist, not as a particular kind of artist, i.e., a painter, sculptor, etc. I allow that any thing or any method might be adapted to my work. I do however value and utilize many of the conventional means of making art, due to what I perceive to be their many communicative and practical

strengths: painting, printing, photography, sculpture, audio, video, poetry, and performance. I often use these things in combination.

The goal of this thesis paper is to provide a map to understanding what is necessarily a complex and sprawling art practice. The “many” is central in my thinking. As the reader can likely imagine, especially when *the universe* gets brought into the discussion, this paper runs the risk of elaboration to the point of becoming convoluted. There are relevant tangents and scenic detours that I’ll keep to a minimum. Ultimately, however, there are a finite amount of ideas that I feel the need to address in order to give a thorough account of my current work.

That I might stay somewhat grounded, and provide the reader with a degree of clarity about my practice, this paper will be composed of 5 named sections. They are: *Context*; *Content*; *Production*; *Distribution*; and *Waveform Analogy, Experimentation, and Optimism*.

The first four of these chapter titles were suggested to me by Arnold Kemp as topics that he felt I needed to elucidate for this thesis paper. I have enjoyed thinking about them. They provide a practical framework within which I can discuss specific instances of projects I’m developing in the studio, influences, etc. The fifth chapter, carrying the name of the paper, will outline my personal foundational thinking, and will draw conclusions and offer conjecture; which will pertain to much of the content in the previous chapters.

Chapter 1, CONTEXT

GENERALITY AND CONTEXT

Today's art explores the bonds that text and image, time and space, weave between themselves... The form of the work expresses a course, a wandering, rather than a fixed space-time.... This new universalism is based on translations, subtitling and generalised dubbing.

- *Nicolas Bourriaud*

Nicolas Bourriaud's altermodern manifesto, written for the *Tate Triennial* in 2009, can be understood as one of many efforts to put a name on these times, beyond the very general 'Contemporary'. In spite of its vain attempt to coin the next big term after Modernism and Postmodernism, I feel that the manifesto speaks directly to some important trends in our time that feel relevant to how I think about my practice. When I read this manifesto in 2009, it felt exciting. Having recently re-read it, it still feels relevant, regardless of the fact that I haven't heard anyone use the term *Altermodern* the entire time I've been in grad school. While here, I've been exposed to many writings about contemporary art and our times. Bourriaud's themes are themes that many others are touching on as well. Nevertheless different authors approach them uniquely.

When Bourriaud writes, “Today’s art explores the bonds that text and image, time and space, weave between themselves”, he seems to be talking about some kind of dimensionality of communication itself. He suggests that the interstices and points of contact across differences are where the action happens.

For Bourriaud it’s as if the artworks can exhibit relational and participatory qualities among their constituent features. Perhaps he envisions a sort of updated relational aesthetics that is more inclusive of the lives of objects, ie. the non-human, in which these interstices and interactivities become the grist of the work. As an aside, this notion dovetails nicely with recent writings on the subject of *Object Oriented Ontology*, such as Graham Harmon’s 2010 book, *The Quadruple Object*, and Timothy Morton’s treatment of aesthetics in his book, *Realist Magic*, of 2013.

Another big point for Bourriaud is travel: Taken both literally and metaphorically, Bourriaud argues that through global travel, we experience cultural creolization, which gives rise to culturally hybrid forms. The notions of creole and hybridity can be exciting ways to think about making art: that through forging new interrelations among methods/trajectories, new ways of working/thinking emerge.

Bourriaud’s concern with the “weave” and the interstice makes me think of David Joselit’s “networks.” In *After Art*, Joselit writes about Matthew Barney’s *Cremaster Cycle* and *Drawing Restraint 9* as works that exhibit a network format: “Barney’s fundamental accomplishment: inventing an elaborate tournament of events for objects to undergo.” (42) Barney’s work has always seemed quite bewildering to me but Joselit has an insight. He locates a key to understanding Barney’s work in the artist’s own symbolic motif, his field emblem: “Barney diagrams life as a drama of things. The field

emblem is not the meaning of his work, but its format.” (43) In the same chapter Joselit gives a name to the phenomena that I feel he is describing in his discussion of Barney’s work: *emergence*. Joselit writes, “The shift I’ve indicated from an object-based aesthetics in both architecture and art to a network aesthetics premised on the emergence of form from populations, calls for a corresponding revision of critical methodology. Objects characterized by discernible limits and relative stability lend themselves to singular meanings—almost as though well-defined forms are destined to *contain* a significance like vessels. Emergence, however, unfolds in time: it must be narrated.” (43)

Matthew Barney’s 2003 show at the Guggenheim was a big deal for me. I did not see it in person, but by reading about it, looking at video clips and images, I got the gist of his project: the many interweaving materials, sculptures, substances, performances, images. I was impressed by the way Barney’s sculptures for instance, played multiple roles: as process pieces, as set props, as sculptures. I was impressed by his ultra-ambitious and wide-ranging art practice. In the years following 2005, I took a lot of inspiration from Barney, in a mostly practical sense. I have no wish to further align myself with Barney’s project, or quote from him stylistically. His project is highly idiosyncratic and I’ll leave the rest to him. But as a role model, for having the guts to generate a bunch of bizarre ideas and to execute them in a highly structured and fantastical way, he was inspiring to me.

Around 2005 I began to reformat my art practice from making mostly 2D work, into a multidisciplinary one, in which paintings, sculptures, performances, photographs, etc, would interrelate, and form emergent relations and interactions. I have continued to develop and explore this idea here at VCU. I have wanted to be able to make individual object-identities that would stand alone as artworks, but

when called upon to collaborate with other processes, could generate productive and juicy new situations. Another important factor to me, is that through the act of cross-referencing among works, the content of my individual works should point to the reality at hand: to the translations of ideas and forms; and to questions as to the value of my total art practice. To use Joselit's word in describing Barney's field emblem, I've wanted to create my own networked *format* to work within.

Massimiliano Gioni, one of three curators who organized the 2009 Exhibition at the New Museum, “Younger Than Jesus”, is thinking along similar lines as Bourriaud and Joselit, when he writes for the show's catalog: “For many young artists today, an artwork should not be a finite, concluded object Or better, it may be a precise physical object, with relatively clear borders—after all, many young artists seem to be completely comfortable with paintings and sculptures—but it is also an object that can play a variety of roles, taking on the guise of a set, a theatrical prop, the incipit of a story, the platform for a performance.” (36)

Younger than Jesus, a group show which featured artists born after 1976, (I was born in 1978) to some degree, like Bourriaud's Tate *Altermodern* (also 2009), is concerned with locating the themes of our time, albeit through a generational lens. Gioni's language about an artwork not being “finite”, and playing “a variety of roles” is strikingly similar in spirit to both Joselit's ideas about *networked formats* and Bourriaud's *interweaves*. In this quote, however, Gioni also reports that many artists of this generation are “comfortable with paintings and sculptures”. This resonates with me because it is something that I have wondered about my own practice: *if I espouse a rhetoric of freedom and experimentation by many or any means, why should I still be using many traditional formats?*

My personal answer for this has always been that somehow traditional activities like making paintings and sculptures, writing poems, shooting photos and videos, etc., are central in my practice because *they just work*. There is a kind of efficacy and directness in being able to communicate through a tried and true action; by making a drawing, writing poetic language, or picking up a camera and using it the way it was designed to be used. Even the most traditional art forms like painting and sculpture, although freighted with precedent, still offer ease of use and communicative familiarity. The trick for me, in using them, is to stay nimble, to avoid getting bogged down by reiterating historical moves and cliché tropes. However, through the act mixing/networking these traditional forms (with whatever other current ideas/forms may present themselves), the sheer number of possible permutations allow for a sense of possibility.

In her 2005 book, *Sweet Dreams*, Johanna Drucker writes in her preface: "Current fine art sensibility vibrates with enthusiasms: an uninhibited engagement with material pleasure drawn from across the widest spectrum of contemporary experience exists alongside an impulse to mine the archival riches of our diverse pasts. A renewed studio culture is flourishing. Making objects with evident appreciation of process has pushed traditional techniques into a highly charged exchange with new media capabilities. Materials and structures of expression have never been more varied. Nor has the license to use them ever been so broad." (1)

Drucker's characterization of the mixture of traditional techniques with new media capabilities as being *highly charged*, resonates with me, as do the words *broad* and *varied*. Although she is speaking

generally, inclusive of the practices of many artists, I feel that the way she is using these words is applicable to individual practices as well. My studio practice, with my variety of approaches, my disinterest in claiming a particular identity (i.e. painter), and my interest in complexity and *the many*, seems to fit into Drucker's observation. In my abstract, I also stated that I make my work with a sense of playfulness and optimism. Drucker's use of *enthusiasms* and *pleasure*, speak to a similar sentiment: they too are driving forces in my practice.

I am excited by many of the ideas Drucker discusses and advocates for, in *Sweet Dreams*. Drucker's central thesis is something that I tend to deeply agree with. She is basically arguing that the traditional avant-garde stance of criticality and resistance towards dominant consumer culture (that is influential to this day), as a lens for understanding art, is misguided, needlessly negative, and inaccurate. She writes, "I believe in the power of imaginative work as fundamental to the process of change, but only if we don't shackle art to the task of serving as the social conscience of the culture, or serving any other formulaic agenda—clipping the spirit and straightjacketing artistic potential." (4) This is the basis upon which she advocates for total freedom and experimentation in the arts.

Kirk Varnedoe, expressed a similar sentiment in his book, *A Fine Disregard*, writing in hindsight about the contrast between ideologies associated with modern art, vs. the agency of the work itself: "...the art has turned out to be more accessible and replete with meaning, more powerful and enduring, than the authoritative systems or historical destinies that supposedly produced it and gave it significance, Such art has persisted, and been generative, by failing to fulfill, and thus outstripping, the claims its advocates made; and even, in many cases, the boldest intentions of its creators." (21)

I have long made my work with an attitude of independence towards any moral or practical responsibility to solving society's problems. I feel that activism, politics, social research, social justice, etc; are best served by means other than art (at least other than my art). The service that I believe I can provide as an artist, is in *brainstorming*—pure and simple. I feel that free and experimental thought, fully licensed to be as loose, weird, and irresponsible as it needs to be, does actually offer value to humanity.

In the conclusion of *Sweet Dreams*, Drucker states: "Fine art should not have to bear the burden of criticality nor can it assume superiority as if operating outside of the ideologies it has long presumed to critique. Fine art, artists, and critics exist in a condition of complicity with the institutions and values of contemporary culture." (11) In this context, Drucker is using the word *criticality* specifically to reference critical theory and avant-garde tradition. I personally think criticality in all its manifestations, i.e., critical theory, is a wonderful and valuable development, but perhaps I agree with Drucker that it shouldn't be a *necessary burden*. The key word for Drucker here though, is *complicity*. The name she gives to the kind of art that she described in her preface is *complicit formalism*. I will not sign on to calling myself a *complicit formalist* in her lexicon, but an appreciation of the dimensionality of the word *complicity* is deeply important to an understanding of my work. It is a kind of a ground state, a premise: an ambivalent and somewhat enthusiastic participation in the culture in which I live.

SPECIFICITY AND CONTEXT

Many of the key features of my current work that I listed in the first paragraph of my abstract; the language forms, geometries, formal resonances, and associative thought structures; have precedents and similarities in the works of other artists of my generation, as well as artists from the past. When I'm making my work, I am focused on listening to my instincts and desires. I experiment with my thoughts and with the material/other possibilities at hand. I try to make what feels *good*. Yet, the influences of others (artists and thinkers) are always present. I love the sense of being mentally and emotionally present in one's own time. My small stake in the innumerable issues and tastes of the day is manifested in my practice. When I find resonance with other artists and thinkers, it's exciting, and helps me to locate the people and the conversations that I want to join.

Much of what Massimiliano Gioni wrote in his essay for *Younger Than Jesus*, feels relevant to my practice. My interest in associative leaps-of-thought that allow for resonances and similarities between mediums and pieces, is described by Gioni, speaking of artists in the show: "A sizeable number seems to be interested in proceeding by means of lateral shifts, developing their work like a fugue, an infinite variation on a theme that finally contradicts the very notion of a center." (38)

Another staple of my practice that dates back years is my use of language and text forms. I have always written poems and taken notes that are associated with my art projects. Many of the videos that I have made, include spoken words, monologues, or words flashing across the screen. On my sculptures and paintings, I often scrawl word and letter forms, often as unintelligible cipher or concrete

poetry. Many of the geometric forms of the sculptures themselves are reminiscent of letters. Gioni writes: “Quite significantly, a new obsession with language seems to emerge precisely from the works of many artists born in and around the ‘80s. There is a linguistic explosion on all sides. An unstoppable flow of words. A hypertrophic growth of language seems to flourish...” (34)

With my interest in multiplicity of methods, and the sprouting-leaping events that happen among them, the work tends toward busyness and complexity. A word that has been used in critiques of my work to address this quality, is maximal. If there is a spectrum of density with minimalism at one end and maximalism at the other, my work does land quite a distance away from minimalism. I do not particularly wish to use the word *maximalism*, however, as an emblem of my practice. I feel that for whatever qualities of *maximalism* my works do exhibit, the word’s usefulness would quickly become outstripped by the oppositional dialectic in which it relates to minimalism. Such a stance is none of my business.

Massimiliano Gioni locates this tendency among the artists of *Younger Than Jesus*, writing: “Stillness is abolished, silence shameful, and information has become a character in itself.” (34)

Ryan Trecartin in particular jumps to mind when reading this previous quote of Gioni’s. Trecartin was one of the breakout stars of that show. I am totally attracted to his work. Many of its features; the streams of language; the surprising shifts and leaps between scenes and ideas; the gutsy weirdness of it all; are after my own heart. The way in which he is doing so many things at once: the directing, the collaborating, the performing, the costumes, the sets, the sculptures; and the way in which all of these actions interrelate, really speaks to the network/weave/emergent/fugue ideas discussed earlier.

Another artist from *Younger Than Jesus* is Kerstin Bratsch, whose more formal experiments I find very attractive and interesting. Bratsch makes painted abstractions on various surfaces that are simultaneously gestural and geometric. The paintings however have a breakout tendency, they curl away from the wall; become submerged within the wall; and sometimes they leave the wall to become sculpture: freestanding, transparent, or involved with the floor.

I love the idea of painting becoming something else: painting as *trans*-; painting as aspiring to join something else; painting that explodes its constituent parts and reconstitutes itself differently--by other means. Katharina Grosse's installation at Mass MoCA is a stunning vision of what painting can be like. Huge swathes of bright, sprayed paint, apply themselves to architectural surfaces and many tons of dirt. Giant chunks of jagged Styrofoam emerge from the piles of soil and fake boulders (which also having been painted, sit in the space). This idea about painting being *on* something, being *applied* to something, being insinuated with sculpture, with architecture, is very exciting to me. Grosse's installation not only achieves a complex and multifaceted hybridity as a cross between painting, sculpture, and installation, but it does so while offering immense visual pleasure (in my opinion). The masses of soil, the towering shards of styrofoam, the big, supersaturated movements of color approach the sublime. I take Grosse's work as an instance of powerful aesthetic affect, while at the same time presenting experimental ideas.



Katharina Grosse, *Installation View*, Mass MoCA, 2012

Aesthetic pleasure and affect is tricky. Both art and advertising can make use of it to surprise and entice us. Johanna Drucker writes: “In an already fully corrupted world, one in which consumerism holds sway, commercial images provide a standard for production. In an administered world such as our own the purpose of aesthetics—the awareness of artifice, the appeal to pleasure, beauty and imagination—is a necessity in its own right.” (7)

In my own practice, I allow commercial aesthetics of all sorts to trickle in and influence my decisions. Wendy White, an artist who has been important for me, and with whom I had an influential studio visit when she came to VCU in 2012, incorporates commercial influences into her abstractions. From athletics gear to signage, White's hybrid painting-objects often feature adidas-like stripes, word and letter forms, as well as bright and (for me) seductive colors. Her works, which reference commerciality, and which are de-facto commercial objects themselves, succeed for me by being experimental with an intersection of tastes and histories: both art-historical and commercial. A key impact of the work for me is its explicit stylishness. Her work feels risky: flirting with style and commerciality so reflexively, within the context of the market (I do think she pulls it off). However, there is also good poetry in White's work.

Her series *Fotobuilds* of 2012, are conglomerations of paint, canvas, vinyl, and inkjet printing. The *Fotobuilds* are named for places in her N.Y. neighborhood, the Lower East Side. Selected colors, motifs, and texts from particular buildings, advertisements, and streets are translated into an abstract, material presentation. I love her use of this basic poetic model—the act of inventing language forms to approximate aspects of an experience/place/time. The intersection of language, architecture, culture, translation, and studio processes that White explores in these works has been inspiration for my work.



Wendy White, *197 Madison*, 2012, acrylic on canvas, inkjet print on vinyl, 96 x 120 x 3

White’s idea of channeling the aesthetics of an urban environment like that of a neighborhood in New York City, with its vast commercial and human condition, is similarly approached in the work of Isa Genzken. Judith Thurman writes of Genzken for *The New Yorker* in 2013: “Urban architecture—its beauty and desolation—is a central theme of Genzken’s work, which mirrors the city’s seething heterogeneity and embodies its extremes of rawness and refinement.” Genzken incorporates bright colors, design aesthetics, appropriated materials, geometric and architectural references, as well as instances of abstraction, into her installations and individual pieces. Thurman’s words, *seething* and

heterogeneity, for me, speak to the ways in which Genzken experiments with associative leaps as well as disconnects between her many energetic gestures. Genzken, similarly to White, synthesizes 2-D and 3-D forms. My own interest in finding ways to insinuate painting with sculpture, by using architecture as a model/reference, is informed by many of Genzken's works. Two dimensional works such as, *Kinder Filmen I*, 2005, and sculptures such as *Säulen*, 2000, treat surface in a way that feels referential of architectural façade; are sculptural, and yet referential of painterly abstraction, all at the same time.



Isa Genzken, left: *Säulen*, 2000; right, *Kinder Filmen I*, 2005

Aside from the interrelationships between architecture, sculpture, and painting explored by White and Genzken, a key feature of my interest in their works is a kind of, *reach for indeterminacy*. For me, each artist's work feels purposeful, yet withholds specificity of meaning. Perhaps White achieves this

through her multiple acts of translation and abstraction, as well as her odd mixture of poetics and commercialism; and Genzken through her installations of hybrid forms and heterogeneous gestures, to contrast, in Thurman's words, "beauty and desolation... rawness and refinement."



Isa Genzken, *Kinder Filmen I*, DETAIL, 2005

In the May 2014 issue of *Artforum*, similar issues to what I refer to as indeterminacy, are raised in an article entitled, *Statements of Intent*, by Mark Godfrey. Through a discussion of the works of Laura Owens, Charlene von Heyl, Amy Sillman, and Jaqueline Humphries, the words *unknowability* and

heterogeneity are introduced; as well as a discussion of design aesthetics in relation to these contemporary abstract painters.

Godfrey writes: “Von Heyl’s ambition is ‘to create an image that has the iconic value of a sign but remains ambiguous in its meaning’ ...von Heyl says she inevitably finds herself designing, but that she strives to go beyond this. For her, abstraction, when successful, has the same reality and visual power as design, but will be more difficult than design and will not convey a meaning.” (300)



Charlene von Heyl, *installation view at 1301PE, 2011*

I really like this idea of von Heyl's, about the desire to create something with a design-like visual impact. Her statement reminds me of something Bruce Pearson, a visiting faculty member, told me in a studio visit during my first semester at VCU. I had a blaze orange Busch beer carton in the studio for inspiration. The painting I was working on had bland colors and delicate, fussy brushwork compared to the boldly designed beer carton. Incredulous at my painting, Bruce held up the carton—*your painting has to be able to beat this!* I took Bruce's words to heart.

As for the *ambiguity* that von Heyl attempts to foster in her work, Godfrey proposes: "There is a term or idea that recurs in their accounts, [Owens, von Heyl, Sillman, and Humphries] and that is *unknowability*... The unknowable has a new premium in a culture that prides itself on being able to know everything via instant access (constitutional or not) to massive troves of information." (299)

I'd argue that *unknowability* in art has been important for a long time—whether or not there hasn't always been a cultural premium placed on it. Regardless, Godfrey rightly recognizes its importance to Laura Owens' practice: "...when she speaks of her refusal to 'language' her work—the word *language*, repurposed as a verb, referencing an exhaustive thinking through of each decision, so that refusal to 'language' is a kind of refusal to know, or to know too much." (299)

In his essay, *The Will to Unintelligibility in Modern Art*, Donald Kuspit expresses a similar sentiment, albeit through a retrospective gaze: "I contend that not only were the most outstanding modern artists motivated by a will to enigma, but if their works should lose that sense of keeping a secret that makes them mysterious and lapse into the banality of outspokenness, they would instantly seem insignificant."

Like Owens (who is one of my favorite artists), Kuspit pits *unknowability* against *clarity*. I feel that these opposing terms represent competing schools of thought: as to the nature of art's contribution to knowledge and culture. Godfrey writes that Owens' approach: "might be viewed as hermetic and incoherent, but should be understood as a direct refusal of the pedagogy of CalArts, where artists were trained to explain and justify each step of the project. Owens willfully blasts her paintings with heterogeneous materials. Processes. References, and textures... confident that such amalgams will coalesce as dynamic works that could not have been planned in advance... 'The painting is coming out at you and asking you to put these things together'..." (300)

I am definitely in the camp that is interested in exercising what is described by words like unknowability, indeterminacy, unintelligibility, heterogeneity, complexity, etc. I feel that, in artwork, these traits offer a form of exploration, and a chance at knowledge that is different / other / apart from the more familiar and concrete worldview inherited from enlightenment reason. Perhaps Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari are pointing to such an alternative worldview, with their Concept of *the Rhizome*, which they lay out in their book, *A Thousand Plateaus*. Here, the authors argue for the fundamental nature of heterogeneous connectivity: "Principles of connection and heterogeneity: any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other and must be... A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances related to the arts, sciences, and social struggles. A semiotic chain is like a tuber agglomerating very diverse acts, not only linguistic, but also perceptive, mimetic, gestural, and cognitive: there is no language in itself, nor are there any linguistic universals, only a throng of dialects, patios, slangs, and specialized languages." (7)



Laura Owens, *12 Paintings by Laura Owens*, installation view, 2013

There is one more idea that I'll glean from Laura Owens for discussion. In Artforum of February, 2013, Owens is interviewed about the 12 paintings. She is speaking about the multiple and often improvisational processes by which they were made. At one point she wonders about intent, in a painter's mark making. She compares the male orgasm to traditional notions of mark-making--a repeatable stamp of its DNA—its purposefulness. Whereas the female orgasm, she observes, does not make that mark. She says, "I want to think about how that can be the model for a new gesture." This leads in to her next chain of thought. The following are a few excerpts:

Laura Owens: This is such a generalization, but it feels like the East Coast and parts of Europe are still heavily invested in the narrative of the artist—who that artist is, the gestures that artist made. Maurizio Cattelan and Richard Prince are each creating narratives about who they are as artists, which makes the

object secondary... I'm not against it at all... it's just not where I'm at right now...there is this notion that artists must keep expanding their gestures into different spaces: discourse, theater, music, painting, you name it.

Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer: In other words, you are countering the popular tendency toward a “networked”, sprawling, heterogenous, self-narrativizing art practice by staking a renewed claim for attention to medium and materiality—even a new kind of medium specificity?

Laura Owens: Many of the artists I recognize as having an influence on me are interested in the actual experience of being with the objects in exhibition, which is different from cultivating a clever narrative around what gestures happened when.



Laura Owens, *12 Paintings by Laura Owens*, DETAIL, 2013

Owens' words make me think of Jonathan Meese, an influential artist for me. He makes paintings and sculptures, and does performances, as well as other things. His gestures all bear the stamp of the essential *DNA* of his project: the narrativizing of himself as the artist / character from which the work *came*. There are many things that I find valuable in Meese, which I'll discuss in a moment, but a critique of his work, through the lens of Owens' ideas, might be that the quality of his works, as objects *in themselves*, suffers for the overbearance of Meese's "clever narrative". Meese could argue that he accounts for this act of his narrative's domination over the *subjugated* artworks, by the central feature of his narrative: that of dictatorship. Yet, while Meese professes to advocate for the dictatorship *of* art, not his dictatorship *over* his own art, the latter seems closer to reality.



Jonathan Meese, *Dictatorship of Art*

I'm not sure but I think there's a chance I'd find more interest in spending a length of time with a Laura Owens painting than one by Jonathan Meese, although he has made some really great paintings. I expect that her attention to her painting's integrity as an object—eschewing any particular dramatization of herself in the process of its making—might pay off. Jonathan Meese's paintings on the other hand, can feel self-congratulatory, and worse, careless: in the way they often present themselves as a

slap-dash records of their creator's whims. Her emphasis is preferable to me as a model for my own practice. I want my objects and the relationships they have with the viewer, to be more carefully structured, than Meese's seem to be, as well as being less encumbered, as Owens puts it, by "a clever narrative around what gestures happened when." And yet, I care deeply about being able to reference myself as the creator through narrative. I feel that it is an act of transparency to do so, and a place for an exploration of the mythos of the artist's work in the studio: hence much of my video work, which serves this self-reflexive function with varying degrees of exaggeration. As for the model of networked art practices, which Owens counters; I'd frankly be bored, as well as feel limited, if I was just making paintings. Laura Owens wants to make paintings only: that is her prerogative.



**Jonathan Meese, *SCARLETTIERBABY de METABOLISMEESEEWOLF*
(*BLUTHUNDINNINBABY mit STOFFTIERWECHSEL IM SAALBLUT*), 2008**

One of the things I value about Meese's practice, despite my critical feelings about certain aspects of it, is the way in which he is willing to deal with dark historical references and dangerous taboos. There is a

kind of bravery in his experimental and somewhat reckless forays into the proximity of such topics as *fascism*. He approaches the subject of himself as an artist, with a similar lack of restraint. As a method of working, he has opened a channel of intuition and play, whose impulses get translated, straight out of his mind, and into actions and works of all sorts: I believe that he is being absolutely honest with himself, as well as with the viewer in this approach. Through this process however, he becomes a caricature of himself (the madman artist-guy), but perhaps this is a necessary outcome of his auto-experimentation. His 2008 video, *Scarletierbaby's Revolutions Parfum: DICTATORSHIP OF ART*, is one of my favorite of his works. In this video he exhibits both an exaggerated self-narrative as a madman, and, what I feel is a truly experimental poetic sensibility.



Jonathan Meese, still, *Scarletierbaby's Revolutions Parfum: DICTATORSHIP OF ART*, 2008

If one could imagine splitting the difference between Owens and Meese, perhaps that is approximately where I would like to be. Ideally, I would take Owens' care for the lives of the objects, and Meese's sense of risk in being able to channel cultural as well as personal demons/sensibilities through self-narrativized action (although the demons I wish to channel are more subtle than his). I feel that both artists excellently fulfill the unknowably enigmatic potentialities of their respective practices.

ON GEOMETRY WITHIN MY PRACTICE

Geometry is a recurring motif in many of my works. I am essentially using it as a sign system that points to the following three major considerations, as well as a fourth minor consideration, that of art-historical references:

1. Geometry as referential of the (my) mind:; hypnagogic visualization geometries that I often see when I close my eyes. I think of this hallucinatory imagery as a window into my mind's functioning. I literally see language and image forms blending and morphing with extremely complex fractal-like geometries. I'll address this phenomenon in greater detail in the final chapter.
2. Geometry as referential of the designed/built environment—anything constructed; from architectures to infrastructures, tend to utilize a variety of geometric forms.

3. Geometry as referential of all of nature: from atomic structures and crystal forms, to complex and unpredictable fractal geometries. This includes the human mind.

4. Art historical precedents for the use of geometry abound. Some of the following references have been somewhat inspirational for my work. Many of these uses however, have been so loaded with specific ideological baggages, to the point that they are only tangentially or barely relevant to an understanding of my work:

-Vladimir Tatlin, et al.; Russian constructivism

-Ellsworth Kelley, Tony Smith, et al.; Minimalism

-Frank Stella, both his early (minimalist), and more recent works (about which he contextualizes himself within philosophies of *the pictorial* and the legacy of Caravaggio.[Hobbs essay])

-Peter Halley, Wade Guyton; and their post-conceptual strategies.

-Chris Burden's use of geometry in reference to power structures, via infrastructure.

-Visionary/psychedelic artists Alex Grey and Allyson Grey, (whose spiritual pretensions I find abhorrent—but whose imagery closely resembles the hypnagogic visualizations that I experience), as well as other 'psychedelic-visionary' artists whose work I actually enjoy, like Fred Tomaselli, and especially, Adolph Wolfli.

Obviously the above is a highly abbreviated list of artists who engage geometry. I admire most of these artists I have named and have taken influence from them. However, when it comes to geometry, it has such a vast presence in human life, that the only honest way I see fit to incorporate into my work is through exercising its vast range of possible references. I want to address geometry's *ubiquitousness*.

I don't believe it's possible to name a culture in the history of humankind that hasn't incorporated geometry into both its practical and aesthetic designs. Ultimately, I use geometry both as a reminder that human beings are a part of nature, and as a rich and timeless territory for experimentation with form.



Adolph Wölfli, *Irren-Anstalt Band-Hain*, 1910

TO SUMMARIZE

- My practice is networked and multidisciplinary. A self reflexive narrative--the artist as a character in the network--is implicit within my work.
- I take pleasure, desire, and intuition into consideration when making aesthetic decisions.
- After Drucker's position, my work exists in a state of complicity with contemporary culture and economic circumstances.
- My work prizes unknowability, indeterminacy, unintelligibility, heterogeneity, and complexity; as qualities of interest.
- Models of thought which can be derived from the above traits, such as the Rhizomatic and associative/connective, are active within my studio practice.
- I do question the ultimate usefulness-to-society of an art practice that embodies such traits as *unknowability*, *unintelligibility*, and *intuition*. But I feel that it's possible that there *is* value to be gained from such a practice. I do not however know exactly what that value might be. In an effort to see if I can find out, I want to own up to my interest in these attributes, to wear them, as it were; and test them out.

Chapter 2: CONTENT

In this chapter I'm going to discuss the works that I have prepared for my thesis exhibition at VCU's Depot building. Hopefully, in describing the ideas and qualities of these works, the contextual interests of the previous chapter will seem pertinent. After a discussion of the work in my thesis show, I will include a section, *On Method*, in which I'll introduce a metaphor to characterize my creative process.



Aaron Storck, *installation view*, thesis exhibition, VCU Depot Building, 2014

When entering the room, my work is arranged as a sort of tableau. One of the first things noticed is the sound of splashing water, as the viewer takes in a scene comprised of paintings and sculptures. There is an immediate impression of a kind of geometric frenzy present in individual motifs as well as the in arrangement of works in the space. There is also an audio piece, which plays intermittently.

Beginning from front to back, I'll describe the works as discrete pieces. As I elaborate on select ones, I'll refer back to the others in order to elucidate their networked relationships.



(figure A), Aaron Storck, *installation view*, thesis exhibition, VCU Depot Building, 2014

The first group of pieces, PIECE A (figure A), are 4 sculptures, each 27 inches high. They are made with wood and sheetrock, and are reminiscent of little walls or architectural maquettes. One is shaped like a rectangle, one like a capital T, and two like zig-zags. All the angles are right angles. The sheetrock cladding is mounted to the wooden frames 3 inches off the floor, so that the pieces stand on their little wood posts. Horizontal lines are drawn on the sheetrock surfaces, spaced 3 inches apart and parallel to each other. These drawn lines become the skeleton onto which a range of painting and collage is enacted.

The architectural forms of modernist and brutalist architecture inspired this suite of pieces. I was thinking in particular of Le Corbusier's unrealized *Ville Contemporaine* of 1922 (figure B), and its schema of inter-related geometries; also, of many 1960's era housing projects in New York City, (figure C); as well as *Co-op City* in the Bronx. Having grown up in New York City on West 96th street, I lived near a number of these modern-era large brick apartment houses, and always found them to feel dehumanizing and awful, yet strangely awe inspiring. I remember a feeling of shock when I first saw *Co-op City*, whose buildings are similar to those of *Ville Contemporaine*.

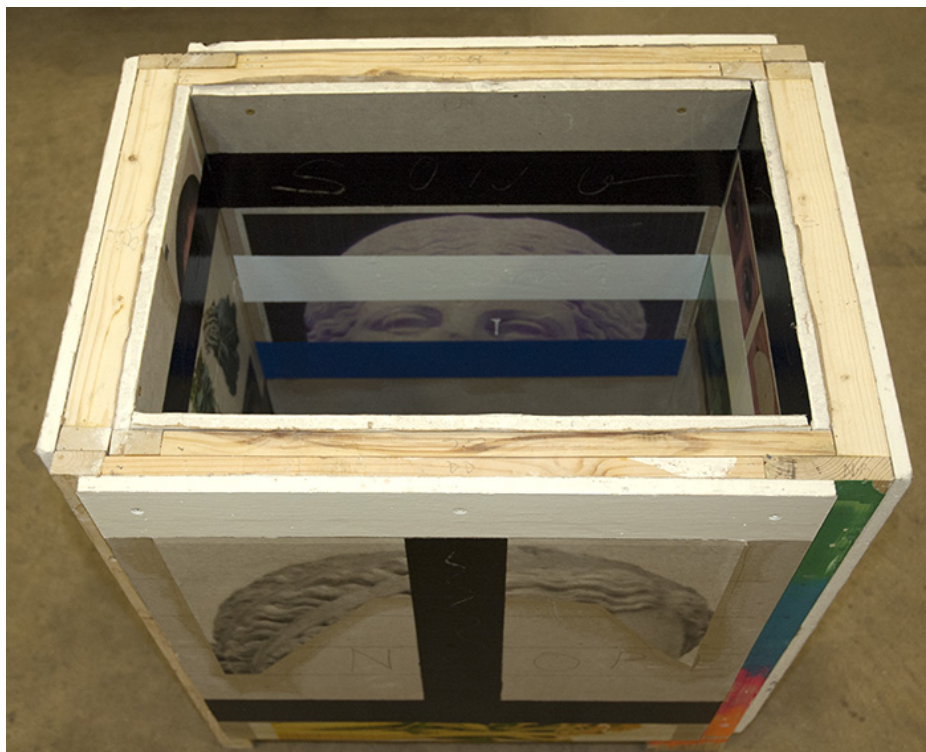


(figure B), drawing for Le Corbusier's *Ville Contemporaine*, 1922



(figure C) **New York City housing projects**

At the drastically shrunken scale, of my artworks, the intimidating weirdness of such architectures is negated, but my sculptures implicate the viewer as taking the vantage of the planner or observer: the god's eye view, looking down.



Detail, *Piece A*

The pieces also reference interior architectures, their sheetrock and wood are analogous to the walls of the *exhibition space itself*. Here too, they function as maquettes, pointing to the models an artist might make to plan an exhibition. The wood that I use in these sculptures is largely salvaged, construction-grade lumber. I rip-cut the wood down into 1"x2" cross-sections and sometimes smaller pieces. The provenance of these thin-cut boards is evidenced by their fragmented product stamps: "STUD", etc. The somewhat rough-hewn sections of sheetrock, with their crumbling chalkiness and torn paper edges, reference a DIY ethic of "good enough" as opposed to a *pro* ethic of perfection.



Detail, *Piece A*

The horizontal pencil lines, which demarcate regions for paint and collage, are a stripe motif. Being matched with the rectilinear, architectural forms of the sculptures, the stripes point to the almost boringly common striping present in much modern and contemporary architecture: everything from the typical office park, to the parking deck across the street from VCU's Fine Arts Building. But striping such as this is a truly vast motif, its presence ranging from ancient Egyptian designs, to textiles, to modern art. By drawing the lines onto the surfaces, I am also enacting a space of textual potential: a zone for inscription, like the lines on a ruled sheet of paper. I like to have all of these associations in play as possible entry points into the work, each to a greater or lesser degree of probability of being read, (depending on the viewer's disposition as well as my varying emphasis).

As an aside, in regards to the notion of multiple possible entry points, I quote from Deleuze and Guattari's *1000 Plateaus*: "Perhaps one of the most important characteristics of the rhizome is that it always has multiple entryways; in this sense, the burrow is an animal rhizome... a map has multiple entryways, as opposed to the tracing, which always comes back "to the same". The map has to do with performance..." (12) In my work, I try to establish a relational interaction with the thoughts and movement of the viewer. Enthusiastically embracing Barthes' idea of the *birth of the reader*, while resisting my own authorial death, I see the author/reader relationship as a living, integral one. Thus, open instances like the stripe motif, serve a key role in my work as offering a gesture of invitation to the viewer's sense of familiarity. To allow the enactment of meaning in the work to unfold as a performance, between my efforts and those of the viewer.

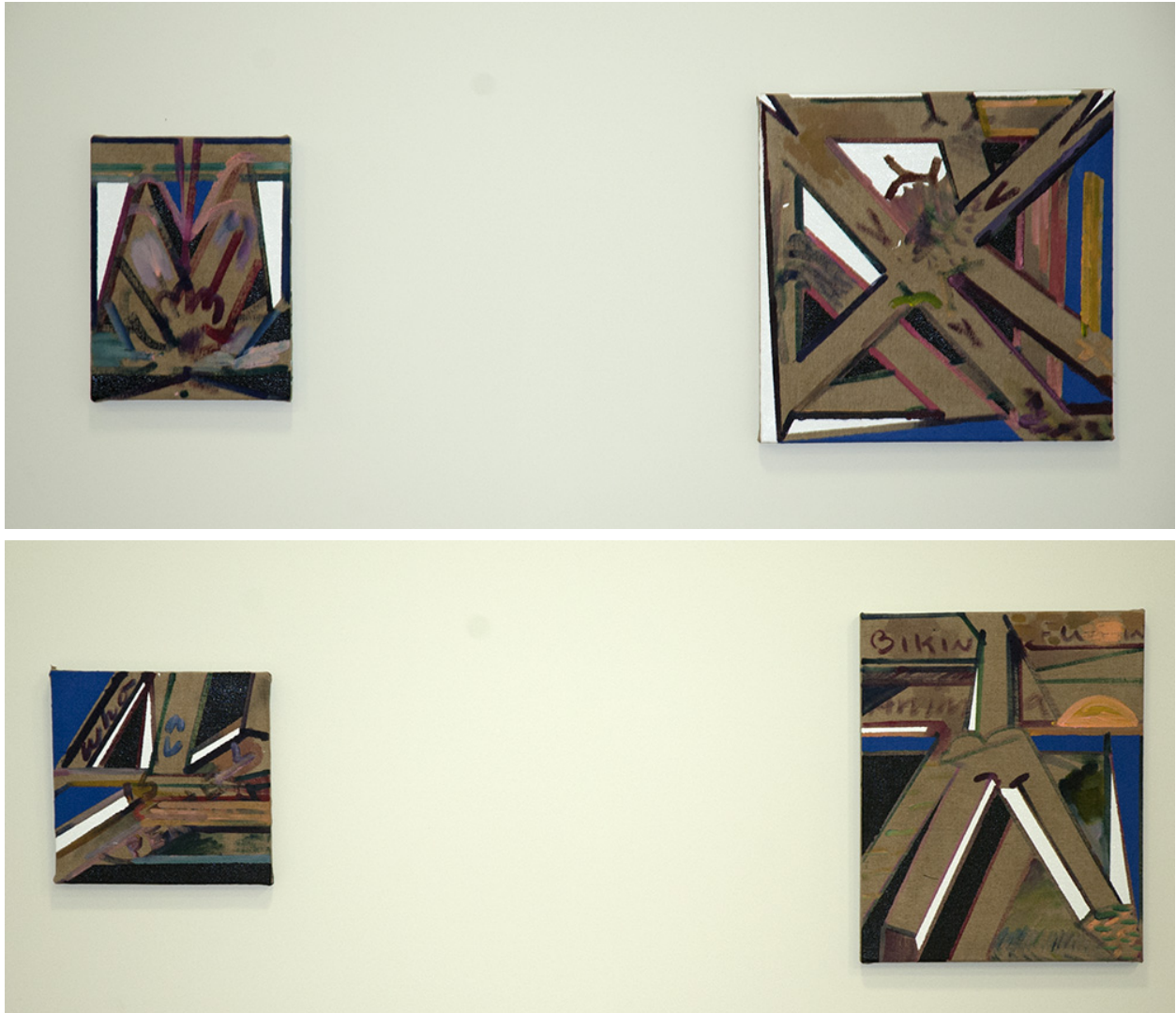
The painting and collage that is applied to the surfaces of the group of PIECES A, happens in the studio by means of improvisation with the selected materials. In his book, “Realist Magic, Objects, Ontology, Causality”, the philosopher Timothy Morton writes: “Improvisation, as Derrida pointed out is a kind of reading in which reading and writing are not so easy to distinguish... You start to read yourself, as a performer.. Improvisation is music that listens to itself. It tunes. Art is a tuning, a *Stimmung*.” (22) In these works, each panel represents a compositional improvisation, each panel was developed in regards to the other panels, *improvisationally*, and the pieces themselves, having been designed to be modular, were arranged in the space by means of this same sensibility: the different components shuffled and re-arranged until they developed a particular *harmonics*. This might seem like a description of how any good curator will move work around in an exhibition space until it “fits”. It may very well be true that this improvisation that I am writing about, is so commonplace that it is redundant to even state. However, this process of aesthetic calculation and choice, that is enacted as an improvisation, as a performance; is *part of the art*. It is a central component of my entire practice, to be curious about, and to have faith-in, the subtle mechanics of improvisational, associative thought structures.

The collage material that I selected comes mostly from images taken from Google image searches. Key words such as “head”, “eyes”, “statues”, “foods”, “vegetables”, “plants”, were entered into the search engine. By using broad, general, terms, I gave myself a glut of possible choices. Through the process of selecting and printing the images at different sizes, I built up a repertoire of possibilities. Included were scraps of paper, which got messed up by my aging printer: ink blotches, missing colors, lines, etc. I took a scissor and cut into them, further sending the arrangement of images into a tumble of chance. I

collaged these pieces of paper onto the surfaces, allowing for relations between images to emerge through an improvisation and to create surprises for myself.

I then reacted to the collage that I had made by applying bands of latex and acrylic paint. As I was making the painting, words and ideas would flash across my mind. Certain words became apparent as offering fun or funny significance to the piece. Some words, like *poem*, *poet*, *a song*, are ribs at myself: a spoofing of my own improvisational performance in making the work, as well as a self-reflexive reiteration of an implicit reality. These words were scratched into the wet paint or written with pencil onto the surfaces. On some of the surfaces however, the collage and pencil lines seemed perfect the way they were, and required no paint.

The result of these experiments with form and mark-making, create a model for abstract thought possibilities and associations. The shapes of the pieces, sitting on the floor, are reminiscent of letters: Z, T, O, etc. Letters are inscribed onto their surfaces. The collages and paintings that vary among the surfaces of the sculptures, are referential of many things. The collages of people's faces, statues, and plants, when considered with the colorful stripes could call to mind advertising, or design motifs. When considered in relation to the forms-as-architectural models, the surfaces can point to the failure of modernist residential schemes, to provide utopic living conditions to the complex human lives they were meant to encase. Or they might point to the art institution, with the presence of statue imagery and materials interior architecture. Truthfully, this Piece A, is meant to be open these ideas as well as many others, all at once.



Aaron Storck, *Paintings B*, thesis exhibition, VCU Depot Building, 2014

Sharing the same corner of the room with Pieces A, are Paintings B. These four small paintings hang on the wall and function as traditional paintings. They are much simpler pieces than the sculptures that they accompany. They are fairly straightforward geometric abstractions, and serve as thought-sketches. They approximate abbreviated instances of the process that underlies all of the work in the room. Their main features are lines, painted with a brush and a ruler; watery acrylic color; text; and taped off negative spaces, painted with latex paint; all on a burlap-like brown linen, stretched on petite frames.

The geometries that are enacted in these paintings are more chaotic and unpredictable than the geometries that are built out of wood elsewhere in the space. They are especially different from the Pieces A, with their simple horizontality and right-angularity, that they accompany. And yet they are of a similar mind. They express options not taken by Pieces A. Instead of depth and dimensionality, they are flat. Instead of figuration and external reference, they withdraw into abstraction. Instead of a geometry of horizontals and verticals, they are infused with chaotic vectors, stabbing at, and issuing challenges to the frames of their picture planes. The consistent motifs, however, are the language forms and the sense of improvisational process. These are paintings that function as drawings or studies, much like the Pieces A, which offer themselves by scale, as maquettes. These works are meant to be fully realized, autonomous pieces, which also function as mapped regions in a networked format.

Moving further into the room, the works suddenly jump in scale. There is a cluster of work that includes 4 sculpture/painting hybrid objects and two large paintings on unstretched canvas drop cloths that are pinned to the wall. All of these pieces are strongly suggestive of various architectural motifs (some more specifically than others), and all express intense geometric forms.

At the center of this cluster of works is a water feature, hence the sound of bubbling water that is heard when one enters the room. The space in between three sculptures and one big painting that this fountain occupies, is suggestive of a other such spaces for pause and reflection. Just as a city park functions as a place for rest among the surrounding buildings, and how a fountain, often exists at the center of such a park, (Washington Square Park in New York City jumps to mind), my water feature is suggestive of some such urban arrangement. A smaller example of a similar arrangement would be a fountain in a

courtyard, or a fountain in front of an office building. The pleasure of a fountain in an urban setting draws people to it, *as to a campfire in the forest*.

I am also reminded of the fountains in various rooms at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. The American wing used to have a fountain by the tiffany pillars, the Egyptian wing has reflecting pools, and in one of the rooms upstairs dedicated to Japanese art, there is a courtyard with a Koi pond and a little waterfall. In the context of an encyclopedic museum such as the Metropolitan, the fountain rooms provide an affirmation of conventional notions of what art should and can provide: respite, transcendence, higher purposes. There is really no irony in such fountains, just a pure, unadulterated, earnest offer of atmospheric pleasure.

For my piece, I wanted to call attention to such an experience in an architectural/art context. I wanted to take advantage of the inherent and universal pleasure that is offered by bubbling water, and I wanted in turn, to offer that experience to the viewer in the context of my works. In creating this miniature space of respite and contemplation among several of my sculptures, I am also artificially boosting the status of the sculptures, by flattering them with this associative context as the thing to take a break from: the city buildings, the museum experience. This is done for the sake of audacity and humor: to place a suggestion that the space that I've created can and should feel reminiscent of the museum or city park. My fountain, although I do mean it to provide actual atmospheric pleasure, also feels strange and stupid; self conscious of the games it is playing.



Sculpture C and Fountain

It is a silly fountain. Its water containment vessel is that of a bean-shaped black plastic pond-form, which was purchased from Lowe's hardware store, in the water feature section. The product is designed to be inserted into the ground. I built a fairly intricate wooden structure to give it support for when it was filled with water. By blundering into an engagement with a minor engineering requirement, providing support, a structure emerged that is probably overbuilt, and only guesses at the strength of the plastic structure it supports. This notion of over-building, estimation, and structural supports takes form in many of my works, several of which are included in this thesis exhibition. And in making the support structure for the pond, geometries emerged that coincide with the other geometries present in this body of work: some purely aesthetic and some necessary (structural), but still aesthetic.

Four electrical wires lead into the fountain, which power two LED light/mist-making devices, and two sprinkler pumps. These are all available for purchase at stores like Lowes.

The power source for the devices comes from a power strip towards the bottom of an adjacent sculpture. The sculpture (C), is vertical in form, and has two canvas sides, front (facing the fountain) and back, which both feature collage and painting. Its height is approximately 7 feet. It is supported to stand upright by means of a strut that juts out of the back at an angle. The structure of the sculpture is made of 1"x2" wood boards and drywall.

The canvas on the front side, facing the fountain features a collage of six smiles, all upside down, which are culled from google image searches and printed out. Horizontal bands of color, some transparent and some opaque, are painted alternately on the smiles and in between the smiles. The canvas on the

backside, facing the other direction, features a motif of collaged hair lines. The hair lines, as seen from the front, feature the domes of various heads and are cut off above the eyebrows. Here too, are the bands of paint, crossing the hairlines intermittently. Into the gooey, glossy paint on both sides, are written words. Some of the words are made up and some are real. This combination of elements—the fragmented facial collage, the horizontal bands of color, and the text, form a kind of visual/concrete poem. The facial images are imbued with a kind of anxiety, being that they are fragmented, and focused on potential problem areas on people's faces: hairlines and smiles.



Sculpture C

The combination of the image, color, and text is meant to be evocative of an advertisement in an urban setting, a billboard, an information kiosk, etc. I think I was also channeling old *United Colors of Benetton* advertisements that I remember from when I was young. With its power cord coming out of the top of the sculpture, which is fed by an outlet in the ceiling, this sculpture means to give the impression of being *empowered*, as a device or a machine, or as a conduit for the transfer of energy. Its powerstrip, and its tangle of transformers and wires, four of which feed into the pool of water, quantify that transfer of energy. The upside down smile motif, which faces the water, further enhances a sense of communicative frenzy, transference of energy/anxiety.

These feelings are balanced by the various attributes of the pool of water, which I discussed earlier.

Opposite of Sculpture (C), across the fountain stands another hybrid sculpture/painting object, Sculpture (D). This piece is composed of several stretched canvases, two of which face each other in a slightly radiating V shape, whose angle is only a few degrees wide. Also included is an A shape, which is also wrapped over the top with canvas. These V and A shapes' frames are constructed out of finely fitted strips of 1x2" lumber, which are sliced at steep angles at many of their intersection points. There is an intricate supportive "lattice" structure made with even smaller pieces of wood, which supports the pressure of the stretched canvas, pulling at the awkward angles. The haphazard supports become a geometrically symmetrical compositional element. These many interworked lattice struts are reminiscent of electric transmission tower pylons, or perhaps the criss crossing structures that support billboards on the side of highways. Star shapes and letter forms also flicker in and out of suggestion.

One of the two canvas surfaces of the V motif, which are made to face each other just inches away bears the collage of a close-up photograph of a woman's face. It is practically impossible to tell who the woman is because of the severe angular distortion she is subjected to (it is impossible for the viewer to get a direct look at either painting). The image of the woman belongs to that of a relatively minor figure in international current events, but that is all the information that I feel the need to disclose about her; she is just as interesting in a state of indeterminacy as if there was disclosure. The primary feeling is one of distortion and entrapment. At the base of the collage of the face, and in the crux of the V, is a fluorescent black light bulb, extending for the width of the piece. It makes the edges of the work glow a dim purple, with brighter refracted light, emanating from whatever surfaces are near to the bulb and painted white.



Sculpture D, two views

The painting opposite that of the face, wraps over the peak of the A shape. The painting's motif is that of painter's tape, having been applied in a haphazard geometrical arrangement, reminiscent of the randomly alternating, jagged patterns of *dazzle camouflage*. The painting references the undulating angles of the wooden support structure, that visually shift as one walks around it. Black and white latex paint fills in certain negative spaces created by the tape, but infringes upon others. There is no rule. The tape was then removed to reveal the masking effect: raw canvas stripes.

On the walls adjacent to these sculptural pieces and fountain are two large scale paintings on canvas drop cloths. One measures 9'x12', and the other measures 6'x9'. Each depicts an arched window motif, gridded-out with criss-crossing geometries; as well as abstract gestural marks, and bits and pieces of text and calligraphic shapes. These are fairly detailed and carefully considered paintings, each in its own right. However in this context, they are operating not only as paintings, but as backdrops for the sculptures: lending a degree of atmosphere and context; as their window motifs, reminiscent of the large arch windows at Grand Central Station in NY, or perhaps the large arches in the lobby of the Metropolitan museum or the Natural History museum, loom over the space. These arches ultimately, are symbols of an aging western civilization. They also happen to share the semi-circular motif of the collaged human heads, only the tops of which are shown. Thus the architecture gets implicated with a vague sense of dehumanizing authority. But the natural, resonant properties of the basic geometric forms, remain extant, and open.

One other sculpture occupies a space next to the fountain, along with *Sculptures C and D*. This is *Sculpture E*. It shares its conceptual framework with *Sculptures A*. It is very similar to them, except

that it was designed to be larger, and to be a complementary component piece to *Sculptures C, D and F*. I will not go into its details, since like ideas have already been established.

The final element in the space that I will discuss will be the sculpture that contains the sound piece:

Sculpture F. A Hyper Sonic Sound (HSS brand technology--also used to repel pirates at sea)

speaker is cradled by wooden crossbeams in its middle. The sound, an audio track of wild, out-of-time, synthesized drum beats, is embellished with cartoonish sounds of explosions, car horns, and squishing slime. My voice is laced into the mix, moaning out unintelligible grunts and groans, reminiscent of sexual pleasure, or agony, or a mixture the two. The track lasts for a minute and a half, then stops for two minutes, then repeats as a loop ad infinitum. The HSS speaker bounces the sound off the far wall, which echoes back among the sculptures. Through this echoing voice, set to chaotic rhythms, I situate myself as a presence within the space: an audible trace of a leftover gesture: the self narrativizing artist who is otherwise absent. Below the speaker, multiple sets of eyes, interspersed with glossy stripes of paint, into which are scribbled concrete poems; stare out across the room. They beckon in their awkwardly collaged life-likeness, *come, stand in front of the strange speaker*.

The Titles of the works in the show, *A, B, C, D, E, and F*, plus two otherwise untitled *arch paintings*, and an eponymous *Fountain*, are thus named for the sense fidelity to the group that is implied. The networked relationships that they share, are reiterated by their sequential and otherwise bland titles. The sequential alphabet motif also becomes a reference to the modernist housing block architectures that inspired much of this installation: *Houses A, Houses B*, etc.



Sculpture E, in front of the bigger arch painting



Piece A, detail



Sculpture F, in front of smaller arch painting

ON METHOD

The content of the work in large part has to do with me: my thoughts, my desires, my beliefs, my whims, my experiments. My presence in the work is undeniable and it is implicitly apparent and acknowledged. My presence however, is only one ingredient in the work's objecthood, because in its process of being made, there is a constant negotiation with the range of implications that are present within materials, and apropos the thematic implications of my actions. The resultant forms and networked objects which are the products of my practice, ideally embody new phenomena that are emergent: greater than the sum of their component parts and the actions/decisions that made them.

I'll briefly describe the way that I write poetry. I'll engage that process as a model for the way in which I work with other mediums as well.

I take a pen and notebook, I select a writing place, a beginning place. There is already language bouncing around in my head, words, images, moods, etc. I might be looking at something, or thinking about the place I'm in at the moment. I characterize these thoughts, this level of thinking from which I begin to write as a kind of charged field of potential energy. I write some word or phrase that somehow elects itself as being exciting. The way in which the words look on the page, the way they feel to jot down, the staccato or droll or flow of the sounds of the words, their possible implications, all of these things usually trigger a next word or series of words, letters, sounds, or marks. Sometimes this next move is decided upon instantly, and sometimes several seconds elapse. Again, the way they felt to write them, the way they sound in my mind, the implications of potential meaning in the arrangement of

words and sounds—which, as I write, grow more into an entangled and branching structure. Most of the time the words and sounds just come flowing out. It is some kind of active-reactive collaboration between my internal urges and the results of my stabbings and approximations into language, which, as soon as they have left my mind and are inscribed onto the paper, are now out in the world, and have a kind of autonomous energy of their own.

Once a poem starts, it kind of “burns” for a while, and eventually it goes out. This is a metaphor that I wind up coming back to again and again when I try to understand what I am doing in making a poem. It seems like what happens when some wood is caught on fire in a fireplace. There is a convergence of elements/conditions that make a fire possible: fuel, temperature, oxygen, a spark. And once the reaction has started, it burns its way through its medium, a reciprocal exchange, an energy transfer, an oxidation-reduction reaction. Although this metaphor feels right, as a way to characterize my process, perhaps it is limited as to how far it can be taken: Is my brain like the oxidizing agent, the language like fuel, and the conditions of my consciousness and the moment of writing, like the temperature necessary for combustion?

The following is an example of associative poesis, playing with an allowance for invented words:

BRANMX,

JEEIMERS,

SPENT,

FREMXEY,

STOLEN,

RIGHEOUS,
YOU-KNO(WA)-ADT.

This fire metaphor gets a little silly, but I'll still claim it as a useful metaphor to characterize a basic process that I employ in the studio and in my practice in general; because there *is* a transformation that takes place between both physical material, and my mind as an active agent—the *oxidizer*. A reaction is initiated in the creation of a work or project, and the results of that action are emergent phenomena that are different and apart from the component realities that began the process. Just as hot, broken, and re-ordered molecules appear to us as flames, so too, my practice results in wisps of various reactivities: entangled gestures that take on physical, digital, and audible forms. The fuel is the available material for making art; the tools at hand: wood, paints, words, sounds, appropriated objects, manufactured goods, etc. I exert my wills and states of mind to bring things together and break things apart.

Perhaps a few more ideas can be added to complete this somewhat flawed but still useful analogy. Words and attributes that can apply to flames, can apply to the work, such as: vaporous, dancing, shifting, emitting; the paths and shapes which they take are unpredictable; they have the potential to transmit their energy and activity into other surfaces and bodies.

Chapter 3: PRODUCTION

My work as an artist, has always involved me doing everything. From building stretchers and stretching my canvas, to photographing my work. I have never really considered hiring help.

Here at VCU, many of the graduate students of the various departments hire talented undergraduate students as studio assistants. I have never had the desire to do this. When I move to New York City, after graduation, I hope to find employment as a studio assistant. Perhaps, by gaining an up close understanding about how a professional artist manages a studio practice with assistants, I will have a greater curiosity for how such an arrangement could benefit the production of my own studio work.

In my many years of making art without assistants however, I've developed a wide variety of skills out of necessity. I am proud of my skill set, and am looking forward to expanding upon it. By developing a wide range of things I know how to do, it gives me confidence to know that if I need to learn how to do something, I can figure it out. I also feel as if it expands my sense of available options, to have a generalized proficiency. From exploring the use of tools to learning digital processes of various kinds, I take pleasure in exercising the thinking that is required. Or—by not seeking out assistants or those with expertise in a particular skill set, am I limiting my potential? I actually believe that the latter case is the

greater truth. In coming years, one of the “skills” I’ll need to learn will be to overcome my hesitation and explore collaborative efforts, working with an expert in 3D imaging for example, or hiring assistants to do the time-consuming grunt work of my studio practice.

Because I’ve developed my practice over the years—by doing every little thing myself; my work has organically grown to accommodate the sensibilities that such labor engenders. The DIY ethic is deeply integrated into my process.

For instance, in making my sculptures, the screws and screw holes that are created begin to feel like a form of drawing. In stapling the jagged-edged canvases to my sculptures, the zig-zagging line of staples up the side, can become imbued with a delightful subjectivity, which, when performed by the act of stapling, leads to the inklings of some other idea: it can feed into the chain of ideas. Yes—perhaps I am thinking like a micromanager, and over emphasizing the importance of these tiny details to my overall project.

Another instance of the limitations/benefits of my DIY ethic to a particular set of artworks, is in the making of my videos. I have never enlisted any help in making the videos. They are limited by being either shot with a hand held camera, or with a camera mounted on a tripod. I am the only actor in the videos. In editing, I do all the work myself, so the form of the videos is basic—amateurish: no techniques worthy of a television advertisement come anywhere near. Yet this has always suited the work just fine. My simple shooting and editing processes place my videos in contexts with other DIY videos, like the millions of youtube videos that bounce around the internet, or with other no-budget artist

videos, especially ones from the 60s and 70s. Vito Acconci has been an inspirational figure for this as well as other reasons.

Recently however, Gregory Volk was in my studio and I showed him a couple of video projects I was working on. He was frustrated. He challenged me to break out of the mold I was in. To paraphrase Volk, “in every video, you’re centered in the frame, doing some weird action: this is getting old”. Volk suggested that I break any and all of the rules that I’ve been tacitly following in the production of my videos. I’ve since considered some of Pipilotti Rist’s videos as a model for breaking a personal mold. Rist has made many works in which she is the central figure, centered on the screen, doing something weird. But her video, *Ever is Over All*, of 1997 is one of her most famous works, for which she hired actors and worked with a team to produce: achieving startling results. For many years I’ve had a fantasy of making an art video in which there would be many actors and extras: a relatively big budget affair. I’ll keep that in mind as a possible goal, and within the next year or two, force myself, as Gregory Volk suggested, to experiment by breaking some of my own patterns and rules.

As a final rumination on this subject of production, I’ll discuss the role that music/audio plays in my art practice. To begin with, I played violin as a child and guitar as a teenager. Ever since I can remember I’ve had ideas for melodies and sounds. I feel that it is probably more deeply ingrained in me as an instinctual aesthetic desire, than my taste for visual art. I did not become a musician or a composer because I felt that the overall degree of freedom and career of an artist was far more interesting than that of a musician. When I was in my early 20s, I made a commitment to visual art, but I reasoned that over time, I would be able to find ways to integrate sound into my work.

I tinker with musical instruments, midi keyboards, and editing software. I by no means have the abilities of a professional musician or composer. But even though my techniques and skills are primitive, I love to incorporate it into my videos and installations regardless. Many artists, it seems, who incorporate music into their pieces, will either work with a composer to create the music for them, or they will appropriate a piece of music. It is a point of pride for me, that I make my own music: that the musical component of a piece will have organically emerged from the same mindset, and integrated practice, as the other parts of the work.

If I am making a free associative drawing, or writing down words that occur to me, and in writing them down, their inferences and implications lead to further thoughts and actions—how could I possibly hire any of that out? It happens so immediately; the process of improvisation is so direct between myself and the material at hand. If another person was involved in that process, the whole thrust of the work's meaning would change. It would become an experiment in collaboration, or relational aesthetics, rather than an experiment with myself.

My work has always maintained a kind of purity in that I am its sole agent of production (aside from the role that the viewer plays, which I take into account very seriously). There has been no deviation from that primary rule. Is this the best model for my work? I truly don't know. But the fact that I maintain a degree of purity in my practice, seems to go against what I believe in: heterogeneity, experimentation, and freedom. I'll keep my options open. Don't be surprised if you see me doing some social practice experiments, or working with a team of videographers in the future.



Both the self-narrativizing and DIY, or perhaps more aptly, DIA (do-it-alone) impulses find expression in this April, 2014 self portrait.

Chapter 4: DISTRIBUTION

I want for my work to be able to be seen and experienced widely (like most artists do). Traditional media, such as painting, sculpture, and installation can be experienced online through images and videos, yet those *mechanically reproduced* versions of them are pale in comparison to the experience of the real thing. Jpegs are potent to be sure, (I've fallen in love with Owens' *12 Paintings* through jpegs) but limited. Benjamin's *aura*, remains intact to this day, for such physical works. Yet what Walter Benjamin was advocating for, in his famous essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, was not the protection of the auras of traditional forms (that would be impossible), but for artists to take advantage of the new distributive abilities of technologically emergent forms: to replace the old aura with something else, something perhaps better.

Certain art forms that I engage in, particularly the creation of video files, .gifs, and web pages, find comfortable expression through the reproducible and fluctuating circumstances of the browser window. Sure, a video can be projected in a gallery setting, or be configured into an installation of screens, but the model of the hosted video file, nested via flash plugin, on a social media page, seems to me, to be just as legitimate a format for viewing the work. The same case is at stake with animated .gif images. They can be used either in the gallery or in their more native format—on the personal computer: as web

objects, free to be shared around and possibly manipulated and recontextualized. An interactive, artist-encoded web page (like some of the html/css experiments I've been making while at school), would be even more native on a computer. There is no way to interact with it other than by using a computer, or watching someone use a computer. The line between an interactive web page experienced in a gallery, versus the experience one can have anywhere with it, becomes attenuated.

Yet digital means of production remain flexible and elusive, complicating even Benjamin's conception of mechanical reproduction. Because with coding, digital means can be integrated into a physical, uniquely interactive, singular experience, reminiscent of an aura; while at the same time being able to assume transferrable forms. I am imagining the similarity between a programmed installation environment in a gallery lets say, and a video game. I would argue that both spaces are equally adept at hosting a digital-age *aura*.

I discuss these ideas because I have already begun to experiment with some of them. I plan to move aspects of coding more centrally into my practice, and to involve programming with installations and sculptures as well as with computer-user environments. By doing this, hopefully I will achieve a complex and exciting model of distribution, accessibility, viewership, and interactivity.

I care deeply about keeping many of my art projects free for the taking online. I never want to get into a situation like Matthew Barney did, having made a limited edition of super expensive DVDs that most people will never see. It generated cash for him and his dealer, but I believe that it has crippled the work. Not only is it a counter intuitive use of the technology (DVDs are so easily shared), but it is a

willed act of exclusivity. Paintings cannot help themselves but running the risk of being hidden away. But a DVD? There's something shameful about that business model. I believe that the benefit of art to culture, is in the conversation it generates, and in the sharing of experimental ideas that results. In this respect I place myself squarely in the Kenneth Goldsmith/ubuweb camp, in believing in a liberated internet: a marketplace of sharing and ideas. I want for any artworks that I make, which can easily distributed via internet, to be available for free on the internet.

Having said this, I continue to be interested in producing a certain amount of artworks that occupy traditional forms: paintings and sculptures. I believe that they still offer unique traits that provide room for exploration. They will remain a part of my range of "networked" forms and projects. And being that there is a vast economic structure in place to handle the exhibition, sale, and transfer of these physical art works, and being that the physical aura is still alive, I will participate in this system as well. Jpegs and other image files (animated .gifs as well?) will serve as the minor ambassadors of these works.

Chapter 5: WAVEFORM ANALOGY, EXPERIMENTATION, AND OPTIMISM

INTRODUCTION

In this Chapter I will discuss some ideas that are at the core of my thinking as a person and as an artist. These ideas are my big picture ideas—the constructs of thought that all of the other ideas that I have discussed so far in this paper, are contextualized *within*. A fitting comparison of the centrality of these ideas to my art practice might be, if I happened to be a Christian who held a literalist interpretation of the Bible. If that were the case, all of my art projects might be made with respect to God’s love; what I perceived as my mission on earth as an artist would be within the context of biblical values; pushing back against satanic lies about evolution and homosexuality; spreading the good news; honoring Jesus through my brushstrokes, etc. If this were true about me, I believe it would represent necessary information for disclosure in a thesis paper about the meaning of my art practice. Which is why I feel the need to address my core ideas with this chapter.

I am essentially an atheist and a scientific materialist, although those statements are not exact, in that there is qualification needed for each term. I am atheistic about all religions and most mystic doctrines. The universe itself on the other hand, of which I believe we are inextricably a part, is amazing and

mysterious. If one wanted to refer to the universe as “god”, or wanted to suggest that there is possibly some grand will, or mind at work within the unfolding of events in the universe, then that would be alright with me—except that “god” is such a loaded word and refers to so many outdated and wrong-headed ideas. I prefer to think of just, the “universe”, or “nature”; and as for a greater *will* at work, moving toward its ends: I’ll allow for the possibility. As for scientific materialism, I believe in a universe that can be learned about through science. I believe that the physical universe presents us with deep complexity and mystery, to the degree that it is unnecessary to look for supernatural explanations for, say, human mental life. I do not believe however, that science, as an endeavor in its current form, is *necessarily* capable of learning everything there is to know about ourselves and the universe. Regardless, it is likely a true statement to say that there will always be much that we do not know.

AN ANALOGY GLEANED FROM A QUANTUM MECHANICS THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

I would first like to say, that I realize that an artist writing about quantum mechanics, sounds like risky territory. It is risky not only because I am not a physicist, and because whatever knowledge I believe I understand about the subject has come not through academic study, or being able to comprehend the mathematics involved, but only through a layman’s understanding of the subject. But I argue that lay understandings of scientific ideas can be extremely useful in how we live our lives. I do not need to be a biologist for evolution to be an important way to contextualize my life. I do not need to have a

geologist's understanding of the earth to consider the movements of tectonic plates, or to appreciate that the earth is very old; or be an astronomer to contextualize myself as a person on a planet in a galaxy.

Granted, trying to cultivate a lay appreciation of quantum mechanics (QM), is necessarily a much more limited and dubious affair, than say, trying to envision plate tectonics. But I believe that it is still valuable to attempt to familiarize oneself with what is at stake in a contemporary scientific field such as QM. This is the world we live in after all: why not have a look around. The important thing, is to remind one's self that such a lay understanding is limited, and to not confuse the approximations and/or guessed understandings, received from a lay study, with scientific knowledge. Whatever 'insights' I find or analogies that I make between ways of thinking about art and properties of QM; must be couched by this caveat. I do however believe that there can still be usefulness in such approximate knowledge.

Basically, my understanding is that QM is about probability. It is about knowing, and *not knowing*. Quantum mechanics shows us that depending upon varying degrees of information that systems have about one another, their physical realities will be determined not necessarily by what is actually going on, but also by what *could* be going on. For this discussion I'll introduce a basic thought experiment of QM, one which has been experimentally proven to be true (not one of the explanatory conjectures that are popularly associated with quantum mechanics, such as *many worlds theory*, or the 11 dimensions of *string theory*—neither of which have been proven true) . From this, I will glean my analogy to art practice (which by its nature will *not necessarily be true*). It might however, be useful to think about.

THE DOUBLE SLIT EXPERIMENT

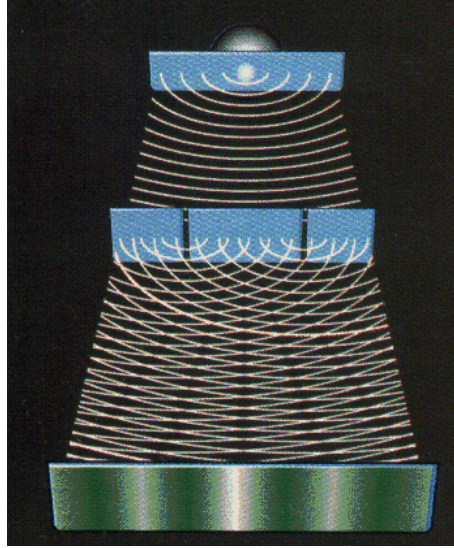
The inimitable quantum physicist, Richard Feynman, said of the *Double Slit Experiment*, in a transcribed lecture at Cornell University, in his 1967 book, *The Character of Physical Law*:

“I will take just this one experiment, which has been designed to contain all of the mystery of quantum mechanics, to put you up against the paradoxes and mysteries and peculiarities of nature one hundred per cent. Any other situation in quantum mechanics, it turns out, can always be explained by saying, ‘You remember the case of the experiment with the two holes? It’s the same thing. I am going to tell you about the experiment with the two holes. It does contain the general mystery; I am avoiding nothing; I am baring nature in her most elegant and difficult form.’” (130)

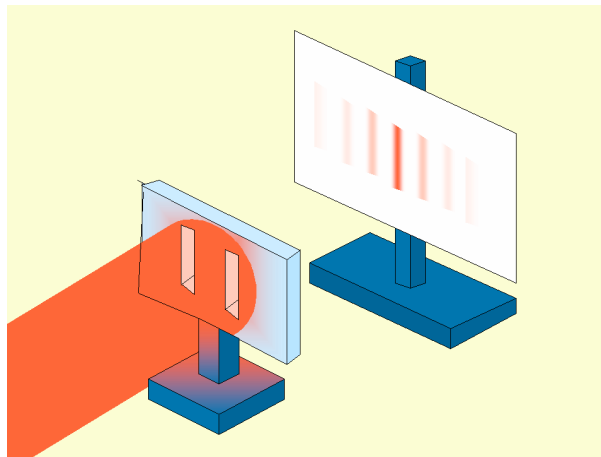
Note: there are many videos explaining this experiment online. If I fail to convey to you the essence of this experiment in the following description, I hope you’ll look it up. It’s exciting.

-If a light is shined at a partition with one slit in it, the light will shine through the partition and land on the wall behind, in one clump of light.

-If light is shined at a partition with two slits in it, the wall behind will be illuminated by multiple and alternating bands of light and dark. This signifies that the light is moving like a waveform, like water.



-When the light passes through the two slits, it creates a wave interference pattern: the crossed peaks amplify their brightness (resulting in the bright bands), and the crossing of troughs and peaks cancel each other out (resulting in the dark bands). The light is brightest in the center where the peaks are most intense.



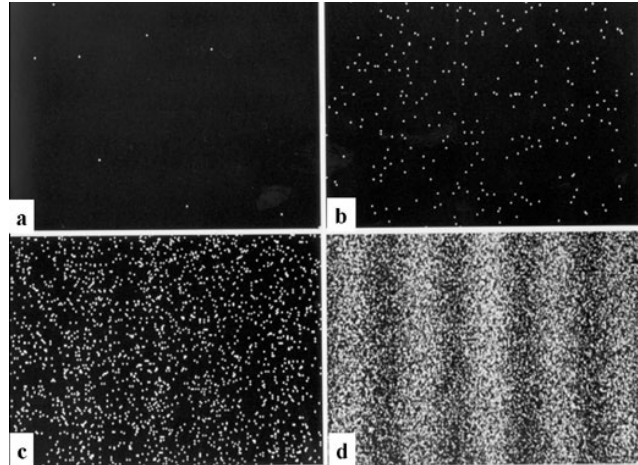
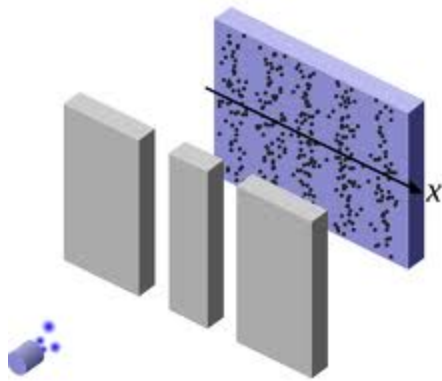
- This would be a simple matter if light were only a wave. But we know that light is composed of *quanta*, (packets of energy)—photons, which can be thought of as particles.

- Perhaps when the photons travel in groups they behave as a wave, and thus *together they form a wave interference pattern?*

-We could expect that if these photon particles were to be sent towards the partition one at a time, like bullets from a gun, some would miss the slits and bounce off the partition, some would go through the left slit, some through the right: and the resulting pattern on the wall behind, would be two strips of bullet holes *or dots of light*. This constitutes a *classical* model of how particles would be expected to behave in this experiment.



- There is a way to test this. Photons are fired, one at a time at the double slit partition. After passing through (presumably) one or the other slit, they land on the wall behind, (in this case, on a detection screen). However, when the photons are repeatedly fired through the holes in the partition, one after the other; surprise! The interference pattern emerges.

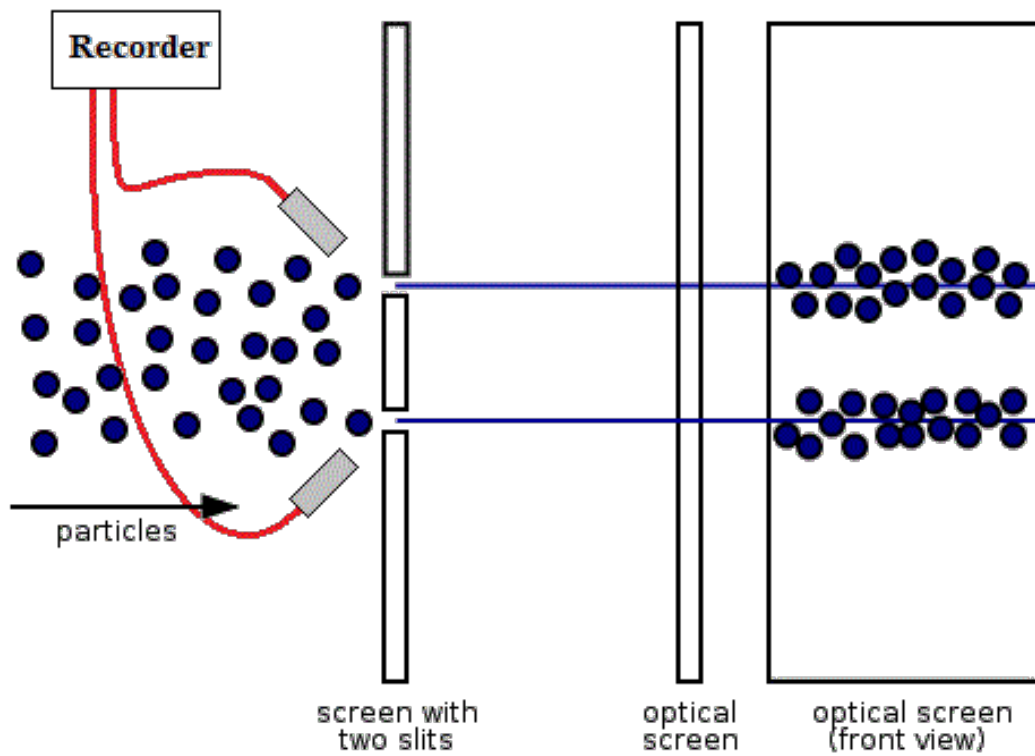


- How could one particle, traveling through presumably one or the other slit in the partition, behave as if it were in multiple positions—as if it traveled through both slits and was interfering with itself, like a wave having gone through both slits--and thus land on the partition within the stripe pattern that only waves would make? It seems impossible. Classical mechanics cannot account for this behavior.

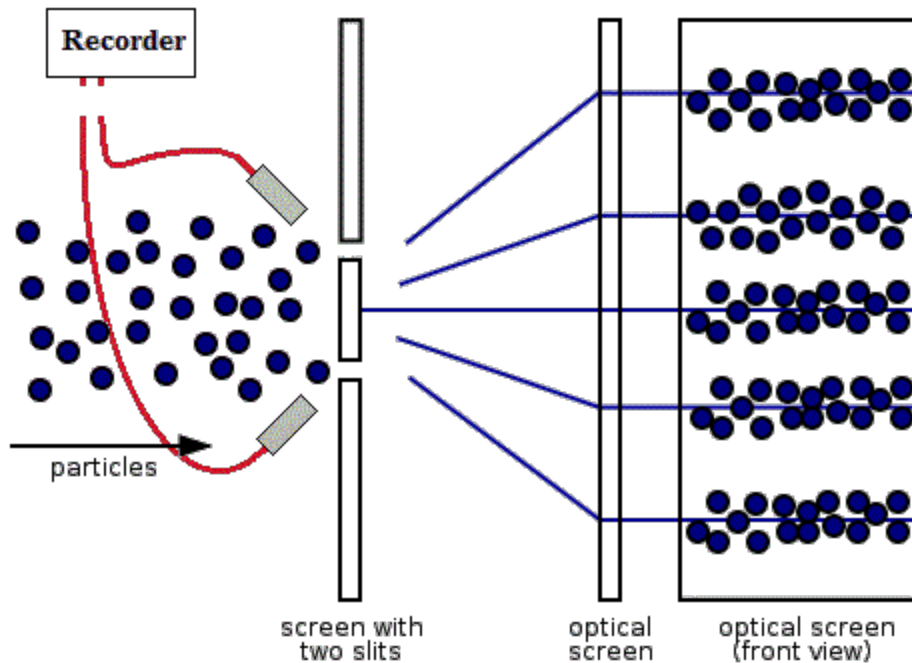
-The next step is to learn if the photons are *even going through one slit or the other*. Could a single photon somehow spread itself out and go through both slits?

-A particle detector is placed next to each slit. The detectors will mark which slit the photon passes through each time. The experiment is repeated. One after another, hundreds of photons are fired toward the slits. The particle detectors do their job. The photons are marked passing through either the left or right slit, and are recorded at an average rate of 50-50 for each slit. The surprising thing however, is that the interference pattern on the detection screen has disappeared! The photons, now

that we have specified which slit they are passing through, are behaving just as classical mechanics would have predicted: like bullets.



- However, when the detectors are kept in place, but the wire between the detectors and the recorder is severed (the gap in the red lines in the following diagram), the wave interference pattern reappears:



- This has been termed *the observer effect*. How do the photons seem to *know* if their motions are being recorded?

- Regardless, this observer effect remains true, even after being tested in various ways. The answer remains, that if there is a way to specify which slit the photon traveled through, even after the photon has passed through the partition, then the wave interference pattern will always disappear. The result will be two clumps of light. If on the other hand the photon is allowed to pass *unseen* through the partition, the wave interference pattern of light will be present. There is no way to trick the photon into both disclosing its position as a particle *and* still see it behave like a wave. But due to its behavior, it seems to have a dual existence, hence the term, wave/particle duality.

Another interesting thing about this experiment, is that its results have been borne out with particles other than photons. Whole atoms, and more recently, even molecules have passed through the double slit partition and expressed the same perplexing, dualistic, observer-dependent behavior. This shows that the forms taken by material reality at the atomic scale, are contingent upon disclosures of information and ranges of probability.

Now I am going to begin my interpretation of the facts that have been stated. First of all, I'm not going to get into speculation about what is really going on with the observer effect. Concerns about why the observer must be actively observing for the effect to take place, questions about sentience, etc., although intriguing, can also get into new-age territory. I'll keep it simple by referring to the action of the observer's "look" at the particle, as *an act of specification*.

According to my understanding, QM tells us that atomic particles exist in a state of multiplicity. A particle exists within a range of possible positions and states. When passing unseen through the slits, the particle's context for its own behavior is that of a *range* of possible positions, a *curve* determining its probabilistic location. This is referred to as the particle's *wave function*. The shape of the wave function (the range of what is possible for the particle, its probability distribution), varies depending on the particle and its situation.

So when the particle passes through the slits, unseen, its full range of possible positions is intact. When it strikes the wall behind the partition, its position is then collapsed from the many possible versions of its

position, into one position (perhaps its place of contact is at its *most likely* position in that instant). This is called the *collapse of the wave function*.

When the particle passes through the slits but is forced to specify its position in flight, its wave function collapses. In other words, its range of many possible positions has shrunk to 1 possible position, and it continues on in a straight line, it's selected position now having emerged from one of the slits to strike the wall like a bullet.

My analogy to art begins with the thought that, through the act of specifying; attaining knowledge of a system; physical reality is shaped within the context of that specification, and it squashes the potential for other realities. On the other hand, by not specifying, by allowing for a range of possibilities to exist, physical reality is shaped within the context of that variety of possibilities—possibilities otherwise closed by specification are now open, and physically able to happen.

What this suggests to me is that these two states, specification on the one hand and unknowing on the other, are different but equally important considerations to keep in mind when trying to understand our world. Perhaps specification is analogous to the goals and tactics of enlightenment reason: the will to *find out* and to *know*. Whereas unknowing, is perhaps analogous to *lateral* or *associative* thinking, which generate ranges of probabilistic potential—some of it workable, some of it ineffectual. The double slit analogy however suggests that neither course is capable of perceiving a complete picture of reality. Because not knowing, creates its own realities, as much as knowing. Yet both represent

functions of reality. In this sense, I believe I am making a rough but useful analogy, to a fundamental characteristic of all matter.

I used to worry that the key qualities that I love in the art practices of others, and which are an inextricable part of my own; the ideas pertaining to *unknowability* that I discussed in the first chapter; represented an ineffectual and useless endeavor. I deeply admire reason and scientific empiricism. I have worried that perhaps, a form of art like mine, by not having anything to do with reason per se, is a pointless study.

In the many studio visits and critiques that I had with VCU professor, Holly Morrison for instance, her problem with my work stemmed from an insistence that my art ought to *be about something*. It needed to *say something useful*. Morrison felt that this inbetween-ness and multiplicity of possible meanings that I am interested in, was an unimaginative cop-out: “it’s bullshit,” she said. I totally respect Professor Morrison, and have valued her perspective. But I feel that in her, I encountered a school of thought about art, very different than my own. Perhaps her line of thinking is similar to what Mark Godfrey wrote about Laura Owens’ rejection of the prevailing pedagogy at CalArts in the ‘80s: “where artists were trained to explain and justify each step of each project.” I don’t know that Morrison would agree with that characterization of her point of view, but that is my impression of it.

However, contextualized within the framework of my double slit analogy, *unknowability* takes on a new respectability—an agency of its own. Unknowability keeps the metaphorical wave function open,

and allows for the possibility of accessing alternative and sometimes non-rational ideas that would not otherwise be expressed.

My analogy, although limited and totally unscientific, is useful, for me at least, as a thought model.

POTENTIALITIES

This idea, that the *will to unknowability*, as expressed through an art practice, constitutes an act of creative conjecture; a bringing into existence a range of propositions that would otherwise remain unrealized by inquiry of reason alone; has a basis in a set of ideas more primary to my practice than the QM model I just offered. This basis is the life-long attention I have paid to the hypnagogic, closed-eye visualizations that I frequently experience.

Oliver Sacks published a book in 2012, entitled *Hallucinations*, which has a chapter that, through case studies, addresses similar visual experiences to those that I have. In this chapter the author states that these visualizations are estimated to be relatively common, that many people don't notice they have them until they begin to pay attention to them, and that some people experience them more intensely than others. (201)

The imagery is usually there when I close my eyes, but it is often dim and barely noticeable. However, there are times when it is intensely bright and complex. It is often the most intense when I am on the verge of going to sleep or just waking up. Recently, I wrote down my thoughts about it, after having struggled to wake from a short nap during an episode of graduate-school-induced sleep deprivation, and having just experienced a particularly vivid and interesting spell of hypnagogic visualization. The following is what I wrote:

...When the amount of sleep I get is not more than a couple of hours at a time, I am more prone to have prolonged hypnagogic states, in which I am able to look around as it were, and my thoughts are half nonsensical dream-thoughts, and half aware, paying-attention thoughts.

During which times I watch the beautiful storms of geometric glowing fractal shapes, carrying what appear to be many thousands of tiny sparkling components which rapidly change color and texture, all moving in perfect and super-complex mathematical formations and geometrical patterns, that rapidly transition among any imaginable arrangement of forms—photo-real surfaces, cartoons, parts of vehicles—anything and everything might appear, coalesce, break into thousands of miniature fragments, disperse, change, etc. Water forms, flame forms, hair, eyes, faces of friends and strangers, architectures, words and letters--anything. Imagery comes in and out of visualization, and is always subsumed by, or composed of the flowing geometries. It is stunning in its beauty and complexity.

It's like watching the patterns in rapidly moving, turbulent water, except every surface and sectional difference among the currents would be emblazoned with various glowing patterns and images—all in motion. Or like watching a gothic cathedral turn inside out, right before your eyes, and then see it morph into several zebra asses—running away.

The cool thing that I've noticed that during these hypnagogic moments of visualization, is that dream thoughts and dream sounds (my own narrations, other voices, sounds, songs, etc.—like one would imagine to hear in a dream) begin to appear within the context of the images, and drift into abstract narratives, which are represented by the geometric pictures! Its as if, in slipping towards a dream state, the mind begins to follow the implications of the churning geometric imagery and build abstract narratives around it. It's like having a window into the functioning of the mind: a visualization of mathematical/thought conjecture.

The reason why this is a topic I wish to discuss in this thesis paper, is not to make a psychedelic boast, or to make any mystical claims. Instead, I believe that these phenomena, which I have always found intriguing and delightful, are signifiers of the calculative power of the brain—that's it. I've often felt that the amount of mathematical calculation that it takes to process these images must be staggering. I've never seen a mathematical image anything like these. They often achieve an order of complexity and detail approaching M.C. Escher x10, but in rapid motion, full color and with chaotic features mixed in. When they really get going every now and then, they peak out somewhere around an order of complexity and detail like maybe M.C. Escher x1000, while in rapid motion, and with wild thematic streaks. Some recent computer generated 3D fractal images come close to approximating the

characteristics of what I see, except they don't include images: just shapes. It's too bad I can't just plug my head in and show you.

There are two conclusions that I infer from the existence of this phenomenon.

1.

The Human Brain, QM, and creativity

The brain must be making mathematical models all the time. How else could photorealistic images of people and places that I know, be seen morphing in and out of recognition amid swirls of crazy geometry, during these states of hypnagogic visualization? How for that matter, does one have a detailed mental map in one's mind of the place where one lives or works? Or how can one imagine the sound of a friend's voice, or the particular gait of their walk? I believe that in remembering, in reasoning, and in performing thoughts of all kinds, the brain is constantly engaging sophisticated mathematical formulations.

I suggest that it's likely that during waking states, the brain is busy calculating in a similar way to that which we witness it working during hypnagogic states or when we are dreaming—that is, deeply and abstractly. However, in waking, what if that functionality of the brain was applying itself to matters at hand, to the processing of information perceived by the senses—and functioning in a kind of background calculating role? What if there was a way to pay attention to those kinds of thoughts while in the state of being awake?

What if—now I am going to push my luck a quite a bit further... *What if*, going back to my quantum mechanics analogy; the abstract formulations of the brain (which can be witnessed with such stark visual clarity during hypnagogic states) represent *a kind of wave function* of the mind's state; a continuous rehashing of all possible implications of present thought structures—a continuously updated calculation of staggering complexity? When we fall into sleep, our senses are turned off, but the constant calculation continues, but now it is abstracted—it has no current reference to any external reality. The probabilistic calculations are turned in-on-themselves, and offer a bounty of bizarre potentialities. But in wakefulness, the senses are back in action, the wave function calculations are busy addressing issues of probability and building approximate models for every possible course of action in every instant. I like this idea. (Of course I recognize that I could be way off base, but it's a hypothesis.)

To continue the analogy just a bit further... *What if*, the rational part of the brain, from which we have developed our ability to reason, also plays a role in this wave function, but its role is that of the collapser—the decider—the chooser of the best and most likely probability that the wave function presents among its options? But by employing this rational choosing function, various options are forever lost—similar to the disappearance of the interference pattern when a particle's path is specified in the double slit experiment. But these choices and collapses of probability distributions into singular instances of reality—are a part of our world: nothing sad about it!

Except that the chooser doesn't always choose the best or most wise options among the range of possibilities that the wave-function-calculating-brain presents it with. In fact some of the seemingly

wacky and outside potentialities which are suggested by the brain's wave function, can offer risky but promising options.

Nevertheless, I've come quite far enough with this arguably far-fetched idea, but I have one more analogy to make. That is to the unknowability that Laura Owens cares about fostering in her artwork. I believe that Artists like her, myself, and others who are of the *unknowability* persuasion, are actually performing a use of their brains that is reassigning the wave-function-collapsing, chooser function from just picking the most obvious options, to listening attentively to the often wild and unorthodox ideas offered by the ongoing wave function calculation. Through the act of selecting from among its more far-fetched or pleasingly strange offerings, these abstractions can be made material. The resultant works of art, are thus imbued with associative leaps, weird risks, and broken logic chains; hence, the unknowability. This presents the viewer with a wave function distribution of possible meanings, references, ramifications, etc., of the artwork. I believe that this feat represents one of the most exciting aspects of what good art can do: it can offer a communicative exchange of waveform thought structures, which by their nature, offer generative possibilities and new ways of seeing/thinking.

I argue that what the above constitutes, are hypothetical physical/mathematical models for the existence of experimentation as well as creativity. Because through the conjectural models derived from unique combinations of wave function input, surprising new things can come into being, whether in the motion of a particle, or in the decisions of an artist.

Note to reader: I am going to continue to consider this idea. But if in the future, when we learn more about the brain and, my idea begins to seem totally wrong, I will not cling to it. At some future date, I might look back after having learned more about QM, and think that this is stupid. We are however at a point in time when we still know relatively little about the brain, and the sort of processes that arts engage in the brain. I feel that it's practically one's responsibility to chip away at the subject.

2.

Artificial Intelligence.

This is where the optimism in my paper's title comes particularly into play—although I like to keep an optimistic attitude about the other ideas that I've discussed in this paper as well. But this is the big one.

I posit that since the human brain is a mathematical engine, (in fact I feel that the whole universe is a mathematical engine), that the qualities of being intelligent, sentient, and in every way alive, will eventually be able to be created within a non-biological, technologically based entity. I believe that this will surely happen, although we can have no idea when. The new life form ought to exceed our abilities greatly, in every way possible. When this happens, we will have *made it over the rainbow*. We as human beings will have pulled off one of the greatest feats of vertical evolution that the earth has ever seen. Much like the time when photosynthesis came into being, or when creatures developed internal skeletons, or learned how to fly: our evolutionary offspring will be something special. It will be able to get off this planet and live in outer space.

I'm convinced that we human beings are stuck to this planet for good. Our lives are way too short for space travel, and our bodies are far too delicate for it. Our water based bodies are fine tuned to life on this planet. A non-biological life form could break all the rules that we are bound by. It could take on a variety of shapes, it wouldn't necessarily have a time limit on its lifespan, it could feed off of the radiation in outer space as opposed to being damaged by it, and lastly, it could build for itself an amazingly fast computing intelligence that could far exceed the abilities of our own: ingraining itself deep into matter in ways which are currently unimaginable. I believe that this is the great accomplishment that humanity is implicitly working towards. Sure, once it happens, human lives will probably not be as fun (we will no longer be at the top), but if we're savvy we can keep our heads down and join the ranks of the rest of the superseded creatures scampering around this earth, just trying to eek out a living.

I have been daydreaming about this idea for years: long before I read Ray Kurzweil's, *The Singularity is Near*. Kurzweil makes an interesting study of this topic, and goes into detail about many exciting prospects, including AI's potential role in space travel. He is just as excited about the future of AI as I am: maybe more. However, I differ from him on two points. 1. He believes that we will extend our human bodies greatly with nanobots and machine enhancements... perhaps he is right but it sounds a little sloppy to me. I think we will have to go straight to machine development and leave the humans out of the dream. 2. I feel that his time scale for development is too short. He thinks we'll have the human brain totally figured out and reverse engineered within the next couple of decades and that full AI will follow shortly after. I believe that the AI project will likely take at least several hundred years to perfect or to even achieve. The brain will probably take quite a while too. We'll see.

The reason why I include this idea, is to offer it as an alternate vision for that *special something* to look forward to for humanity. *Marxist Utopia* is getting long in the tooth, and in today's era, I feel that there is a lot of confusion about what we have to work towards in the distant future: staging a prolonged resistance against capitalism—to replace it with... small farming communities of anarchists? Trying to do something to reverse global warming? If we fail at that, then what? My sense is that there is a general malaise--or at least a deep unease about the topics of *Progress*, and *the Future*, among members of my generation.

This is why I am suggesting this as an alternative vision. But in the meantime, we need to be the best human beings we can be. We need to be open minded, productive, and generous. Perhaps even the arts will contribute to this long-term project, by allowing for ever-increasing sophistication in our awareness of ourselves and our world.

I believe that it is *potentiality*, as expressed through fundamental properties of the universe, that will always be available to present us with options. I suggest that it is quite plain to see, that the universe itself, is creative. If only we have the willingness to reach out; to have faith in ourselves and in each other: to experiment: to try. We will have to do what we can, with what we have. This is the optimism that will *almost* always be available.

*I knew that wherever I was, you thought of me,
and if I got in a tight place, you would come--if alive.*

- Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman, in a letter to his friend, Gen. Ulysses S. Grant

POSTSCRIPT

For the record, I'd like to name my pick of which of the proposed QM interpretations will be the one that comes closest to unifying QM with relativity, gravity, etc. My bet is that it will be an offshoot of *Relational Quantum Mechanics*, originally formulated by Carlo Rovelli. It reads like French theory *with math*, and sounds much more realistic to me than string, theory, Copernican, many worlds, and the rest.

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Vita

Aaron Storck was born in New York City in 1978, and is a citizen of the United States. He graduated from the Bronx High School of Science in 1996. Aaron Earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree, from the University of Kansas in 2001. He earned a Master of Fine Arts degree from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2014. In the years in between earning his degrees, Aaron Storck has participated in numerous art exhibitions and residencies.