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Being in the Place of Possibility

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Abstract

This paper explores my art practice as a phenomenological search for understanding how to be in the world. It begins with a description of my practice as a way to access the place of possibility that exists between faith and doubt. I examine materiality in art making to encourage consideration of both the physical and temporal nature of experience and to find balance with the increasingly incorporeal experience of the digital world. I discuss the materials and processes of drawing, sewing, and printmaking within their historical contexts. This paper connects my practice with artists who consider the act of perception and question power structures through abstraction. I conclude with how the relevancy of the works created for my thesis project are heightened in light of the pandemic's affect on our lives, and further the essential dialogue in contemporary culture.
Being in the Place of Possibility

Laura Domencic

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

at Lesley University, College of Art + Design

June 2020
Introduction

My practice is my sanctuary. It is contemplative, uninterrupted time to be in the place of possibility. It is a state of not knowing, where potentialities are endless. I explore materiality to encourage consideration of both the physical and temporal nature of experience and to find balance with the increasingly incorporeal experience of the digital world. My work is a quiet declaration of lived experience,¹ that questions the ostensible productivity and progress gained from new technologies. It is a search for understanding how to be in this world, at this time.

The body of work I created in the MFA program at Lesley University is made of ephemeral materials, marks, actions and time. The lines and threads bind, hold, secure, break, and rip apart at the seams in a state of constant repair and collapse. They are complete in the unfinished state, resting while hidden in plain sight, understated. I find value in repetition, not busy work, refining craft through practice. The repetition creates a muscle memory, an “automatic” action. This slow making eases my doubts about cultural experience – the meditative movements of drawing and sewing provides the certainty of touch while making the investment of time physical. The quiet subversiveness and frenetic energy in these works are the physical form of my doubt and hope in the possibilities of each moment, asking the viewer to pause and wonder.

Being in the Place of Possibility

Since there is little in my life that is routine, I write lists so I can remember, see progress and be accountable. I am constantly revising lists to juggle the multiple priorities in my roles as a
parent, provider and artist. To respond to the moment while always keeping in mind the larger perspective, I am perpetually re-assessing what is the immediate need. In any given circumstance, whether with family, studio or work, I wonder what else could make it better? What did I forget or not consider? I balance my anxiety and doubts with persistence and faith in finding a way, believing that if I just keep doing, clarity will come.

This tension between doubt and faith is where possibility exists, and is at the core of my practice. I do not know why I make art other than I must. If I stop making, I am not well. I cannot be whole. Time alone in the studio helps me access a state of mind where I do not have to know answers but can search for meaningful connections. I want to keep options open for as long as possible before making a decision. I often choose time intensive processes, such as carving wood instead of linoleum, or embroidering edges of paper instead of using sourced fabric. In contrast to our distracted and mediated online experiences, these laborious methods are meditations, providing time for concentration on the meanings of and associations with the materials. Whether it is procrastination or deep consideration of potential outcomes, this place of possibilities is where I am engrossed in making – my thoughts flow when making leads the way.

**Drawing**

Drawing is my starting point, with its raw immediacy and method of making. I began my graduate work using an iconography of architectural elements comprised of ladders and steps that suggested transitional spaces, between physical and spiritual states of being. These metaphorical structures existed in imagined, neutral spaces. *Thicket*, is one of a series of
tunnel-like drawings constructed of a dense web of ladders. The ladders vacillate between being physical portals or transcendental states, integrating phenomenology into pictorial space. The paint layering creates a depth of field, yet also flattens into the materiality of the surface, employing the idea of phenomenology through the contrasting readings. These psychological landscapes explore the shifting boundaries of what is or isn’t encircled, whether it is a void or light filled space. Works such as *Aftermath* are reminiscent of the charcoal and earth tone palettes used by post WWII painters. My brooding, dystopian imagery, suggestive of burnt scaffolding, furthered the reference to this time. While one can find parallels between the beginning of the 21st century and WWII, my imagery and materials verged on being illustrative and were contained within the boundaries of the page.

I started to focus more on the meanings associated with the imagery and materials, researching artists who grappled with the new historical realities in the aftermath of WWII. The dawn of mutually assured destruction created existential uncertainty, Paul Schimmel described it as a “doubt that
transformed human consciousness,” redefining art, and how people perceived the world. During the postwar period, physical manifestations of doubt and search for meaning were investigated through materiality and are found in the work of Alberto Burri. *Composition, 1953*, is made of stitched burlap sacks, one of his wounded paintings that seems to respond (despite his denials) to his experience as a military physician in Italy and prisoner-of-war in Texas. It is not a representational image to view, but a physical presence that confronts you. This visceral painting is like a gut punch. The viewer’s sense of touch is activated through the visual experience of stitched fabric and uneven surfaces. The fabric’s texture and taut thread tangibly “speak” to the viewer’s body and its materiality. We are intimately familiar with fabric, our nearly constant physical contact with it makes it practically a second skin. This sensory memory is particularly relevant today in the digital age, when many (on this side of the digital divide) are disconnected from physical experience, spending several sedentary hours each day in front of a computer, monitor or smart phone screen. Fabric is a powerful symbol for the body, reminding us of our mortality and ephemeral existence.

### Sewing

Having learned to sew from my grandmother during my childhood, I thought of sewing as a kind of drawing with thread. It had the same innate line that my signature had, yet had loaded historical associations with the body and society because of its connotation with
fabric and clothing. Because of its utilitarian functions, sewing and fiber work was classified as craft, or women’s work. It was not taken seriously as a means of making art in a patriarchal society.

For me, the connection between sewing and patriarchy is linked through my grandmother’s experience. Growing up as one of twelve children of poor immigrants during the Great Depression, and starting a family just after WWII ended, she sewed out of necessity, making quilts, repairing clothes, caring for others. For most of her lifetime, her labor was not as visible or valued as much as mine is today. Sewing is a way to remember her perseverance and strength, as well as grounding me in the comforting muscle memory I learned at a young age.

While creating the drawings referenced above, I was also working on a series of hand sewn pieces. Combining ordinary materials and actions that are a part of my personal history, I sew paper which becomes skin-like in relation to the thread and needle. The act of sewing paper weakens the paper by puncturing it, yet can also become what holds it together. These contradictory results and meanings produce ambivalence and reflection, adding another layer to sewing’s typical function of repair or decoration. They elevate the process, focusing on its line and meaning of the material, references our bodies, suspended between fragility and strength. By accentuating sewing, a traditionally feminine activity in Western culture that is less valued historically, the pieces acknowledge unseen workers or invisible labor. These monochromatic, white thread and paper drawings have an affinity with the way Agnes Martin described her ethereal paintings, as a field to expose “not what is seen,” focusing on
the metaphysical. In *Untitled, 1965*, her grid structure has “every part of the surface in perfect equilibrium,” and embodies her conviction that everything is of equal importance. Negating a sense of hierarchical order is the basis for her critique of power. As Martin states, “the formats are square, but the grids never are absolutely square; they are rectangles, a little bit off the square, making a sort of contradiction, a dissonance...When I cover the square surface with rectangles, it lightens the weight of the square, destroys its power.” The square’s aggressiveness and strength is subdued by the rectangles. (Martin’s squares have also been interpreted as tabula rasa or the feminine power of the blank page.)

Like Martin, I question power structures through abstraction. The subtle palette and materials I use in *untitled thread drawing* are low tech, simple and subversive. I employ the square as a way to accentuate its objectness, upsetting the traditional associations that come with Western painting. The white on white palette demands close attention, otherwise the piece remains unnoticed. The viewer must work to experience it. This series of works challenge our abbreviated
attention spans to resist the urge to perpetually consume without reflection. It questions our constantly interrupted state of being, that is shaped by contemporary culture and technological systems. By contrasting the fragility and strength of the paper and thread, it is an intentional decision to engage physical objects and hands-on processes in our digital age; not out of nostalgia, but referring to the durational experience for deep concentration. Doing the work, to labor and invest time in something physical, is a commitment. The thread drawings are tangible reminders that tap into embedded histories in the common objects around us. Embedded histories are the stories and specific context that surround objects. They are the lineage of connotations and uses of things that make them powerful signifiers.

**Materiality and Process**

Petra Lange-Berndt argues that “to act with materials is to investigate societal power relations.” It is “a political decision to focus on the materials of art: it means to consider processes of making and their associated power relations, to consider workers.” The language of materials connects artists to the labor of others outside the realm of the insular art world through the physical interaction with objects. Whether it is working in an office, factory, field, or studio, there are parallel issues of who is in control of decisions and who follows out the directives. I think of materials as a common denominator that connects us and value the skill of those that work closely with them.

My work insists that viewers engage with the physical world at a time when we are interfacing more and more through digital devices and in virtual spaces. An example of this
contrast is the basis of my drawing, *after burning*. It was a record of my response to seeing the updates on my smart phone when the Cathedral of Notre Dame suffered a devastating fire in April 2019. The structure was irrevocably altered within hours, with generations of craftsmen’s labor that built it rendered largely unseen. Like a Vanitas painting, the cathedral became a symbol of the illusion of permanence in our ephemeral existence. Similar to the layered drawing that is mostly painted over or washed away, hiding its history, what is no longer seen is just as much a part of a place as what is visible. The process of consuming the news of the fire virtually, and responding to it physically in real time highlights the necessity of physically and emotionally processing events and ramifications. It takes time to do, and is often in conflict with the onslaught of continuous information.

This dialectic became more overt in my practice. I noticed that having different modes of working provides a dialogue between pieces. It drives me to keep generating objects and not become too wedded to one series. Instead of focusing on how a piece would be interpreted, I allow myself to give up more control, trusting the making, and intuitively integrating materials and processes. I often start with smaller pieces and respond to materials not knowing where they will lead. Embracing this state of uncertainty as part of my process resists the prescriptive nature of contemporary society. My work’s slow evolution denies our
culture’s anxious craving for immediate clarity. An equilibrium is found in the physical action of alternating processes. It frees me from overworking and I literally gain perspective.

I employ labor-intensive processes to suggest the ongoing decisions involved in creative acts of visualizing, writing and building language and architecture, as well as the destructive ones of narrowing, manipulating and obliterating histories and cultures. In my collage, *drafts of illuminated scripts*, I consider the malleable nature of history – what is recorded, corrected, preserved or destroyed. The layers of paper and marks imply the time involved in revising drafts. In our text based culture, much is dependent on not only who writes a story, but what is edited out. The silver thread embroidery references the illuminated texts of the Middle Ages. The texts centralized the command of the Christian church, similar to how institutions of learning – universities, libraries, museums – are designated as authorities of knowledge.
today. For many contemporary critics, language is the word of law and authority. My highly contingent work disrupts the rigid structure of language, art and culture. The nearly blank pages whisper inquiries into the dynamics of this power. What history or knowledge is hidden? What can still be seen? What has been obscured, erased or altered?

Making physical objects that waiver between two and three dimensions, the meditative layering of marks accumulates a density of histories. I use the tensions between absence and presence, revealed and hidden, known and unknown to explore the systems of knowledge and communication that shape our perception. This relates to Lange-Berndt’s discussion of being complicit with materials by enabling them to talk. Since “the ‘content’ of any medium is always another medium,” she highlights the “predominance of language as a tool in our culture to generate and communicate meaning.” It is not only a communication tool, because of the nature of language and its physical forms, such as books, written documentation or broadcasted conversations, it is a system which creates knowledge and references itself. It is so pervasive that it is often conflated with knowledge, and can be used to exclude other forms of knowledge that are based in intra-action of phenomena. This system can create a hierarchy where people that are not as proficient with language are marginalized, setting up a systemic bias to even access information.

**Influences/Affinities**

Extending the theme of materiality and their meaning, I researched artists that responded to architecture whose work was grounded in site specificity and context. Gordon Matta-Clark addressed social constructs through the built environment. Known for cutting out sections
of buildings slated for demolition, Matta-Clark’s “interruptions” were gestures through structures not intended to be preserved. He was a founding member of Anarchitecture, a loose collective whose purpose was to think “more about the metaphoric voids, gaps, leftover spaces, places that were not developed. Much like the place of possibilities, these uncontained spaces hold kinetic potential, or “movement space.” The ambiguous nature of space, beyond the built environment, is a space that could be described as the dark matter of architecture. They remind us that all that is seen is merely a tiny fraction of all that has existed, or ever will. Pointing out the constructs of how we typically perceive these spaces, it opens up alternative ways to understand them.

Martin and Matta-Clark understood perception as a physical and temporal act. Using opposite qualities of materials and actions, they focused on bringing to light what is not seen. Labor and process were instrumental to realize the work, transforming the artists through the exploration. Their art practices were progressions of the artists, materials and ideas in an ongoing state of becoming. Matta-Clark’s inclination toward entropy and Martin’s toward freedom illuminated the limitations of static space and time constructs. In this way, my work has a synergy with Matta-Clark’s aggressive gestures as well as Martin’s calm, transcendental energy, traveling along the continuum between strenuous and restful states.
Place and Site

Just as no material is benign, no place or site is neutral. It has a history.

*Horizon Mapping* expands on the idea of durational making and seeing. It reinforces the importance of extended time to create, allowing the work to rest in between transitions. My desire for open spaces, physically and psychologically, where potentials can play out is found in the composition’s slow evolution. The collaged paintings are where thoughts and forms intersect. By working with materials it gives me time to observe how separate elements start to speak to each other. I had started a wood cut not knowing why I wanted to do it, but did it to get the image out of my head. It is based on a photo I took flying over the Eastern plains of Colorado, where roads and farms carved the land into grids. The land is divided into sections that were surveyed to designate boundaries and ownership. Planted with alternating crops, they create a patchwork quilt effect across the landscape of the high plains.
The horizons there are so wide open, the shape of the sky is entirely different from the hills in southwestern Pennsylvania where I live. A horizon is always dependent upon your perspective, your position in space. This subjective territory of sight changes with each step. Just as there are a multitude of frameworks for time, there are numerous interpretations of space. I allude to the idea of Manifest Destiny and how we define space and boundaries. The belief that the United States’ westward expansion in the early part of the 19th century was providential, presumably to spread democracy and capitalism, is more critically viewed as American Imperialism. I reference these ideas by folding the paper in a map format. Its creases suggest latitude and longitude, arbitrarily dividing up the luminous washes of atmospheric paint. Pencil lines on the large paper echo the woodcut grid, adding another layer of mapping – claiming ownership of a place by authoring the map that defines, classifies, and categorizes it. The printing on the sky also points to the more recent ideas of ownership of air (and outer) space.

The aerial perspective of the repeated woodblock print is overlaid on top of the one point perspective painting and drawing that makes a vague reference to both land and sky. The hours I spent carving the woodblock are not easily seen, only lightly suggested by the white prints, operating more like palimpsests. The prints are flipped on the upper “sky” portion, playing with the position in space, mirroring sky and land, reversing what is up or down. As an object, event, or dark cloud on the horizon, a wire interrupts the two-dimensional image, piercing the paper in a forceful gesture.
The dynamic between these perspectives was enhanced by my physical interaction with the paper. I started the painting and drawing while it was on the wall, then I placed it on the floor and made relief prints by standing on top of the woodcut. I folded it so it could travel easily and I could embroider edges while away from my studio. The folding emphasizes the reference to a map, insinuating time zones and the expansion and contraction of time.

Pinning the piece to the wall also indicates its temporal state. It is physically there, for now, yet can also be quickly taken down or rearranged depending on the space. In this way, the work has a fleeting/timeless quality – this is just one iteration. Just like its detachable side sections, it could still be modified, appearing to be not quite finished. The installation itself continues a sense of flux, extending the idea of a place of possibility. It suggests that it will exist in different arrangements, continuing to be altered and revised, still in a state of becoming. Each time it is folded for travel, the creases will be deeper, edges more worn. It is not too precious that it can’t be repaired, and has a presence of having been touched. The folds have a similarity to the fence lines in the land, where livestock and weather are constantly wearing on the boundaries making the creases in the land deeper with each generation. Embroidering some of the edges made them metaphorically stronger, accentuating the paper’s (or body’s) vulnerability and durability at the same time.

Its quietness is much more complex upon closer and sustained observation. The larger, gestural drawing is combined with the labor-intensive work and require close physical proximity, intimacy, to see and feel the subtle tactile quality. The line and the thread become signifiers of time. They are evidence of the hours to make the machine sewn horizon lines
that suggest time passing through traveling. The sequence of its making can be illusive, just like history.

**Notions of Time**

Of all the social constructs we create for ordering and understanding the world, notions of time and time keeping and recording, are our most powerful ways to shape perception. Time, this indefinable thing that we sense, acknowledge and exist within, has for the past couple of centuries in Western civilizations been understood in terms of space. In *The Trouble with Timelines*, Daniel Rosenberg points to charts that symbolize Western mindsets and helped to expand the use of timelines.

As Rosenberg notes, “Giving a non-object a spatial representation coincided with the western imperialist mindset. …The argument for line amplified conceptions of progress.”

The singular unified line progressing forward was an effective symbol and tool for Imperialism’s domination of other culture. This ties into the efforts to map the West as a fundamental aspect of Manifest Destiny. Lewis and Clark’s mapping was an extension of the Western European culture, in direct conflict with the native nations’ perspective that land could not be owned. The time line and Imperialism’s domination mutually reinforced each other as they excluded other cultures’ understanding of time (as well as space). The model shapes the idea, and ideas, the mindset.

During the industrial revolution, Western civilization began commodifying time so that it could be measured and bought. Time as duration was disregarded, replaced by lengths of
time, a spatial reference. Concretizing time into a consistent construct was a strategy, whether intentional or coincidental, to maintain power and control of people and things. The “worship of the clock,” became so pervasive that it changed our relationship to time. Clearly connected to other advances of technology and civilization, such as the harnessing of electricity, the shift from a primarily agrarian culture to an industrial one changed how we divided our time, from sleeping habits to the newer notion of having “free time.”

Even our “free time,” or leisure time and attention, has been monetized. Savvy advertisements and influential algorithms compel us to use our time for consumption of both mass media and physical goods. Our mainstream society has conditioned us to believe we must be actively consuming to fully enjoy our free time, while the internet continues to conflate "free time” with consumerism. We surf the internet as a form of leisure and entertainment, but this very act is itself a means of feeding the financial needs of various industries – including advertising, retail business, mass media, etc. Even in our “free time," we can be transformed into consumers/workers without even realizing it.

As with anything, this is not absolute. There are counter and sub cultures that resist the monetization of time. In regard to internet, there are those that do not have digital access, choose to have minimal or no online presence, or leverage digital technology and systems for alternative voices, positive and negative. One wonders what will be the next revolution to change time? Maybe it is now, as Walter Benjamin suggests, with the “notion of revolution as an ongoing latent presence.”
My understanding of time is of course linked to my experience. My grandmother’s death profoundly changed my sense of time and world view. Family dynamics dramatically shifted without the matriarch. The image on this page is of cut threads from the hems she stitched in a pair of my (then 4-year-old) daughter’s pants. She grew into the pants within the year after my grandmother died. When cutting the threads to release the hem, I was unable to throw them away. Her knots and stitches were intimate gestures of love and devotion that became a micro-milestone of my child’s growth after her death. The generational expanse between my grandmother and my child were embedded into these threads that they had both touched. In the grieving process, my sense of time transformed. The act of cutting the threads was a physical memory that became a symbolic act.

Every culture is first and foremost a particular experience of time, and no new culture is possible without an alteration in this experience. The original task of a genuine revolution, therefore, is never merely to ‘change the world,’ but also and above all to ‘change time.’


The idea that the perception of time shapes culture places artists in an instrumental role.
They consider what is not mainstream or arrived at by consensus. Searching for what is not understood or known, it is a mindset that is encourages them to step into the uncertainty. Being in the place of possibility is not necessarily comfortable, but it is being open to something new.

**Conclusion**

I am an artist, and my job is to decode the full spectrum of being human…. Worldview is a cosmic declaration of being; it guarantees us our place in the universe. The structuring of a viable worldview is hard work, and filled with risk…. …Art is our best hope: Perception, perception, perception. Reality is founded in perception. If we can change perception, then we have a good chance in the restoration of balance that is necessary for a sane, healthy society.19

- *Jack Whitten on Art in Times of Unspeakable Violence, 2015*

We live in a society with a rapid flow of visual and cultural information, accelerating the pace at which we build, destroy, and transform our understanding of the world.

The pandemic’s affect on our lives underscores the relevancy of my work. The long-term impact is yet to be seen, but this drastic turn of events has altered our understanding of time and relationship to materiality. The fear of spreading an unseen virus through touch or proximity to each other, is requiring an extreme and sudden switch to living online and minimal physical interaction. The physical and psychological toll on people is mounting from the separation. The need to connect is partially and creatively satisfied by technology, but it
is not the same as being present with someone in the same physical space. As amazing as it is, it is mediated through a screen. Physical intimacy and human touch are essential to human beings. We crave the connection through shared experience, whether it is how one can be emotionally lifted by the energy of a group of people, or how newborns thrive with skin to skin contact to bond with others and feel safe. My work asks you to pay attention to the smallest of details in a large expanse, acknowledge the interconnectedness of the mind and body and be still in the place of possibility. Especially in times of fear and uncertainty, it can remind us to have empathy and comfort for each other. We can show strength in letting ourselves be vulnerable, acknowledging our humanness, as ephemeral and eternal beings.
Bibliography


Chave, Agnes Martin: “Humility, The Beautiful Daughter…. All Her Ways are Empty.” Haskell, pp.131-153.


Footnotes

1 My thesis work is linked to phenomenology, a philosophical movement starting in the 20th century, that investigates everything as lived experience. In Dermot Moran’s Introduction to Phenomenology, he states “Phenomenology claims, first and foremost, to be a radical way of doing philosophy, a practice rather than a system. Phenomenology is best understood as a radical, anti-traditional style of philosophizing, which emphasizes the attempt to get to the truth of matters, to describe phenomena …Explanations are not to be imposed before the phenomena have been understood from within.”


3 Chave explores various critiques of the feminine and masculine aspects of the blank page as symbol of power and its subversion of it. p.138-143.

4 Lange-Berndt.

5 Some might argue that Google or the internet is replacing libraries, museums, or universities, but they are tools and platforms for accessing information, not environments and institutions that include these tools.

6 I critique this structure while acknowledging my work is largely dependent upon this framework to be seen.

7 Lange-Berndt. Marshall McLuhan, “Understanding Media,” Materialities of Media, 1964, p. 200. Marshall McLuhan’s Understanding Media, Materialities of Media, “The content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print, and print is the content of the telegraph.”


9 Lee, p.105.

10 Bossa, Anarchitect, p. 10. Bossa notes the Matta-Clark’s potential inheritance from anarchist Louis Auguste Blanqui and his instructions that recommended to “demolish the staircase from the ground floor, and open up holes in the next floor, in order to be able to fire on soldiers invading” in 19th century French class struggles that led to the Commune.

11 Bossa, p.6. Bossa also suggests that Matta-Clark could have been influenced by Robin Evans’ Toward Anarchitecture, that reflected on architecture’s relationship to human freedom.

12 Lee, p. 105. Lee describes the movement space as a liminal space, unbounded ….not legislated for use, these spaces refuse ownership because they are illegible, ambiguous, kinetic even.”

13 When I was traveling in Colorado I was struck by the story of the Sand Creek massacre, one of the worst mass murders in U.S. history. In 1864, 230 Cheyenne and Arapaho tribe members who thought they were under the protection of the U.S. Army were slaughtered by them. Other than family accounts, it was largely forgotten. The undeveloped, open plains were established as a national historic site in 2007 by the


15 This reflects the impact of Taylorism, which was based upon the principles of rational and scientific management. Frederick W. Taylor (1856-1915) sought to maximize the efficiency of assembly line workers by finding ways that they could produce more quickly, especially within the steel industry. He instrumentalized and monetized time. For Taylor, time was money.

16 Outside of the scope of this paper is the impact of digital technology on society in general: Good actors, such as citizen documentarians capturing civil rights injustices that might be otherwise hidden; Bad actors, such as hackers and purveyors of the “Dark Web” who prey on others for financial gain; and Big Industry and Government who are now able to track our digital footprints for their own agendas, whether it is for public health or control of information.


18 Ibid. Elena Filipovic quoting Giorgio Agamben’s ‘Time and History: Critique of the Instant and Continuum,’ 2007, p. 44.