The Experience of grey

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by Andrew Super

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Abstract

This text is an accompaniment to an endeavor spanning approximately thirteen months in which I used photographic and literary processes to create documents concerning my history. These nearly universal processes were chosen because of their correlative nature.

Images are read in a similar fashion to texts and both facilitate discourse. This thesis is an investigation on a personal level about the manner in which experiences are had, documented, and in many ways conditioned. The photographs that amount to the physical portion of this thesis explore the personally anecdotal within the context of generalized methods of documentation.

In this work I discuss how a consciously reflective engagement with particular processes can actively shed light upon, and ultimately proctor, the manner in which experiences are created.
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“The artist of today is more than an improved camera, he is more complex, richer, and wider. He is a creature on the earth and a creature within the whole, that is, a creature on a star among stars.” – Paul Klee (Zakia 1980, 4)
Introduction

I took my first photograph seven years ago. It was nearly two o’clock in the morning and I was walking, alone, across my college campus. The air was biting as it blew through the trees near the former library that now houses the art program at Pittsburg State University. I remember the image vividly as being a tree thrashing in the late winter wind. I remember that the bars were shutting down so the streets were becoming noisy again. And, most importantly, I remember that I didn’t yet fully understand exposure, as my resulting negative was as thin a trace of silver clinging to the film as one could imagine.

It was at this time that I began creating photographs that would serve as documents for comprehension. Seemingly truncated, these purely tonal reflections of the spaces and people around me became objects of personal understanding. These objects held no inherent truth and told no inherent tales outside of their growing collective. It was in totality and temporality that meanings arose among them, and it was this desire to take part in a camera based discourse to help mediate experience and foster understanding that drove this project.

The idea that this was a project, however, is in and of itself misleading. There are no logical starting and ending points for what I have done. I would never have tried to take that photograph that night so long ago had my grandfather not purchased that Minolta Maxxum 4000 to document his bus trips for my grandmother. And every photograph I will ever make with whatever camera will bring back the, at least slightest, memory of him spitting his dentures into his soup on those days when I was upset and just didn’t know why.
Part I: The Process of Discovering (A Process)

For the fourth night in a row I sat staring at a darkened lake (see page 31), trying to naively study star patterns and predict the path of the moon as it slowly drifted across the sky. During this time I pondered what I was doing, and as the temperature around the water dropped to meet the dew point I became painfully aware of the absurdity of my self-imposed situation. I took stock in this process, trying to become conscious of why it seemed so important that I put myself through it, almost as if it were instinctual. I had exploited all the usable light in order to finish re-reading a novel, and was fortunate that the light from the moon was ample enough to write for a few hours in my journal, providing a sort of real time document of my time on that lonely dock amidst a flock of roaring geese.\(^1\) It was during the beginning this fourth

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1 A form of the word ‘journal’ appears in this writing, which is technical in nature, twenty times. The writing itself takes on a certain voice that borders on narrative and autobiographical, and only tangentially academic, making it seem an extension of the journal itself. However, this stylistic decision is more a manner of establishing the writing within a certain theoretical discourse, namely that of Jacques Derrida, in which academic writings occur in fashions that begin to call into question the very nature of what academic writing is supposed to be. Works such as Cinders and Glas establish a precedence for using a voice that reflects the subject matter rather than simply discusses it. (Lukacher 1991) (Leavey, Jr. and Rand 1986) To that end, as this writing is reflective of a type of autobiography, the voice I use as author is not one of dispassionate observer and analyst, but that of the first person, the one who is experiencing the anecdote in order to describe it as accurately as possible.

Metaphor and hyperbole are tools used in the same regard as improperly filtering the light for my photographic prints and over-agitating my negatives in order to achieve a desired aesthetic effect. The voice I establish in this writing is a necessary one. This writing is one of the many conclusions to this process and deserves to be treated as a part of it rather than its termination, so I treat it as I treated everything else, with care and delicacy.

2 The form of this thesis paper is also a direct product of precedent and the circumstance regarding my work. Derrida’s Cinders and Glas are synthesized in a way that a disjunctive and difficult meta-text is created by simultaneously presenting disparate texts aside one another. (Lukacher 1991) (Leavey, Jr. and Rand 1986) The final product results in a text more akin to an e e cummings poem than a formalized, theoretical writing. The reasoning behind Derrida’s choice of presentation is tangentially similar to my own. Derrida’s choices are reflective of his personal philosophical leanings, mainly that phenomenological and structuralist approaches to discussing experience need to be synthesized to accurately
trip to the pond that I suddenly became aware of what I was doing and, most importantly, why I was forcing myself into solitude with my cameras and my negatives and my journals. I re-read what I had written the night before in my journal in order to better make some photographs\(^3\) of the ephemeral experiences I had during shooting, and the answer was clear (see page 32). I was letting go. Of what, I was uncertain, but I suddenly became aware of the ameliorative component of my actions. I was using photography and writing together as a means of understanding my history.

My work is a process that is overwhelming, consumptive, analytical, and absurd. Most important, however, it is wholly personal, teetering between observational documentary, conceptual abstraction, and emotionally raw self-portraiture. The process itself is one of nearly absolute solitude. The majority of my shooting is done alone, at night, or while on walks in the late evening before and early morning after completion of a long exposure. I process film alone, work in darkroom I refuse to share with my peers, and write expositively for hours in small postulate arguments. My choice is a direct product of my intense desire to create objects that allow for a more cohesive understanding of a process. To that end these annotations are a means of bridging the gap between what I see as the necessity of a certain voice in my thesis paper and the academic standard for formalization. This two faceted approach to the structure of this text allows for it to be a product of the phenomenology of Andy Super and the structure in which Andrew Super is currently functioning.

\(^3\) Rosalind Kraus wrote in *The Optical Unconscious* that “[p]hotography’s picture can never be anything but frozen movement, the gesture deprived of its inner life.” (Krauss 1993, 210) This notation operates upon the various framing devices within photography that truncate what is photographed from the photograph itself, whether it be the shutterspeed chosen to accurately expose a scene or the literal framing of the dimensions of a negative. This acknowledgement is of vital importance to artists like Duane Michals, who regard photographs as important visual documents concerning time, history, and memory, irrespective of objective concerns of efficacy. Michals is of particular import and a significant influence regarding the physical production of this work. For Michals writing and the act of narration are such integral parts of the photographic act that his mark is left directly on his images, his words an inseparable part of the artistic equation. Michals is a precedent for this work grounding itself as photography rather than simply illustrated literature.
gridded journals. The ordeal is a fetishized ritual to try to impart a sense of control on the world via photographic and literary processes. Ultimately, however, the goal of my process is to open up rather than exclude others from this rather unique sort of portrait. The entire process is a macrocosm that, in its entirety, does a great deal more to help portray myself than any singular part of the process ever could alone. In the end the process is manifested in an exhibition, as photographs and words and objects in a particular place at a certain time. But this is not my work. My work is all the things that go into getting those photographs and words and objects into that particular place.

Raymond W. Gibbs, Jr. defines image schemas “… as dynamic analog representations of spatial relations and movements in space.” (Ward, Smith, and Vaid 1997, 354) Gibbs, Jr. further explains the practical engagement with image schemas in regards to our physical presence in the world by stating “[w]e refer to those recurring bodily experiences as image schemas to emphasize means of structuring particular experiences schematically so that we can give order and connectedness to our perceptions and conceptions.” (Ward, Smith, and Vaid 1997, 355) This definition is referential to the notion of the primacy of sight within the Western tradition by which we categorize and store actions as images or sequences of images rather than aural or literary texts. An image schema essentially breaks down to a linear function, where a source (experience) guides a person down a path (actions similar to those that had proved effectual in the past) towards a goal (a desired, predictable outcome based upon the source and path). This respectively correlates, within this work, to the exploration of personal history (the source) via photographic and journalistic means (the path) in order to try to gain a better understanding of how the use of these media structure experiences and how they subsequently structure the possibilities of experiences (the goal).

Ann Hamilton’s installation works are site-specific works that utilize the particular materials centralized within particular locations, and that comment upon the historical relation between the two. *aleph*, an installation of mirrors and texts regarding outdated technologies at MIT, and *indigo blue*, an installation of thousands of blue work uniforms located in a defunct garage, are examples of her works that use the relation of materials with very specific spaces to create a dialogue regarding history and the objects that facilitate particular experiences. (Stewart 2002, 223-5) The installation of *The Experience of Grey* functioned in a similar fashion, where five dozen personally created silver gelatin prints hung in the most technologically advanced digital printing studio in Rochester. Whereas *aleph* and *indigo blue* were referencing particular sociological and economical issues, the installation of *The Experience of Grey* within this particular location referenced a larger issue concerning the contemporary role of the artist as creator within photography. This work and Hamilton’s work function, essentially, as flip sides of a coin. Both comment upon the history and function of particular places in an ironic fashion based upon the objects presented within
Part II: The Sole of the Matter

I’ve never been one to play well with others. Or, perhaps more appropriately punctuated as: I’ve never been one to play, well, with others. As a young boy I had very few friends and spent most of my weekends and summer days trouncing through the woods alone. In high school I could only justify competing in track and field because the idea of success based upon teamwork confused me. When I went to college I lost virtually all my friends in the divorce, so to speak, as they seemed to follow my long time girlfriend when she parted my company. These little snippets of history have led me to a working method that doesn’t necessarily require solitude, but definitely encourages it.

Because of my propensity for being alone, my working process has gravitated towards more secluded confines and isolated areas of stay. First and foremost is my darkroom, located inconspicuously across the hall from faculty offices on the second floor, near a sensitometer lab that is used perhaps once an academic quarter and various other rooms that contain old forgotten artwork, bicycles, and an enlarger or two.

Harkening back to the notion that a strong sense of personal history grounds my practice further explains why I spent roughly six hours on a bright, warm autumn afternoon in a cinderblock room cleaning calcium, bromide, metol, and various other heavy metal deposits off of brown bottles and stained plastic darkroom trays. It those spaces. However, Hamilton’s work functions on a macroscopic level, with her comment revolving around socio-economic issues, whereas the work in The Experience of Grey functions more (but not exclusively) on a microscopic level, with the comment revolving around the role of the producer of the work of art.
wasn’t just my overt need for cleanliness that drove me to do this. It was my need to have a space that allowed for, and encouraged, a type of kinetic creative process that I could not achieve had I been using a darkroom upstairs with the undergraduates, even though I would have been closer to the fiber washers to properly clean my prints. Likewise, I believe my dartboard would be shunned in the various computer labs in the building, but it was more than welcome on the back of a door no one would ever open save myself. The opportunity for movement and active engagement in tangential activities within the confines of my darkroom was necessary in order to maintain the veracity of the process I proposed.

The physical production of the photographs, taking place in a solitary manner, was an echo, a shadow, of the fashion in which the film was shot. At a few points in the several months spent creating the images for the exhibition I was not alone. I had company, but it was never that of passive observer or happenstance acquaintances. The few times I had company while shooting their presence was noticed conspicuously in my journal, our conversations rampantly flooding into my writings (see page 33). However, this was by far the exception and not the rule. I would go and set up my camera alone; I would lurk in the waxing and waning light alone; I would sit there all night, in the cold and in the dark, alone.

When trying to figure out just what it was that was feeding my desire to be working alone through all this I kept returning to a quotation by William James.  

6 William James is of profound influence to this work as process. James’ history led him to a particular process of philosophical discourse that became an ameliorative act. For James proactive participation in self-reflection and philosophical dialogue created parallel paths down which he traveled. While his writings dealt with psychology and pragmatism, with his words being rather inclusive and not wholly personal, the process of creating the writings was an exclusive act of self-preservation. James used the process of writing in the philosophical tradition as a vehicle to alter his individual circumstance. Likewise, this work was taken on in much the same way. There are established orders concerning thesis projects,
That is, be systematically ascetic or heroic in little unnecessary points, do every day or two something for no other reason than that you would rather not do it, so that when the hour of dire need draws nigh, it may find you not unnerved and untrained to stand the test. Asceticism of this sort is like the insurance which a man pays on his house and goods. The tax does him no good at the time, and possibly may never bring him a return. But if the fire does come, his having paid it will be his salvation from ruin. So with the man who has daily inured himself to habits of concentrated attention, energetic volition, and self-denial in unnecessary things. He will stand like a tower when everything rocks around him, and when his softer fellow-mortals are winnowed like chaff in the blast. (Menand 1997, 67)

It was through this quotation and my recalling the history of this endeavor that proved to be the appropriate lens through which to view these solitary processes. I’ve always been close to alone, or at least more comfortable in that regard, because I knew that I had very little to lose. And creating this work, which was, and is, so incredibly personal was something upon which I couldn’t take a chance. I needed to protect myself, and so I worked alone, in the dark.

While the work was done in solitude it was not done in a necessarily solipsistic fashion. I was actively and kinetically exploring and responding to my environment as well as my self. To this point I had essentially been working within the scientific method, and by that model I found myself at the stage in which the hypothesis is tested by experimentation. However, it should be conspicuously noted that, like virtually every aspect of this ordeal, the scientific method is but another metaphor for a grander activity. There was never the slightest intention of attempting empirical measure or wholly objective observation. My hypothesis was that the photographic process art, installation art, traditional black and white photography, and a multitude of other academic endeavors that fall under the umbrella of this work, where participation in these orders carried aims similar to James’. The desire was to add to a specific academic community and participate in these discourses, while simultaneously exploiting the fact that these discourses add to the substantive portion of those that take part in them in a very positive way. This is ultimately reflective of the prior note given the nature of the human relation with cameras – they are used as they use those who use them, and this work has added to this particular train of discourse because it has added to the work itself.
and journalistic processes would create important personal documents to interpret regarding my understanding of my history. In other words, the objects I was creating were meant to be understood through dialogue grounded in temporality, and if I viewed these objects for what type of documents they truly were, I could gain a new understanding of the events that led to their inception. The control I set up for this experiment was that of the long exposure, where I would maintain a presence, a vigil, with my camera for hours on end, actively engaged in the actions of recording. These variant processes of writing and photographing, where I was capturing thoughts on paper and bits of light on film, are exercises in phenomenology rather than pure attempts at autobiography. I used this philosophical sort of approach in order to avoid a multitude of problems inherent in the nature of consciousness, namely that of accurate description of the real, or more plainly, objectivism. These processes were personal, the locations of my excursions deeply rooted in my memory and a very subjective interpretation of the history of my world. Of course I would be biased. How could I not be? Through the mediation of the camera and the dialogue of subsequent photographs and writings I was able to better understand these biases and move towards a more objective understanding of my history, of my self. But if I worried and troubled myself with these sort of veracious issues from the onset I would, in every regard, be doomed.

So instead of looking into the nature of these things and places and people, which were the embodiment of memories and the impetuses of this endeavor, I simply looked at them. The philosophy of personal vision grounded the personal discourse around the physical products of my actions. In *The Opening of Vision*, David Michael Levin writes that “Is it any wonder that our eyes are so often strained, tired, bored, clouded by tears of loss and mourning? When we reflect on our
everyday habits of receiving the presence yielded up, already articulate, by the light of the field of visibility, perhaps we should not be greatly surprised that our experience is so often bereft of visible meaning.” (Levin 1988, 63) I took interest in how things appeared rather than of what they were made, and the camera and my journal became the standards of measure for these investigations. The focal length of my lens, the speed of my film, and the size of the grids in my journals all became mediating factors in the recording of my experiences. I used these tools in a fashion that made their presence be known. I wanted my physical productions to be transparent in regard to showing their substance rather than operating as windows into other worlds or veils hindering some objective truth. I shot in black and white, to make the depictions of the world an overtly obvious abstraction from reality. I kept a physical journal rather than a digital one, so my hand could be seen and misspellings could occur and occasionally a few words could get warped from tears. These objects, photographs and journals and ultimately the installation, needed to be taken for what they were. New understandings could, and should be, drawn from them, but no intrinsic truth would be espoused. As George Berkeley pointed out in A New Theory of Vision, “the truth of the assertion will be yet further evident to any

7 Certain structural elements are important to the installation. The term ‘structural’ is a precarious one that deserves attention. ‘Structure’ implies a sort of hierarchy, where the elements or parts of a thing can be traced back to a center. According to Derrida in Writing and Difference, that center is located within the structure itself, but simultaneously outside of it. (Bass 1976, 155) This would appear to be a logical contradiction, as nothing can simultaneously be and not be a part of itself. However, this paradox helps explain the relation of the various processes employed in this work and their center, which is both their cause and their effect. The center of this structure is experience itself and how it is understood photographically and literarily. However, this understanding can only be structured or formed through photographic and literary structures. The photographic and literary similarities are obvious to almost comical levels as the grid of the pages of the journal is directly proportional to the grid on the ground glass of the field camera used for the long exposures. Ultimately this idea is a further comment upon how, as an attempt to explain and understand history through the use of certain systems is made, that history is one that is a product of those very systems.
one that considers those lines and angles have no real existence in nature, being only an hypothesis framed by mathematicians, and by them introduced into optics, that they might treat of that science in a geometrical way.” (Berkeley 1709, 16) While the cats and furniture and oceans that were the existential beginnings of my photographs did, in fact, exist in nature, their eternal depictions in silver were but traces of my encounters with them (see pages 34, 35, and 36). Hopefully my audience would be able to understand the physical production in a similar fashion as I understand it: a collection of objects existing together at a particular place at a point in time. These objects then create a new opportunity for experience and reflection due to their collective whole. This hope will be addressed further in due time, but first the idea of the photograph, of the print, needs a bit more attention.

Part III: Objects

As soon as I make a print the process begins to contradict itself. Prints tend to signify an ending of some sort, a finality in silver permanently and forever affixed to cotton rag. But this isn’t, or at least should not be, the case. This whole ordeal is, after all, about processes and examinations and the establishment of an order that helps me to understand the things and the people and the places around me. The processes wouldn’t prove very effective, or warrant the import I give them, if they provide me a sort of one and done analysis where I simply just got ‘it’. What would ‘it’ be anyway?

In order to make these final things not quite so ultimate I had to find a way to make sure that they became an evident part of the processes rather than their logical end. If the physical consequence of my processes existed in multitudes and
simultaneously in various locations then they could not logically be seen as a collective of objects, but rather always as parts of a larger whole.

To this end I blatantly denied some of the mechanical abilities of the medium and went against mainstream practice. I have talked about the importance of working in and maintaining my own private creative space, and I wanted that space to be evident in what I produced. I refused to clean the dust from my negatives so my darkroom could make itself a bit more visible in the prints. I slowly began to embrace areas where the technology broke down because the science just wasn’t quite right. Oftentimes I chose images that had problems because my water wasn’t exactly clean enough or cold enough, because my chemistry was a bit past its prime, because every bit of that beloved paper I bought had the slightest fog from that week of Indian summer in MFA-3 (see page 37). This was a difficult move to make because I have an overt love and appreciation for the craft of photographic printmaking. But my surroundings were so vital a part of my processes that I had to allow my darkroom its own voice, its own presence in the physical manifestation of my work.

8 Susan Stewart wrote, regarding John Cage’s work, in the first chapter of *The Open Studio* that “…in the nature of chance composition is the contention that all answers answer all questions…” and that “…the ethics involved [in such] seemed paradoxically to arise from a determining, even colossal, willfulness.” (Stewart 2005, 9) There is a history of artists using chance operations to bridge a gap between coincidence and parametric guidance in the creation of work. One such example is a deck of cards, coincidentally collected by Tom Whiteside between 1985 and 1989. The collection started as the simple happening of coming across a three of clubs on the ground in Philadelphia, and occurred through a process of adhering to certain parameters in order to acquire the remaining fifty-one cards needed for a full deck. (Stewart 2005, 10) The manifestation of this idea within this work was in regard to the photochemical process of photography. Accurate exposures were sought after and accounted for by multiple exposures over the course of several nights. However, a certain amount of play was given to the quality of the resulting image based upon the parameter that all photographs needed to be created within one particular location, regardless of whether or not that location was the soundest venue for their creation. This parameter comments further upon the personally historical relationship of a place to the photographs. Whiteside’s collection was centered around chance encounters with stipulations on what could be taken from them. This grouping of photographs was centered around the idea of working towards a
In order to get my prints to be understood as objects as opposed to a single of multiples I created mono-prints. This was not meant to make a statement regarding the value of the print as much as the purpose of the prints. In an art historical context mono-prints were initially valued very little. They counteracted the purpose of photography, which was reproducibility. The mono-prints I created were a necessity in order to properly place the prints as metaphors for the people and the places and the memories with which I was trying to reconcile. Each photograph was made in regard and reference to a past as I was reconciling it via a camera with the present. I wanted the viewer to have the opportunity for a similar understanding, meaning that just as I could not segregate my memories from my past or my present, the individual prints could not be segregated from the installation. The photographs would exist in a collective, and made no sense separated from the group. To this end the idea of multiples and editioning seemed counterintuitive as that sort of production lends itself to having parts taken from the whole. I would rather viewers only bear witness to the whole rather than have them see a photograph that only tangentially corresponds to the overall process.

And then I went a step further. I want the photographs to exist in time and space in singularity, as well as bear their own particular history. I want the collection to mature, so to speak, and be held in account to the chance that governs our everyday experiences. Accidents happen, things go awry, and the physical manifestation of my work is intended to operate in the same uncertain realm as the certain photographic result (properly exposed scenes) within the locus that a certain amount of control would be granted to the location where the negatives were processed and the prints were made. Instead of the chance occurring fully in the location of the exposure, it was also allowed to be present in the darkroom, such that if a negative were accurately exposed yet improperly developed for whatever reason (barring simple errors in craft such as temperature control or improper measure) then it would remain.
viewers who engage it. The night before the opening of my thesis exhibition I, along with my two roommates, stood on my front porch and burned every negative, test print, paper box, Pec-12® pad, and Mike ‘n Ike® wrapper that went into the physical production of my thesis. I watched the possibility of recreating or salvaging a damaged bit of the collective literally go up in purple and green and brown smoke.\(^9\)

As we stood there watching the flames jump and the film ball up and the cardboard glow I found solace in the fact that, whatever the future held, it would not allow for reproducibility of the experiences that went into creating these photographs. I found this comfort because then my work could truly begin to take shape. Just as the memories that drove this process could not be amended, neither could the physical manifestation of the process. The photographs could be recontextualized in regard to place and time, but those ashes could never manifest new objects to be thrown into the mix. The prints would live and age. Hopefully I had crafted them properly so that they would not change, but the test would have to be time. And if I did falter in my technique then it would be a lesson and an opportunity for the work to change, to start dealing with its history.

\(^9\) Derrida wrote in *Cinders*: “For abandoned to its solitude, witness to whomever or whatever, the sentence does not even say the cinder. This thing of which one knows nothing, knows neither what past is still carried in these gray dusty words, nor what substance came to consume itself there before extinguishing itself there…” (Lukacher 1991, 41) This statement, in its poetic ambiguity, presumes that the supposed finality of a thing, in this case the metaphoric ashes of words, remove themselves from the history of what they used to be. No longer are these ashes merely representative of the words of which they are made, but are now also things separated from that history and deserving of uniqueness. The relation of literal object to metaphor is such that, while being two separate things, they cannot be fully pulled apart and segregated from one another. The act of burning the negatives of the photographs within this exhibition metaphorically closed the edition of these prints at one, while grounding the action within a very particular discourse. The prints now exist as objects, essentially sculptures in barely three degrees, rather than things that can exist anew in some worse-case scenario.
The process of creating journals as intimate reflections of thought during the act of photographing has been a staple in my practice for a long time. However, this act had always been a secretive one, shared with no one regardless of the level of trust and confidence I had in them. For the first time I was opening up my most private thoughts and responses to the world around me to an audience. There would be melodrama and subtle bits of humor and, for some, a frightening glimpse of what I think and fear and hide from the outside world. But in revealing my writings, without which my photographs would be even less comprehensible as a whole, I ran the risk of overpowering the mechanically produced, abstracted versions of a reality with physical objects that didn’t necessarily seem as removed from first hand experience as the photographs.

I have maintained from the beginning that the act of writing is of equal importance to the act of photographing, thus I chose to begin photographing my journals. This act was a difficult one even though I performed the ritual for weeks before anyone saw the resulting photographs or even knew I was doing it. I would lock myself in the tiny copy room hidden in a seldom used corridor on the third floor, right across from my color darkroom, and sweat in the brightened black room for ten

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10 Ferdinand de Saussure used particularly pointed metaphors in *A Course in General Linguistics* to describe the potency of writing in linguistic culture. He states that “[i]t is rather as if people believed that in order to find out what a person looks like it is better to study his photograph than his face.” (Harris 1983, 25) This avowal presumes the written text over the spoken text such that the written becomes less ambiguous in meaning than the spoken. Saussure is arguing that by presenting images of texts, rather than a significantly more aural rendition of them, that the viewer has a different opportunity for inspection and reflection. The emotive quality of the words can still be inferred, possibly more so when viewed than heard, by paying heed to the formation of the script, noting where pauses occurred in the ink blots, and where a certain discomfort was had as words were hurried through and letters were ill formed or missing.
exposures, and then steal away to the patio to catch my breath until I was calm enough to change my film back and do it again. That I was about to unfold my most private thoughts was nearly incapacitating.

Ultimately I knew that the only way I would be able to present the plenty of my writings and have their presence be tantamount to the rest of my photographs was to begin considering them in a similar regard. Just as the anecdotal photographs were truncated and pulled out of context for the viewer, I truncated and de-contextualized my journal by editing the photographic reproductions of its pages. I did not edit the journals themselves, rather I removed what I desired from the negatives. The light that caused so much to clarify would simultaneously obscure and censor what I was not ready to share (see page 38). This act of removing silver and creating black masses on small prints was not a frivolous endeavor, but rather an exercise in internalizing my writings and determining just how much I was willing to divulge to my audience.¹¹

With my working method solidified, with equal time spent creating photographs and writings, I set out to create and observe and learn. Unfortunately I

¹¹ Derrida wrote in Cinders: “[t]he sentence says what it will have been, from the moment it gives itself up to itself, giving itself as its own proper name, the consumed (and consummate) art of the secret: of knowing how to keep itself from showing.” (Lukacher 1991, 35) Derrida is speaking about the additive nature of the world and constant forms of editing. Specifically, he is speaking of language and how words in sentences acquire meaning not only denotatively through agreed upon standards but also connotatively through the words that they follow and precede. A word will contain in and of itself a particular meaning, but that meaning will be altered to a degree depending upon the sentence in which that word is used, and altered still based upon the paragraph in which that sentence lies, and altered still based upon the entirety of its text, and altered yet still by the interpretation of the text within the relation of the other texts in which the reader has read. Likewise, this work suffers from a great deal of unending editing. While the work was edited within a particular frame, into a certain collection, and into a specific location, it will continue to be edited through the individuals that viewed it. Yet the work will also edit the individual viewers as a means to judge and levee previous and future exhibitions that they have been and will be witness to and participant of.
knew that while I finally had some clarity to the process I would have to re-contextualize everything I was doing to facilitate the proper opportunity for viewing experience by an audience.

Ideas concerning light and dark run parallel with notions of knowledge and ignorance within my work. In the long exposures the more light present the more information given to the viewer and the more discernable the scene. However, concerning the photographs of my journals it is the opposite that is true. With the removal of information on the negative, larger amounts of light add up to black splotches and lines and scratch marks on the print, where the light becomes a hinderance of understanding rather than a facilitating factor. At this point a full engagement with the photographic process is apparent as light itself starts to become the metaphor used for my personal experiences in all aspects of the processes.

Part V: Physical Objects in Physical Spaces with Physical Faces

The whole of my processes are opportunities to study motion in some regard. My long exposures show star trails and light painting and trees ill defined. My darkroom practice allows me to pace and throw darts and do push-ups while my paper is exposed. Similarly, five hours spent staring at an abandoned psychiatric facility that borders a wood at the onset of the spring thaw also provided several reasons for me to move about, ranging from getting some warmth back in my bones to shooing a young buck away from my camera.

As a whole the human species is one designed for movement. More specifically, for fast motion with the ability to keep targets locked in our sight at all
times. Our faces are flattened, our shoulders are broadened, our gluteus’ are enlarged, and we have a ligament attached to the base of our skulls and our spines whose sole purpose is to prevent our heads from swaying and our gaze from shifting from whatever target we happen to be chasing. The nuchal ligament, the only apparent genetic bond between humans and other species built for, essentially, rectilinear motion is uniquely human in regards to our closest relatives, as it is absent in every other primate species. Not only are humans biologically designed for some sort of chase, we’re also rewarded for it. Extended bouts of motion, specifically running, activate over thirty genes within the hippocampus, which controls our mood, memory, and ability to learn. (Conniff 2008, 135-6) So, if nature be our guide, we best run after her.

Our biological predisposition for motion is echoed by a sociological predisposition for cohabitation and association. We like to move, and we like doing it in groups. I wanted my audience to gain an understanding of the photographs I was presenting them on an experiential level. As John Dewey pointed out “[i]n the perception of the spatial field as a whole, all distances are fixed primarily with reference to the position of the body, and, secondarily, with reference to each other. It is, in fact, the mutual reference of objects to each other that makes perception accurate and complete.” (Zakia 1980, 19) I wanted the experience of the installation to be one that relied upon viewership. More specifically, I wanted the amount of viewers to directly affect the ability to view the work, requiring my audience to have a certain amount of gumption in order to fully view what was presented. If viewers walked through the installation passively then they would take little from the experience, but if they grew quite aware of the additive nature of the installation,
where what was presented were photographs, as well as books, clearly defined walls, and other people, then dialogue could begin.  

To this end I chose to suspend the vast majority of the photographs away from the wall. The prints floated in space, hanging by monofilament attached to the ceiling of the exhibition space (see page 39). By not affixing the photographs to the wall active viewership was allowed to alter the audience’s perception of the work. Simply stated, the more people there were present to be looking at my photographs, the higher the likelihood that the prints would be physically moving within the space, necessitating a more active engagement by viewers. I am very interested in how people engage with work that seems in no way precious.  

Generally, especially in gallery situations, fine art prints are shown only matted, behind glass, permanently affixed to a substrate. But these prints were just floating, with small handwriting that required close inspection. Clean white gloves normally accompany work that is meant to be handled, so that the trace of those who touch it is not allowed to be apparent to future viewers. But I want the history of those who actively engage in the installation to become a part of its history, to be evident to future viewers. To my surprise, and pleasure, I witnessed viewers so actively engaged in the work that they were holding the prints of my journals in front

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12 Susan Stewart wrote in *The Open Studio* that “[c]oincidence preserves experiences and knowledges from the ephemerality of time passing, making them, by their intersection, cohere as events and phenomena of significance.” (Stewart 2005, 76) Regarding Tacita Dean’s work Stewart went on to write: “[i]n emphasizing coincidence and the impress of coincidence on her own life, she reminds us that coincidence is the intersection of multiple times within the frame of an individual moment observed from a single point of view.” (Stewart 2005, 76) Structuring the display of this work as installation rather than more formalized gallery display is a means of structuring the experience of viewing the work in an actively participatory sense. Allowing prints to move within space in relation to the viewers of the work created a particular type of experience for the viewers such that each viewing was a unique opportunity for engagement with the work.
of their faces to get a better read. Fortunately, these viewers played the part and seemed to experience the work a little more intimately than if it had been placed statically on the wall.

But no matter how closely people inspected the prints and noticed the warp of the paper and read the text, I knew that there would be those on whom the message was lost. This work is highly conceptual and not all viewers of the installation would be equally well versed in the experiential dialogue regarding photography I was trying to foster. I knew that there would be people that just wouldn’t understand how trying to stay awake all night while the moon shone over a small bay south of Boston would provide me with a richer understanding of the photograph I produced of just that scene. In order to try to broaden the dialogue a bit and allow for people to try to understand that ultimately the prints were metaphors for experience, I created images of objects that were meant to be blatantly metaphoric. These prints were not depictions of anecdotal memories or long exposures of personally relevant landscapes. They were simple images of objects, shown disproportionately large in comparison to their normal size. An axe, a matchbook, and a honeybee became metaphors for the objects that govern our daily experiences and accordingly our lives. The axe is metaphoric for man’s ability to alter our surroundings more than any other species, the matchbook a stand in for our capability to create energy, and the honeybee a foil for the innate worldly things that are equally wild and harnessed by our societies.13 Ultimately these objects as metaphors show promise and potential,

13 Maria Hammarén wrote in *Skill, Storytelling and Language: on Reflection as a Method*: “[t]o create a reflective practice, one works systematically with imagination and thought, through the crucible of memory.” (Hammarén 2006, 207) The object of the three large digital prints was to allow for a certain level of personal engagement with the work as a whole grounded in the experiences of the viewer rather than that of the creator. It is the specificity of the images and how they displayed singular objects rather than more visually dynamic
where if used properly the supposed betterment of the world is achieved.

Simultaneously, however, the choice in objects presented also points to the ease at which these objects can be misused and the danger that can arise from that misuse.

These large digital prints were finished quite dissimilarly from the silver gelatin prints in the installation. They were pinned to the wall and covered in varying degrees with graphite powder. The addition of these elements was meant to ground the dialogue concerning these prints in a similar regard to the photographs. As my darkroom made its presence known via chemical stains and dust spots, the finished quality of the gallery walls showed through in the manner the graphite dust adhered to the digital prints. The night before the opening of the exhibition I spent nearly seven hours walking between the three images slowly adding and removing layers of graphite on the prints. The trace of the process was left in the space itself with small piles of black dust and eraser shavings amassing on the baseboards of the gallery. With the bumps and imperfections of the gallery walls now pressed through areas of the images I was able to ground them within a particular locus of creation. They were printed only feet from the gallery space and finished in a way that was unique to the environment in which they were first displayed.

Amidst the plethora of images were quotations from texts\textsuperscript{14} that I believed provided a certain insight into the nature of the subject matter of the photographs.

\textsuperscript{14} Paul Ricouer wrote in the essay \textit{What is a Text? Explanation and Understanding} that “\textit{[w]hen the text takes the place of speech, there is no longer a speaker, at least in the sense of an immediate and direct self-designation of the one who speaks in the instance of discourse. This proximity of the speaking subject to his own speech is replaced by a complex relation of...}”
and prints. The quotes were stepping stones for unraveling the sometimes cryptic quality of my journals. The quotations themselves were quite disparate, ranging in authors from literary powerhouses like Plato and Marx, to Steve Friedman, a modern contributing author for a backpacking magazine. Overall a common thread was sown through the texts regarding the nature of beginnings and endings and a desire to internalize history.

The notion of history is rampant in the work, with the use of documents as a mediating factor in discursively understanding the present as a product of the past. The photographs were documents meant to be seen as metaphors for my personal experience, with the journal writings being a much more personal understanding of my experiences, and the quotations an alternately macroscopic survey of the philosophic grounding for how and why I went about things. The quotations, ultimately, were a way to show the audience that this process was not entirely internal and in my own voice, but rather a conversation between personal and widely cultural factors.

Part VI: The Success of Failure

It took a great deal of faith on behalf of my thesis committee to allow me to show my work. I had worked in seclusion for the most part and been absent from the academic community for a good while. I had been working full time in the studio that would
ultimately provide the space for my thesis exhibition and spent the majority of my
days there, with my nights oscillating between shooting and printing and the
occasional foray into various social circles. But for the most part no one knew what I
was doing and there was anxiety over how it would come together. But for some
reason I knew that my work would prove to be as engaging as I believed it to be. And,
truth be told, it was. The work was engaging because of my level of commitment to
the process. The active connection I had with the work was one of necessity, such
that if I hadn’t devoted nearly every free moment to the process the installation
would have proved insincere. In all honesty, all I could do was work.

Before I address the successes, though, I must point out the failures. Some
saw the quotes along the walls not as hints and clues and bits of insight, but rather a
grasping at textualization that may or may not exist within the work. My chosen list
of authors and scholars is a daunting one of a particular mindset and, generally, of a
certain period. All of this was seen to de-personalize the work I was presenting,
which was the exact opposite of my intentions. As is the case with hindsight, the
detriment the installation suffered by the quotations could have easily been avoided
by simply choosing others from the list that I had personally edited down. There
were also, apparently, overtly masculine overtones to a great deal of the work,
ranging from the large digital print of the axe to the fact that all the authors I quoted
were male, to the segment of my shooting process that facilitated the use of a large
format camera. But all of these things are mere products of circumstance, and are
easily cleared up when the processes are elaborated upon beyond the installation. My
processes, although controlled, are ultimately tools that help facilitate personal
growth and discovery. This endeavor was never about my becoming a man, but it was
very much about the actualization of my self.
But back to that nagging feeling, that belief that what I was doing was right and that it would work. I knew it had something to do with my connection to the gallery in which I presented my work. I figured that it had to do with the fact that I had built that space and painted those walls that would somehow cause the stars to align and the art gods to smile mercifully upon my exhibition. Then I remembered that I believe in reason, not providence. I looked back upon the work when the first talk of cancellation arose because I needed something to bolster my confidence. I looked back and it was staring me in the face.

The photographs I was creating of these little anecdotal experiences and the long exposures all seemed to exist within a dialogue to the photographs of my journals. They went back and forth with one another and provided a means to help explain the disparities and inconsistencies. I thought about this in reference to viewership of my work and it hit me so blindly I felt like a fool for not understanding it sooner. My personal relationship to the exhibition space wasn’t that I had constructed it. It was that I was present in it. Because of my work schedule I would almost inevitably be present for every viewer to my exhibition and would then have the opportunity to discuss what I had done and why I had done it. In many ways the duration of the exhibition was a prolongation of my thesis defense, performed over and over, each time taking a little something else from the last in the series of performances. Then the true nature of my work, the performative act of dialogue, came out. The process of explaining and elaborating and simply discussing took the place of the processes of shooting and printing. In many ways I was still writing, still exploring and interpreting, but this time I was able to get yet another meaning from those tangible objects of the photographs, this time based upon discussion and the witness of a third party’s attempt at internalization of my work.
So, at least in my opinion, my exhibition was a success. A rave success no, but a success all the same. I was able to foster an internal dialogue that materialized in the form of an overwhelming working process that materialized in the form of an overwhelming exhibition that resulted in a long discussion about experience with a multitude of people. And ultimately that’s what the work was intended for. In order to really get others to understand what I meant by experience and why it was so important to so intimately document my own, I needed to help foster experiences that they could ultimately remember as quite specific. I did not necessarily want people to remember the photographs. Likewise I did not necessarily want people to remember the installation or the chair or the black curtain attempting to hide view of what takes place beyond one of the gallery walls. What I did want them to remember was all those things and then some. The slight heat of the gallery, the scent of pear wafting through bits of the air from the Scotch served at my reception, the way sunlight filtered into the gallery on only one wall, and the conversations the viewers had with myself and one another are but small bits of what amounted to my thesis exhibition.

Conclusion

My exhibition was the most frightening experience of my life. I’ve never forced myself to open up before, I’ve never put these words in public, I’ve never had so many problems completing something in my life. Perhaps I’ve struggled because I am so uncomfortable. For the first time in two decades I will no longer be a student. My history is undergoing the largest, most dramatic shift since I learned to speak.
For the thirteenth consecutive night I sit here staring at my computer, trying to figure out how in the world I’m supposed to conclude this paper. During this time I pondered what I’ve been doing and how my deadline is so rapidly approaching and how all I need to do is just finish the damned thing. But therein lies the problem. It’s a fallacy to say that this process has an ending, that there’s some sort of logical conclusion. Yes, my exhibition has run its course, but I’m still working all the same. I’m still taking photographs and writing and trying to figure out what it all means. I’m still looking back and finding little bits of minutia I missed before but are now become glaringly present as I alter my prints and try to undo the consequences of hasty actions. So I guess the logical thing to do would be to take a lesson from the work itself. There can’t be an ending, but this paper can definitely be a metaphor for the conclusion to my thesis, another document created to better understand my history, and right now my present.

My conclusion, then, is to look forward. To ponder how I will look back upon the installation in five or ten years. To remember the importance of dialogue and remain conscious of how the only logical fashion to write this paper was in an overly conversational style. To wonder what will follow the phrase “I took my first post-graduate photograph seven years ago. . .”

This was never meant to be a project. The exploration of history and the relation of events leading up to my working here has no logical beginning, and the expansion and propagation of this working method subsequently leads to no logical ending. I will continue to work, and I will continue to grow, and I will continue to try to pay special attention to that subtle grey that permeates all of my experiences.15

15 Martin Heidegger remarked about Aristotle that “[h]e was born, he thought, he died.” Derrida, in paraphrasing Heidegger’s remark, replied that “[a]ll the rest is pure anecdote.”
This statement is accurate in the regard that the notion of the anecdotal is grounded in the intertextuality between the varied experiences that amounted to the lives of Aristotle, Heidegger, and Derrida – that Heidegger could be the man he became based upon the amount of his subject that was inherited from Aristotle, and likewise what Derrida inherited from Heidegger and Aristotle, and how these inheritances helped to shape the selves that the three became.
She said no.
And I finally started letting go.
All those memories of trying to understand the forests in the woods, up the twists and turns, the evolution and why it was never turned on. All those ideas taught me about being a man, about being fragile and imperfect and most importantly... prudence.

She's slipping away now too, but not as fast as before. When she's gone, it's all over— that dream, that memory of what it was, and the reality that I've turned it into. Every tick, every whisper, they're just for emphasis that I'm trying to hold on to...
Bibliography


