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Paradox in Language: What I look at is never what I wish to see

THESIS

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in Art

By

Allyson Unzicker

Thesis Committee:
Professor Juli Carson, Chair
Professor Rhea Anastas
Professor James Nisbet
Professor Daniel J. Martinez

2015

DEDICATION

To

my parents and my Oma and Opa for their constant love and support.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Paradox in Language: What I look at is never what I wish to see

By

Allyson Unzicker

Master of Fine Arts in Art, emphasis in Critical & Curatorial Studies

University of California, Irvine, 2015

Associate Professor Juli Carson, Chair

Paradox in Language: What I look at is never what I wish to see is written in context with a group exhibition curated at the University Art Gallery, featuring the work of Charles Gaines, Benjamin Verhoeven and Erika Vogt. This project investigates the influences of various strains of conceptual thought that began to take form in the early 1960s when the influences of Structuralism, including the theories and methodologies of Jacques Lacan and Roland Barthes, became increasingly important to visual analysis including the many forms of conceptualism from the 1960s to present. These three artists form a constellation of varying practices that consider the aesthetic strategies of Conceptualism and Structuralism and the challenges that lie in the pursuit of pictorial representation. Paradoxically, language is both inside and outside meaning.

Charles Gaines' (b.1944, U.S.) invents a set of rules for randomizing appropriated texts which he then draws out onto paper. Through this undoing of language, the meaning of the original text is reconstructed allowing a space for the viewer's interpretation to enter. This relationship between the text as image and image as text poses the question: When language is present, what is absent? Benjamin Verhoeven (b.1990, Belgium)

appropriates scenes from films such as Antonioni's *Blow-Up* in his series *Scanning Cinema*. These films are re-interpreted by scanning them in real time, creating a distorted echo of the original. Influenced by early experimental and Structuralist films, Erika Vogt (b. 1973, U.S.) creates installations that include video, drawings, and sculptures. Nonlinear logic and abstract concepts are characteristic of Vogt's practice which is grounded in both experience and process.

INTRODUCTION

In the depths of my eye the picture is painted, but the subject is not in the picture... if I am anything in the picture, it is always in the form of the screen... the stain, the spot."

- Jacques Lacan, Seminar XI

"The perceived thing is not an ideal unity in the possession of the intellect, like a geometrical notion, for example; it is rather a totality open to a horizon of an indefinite number of views which blend with one another according to a given style, which defines the object in question. Perception is thus paradoxical. The perceived thing itself is paradoxical; it exists only in so far as someone can perceive it."¹

- Maurice Merleau-Ponty

"The relation of a Non-site to the Site is also like that of language to the world: it is a signifier and the Site is that which is signified."

- Robert Smithson

There is always an absence or lack in representation. Jacques Lacan would describe this lack as the gap that occurs between that which we see and that which we perceive. The gap that occurs between image and text can be understood through Ferdinand de Saussure's algorithm between signifier and signified in which a bar both binds and separates the two. It is this bar which can be understood to represent the place where a screen memory occurs. Freud describes a screen memory as our most lucid memory in that it is a memory which is recalled from the past and reconstructed in the present. The process of recollecting a memory brings forth the past into a place which it does not belong, the present. This operation causes a slippage much like the slippage that occurs between what Ferdinand de Saussure defined as the signifier and signified. Lacan took many of his ideas and elaborated upon them in his own work defining the signifier (sound, image) as the conscious state and the signified (concept) as the unconscious state. In order to

¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Primacy of Perception and Its Philosophical Consequences," from *The Primacy of Perception*, (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 1.

understand this gap between conscious and unconscious state, there must always be a return. Luis Borges stated that the purpose of any return is to unbury unconscious cues from the past. Borges writes, "In any case, I think that my duty as a writer is not to discover new themes nor to invent anything – as a writer my duty is to repeat, in the dialect of my country and my era, certain poems that are always being repeated, with slight variations that might or might not be lovely."² It is with this notion that I would like to return to the site of circa 1966 to address the moment of conceptualism and its relevance to contemporary practices today, particularly the work of three artists who provide a critical framework for this return – Benjamin Verhoeven, Charles Gaines, and Erika Vogt. By reflecting on the political, historical and aesthetic climate of this period in relationship to their practices, the terms and debate of conceptualism have changed since then. One of these many concerns is the challenge of pictorial representation.

In Craig Owen's text *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power and Culture*, he argues that a cultural war is being waged through systems of representation in that an image's importance is reliant upon its historical significance. Although the confines of representation are a major concern of his work, how can we escape the powers of representation? Lacan's well-known formulation of the gaze and its description of the conditions of perception evoke this representational dilemma. The gaze is the desire yet inability to see from the place of the other. As a result, perception is always paradoxical. The break between image and text is an example of this – we cannot thoroughly explain an image with text or a text with image, there is always a gap.

² Jorge Luis Borges, Osvaldo Ferrari, *Conversations, Volume I*, (London: Seagull Books, 2014), pp. 1-2.

PHOTOGRAPHIC PARADOX

In 1966, Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni released his first English language film *Blow-Up*. Antonioni was known for redefining narrative, often concluding his films without a clear answer or conclusion. *Blow-Up* was Antonioni's most successful commercial film to date and was created during a cinematic shift in Europe that explored moments of artistic imagination, memory, politics and history embracing film as an artistic medium and not a spectacle of consumption alone. The first half of the film seemingly embraces this consumptive spectacle of entertainment depicting a protagonist invested in fashion photography, yet it is the second half of the film that turns this assumption on its head. The second half of the film explores the paradox of the photographic image, alienation, and the death drive as the core of the photographic medium. Made in the center of major political and cultural developments, this film functions as a historical index to Belgium artist Benjamin Verhoeven's video piece *Somebody was trying to kill somebody else* (2014) as it performs like a screen memory between 1966 and the present. The video functions as an anecdote between the materiality of analog and digital.

Benjamin Verhoeven's, *Somebody was trying to kill somebody else* (2014) is a video piece that appropriates a six-minute clip from Michelangelo Antonioni's 1966 film *Blow-Up*. The title of Verhoeven's video is derived from the film's elusive nature. The film follows a young fashion photographer who craves inspiration outside of his commercial occupation. A voyeuristic photoshoot taken one afternoon leads him to photograph the scene of a crime. Unbeknownst to him, this knowledge only surfaces upon further inspection of one of the photographs he has taken in which he notices the semblance of a corpse in the bushes.

In an attempt to solve the mystery of the photographic image, he begins to enlarge the photos in his darkroom in order to “blow-up” the content of the image in an attempt to clarify the content. However, in doing so, the more he enlarges the photograph, the more the corpse becomes illegible, appearing merely as photographic grain. The meaning he attaches to the traces of the photograph amplifies a desire within him to obtain more knowledge from the image. However, the more he seeks clarity through enlargement, the more the image is abstracted, rendering its visual content useless. Rather than discovering any truth to the image he instead is faced with the conundrum of photographic grain – the result of zooming into the photo too far. Verhoeven edits a clip from the middle of the film at its pivot point when the protagonist discovers the corpse in one of the photographs he has taken.

Verhoeven’s return to the film is an involved and labored process. He first takes a clip from the original film and scans it in real time through a scanner bed attached to his monitor. The result of this complex digital navigation creates a gap, or a screen, between the site of the film and its present reconstruction. The final composition of the video piece retains residue from the glass of the scanner bed and the vertical pixels of the artist’s monitor screen. Due to the lag time of the scanner in proportion to the running time of the film, the scanned film is caught in time resulting in a warping, sweeping effect making the protagonist appear as if he is gliding across the screen, yet the photographs remain still (see Fig.1). By filtering the film through a scanner the operation demonstrates what Freud called a screen memory. A screen memory is always trying to move into a place it does not belong. It is always constructed in the present and as a result it is always our most lucid memory. No event or memory can be authentically repeated thus the screen memory has

no value in the shifting space it occupies. Thus the screen memory is tertiary forming a third meaning outside of the past and the present. It occurs between the projections of two images. In this case, the two images or sites are the film and Verhoeven's reconstructed video.³ The video, much like a screen memory, is inconsistent with its indexical origin and the warping or staggering effect is a visualization of this operation.



Fig. 1

When the film is scanned it transfers from analog to digital interrupting the original site of analog film. The film is measured in yardage and the video is measured in time, in other words the material versus the immaterial process of each medium. Only the scenes of the still photographs remain stagnant while the rest of the film is in motion. The lag time of the scanner bed becomes an atemporal non-site. The staggering reflects the motion of trying to return to a time and place that cannot exist in the present. It is the scanner bed that creates the incision or the point in which the screen memory operates between two sites - the site of 1966 as analog and the present digital age. *Blow-Up* acts as the site of the

³ Sigmund Freud, "Screen Memories" in *The Freud Reader* ed. Peter Gay, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.) 122.

past or unconscious while the present or screen memory is enacted through the revisiting of the film in Verhoeven's work. In this way the life drive sustains the death drive i.e. the digital maintains the analog through digital time.

Considering Verhoeven's work within the context of non-narrative Structuralist film, the year 1966 was also an important moment for the development of post-Structuralist thought and Conceptualism as we have come to understand it today. Concurrently, Barthes' writings were vital to the formulation of Structuralist thought as well as Jacques Lacan, who was largely influenced by Saussure. It was a time when the investigation of signs and systems became increasingly relevant to artists and their practices. Saussure stated that all signs are dyadic consisting of both a signified (concept) and signifier (sound/image). An object does not necessarily have a natural relationship to the word used to describe the object. An image, like a single word, is a sign and has no intrinsic meaning alone. Thus, language is metonymic and its meaning continually shifts; it is successive and depends upon context.

In Lacan's Seminar XI he states in relation to the gaze that we never see what we wish to see when looking at an object directly, "you never look at me from the place from which I see you. Conversely, what I look at is never what I wish to see."⁴ The object of desire is thus seen only in part and never as a whole. This is what Lacan terms a blind spot. The blind spot is the unconscious desire to be outside of language in order to evade its annihilating effect.⁵ In attempting to zoom into the image he only understands the material

⁴ Lacan Seminar XI

⁵ Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. A. Sheridan, (New York: Norton, 1978), 87.

aspect of the photograph. As in Michael Snow's *Wavelength*, the zooming in affect leaves us with nothing but a material surface, the material grain of the photo and the crux of representation – that we only see what is given to be seen in that a photograph is always mediated. There is always a gap between meaning and perception and between representation and desire. A viewer's perception is always blocked from full visibility. It is a misconception that the Freudian gaze is an all-perceiving male gaze when in actuality it is always only in partial view. The object of desire can never be seen in whole so it is anamorphic. Lacan uses the example of Holbein's painting of the skull to illustrate this concept. The skull can only be perceived from a certain angle and in doing so obliterates the view of the rest of the painting. In this way, the image can only be seen indirectly since something is always out of focus or dropping out of our line of sight. The *objet petit a* comes into being through its disappearance and is constantly sliding out of reach. The warping in Verhoeven's video has an anamorphic effect maintaining the stillness of the photographs but warping anything that is moving in the film creating an angle or dimensionality imperceptible to the viewing eye.

The paradox of the photographic image is its *atemporality*, what Barthes terms in *Camera Lucida* as the photograph's noeme or "that-has-been" and its spatial proximity in the "here-now." The photographic paradox is that it proclaims what-has-been not what-is-no-longer.⁶ It is a documentation of the past existing in the present. In the film, the protagonist attempts to revisit the scene of the crime in order to re-photograph the corpse as proof that it exists, but when he returns with his camera it is no longer there. This scene

⁶ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. R. Howard, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

illustrates the way memory functions in that you cannot return to a moment in the past, you only use your memory to remember, but in doing so the memory is always constructed anew in the present. The protagonist's attempt to photograph something from the past is his attempt at recreating an event that cannot be recreated. As Heraclitus once said, no man ever steps in the same river twice.

In a shallow reading of Part 1 of Barthes' *Camera Lucida* the punctum is conceived as a traumatic detail that pricks the viewer. However it is in Part 2 that Barthes completely dismantles his first definition of punctum. The punctum is never a single focused detail instead it is always moving. The punctum is always repressed; as soon as one becomes conscious of the punctum it has already fallen out and been replaced by something else. The punctum does not lay in the trauma or detail of the photo, rather the punctum is like the active drive of trauma. In this way the punctum points towards the death drive. It is "unnamable, endlessly, metonymically expanding and always appears as a partial object."⁷ Once the punctum is named it is no longer disturbing. It can then move and slip into a different punctum as a form of repression. Returning to *Blow-Up*, the punctum at first seems like the couple he candidly shoots. Then once he discovers the corpse the punctum becomes the corpse. Thus, once the corpse is discovered, it is no longer the punctum and it disappears as he returns to the site of his trauma.

Barthes explains that the photograph always represents death, in that it captures a place which one cannot return to thus it is outside of meaning and time. The photograph is always invisible because what we see is only the referent. The end of *Blow-Up* fittingly

⁷ Juli Carson, "On Critics, Sublimation and the Drive: The Photographic Paradoxes of the Subject," in *Art: Sublimation or Symptom*, ed. Parveen Adams, (New York: The Other Press, 2003), 87.

concludes with the protagonist's own disappearance. He is a sliding signifier in the place of the viewer because "a signifier is that which represents a subject for another signifier."⁸ The protagonist is a shifter. As soon he realizes his subject, the corpse, disappears then the viewer loses the subject, the protagonist, and he subsequently disappears. He circles and returns to the place of trauma in an attempt to repeat the scene of the photograph. As soon as he becomes conscious of the corpse, the corpse slides out of meaning shifting his desire and thus becoming a sliding signifier for the viewer. When we lose the protagonist of the film, we lose a third person narrative and take the place of the protagonist losing sight of the subject, in turn becoming a part of the chain of sliding signifiers. It is not about what is real but what we perceive to be real. To use the algorithm of the life drive over the death drive, the life drive would be the digital video and the death drive would be the analog film. Through the scanner bed the film is transferred into digital enacting the reconstruction of time and memory. In this way the life drive is sustaining the death drive and vice versa.

As with Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, *Blow-Up* can also be dissected in two parts, with the first part being the punctum as detail and the second part being punctum as time. The punctum is ever moving and inconclusive by the end of the film. In Seminar XI Lacan recalls a story about Petit Jean who points to a sardine can in the ocean and tells him although he can see the can, the can cannot see him. The blinding reflection from the can causes a blind spot reflecting the lack that always exists in the visual field. The stain of the protagonist's image is the corpse which creates the source of the anxiety. The work of art, in this case the photograph, holds the viewer in its fold never fully revealing itself.

⁸ Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. A. Sheridan, (New York: Norton, 1978), 207.

Verhoeven's process exposes the materiality of film. The video exists as an index providing a language for which he can reconstruct. The video cuts between scenes revealing both the lag time created by the scanner as well as the actual cuts that are happening within the film. In order to rectify time he has to return to the year 1966 but he cannot do that authentically. He leaves his fingerprints on the glass of the scanner bed and the lines from the digital monitor creating a screen between the past and the present. The year 1966 is also a screen memory. It is an arbitrary year that creates the index for the film. In doing so, the artist reconstructs a memory in which he did not exist. Like memory, the film is altered through the scanning process leaving an imprint of the original but in a new configuration. The piece visualizes the operation of memory recollection, of the distortion that occurs when a memory is recalled from the past and is reconstructed in the present. In the film, the protagonist looks at the photo but never sees what he wishes to see. This is the paradox of the slippery slope between imagery and language. There is always absence in the presence of the viewing subject.

DEMATERIAL CONCEPTUALISM

The first instance that comes to mind of the absence of the art object is John Baldessari's act of destroying all of his artworks since c.1959 in 1966 declaring that he no longer believed work needed to be made by his own hand and that information itself was art. It was a tabula rasa of Minimalism that marked a beginning for many artists to challenge notions of materiality. Artists such as Robert Smithson and Adrian Piper began writing about their own work marking this time as "an age in which artist are becoming

increasingly verbal in order to forego the critical middleman.”⁹ Looking towards the historical moment of 1966 to pinpoint a moment in which language and image coincided through conceptual art; I am interested in the paradox that occurs in language between image – representation and language- particularly looking at the year 1966 which is often cited as the beginning of such discourse.

The year 1966 marked the beginning of discourse surrounding dematerialization or concept art for the first time in North America. With Abstract expressionism waning and Minimalism at the fore, post minimalist critique was already underway with Conceptualism being largely a critique on modernist formalism. The Women’s Liberation Movement, Civil Rights Movement and Vietnam War set the tone for the political atmosphere for artists working at this time. Art critic, writer, curator and activist Lucy Lippard wrote and published her seminal book *Six Years and the Dematerialization of Art* in 1973 cataloguing and chronicling the historical moment of conceptual art as she had experienced it in New York. Writing what she recognized as a biased historical account of these years, the catalogue served to chronicle these years from her perspective avoiding any explication or theorization. The 1960s was also the first time artists transcended the boundary as writers and critics. The distinct role of curator, critic, writer, and artist dissipated. Lippard’s position as a writer rejected the normative role of the art critic in which she de-centered her authorial function by often working alongside many of the artists she wrote about. Arriving out of a critique of Modernism, artists sought to relinquish the idea of taste and

⁹ Cornelia Butler, *From Conceptualism to Feminism Lucy Lippard’s Number Shows 1969-74*, (London: Afterall Books, 2012), 23.

formal tendencies in their work. This turn towards dematerialization was a political turning point in critiquing commodification and institutional models. With distribution and communication being a key component of conceptual work including publications and mailings, language became a central vehicle for visual communication.

This biased history is a way of contextualizing one of many conceptualisms conceived during this time, hers being a reflection of market drives in New York at the time and a way of strategizing an exhibition history. Lippard's idea of dematerialization became marketable commodity as a catalogue then later as an exhibition recently in 2012 as an exhibition strategy. This viewpoint can really only be viewed from a social level from a specific time and place as only one of many conceptual histories. Although it is of a particular perspective, it was Lippard's trip to Argentina that marked an interesting parallel to the conceptual art world outside of the United States. Lippard's trip to Argentina in 1968 led her political consciousness as she recognized the inseparability of aesthetics and politics in a way that was not occurring in New York:

"I was politicized by a trip to Argentina in the fall of 1968, when I talked to artists who felt that it was immoral to make their art in the society that existed there. It becomes clear that today everything, even art, exists in a political situation. I don't mean that art itself has to be seen in a political terms or look political, but the way artists handle their art, where they make it, the chances they get to make it, how they are going to let it out, and to whom – it's all part of a life style and a political situation."¹⁰

¹⁰ Lucy Lippard, *Six years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object From 1966 to 1972*, (New York: Praeger, 1973), x.

Many of the artists were abandoning their material artistic practice for various modes of activism. For instance, in 1966 artist and socialist Roberto Jacoby, along with Eduardo Costa and Raúl Escari, wrote a manifesto “Un Arte de los Medios de Comunicación” (“An Art of Communications Media”), employing mass media as an artistic medium and doing away with the hierarchy of printed material. At the time, Lippard was discouraged from the New York art scene and apolitical stance of many Conceptual artists who played an inactive role in activism. The ability for artists in South America to take on a political dematerialized practice in turn influenced Lippard’s career towards criticism and becoming actively involved in the Feminist Movement by 1970. Lippard and Chandler first to recognized this movement towards dematerialization in their essay ‘The Dematerialization of Art’ in 1968. Dematerialism marked a form of art that put material secondary to concept, the material aspect either completely removed or diminished in importance, a direct dialectical turn from a Greenbergian modernism. The focus was on the signified not the signifier and the importance of medium specificity was obsolete. Dematerialization was characterized by the progression of Minimalism, Pop, Happenings, Fluxus and conceptual art movements. It stood for a removal of the subject from the art object and artist ego and an aesthetic removed from the artist ego. This was an intentional dematerialization of capitalism with happenings being the social artistic event in resistance to capital.

Argentinian artist, activist and theorist Oscar Masotta had written about dematerialization just a year before Lippard had making a link between art and psychoanalysis although Masotta resisted Lippard’s definition of Dematerialism. Masotta set himself apart in the way that he operated in his artist practice holding to a model for

critical aesthetics – a binding of politics, art and theory. Masotta was the first Argentinian artist to revisit Lacan at the time. Rather than embracing Lippard’s concept of dematerialization, Masotta’s radical gestures were meant to revitalize Lacanian theory in order to challenge the notions of material and representation and critique within the political field.¹¹ It was the 1966 Argentinian coup d’etat concurrent with his discovery of Lacan that influenced his aesthetic turn.¹² It was this climate in contrast with her assessment of the New York art world that influenced her conceptualization of conceptual art at the time. In 1966, Roberto Jacoby, artist and social activist, pronounced Dematerialism as the use of social material and mass media as an art form. It was also Masotta who proclaimed in 1967 that art would dematerialize after Pop.

In Krauss’ 1973 essay *Sense and Sensibility*, Krauss addresses the negation of the terms “dematerialization” and “post-Minimalism.”¹³ Intention and questions of the author’s role and agency of the critic were addressed during this time through Barthes’ essay “Death of the Author,” and Foucault’s “What is an Author?” Through structuralism, semiotics and essays such as these, the role of authorial intention shifted pushing towards systems of interpretation. The problem of such analysis becomes apparent through Structuralist practice an overreliance on a singular contextualization. Krauss asserts the private meaning of works when considering the works of Minimalism, although conceptually driven, often creating a phenomenological experience where the viewer completes the

¹¹ Juli Carson, *Aesthetics of Repetition: A Case for Oscar Masotta in X-tra*, p.8

¹² What is important to note is how these events led up to the Argentinian Dirty Wars of 1976-1983 and U.S. involvement in the Dirty Wars in which over 30,000 people disappeared unaccounted for who have fallen out of representation.

¹³ Rosalind Krauss, “Sense and Sensibility: Reflection on Post ‘60s Sculpture,” *Artforum*, Vol. 12, no. 3 (November 1973).

work (i.e. Carl Andre's floor installations), and the experience being the driving force of the work. This authorial displacement from artist to spectator is touched upon in Krauss' essay. Conceptualism was a move away from Greenberg's model of expressionist painting in illusory space. Rather, this illusionism operated unconsciously at the heart of conceptual work. Duchamp allowed us to think about art outside of its material and aesthetic presence alone and rather on the function or operation of the artwork. To have art whose meaning is without intention to avoid being entrapped "within the privacy of a mental space which the old one entailed."¹⁴

MATERIAL CONCEPTUALISM

Erika Vogt's work evokes a latent index, one that is not readily apparent. Vogt's work is nonlinear in nature, often abstracting space and time. Influenced by her own every day experiences, her videos are intuitive and work through and against Structuralist film techniques often denying any mathematical or narrative logic. *Geometric Persecution* (2010) is a fifteen minute video in which perspective fluctuates between first to third person views. Like a mise-en-abyme, a screen is projected within a screen. The subject of the film is a wandering traveler who is constantly slipping in and out of the screen often disappearing then reappearing in reverse. The title *Geometric Persecution* was created by the artist to describe the longstanding debate between pictorial representation and abstraction. The video consists of multiple layers created through digital and analog techniques. The film's construction is as important as the content. Drawing becomes a way for the artist to study form and often influences the production of her work. Her videos and

¹⁴ Ibid., 52.

sculptures are an extension of this formal exercise. This non-dialectical approach is ahistorical and atemporal in nature yet its dialogue with aesthetic strategies of the neo-avant-garde makes the work historically conscious. This political content is latent (visual experience of metaphor). Objects are exchanged like words; film is made equivalent to drawing; and sound performs like memory. Working with found objects, the pieces lack a determined functionality marking them obsolete.

The ritualized process of exchanging objects from hand to hand performs the operation of currency. Vogt's installations and work are tangible in part but oblique in nature causing a reliance on the parts interrelation with one another. The ambiguity of the exchange resists any form of determinacy. Intermittently objects are transferred between hands like information from one mouth to another. The objects are made equal to words. The reflective surface on the wall of the projection creates a glare or blind spot for the viewer, further mystifying the video.¹⁵



Fig.2

In the installation of this video she also includes a series of drawings and sculptures. Erika Vogt's installation *Armors for Chorus and Players* (2010) is a series of painted sticks and sculptures that can be recognized as props from the video. The objects can be handled, yet have no utilitarian purpose. They occupy a symbolic space of potential value and exchange. A series of nineteen drawings titled *Studies for Conversing Figures* (see Fig.) depicts an indecipherable conversation repeated between two figures. The drawings are xeroxed in a series but no two drawings are alike. Each Xerox is drawn onto contrasting paper, the mimetic nature of the series. The two floating heads face each other as if in a conversation. The faces mirror the linguistic exchange produced in an early drawing from Saussure's *Course of General Linguistics* in which two figures symbolize the enactment of speech from A to B where the full exchange between A and B produces conscious language in a speech circuit. Like the objects in *Geometric Persecution*, this is a symbolic exchange. Language both precedes and exceeds our relationship to value and is bound by the temporal conditions of linguistic structures. Erika's sculptures echo early Minimalist sculptures with their leaning sensibility and monochromatic handmade simplicity.¹⁶ Vogt's sculptures take on the form of early Minimal work yet they resist the theatricality while simultaneously engaging with how the viewer perceives and interacts with the work. Due to the objects' tactile nature they have an empathetic quality.

¹⁶ Polish artist Andre Cadere was known for his series *Round Wooden Bars*, 1970–78 series which consisted of long colorful wooden poles which the artist walked through public space. The pieces were meant to be handled much like the work in Vogt's installation.



Fig. 3

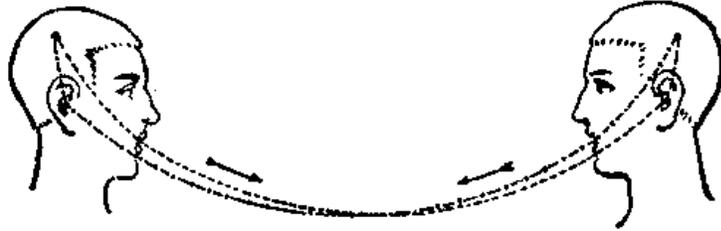


Fig. 4

Vogt's work evokes a desire to look outside of language in order to understand it. Its intention is concerned more with what is unsaid than what is said. Although not overtly feminist or political in her work, this content lies subversively. In seeking to be outside of language and meaning in her work, the figure of the wanderer in her work illustrates a Foucauldian unreason leaving the wanderer trapped in madness with no direction. Much like Antonioni's films, Vogt's work leaves the viewer with more riddles than answers. The nature of Vogt's work is Surrealist in strategy, structured much like the unconscious. The dream state is nonlinear in which time is nonlinear and thought is abstracted. Although there are moments of clarity the way they are structured together are illogical creating free associations. In this way form and meaning are given limited access making it unstable. This challenges any concrete adherence to a systematic approach. It is a resistance to formal structure while engaging in its strategies. What can happen in the gap space, the in-between space of the unknown? Can there be an affective quality between object and viewer. The video literally strives to push outside of the frame, finding rest within the frame only for a moment then bouncing outside the frame again. The work lies between

real and imagined space, the objects are represented in digital and actual space. Although complex, the work is transparent in its making showing signs of the artist's hand. The work strives to push outside of language to a point where it cannot be classified. There is an emphasis on the mobility of objects and the perspective of images which is constantly in flux.

In Krauss' 1973 essay *Sense and Sensibility*, Krauss addresses the negation of the terms "dematerialization" and "post-Minimalism."¹⁷ Intention and questions of the author's role and agency of the critic were addressed during this time through Barthes' essay "Death of the Author," and Foucault's "What is an Author?" Through structuralism, semiotics and essays such as these, the role of authorial intention shifted pushing towards systems of interpretation. The problem of such analysis becomes apparent through Structuralist practice an overreliance on a singular contextualization. Krauss asserts the private meaning of works when considering the works of Minimalism, although conceptually driven, often creating a phenomenological experience where the viewer completes the work (i.e. Carl Andre's Tiles), the experience being the driving force of the work. This authorial displacement from artist to spectator is touched upon in Krauss' essay.

Conceptualism was a move away from Greenberg's model of expressionist painting in illusory space. Rather, this illusionism operated unconsciously at the heart of conceptual work. Duchamp allowed us to think about art outside of its material and aesthetic presence alone and rather on the function or operation of the artwork. To have art whose meaning is

¹⁷ Rosalind Krauss, "Sense and Sensibility: Reflection on Post '60s Sculpture," *Artforum*, Vol. 12, no. 3 (November 1973).

without intention to avoid being entrapped “within the privacy of a mental space which the old one entailed.”¹⁸

CONCEPTUAL RECEPTION

As much as Vogt’s work pushes outside of language yet engages actively in form, Gaines work uses language directly and resists form. The activity of Charles Gaines’s visual practice takes up the challenges and slippages that occur within language and representation. Using conceptual strategies to remove his own subjectivity or artist ego from the work, for instance the series *String Theory* and *Randomized Text* series, Gaines invents a set of pre-established rules for randomizing texts sourced from post-war writings by Edward Said, Frantz Fanon and Georges Bataille. He then draws the words out meticulously by hand. In this context, the act of drawing functions as a rhetorical action. The systematic process of arranging the texts is juxtaposed by the physical labor involved in drawing them. When the rules of language are altered, the way in which meaning is constructed begins to surface through its unraveling. In rearranging the texts, the sentences retain their grammatical integrity, yet turn toward incoherence. Through this undoing of language, the original meaning of the text is reconstructed, allowing a space for the viewer to re-interpret them. By breaking down the structure of language, Gaines’ two series reveal what language is made of –a system of interconnecting signs. Regarding this separation he states, “One thing that made me different from other conceptual artists is

¹⁸ Ibid., 52.

that I was not shying away from language or meaning or content. Those things are part of the art, whereas for the most part, conceptual art was phenomenologically based.”¹⁹

Gaines’ work is driven by race, identity and politics. In 1966, Italian filmmaker Gillo Pontecorvo’s *Battle of Algiers*, a chronicling of the bloody revolution between Algerian nationals and French nationalists, was released. The film was studied heavily during the 1960s for its thinking on colonialization. During this time, the writings of Algerian revolutionist Frantz Fanon, whose writings Gaines pulls from in his series *String Theory*, became a focal point for study as well. Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* is a psychoanalytic study of racism. In his piece *Rewriting Fanon #6* (see Fig.5), Gaines has us read: “It told all that the sexuality of the Negro is pre-logical.” The words are ambiguous, perverted and obscured. This is emphasized by the gray smoke screen appearing behind them like the aftermath of an explosion. The metaphoric presence of smoke creates an unexplainable space which mirrors the ephemeral nature of language and the way meaning fluctuates within context.

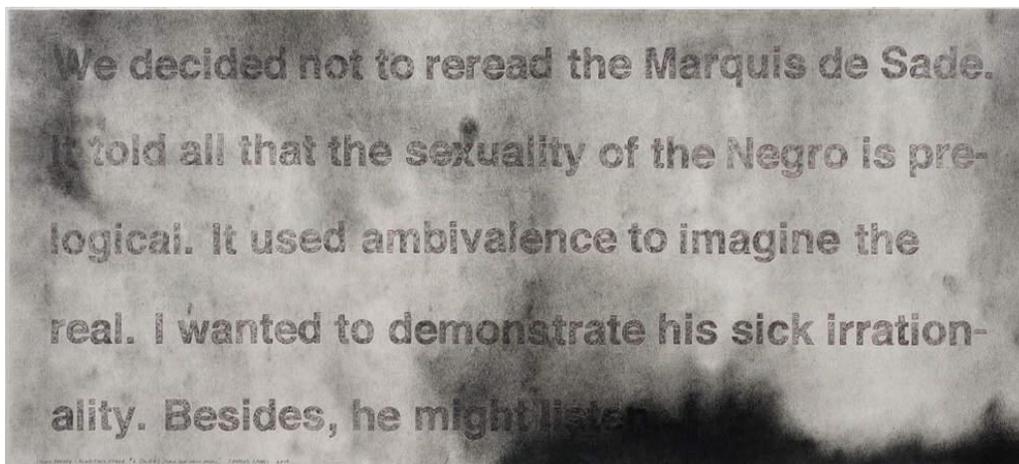


Fig.5

¹⁹ Charles Gaines to Malik Gaines, “Remember the Grid,” 2001.

Since the beginning of his career Charles Gaines has worked with language using systems and rules to juxtapose the role of image and text. In *Randomized Text* drawings (2006-2008) and *String Theory* (2011). In these two series he appropriates text in order to break apart language through a system of randomization which he postulates prior to creating the work. A more recent work is *Librettos: Manuel de Falla/ Stokely Carmichael* (2014) at Art + Practice, Leimert Park, which was curated in tandem with his first museum retrospective *Gridwork: 1974-1989* at the Studio Museum in Harlem. Gaines' practice relates to issues of identity, desire, representation and perception by building a language of politics in tandem with a language of poetics through elements of literature, music, political activism and philosophy.

Charles Gaines emerged as a conceptual artist in the early 1970s and quickly became recognized for his use of systems and grids to provoke a critical engagement with representation. Influenced by early conceptual artists such as Sol LeWitt and John Cage who also used systems as a mode of production, Gaines employs rules in order to remove a sense of subjectivity or ego in his work while still maintaining a conversation with aesthetics and form. LeWitt and Cage had sought to free their work from stylistic association altogether. In this way, Gaines can be seen as a historical bridge between early conceptual artists and recent contemporary artists who are also engaged in a conceptual practice including Andrea Bowers and Rodney McMillan, both of which were students of Gaines at Cal Arts where he has been an influential professor for the past 25 years. A close reading of George Kubler's *Shapes of Time* (1968) also had an early influence on Gaines' understanding of systems along with many other artists at the time including Robert

Smithson. Kubler's text was influential to artists at this time due to its radical re-reading of art history.

Gridwork: 1974-1989 at the Studio Museum in Harlem was the first opportunity Gaines has had to show at the museum having been long excluded from the museum which is known for representing and supporting influential black artists. One of the reasons he attributes this exclusion is the fact that his work does not directly represent issues of race and identity aesthetically in that his work would not be relatable to the museum's audience. There are two opposing responses to this dilemma, 1) the response that is art does not look "black" will not be accepted by the black community and 2) the idea that black art does not exist as stated by Michael Brenson of the New York Times in a review that "[T]he sources and approaches of Black artists are so diverse that there is absolutely no such thing as Black art."²⁰ In the first response this denial supports naturalized ideals for aesthetics based on the identity of the artist while the other denies a voice of difference. It is these types of arguments that fuel much of Gaines' work. Early in his career Gaines found success among many galleries in New York that were known to represent only white male artists. His work was able to transgress the boundaries of race in the gallery world, yet much to his chagrin he was often excluded from exhibitions in the black community. This marginalization in turn is a double edged sword. Gaines work is more about giving voice to difference than simply race. It is also important to note the historical and political context for which he makes his work. Often incorporating appropriated text into his drawings, he investigates the writings of philosophers, theorists, poets and activists such as Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, the Black Panther Party and Gabriel García Márquez.

²⁰ Michael Brenson, "Art View; Black Artists: A Place in the Sun," in *New York Times*, March 12, 1989.

Gaines' most recent work *Librettos: Manuel de Falla /Stokely Carmichael* are currently exhibited at Mark Bradford's social practice studio and gallery Art +Practice in Leimert Park. The exhibition is a series of Plexiglas paintings that appropriate the musical score and libretto from the Spanish composer Manuel de Falla's 1904 opera *La Vida Breve* (Life is Short) and includes excerpts from a speech given by Black Panther Party member Stokely Carmichael. The libretto and score are painted on the Plexiglas over the backdrop of the speech. By positioning the musical score of *La Vida Breve* on top of the Plexiglas, Carmichael's speech must be read through the Plexiglas exterior. The music can be seen as a bridge between image and text. *La Vida Breve* is an opera told in two acts depicting a tragic love story between a gypsy and a wealthy suitor. These two disparate mediums combine to enact the endless desire for equality and the suffering involved in class disparities; one functioning as a metaphor the other as a metonym for change.

Gaines' work is poignant today due to its political intent as well as its cultural and aesthetic content. By juxtaposing the political and poetic he creates a platform for a critical aesthetic discourse. How does positioning the work of the greatest Spanish composer of the twentieth century with a speech by revolutionary Black Panther leader Stokely Carmichael create a discourse on class and identity? Born in 1876, Manuel de Falla studied in Madrid until the late 1890s before moving to Paris where he became a close friend and colleague of Claude Debussy whose influence would include years of revisions before the opera finally went live in 1914. The narrative of the opera deals with the tensions of social class centering on the relationship between a gypsy girl and her wealthy suitor. Although criticized for its banal libretto, the opera had successful reviews offering an atypical depiction of a gypsy who was both tragic and naïve rather than passionate and vengeful as

per usual. It also proved Spanish opera to be fair competition amongst the more popular Italian and French operas. A Spanish critic at the time wrote that the piece did not lend to a “vain and ephemeral appearance of life by inserting and freely taking advantage of popular folklore, but rather by realizing something of far superior merit, which is to... engender a genuine being, investing in it the entire spirit of a race.”²¹

Although *La Vide Breve* is a romantic tragedy that leaves the protagonist dead over the heartbreak of her suitor who leaves her for a woman of his own social class, the social implications of casting a female minority as a lead challenged perceptions of gypsies at the time that had faced prejudice and persecution. By pairing the play with the Black Panther speech, Gaines provokes a relationship between prejudice and tragedy encountered throughout history and time. This conjugation of the poetic and political is a reoccurring tactic used in Gaines’ work in order to deal indirectly with political concerns often obscuring meaning in order to allow the viewer to draw their own conclusions. The relationship between these two texts has a direct relevance to the city and surrounding community in which the exhibition is held. Leimert Park, Los Angeles is the center of a history rich in African American music, art and culture and is known for its Spanish Colonial Revival homes. Considering the audience of Art + Practice, these two languages create a platform to support social change and develop a voice for the next generation. The speech by Carmichael used in Gaines’ piece was delivered in 1967 in Seattle arguing to dissuade African Americans from serving in the Vietnam War and declaring: “Black youth...value and respect [your] own cultural heritage instead of aspiring to white cultural

²¹ Carol. A Hess, *Sacred Passions: The Life and Music of Manuel de Falla*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 73.

values.”²² The use of this speech is particularly influential considering Art +Practice is built as a space for young adults to gain proper professional training and skills after they leave their foster homes.

Gaines’ uses images and text that seemingly have no connection to one another operating between the slippages that occur in language and representation. These gaps allow for new meanings to be constructed through a reconstructing of language. Culling found texts by philosophers such as Edward Said and Frantz Fanon, Gaines takes the texts and enters them into a system of randomization in order to rearrange the words and sentences. For instance, in *Randomized Text: History of Stars*, photographs of the night sky is paired together with handwritten texts derived from two books, *Love in the Time of Cholera*, by Gabriel García Màrquez, and *Orientalism*, by Edward Said. The description that accompanies the work provided by his gallery states, “The sentences are chosen based on a randomizing system in which alternate sentences from each text are combined according to the letter of the first word in the previous sentence.” This process of creating newly formed sentences casts arbitrary connections between the words and sentences. This operation strips the text of its original meaning creating space for the production of new meaning. Once the new sentences are constructed they are meticulously drawn by hand. The systematic process of arranging the texts is juxtaposed by the physical labor involved in drawing them. Although retaining grammatical integrity, the texts are difficult to comprehend, making the process of reading them an exercise in perception.

When the rules of language are altered, the way in which meaning is constructed begins to surface through its unraveling. Through this undoing of language, the original meaning of the text is reconstructed, allowing a space for the viewer to re-interpret them. By breaking down the structure of language, Gaines' two series reveal what language is made of – a system of interconnecting signs. In choosing to work with grids and systems popularized by conceptual artists of the 1960s and 1970s, Gaines' practice of randomization and scientificity reflects a mode of authorship that is independent of self-expression alone revealing the myth or illusion of authorship. The integration of photos into his work is intended to create an emotive response for the viewer in relation to the work. The grids and systems complicate the reading between what is fiction and reality. In setting up pre-requisites or rules before making the work, the idea precedes any the responsibility of craft alone. Placing found photos of the stars with texts by Marquez and Said, the photos bring new meaning to the text and vice versa. The stars serve as metaphor representing the infinitude of space and our finite understanding of it while the text is metonymic moving in a chain of sliding signifiers. When language is present what is absent? Gaines work is an attempt to measure infinitude by join astronomy and poetry together within a Structuralist paradigm to create an expansive experience of the everyday.

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), is a canonical text to post-colonial studies, which analyzes the divide created by European colonialism between the East and the West. Said works to provoke a discourse that challenges notions of "otherness" caused by colonialism, particularly the inaccurate generalizations and myths surrounding Asia and the Middle East. In using this text, Gaines formulates an indirect reading of the text to take to task the process of denaturalizing such myths. Through the process of rearranging texts and placing

them with images, the exercise of reading is made conscious. In *Pleasure of the Text* Roland Barthes states that reading is often done passively and urges the reader to instead experience the text slowly in order to understand the place of the writer, the reader and activity of reading itself. Gaines abstracts language by rearranging the sentences and words forcing a slow reading of the text. This layered process of slowing down the reading of the work is evident visually through obfuscation including the smokescreens in the *String Theory* series or the Plexiglas layering in his most recent works. The Plexiglas and smokescreens provide yet another layer to bury and repress the text in order to complicate the viewing process. In repressing the texts not only does it allow for a slower read but creates a space for reconsidering language and its meaning. According to Lacan, the unconscious reads like language, it is infinite and functions like a bladder that is emptied then filled back up again. In other words, as soon as one object becomes conscious another one falls into the unconscious. In the operation of reading the texts, Gaines' works allows the viewer to exercise the re-reading of a text outside of its original meaning. This process of randomization opens up possibilities in language by allowing the rules to change. It is the point at which language loses control that Gaines finds most valuable in his process. Gaines series *String Theory* deals with text and language in a similar manner. Gaines states, "Even the people whom I really liked—Cage or Legit—were visionaries, but they were suspicious of letting language get out of control. It was important to protect visual or sound culture from that. I was just the opposite. For me, an artwork is the impetus for letting language get out of control—letting the dynamic experiences happen."²³

²³ Charles Gaines to Courtney J. Martin, "Five Will Get You Ten: A Conversation with Charles Gaines" in *Gridwork:1974-1989*, (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2014), 35.

Today it is commonly stated that racism no longer exists because race does not exist. But it is the ideologies surrounding racism that still exist and need to be addressed, especially within language. In *The Theater of Refusal: black art and mainstream criticism*, an exhibition curated by Gaines in 1993 at the University Art Gallery in Irvine, CA, Gaines writes on the issues of marginalization, the concept of post-modernism being one of them, and the importance of giving voice to difference in critical discourse. In order to counter the Hegelian tendency towards universality, Gaines instead turned towards Deleuze and Guattari's concept of deterritorialization as a means to "eschew identity constructions."²⁴ Critiquing the forms of mastery present in Hegel's dialectics, Deleuze's theory on deterritorialization was originally used to dispute the freeing of labor-power relations and can be seen as a form of decontextualizing. In the exhibition he discusses the paradox of marginality as a double edged sword. Minority artists can use marginality as an empowering tool in the discourse of their work but at the same time it causes their own marginality to surface. It is often that in trying to de-racialize canons of thoughts that they are permeated, for instance a critique of Said's writings is that although it is able to conjoin literature and politics in order to analyze American and European domination it also reproduces stereotypical tropes around the Orient. Ashcroft and Ahluwalia expand on this problem in *Edward Said: The Paradox of Identity* on trying to form an identity in a post-colonial world.²⁵ It is important to look at the work of Charles Gaines in the context of Lippard's analysis of Conceptualism with consideration that Gaines is a West Coast artist and found resistance to his work due to race and identity early in his career when he was on the East Coast.

²⁴ Charles Gaines, *Theater of Refusal*, (Irvine: University of California Irvine, 1993), 15.

²⁵ Bill Ashcroft and D. Pal S. Ahluwalia, *Edward Said: The Paradox of Identity*, (London: Routledge, 1999).

Through the incoherency of the rearranged texts, Gaines' work allows the viewer to subjectively input meaning into something that seems meaningless. As in Jorge Luis Borges' short story *The Tower of Babel*, the meaning and origin of language is opened. It is when the text loses control that it begins to reveal another level of meaning. This approach sets Gaines apart from conceptual artists that used a structured systematic approach to language stating, "One thing that made me different from other conceptual artists is that I was not shying away from language or meaning or content. Those things are part of the art, whereas for the most part, conceptual art was phenomenologically based."²⁶ The mechanical rules placed on the text are countered by the labor of drawing the pieces. Our desires and fantasies are implicated in the viewing process as we build our own meaning through the rearrangement of the text. Gaines pieces mystify the meaning of language by repressing the original texts they are derived from. Gaines work reaches towards the sublime and illicit a desire for further explanation outside of the piece. The challenge of the work lies in resisting explanation and embracing the indeterminacy of what you see and experience. The randomization allows the work to remain open ended, always leaving a blind spot subject to interpretation, subject to translation and desire which is always operating between the artist and work as well as language and representation. Charles Gaines' practice uses language to point towards something which is not there. "It's a chain of signification that paradoxically summons the invisible, the intangible, using one system of representation (language) to point at the unresolved complications of the another (the

²⁶ Charles Gaines to Malik Gaines, "Remember the Grid," 2001.

visible).”²⁷ Gaines works through a system of removals in order to subvert subjectivity. Although Gaines seeks to remove the subjectivity of the artist, he leaves an entry point for the return of the subject and material latently.

CONCLUDING NOTES

We can view Gaines’ work as a textual investigation withholding the revenue of Conceptualism and the linguistic turn²⁸. His practice serves as one that transgresses a mimetic practice of racial identity, allowing the ethnic and racial content to exist through an operation, performatively through language. It is important that conceptualism is not be considered immaterial alone. Gaines’ work incorporates both philosophy and language, with concepts of race and identity existing on an unconscious level with race not entering into discussions around his work until later in his career. In relation to race and identity, Gaines’ work denies any mimetic aesthetic form, setting him apart from ethnic profiling as a black artist avoiding any obvious appropriation. When dealing with race, one either deals with the subject representationally or completely opposite through abstraction. Gaines instead chooses to work through language and text to subvert the gaze. It is important to recognize what is mobilizing race through Gaines’ representation in Leimart Park and the Hammer Museum’s involvement in this space for political and institutional reasons. By moving an institution into this neighborhood one must recognize the political implications of such a collaboration. There is a grave disparity between Westwood and Leimert Park

²⁷ Michael Ned Holte, *In the Shadow of Numbers: Charles Gaines: Selected Works from 1975-2012*, (Pomona College Museum of Art, 2012).

²⁸ The linguistic turn came to prominence in 1967 with Richard Rorty’s anthology of the same name pointing towards linguistic philosophy. Wittgenstein was one of the many progenitors of this turn as well as many well-known poststructuralists thinkers including Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva and Jacques Derrida.

and this move can be seen as a gentrification. To mobilize the bourgeois art world into the neighborhood of Leimert Park occurs as a cultural slippage, much like the comparison between Harlem and Manhattan in New York. There is an ethnic and moral context that is ignored in such an exchange, one that Gaines' work constantly contemplates in the structures that create otherness. The corporate context of the Hammer as an institution in a minority neighborhood creates an insensitive dynamic, creating and validating a space specifically for minorities to be enjoyed by the bourgeoisie.

A critique of early conceptualism was that even though it meant to pull away from art market trends through a de-materialized production, it was largely marketable. What was supposed to be an artwork that removes the artist ego, the skilled Kantian genius, would instead create an art world that was even more complicated form for the general public to understand. The works represented here are not overtly political, their political content latent. How then do we return to the place of conceptualism today and Structuralist systems especially in the context of such artist? Roland Barthes notion of the punctum in *Camera Lucida* mirrors this operation. Today a return to conceptualism is often shallow - a formal return taking on the suit of conceptual aesthetics strategies to meet art world market demands. Conceptualism's political content is often lost in this transition. Conceptualism's return happens through memory much like Lippard's openly biased history. I would argue that the project of conceptualism is still shaping and forming.

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