Fountains of Sand Part II

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of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

Comprised of five large format oil paintings and one sculpture made of stucco, Fountains of Sand II: Pictures Not As Windows But Display Windows, or Barriers is the latest iteration of my interest in pictorial structures as they relate to subject matter and its relationship to real matter, paint. FoS II not only affects this struggle as one of thinking through the act of doing, but also attempts to manifest this through the continual obfuscation of a paradigmatic framework: the work displays a “postmodern look” that is constructed and reflexive, but it takes this further to suggest an organic connection between disparate elements. The paintings were made as if an easel painter wanted to participate in eclectic postmodern styles, and with this he or she brought along the baggage of authenticity, as if this were possible.

Keywords: painting; sculpture; video; powerpoint; postmodernism; the recent past
To Meg, with love
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Thank you to Neil Wedman, for the title Jungle Beach, and for your enthusiasm.

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To my cohort: you are a lovely group of people. I was originally planning to call this project My Time With You on account of this.

I would also like to acknowledge the generous support of SFU, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and the BC Arts Council—for giving me the freedom to pursue my work.
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Figure 1.  Studio with works in progress
Introduction

This thesis document is in two parts. The first is an artist statement that was distributed in conjunction with my thesis defence. The second, found in the appendix, is a research paper written in the Fall semester of 2011 for the class Interdisciplinary Graduate Seminar II, taught by Dr. Henry Daniel. The two parts are titled Fountains of Sand II: Pictures Not As Windows But Display Windows, or Barriers, and Thinking Experiments, Clairvoyant Programs, respectively.
Artist Statement.

Fountains of Sand Part II: Pictures not as Windows but Display Windows, or Barriers

I am writing in response to your friendly letter to explain to you the reason the couch in question is where it is. This woman asleep on the couch is dreaming she has been transported to the forest, listening to the sounds from the instrument of the enchanter. That explains the motif of the couch in this picture.

*Henri Rousseau, the primitive painter of jungle scenes who never left France, writing to the critic Andre Dupont in order to dispel any doubts (1910)*

I shall remain in Borges, not in myself (if it is true that I am someone), but I recognize myself less in his books than in many others or in the laborious strumming of a guitar.

*Borges and I, Jorge Luis Borges (1960)*

Architectural features that seem intrinsic, but are in fact for looks only, are a common journey’s end for malleable stucco. The low-rise wall, or ponywall, appears frequently in Santa Fe-style restaurants, often next to exposed brick, and sometimes in the lobbies of shopping malls where a grotto effect is required. Add to this a water feature and so is born public space engineered to produce desire for exotic locales. Like the bureaucratic obstructions of Martin Kippenberger’s *The Happy End of Franz Kafka’s Amerika*, these barrier-mazes are perhaps all the more insidious, however, for they offer hope. Again, they are comparable to the obstacles of equestrian sport: thrilling when one possesses the right equipment, low enough to mount—and this festooned with indigenous flora. Having already been appropriated from a colonial soup, these pavilion spaces form one starting place for the paintings of *Fountains of Sand II*.

* * * * *
Preparation for FoS II involved going to desert locations in California to look at the quixotic works and performances of artists who eschew regular life—a trek to be featured in an upcoming documentary work, *Fountains of Sand I*. The video begins with the question, “who are these people who do what they want?”—a query foreclosed upon with the cryptic answer, “you can’t ask them”. From here the story develops through a series of detours where evidence, left by the activities of these persons, begins to take on increasing significance for the filmmaker—he is buoyed with hopes of transcendence, reflexively capitulating to the wish of doing what he wants). The shots are structured in layers to conflate large and small spaces, inside and outside, to propose barriers to desire and to suggest ways they might be wrestled with. And though this familiar thematic goes through a series of allegorical twists that leave the video ultimately open to interpretation, it is important to note that convention is also held up as a way forward. The desire for freedom, apparently, is a foil at first, but this leads to hope.\(^1\) In more succinct painterly terms, Philip Guston had this to say: that “[even] as one travels in painting towards a state of “unfreedom” where only certain things can happen, unaccountably the unknown must appear” (Storr 107).

* * * * *

It might therefore be serendipitous that stucco appears throughout *FoS I* and in the paintings of *FoS II*. Or perhaps this is not surprising, since the popularity of stucco today extends well beyond California to include any place where an aesthetic topcoat must guard dubious construction methods. Like paint, stucco can be coloured and applied for texture, but perhaps most importantly, stucco itself contrives to be more than a mere representation of adobe. The paintings of *FoS II* could similarly be thought of as striving for something that anchors the whole thing, but that can only come at the very end, and this as a kind of speaking back to the painting from the outside. The crux is not to just look like something but be like something, and in this respect there is something vaguely ontological about stucco (and painting too). Stucco can of course be used as a

\(^1\) or perhaps death (spoiler alert).
sculptural material, but its extrinsic sensibility, its non-essential quality, contradicts its otherwise weighty presence. Herein lies a complexity that the architect Robert Venturi seems to have foreseen: the contrarian author of Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture (1966), Venturi challenged the famous adage “less is more”, with a view of complexity as a better descriptor of modern life:

I like elements which are hybrid rather than “pure,” compromising rather than “clean,” distorted rather than “straightforward,” ambiguous rather than “articulated,” perverse as well as impersonal, boring as well as “interesting,” conventional rather than “designed,” accommodating rather than excluding, redundant rather than simple, vestigial as well as innovating, inconsistent and equivocal rather than direct and clear. I am for messy vitality over obvious unity. I include the non sequitur and proclaim the duality.  (Venturi 16)

An early project, the Vanna Venturi House, which he built for his mother between 1962-64, was and is coated in stucco, a material always contingent on a support.

* * * * *

Put in romantic terms, paintings can be thought of as places where a desire for what’s out there becomes materialized right here, and possibly even for all time, to be seen. And yet paintings are also barriers to seeing. They are displays. In the past I attempted to bear this out by making paintings with a series of over-painted screens that reframed subjects again and again, suffocating the picture right on the surface. In this present series I have tried to diminish this continual obfuscation of subject matter by allowing a few such frames to appear simultaneously, leading to a more “open” picture. This, I believe, has produced an unsettling effect. For example, in The Levy, there is landscape, figuration, and even an apparent narrative. The sliver of raw canvas, visible through the open door of a cabin, is one clue of critique in this otherwise oddball picture that appears to celebrate all the problematic and romantic notions of painting simultaneously. In New Mexico, a young man blows smoke out of a clarinet in a realm of stucco and water features, and where an easel, unmade bed, Memphis chair, fruit bowl, and eccentric self-styled lamp sit like multiple, arranged presences, strategically placed like pieces on a chessboard. The painting of absence—vis-à-vis that which is not painted, vis-à-vis the failure of painting to produce a body—cannot be explained away by
many presences, of course, but, is it possible to think that many presences could, through determination, make the former blush? As much as this may simply be another level of obfuscation, the filling up of worlds feels strangely affirmative for bodies wishing to suspend disbelief.

** * * * * *

The quote from Jorge Luis Borges at the top is taken from a short piece entitled *Borges and I* (Borges 246). In it he describes the strange out-of-body sensation of apprehending himself, the writer Borges, out in the world with his books and success. This he compares to the nebulous inner self, reflecting that he recognizes it “less in his books than in many others or in the laborious strumming of a guitar”. I would like to stretch this, for a moment, to include apprehending one’s own work not just as a reflection of one’s self but as an expression of speculation about what a painting might look like from outside one’s self—separated from the ennui of self-expression, and developed through a sensitivity for one’s surroundings, of things and places and persons that are, if not equally considered, at least on speaking terms. I would like to suggest that such a view is something like faith, made real (enough) through the act of working, but so that it is lightly intentioned, seen from the corner of one eye perhaps, where doubts are a kind of believing. Needless to say, and to stretch Borges again, every painter is really two painters: the one who paints and the one who has to see it.

** * * * * *

And so how does one step back to see a painting? The above quote from Rousseau, reprinted here, gives a clue:

I am writing in response to your friendly letter to explain to you the reason the couch in question is where it is. This woman asleep on the couch is dreaming she has been transported to the forest, listening to the sounds from the instrument of the enchanter. That explains the motif of the couch in this picture. (Ehrlich 25)

This simple and magnanimous response to his critic belies a complex defense of Rousseau’s last completed painting, *The Dream* (1910). He shrewdly undermines Andre Dupont’s criticism by seeming to mistake incredulity for not being able to see the
painting as it is. At another time and again regarding the couch, Rousseau commented to the poet Andre Salmon: “The sofa is there only because of its glowing, red colour” (Scobie 10). Whether or not this shrewdness cum naivety disarms pundits, the practical tone—this uncontrived and formal explanation for the couch—feels no less erudite. But Rousseau’s chameleonic accounts of the couch, one expansive and lyrical, the other formal, should also be resonant for the present moment, in which attitudes have shifted toward an indirect identification with theory. That is, neither account is overtly theorized, or given to contextualizing the picture. Rather, the poetics of the image and physical facts take the place of interpretation.

Lawrence Weiner’s statement for the public pavilion Under the Sun (2010) in Castello, Spain, is an apt example of this kind of writing in which formal relationships of space to sculptural dimension are processually linked to gesture in a way that only hints at meaning:

THE MARKING OF A SPACE WITHIN A PUBLIC PARK THAT IS DEPENDENT UPON MEANING NOT MEANS THE PLACING OF A CLUSTER OF STRUCTURES THAT AFFORD A PLACE DEMARKED AT THAT MOMENT BY THE RESULT OF THE FLICK OF THE WRIST A FORM THAT CAN FLY A KITE OR KILL A BULL WITH GRAACE THAT SETS ASIDE A PLACE FOR THE MOMENT THAT IS YOURS BEING ONLY ONE METER HIGH THEY AFFORD NOT PROTECTION BUT A DEMARCATION OF SOVEREIGN TERRITORY WHEN OCCUPIED TWISTED & TURNED UNDER THE SUN

Another recent statement regarding an online project, written by Francesca Szuszkiewicz in collaboration with artists Derya Akay and Nicole Ondre, goes even further by describing, in detail, every step in the creation of their work:

[...] In the process, the source images were scanned once directly, and then scanned once, or several times, indirectly, from screen images. The light emitted by both monitor and scanner neutralized the brilliant colour of the source images and initial scans, resulting in mostly black and white images, speckled with coloured digital noise. The wavy irregularities and sharp distortions are results of slower or faster movements of the handheld scanner. Constrained by the size of the device these longer and shorter rectangles are consistently 2560 pixels high, and are presented here in two formats—individually at a 1:1 ratio on the index page, and together at a smaller size on the images page [...] http://blackdiamondturnervalley.com/text.html (2012)
To wit, and to go back to the beginning:

I began with a piece of 22”x30” Stonehenge paper, hot-pressed and good for erasing. The first thing I drew was a pair of Solomon SX81 rear-entry ski boots,\(^2\) with one tipped on its side to suggest a still life arrangement. To this I added skis leaning in a corner of the room. Next I decided to add a figure to the left of the boot with one hand gripping it, in pose for a portrait (think of St. Jerome by Caravaggio). I added the table, blanket, skull, and candles next because this seemed appropriate to the development of a little mise en scène. The skis now seemed out of place so I erased the bottom half and left this. I drew in a room but did not like the interior space. I erased some lines and left others. Eventually this turned into the little tent at the upper left. I partially cropped out the figure to the left since the skull was now doing the job of the figure’s head. The entrance to the tent would open to another further away space so this would be left as raw canvas according to my formula. A presence would appear from this absence—a thick pour of paint. And this balanced in the mid-ground by an amorphous shadow, another stand-in for the truncated figure to the left. The vertical of the remaining figure was then balanced out with a plinth to set the ski tips on, to hold them in the right place, with another shadow added to produce a horizontal rhythm […] The contour drawing was now photographed with a cell phone, put in Photoshop to enhance the contrast, and projected on the wall to determine the final size. The paintings would be large-format with the ratio tipped slightly toward landscape—80”x84” in the end. After cropping the drawing different ways, the final image was painted lightly from the projected image onto the canvas.

First thing was to spray the horizontal plane, the ground, to get an effect other than depth. Soft pastel with grey cross-hatching using an airbrush […] special attention paid to the table in the foreground (thin layers to look like the fake wood grain doors in Hycroft Towers). Every color used is added to the figure to the left, the anchor. This starts to add up to a thick mix so I bring up the bottom right corner stage too. I articulate the rocky wall in a codified style that reifies abstraction into thing-ness once again, or so I say to myself at least. A small table is left below the waterfall painting to hold painting tools. I feel dread at this point. Is this some kind of joke? Not once the silhouette of a butler shows up from behind the rock wall carrying a tea tray. This distributes figuration and reminds me of an episode of Night Gallery called ‘The Cemetery’ starring Ossie Davis as

\(^2\) The rear-entry ski boot was a relatively short-lived style. It was easy to put on but required overly-complicated mechanisms to hold the heel in place.
a butler who gets revenge using a haunted painting.\(^3\) I pour the black sludge to get black in different places but the problem now is that it’s too black. I end up spraying a custom oil mixture of all the colours so that the black fits better, except that a bit of the spray gets under the masking which produces a trompe-l’oeil effect—as though the sludge is peeling up slightly. I had already put the affected dabs of pink on the left hand figure so I add heavy-handed shadows underneath each to “approximate” and distribute the same effect. This was also about the time I decided it would be a good idea to frame everything that touches the middle ground with a nice green-grey, another kind of shadow effect. This area sits very flat, too flat, but rather than finessing it into something moody, I begin to decorate it with marks, small pieces of paper, and a radio. Some of these get shadows too. At this point I noticed that I had dripped a little bit of runny paint on the sprayed ground and this could not be fixed. In an unusual move—unusual because I didn’t really debate it—I put little cups under the drips. I put an asterix by one with a footnote at the bottom of the painting that read “just kidding” (later covered up). The orange blanket was very well-modeled at this point, and I sensed it wanting to break out of looking like a blanket to being a blanket a bit more, so I started painting it a lot, thickly, and muddily, like a transmogrification. In the end it appears very amateur, over-painted about 10 times. For the palm fronds to show up, they needed to be dark at the top and light at the bottom. So I use a gradation even though I fear this will look like an internet effect. With orange and purple in the front I decide to complete the triad with a green. This I contrived as a banner that became a ribbon that I used to demarcate the various depths of things in a flat, unmodeled way. (Note the moment where the ribbon goes between two palm leaves.) Now it was time to multiply the connections made by the green, but in a less abstract way. The proliferation of connections becomes spiders’ webs—a good solution considering the skull, and plus they could be put anywhere. And with little beads of dew on each because in death there is also life—just kidding, I needed to distribute white to other parts of the painting. Finally, I added one more gradation, the blue at the top, to cover a bunch of marks that looked like Memphis laminate. A calm blue spot, like a James Turrell or the sky, reflected slightly in the vestments of the butler. (Hubert, notebook)

OK. So what can be said about this way of seeing a painting? It’s not really stepping back at all, more like stepping \textit{into}. It’s the kind of statement that comes naturally to the maker—and for those persons who wish to clarify rather than to confound. Except that

\(^3\) The pilot for Rod Serling’s \textit{Night Gallery} (1970-73) combined 3 short episodes, of which \textit{The Cemetery} demonstrates the most vital connection of the three to its respective painting. It is perhaps the best filmic representation of what a painting is capable of.
such an exposition should really be held with a certain amount of suspicion, and possibly even avoided at all costs, if only for the sake of *less* clarity. And for another thing: earnestness can be as beguiling a surface treatment as stucco.

* * * * *

“Who are these people who do what they want?” says the first line of *FoS I*. The answer: “you can’t ask them, but you can see where they’ve been.”
References


Documentation of Works

Figure 2.  Jungle Beach, 2012, oil on canvas, 80” x 84”
Figure 3.  *New Mexico, 2012, oil on canvas on panel, 80” x 84”*
Figure 4. Skiing Display, 2012, oil on canvas, 80” x 84”
Figure 5.  *The Levy*, 2012, oil on canvas, 80” x 84”
Figure 6.  *What is Enlightenment?, 2012, oil on canvas on panel, 80” x 84”*
Figure 7. Installation #1

Figure 8. Installation #2
Figure 9.  Installation #3

Figure 10.  Installation #4
Figure 11. Stucco Stand with Hamburger Computer
Appendix.

Research Paper:
Thinking Experiments, Clairvoyant Programs

He stated that he wanted to make of impressionism “something solid like the art in museums.” His painting was paradoxical: he was pursuing reality without giving up the sensuous surface, with no other guide than the immediate impression of nature, without following the contours, with no outline to enclose the colour, with no perspectival or pictorial arrangement. This is what Bernard called Cezanne’s suicide: aiming for reality while denying himself the means to attain it.

(Merleau-Ponty 3)

Not all syntactically correct programs are semantically correct. Many syntactically correct programs are nonetheless ill-formed, per the language's rules; and may (depending on the language specification and the soundness of the implementation) result in an error on translation or execution. In some cases, such programs may exhibit undefined behaviour. Even when a program is well-defined within a language, it may still have a meaning that is not intended by the person who wrote it.

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Programming_language)
Thinking Experiments

If intentionality plays out as a preface to the act of painting, the act of painting itself having some vague effect on one’s intentions, then the painting Postmodernism (see Figure A1) should nevertheless appear to have been highly organized from the outset. For example, the masking out of canvas prior to applying gesso suggests a preconceived painting “design”. The picture is compositionally tight because of specialized angles that cannot be changed, and a careful but varied symmetry further emphasizes the theme indicated by the title. At the same time, and perhaps contrary to this apparent tightness, the murky statement this painting appears to be making about postmodernism—(is it emulation, critique, contrarian, enthusiastic, illustrative etc.?)—should be framed by the basic unlikelihood that this subject (postmodernism) would be broached in the first place: the very recent past of postmodernism is as difficult to achieve a critical distance from as it is unfashionable.

A thinking experiment to do with this notion of the recent past:

Let us begin with the impossibility of the very recent past, the impossibility of inhabiting its forms as a gesture of newness, and of the postulation that the recent past could offer a possible site for a proto-avant-garde. When one thinks of something to emulate as a point of critical departure, the recent past is by all accounts the very moment of indecipherability! Without an accompanying text or a connoisseur friend with insider knowledge, the second work will almost certainly appear derivative. For this reason and perhaps others, the impossibility of the recent past may represent a novel possibility in and of itself, the more so in a field that champions paradox and failure, reflexivity, and historical embeddedness, usually without bounds.

Figure A1. “Postmodernism” (inset image in Powerpoint #4, 2011)

The above slide is an excerpt from a recent PowerPoint performance having to do with studio work and the relationship of thinking to making, preconceived notions to process.
The text goes on to elaborate how work that performs this idea of the recent past might, in fact, unfold:

But, since contrast is the more obvious, and therefore notable, form of exchange in the visual arts, such a challenge to the status quo—by literally embodying the status quo—can only be seen as the brainchild of the contrarian. Wishing to obscure readability in a field that generally wants to be read, or felt, or at least appreciated (as being nonconformist), the contrarian might try, impossibly, to emulate the recent past strictly to prove a point or maybe to strike a blow for the non sequitur. Such a stance, perhaps not dissimilar in appearance from that of the disgruntled outsider artist, would certainly be untenable for the career-minded insider, but more importantly, it could have the dangerous effect of too much reflexivity—too much meta-ness—(once again aligning it with the recent past, in this case of postmodernism), but also because this would create a sideshow having not enough to do with the work itself. Not to mention that the work itself would appear to be quite ordinary. Perhaps this is one reason why such an artistic practice has never been attempted (and if it has, how would we know?). It comes down to intentionality, and with this, a difficult to subsume level of triteness.

The conclusion offered here—that the recent past is not only impossible to apprehend but also impossible to execute, at least well—illustrates how this idea would require such heightened intentionality, such contrarian spirit, such triteness, as to be reprobate. But beyond singling out this one effect, the experiment becomes useful in underlining a difficulty of studio work: how does thinking manifest itself in the creation of a painting? What kind of thinking is suitable to making? Is it thinking before or during? Or both? Or is such a distinction even possible? Of course if one holds to the perspective that thinking interrupts the flow of creation, then this question is beside the point. On the other hand, if one accepts thinking to have an ineluctable relationship to experimentation, before, during, and after the painting, then the nature of studio work as process takes on additional dimensions.

*****

So far the thinking experiment has described the sometimes-rhetorical struggle to make new things in the studio, which connects in part to the problem of how to ascribe concept or intentionality to works. Also, the specific thinking experiment of the recent past alludes to the complications arising from historical embeddedness in general. The
agency of the thinking experiment, as something generative, is both threatened and affirmed by the continual opening up and closing down of its own possibilities. This is because of the nature of time: thinking experiments track along side the anxiety of not knowing the future ahead of time. Like a Shakespearean soliloquy, a thinking experiment is ponderous about events yet to unfold, what one’s role in these events will be, and whether one’s plans will come to pass. It situates you in a world of pure potential. It uncovers, as under sediment, latent clues to a fresh approach, and with this, still further problems to consider. A bundle of nerves, the preconceived painting awaits execution, waits for the impossible time when everything has been worked out. Such anxiety is addressed, in part, by thinking in advance of the event, and yet also such thinking contributes to the problem. At the same time thinking experiments address the anxiety that circles around inarticulateness, giving a voice to such concerns in a circumspect and open manner that forestalls judgment. For the purposes of this study, the thinking experiment serves the role of a kind of muse, used to perpetuate the linkages of a formal structuring of ideas that all of a sudden wants to come to terms with words and writing.

And so, understood in studio terms to be an alternative to carte blanche, the thinking experiment conflates intentions by providing a level of circumspection to writ. But all of this is a balancing act: such thinking revolves uneasily around intentionality—especially where knowledge of intentions becomes a requirement for appreciation. On the other end of the spectrum, though, the thought experiment can have a profound connection to intuition. Understood as means and methods that go untold in the stratified logic of writing (Melrose 2002), intuition finds a perhaps unlikely comrade in the hypothetical language of the thinking experiment. One feels out a train of thought similar to the way one feels movements of the paintbrush across time. In both cases there is a surprise ending brought about by a consolidation of individual parts that displace, for a moment, anxieties about the future.

But the problem still arises that the thinking experiment depends on language, and with this emerges the problem of the limit of a kind of rationale that seeks to instrumentalize painting. Out of this awareness, the thinking experiment is duty-bound to infer a critique of its own rationale insofar as its subtle manipulations of premise and its flaws of logic make up the jargon, but not the gist, of its appeal. This is to say the thinking experiment
offers the kernel of a belief at its core, or in its wings, even if it cannot avoid the appearance of equivocation. Within its peculiar proclamations is the quiet insistence that one must act. This suspension of disbelief is directly connected to the workings of intuition, in the sense that one must momentarily suspend hard thinking, or leap forward out of logic, in order to intuit. And so it would seem with the arrival of the inexplicable, that one comes to the end of analysis, the end of a kind of connected thinking that is the requirement of the essay form. But, let us take a step backwards and produce thoughts based on the idea that intuition is really just thinking at a very fine level. Let us consider the clairvoyant program.

The Clairvoyant Program

This is because, if we consider the painting in its reality, the heterogeneity of the manual diagram and the visual whole indeed indicates a difference in nature or a leaped as if we leapt a first time from the optical eye to the hand, and a second time from the hand to the eye. But if we consider painting as a process, there is instead a continual interjection of the manual diagram into the visual whole, a “slow leak,” a “coagulation,” an “evolution,” as if one were moving gradually from the hand to the haptic eye, from the manual diagram to haptic vision. (Deleuze 159)

The comparatively closed framework of the program—as something understood to force outcomes along certain trajectories according to parameters that are set externally—suddenly sparks to life with the idea of the thinking experiment linked to the program. In this, one finds structure for the occult processes of painting. Within the fine thinking of intuition, one can perceive rapid micro-decisions being made at a speed beyond what can adequately be described, events that occur in multiple places at once and so do not seem to correspond to conventional modes of narration. These micro-decisions connect to a much larger network of programs that come from history, life, and perhaps even the thinking experiment itself: it is in this way that thinking at small and big levels constantly inform one another, face one another, challenge or ignore one another.

The historical/contemporary milieu of painting is a macro-program in the broadest sense, whereas programs like brush type and movement, colour and saturation, connect to super-fine thoughts that occur always in the immediate present and that come out crudely as “less pressure, left, then right, stop, lift, roll brush, turn up at the end, lay flat”.

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Questions like whether to combine this kind of line with this kind of field, or that kind of transition, occur in rapid succession but always with a secret consciousness of the macro, whether this be the larger picture of the painting or of all painting in general. These micro- and macro-programs together give rise to finer and finer perceptions resulting in an emergent intuitive-intelligence, or clairvoyance, called “good painting.”

The model of a program represents a critical opening for painting. Programs such as PowerPoint allow one to assemble, augment, and exchange subjects, but always within certain limits expressed by an overarching design. It allows for compositional elements that are prefabricated but editable, and video content; it is speech related, and may give rise to sculptural possibilities in the form of auxiliary equipment. It is open at one level and closed at another. Yet one can imagine an expert hacker with the skills necessary to repurpose code, reconfigure a user interface, or interject hitherto not seen links between programs. For example, a program could be made out of Greenberg’s tenets on flatness, edge, and surface. This could be set up to channel, through a subroutine, a Surrealist mentality of automatic drawing and then this perhaps taken to a performative end point where sleeping, and perhaps the motions of the mattress caused by breathing, could be rigged up to produce a painting somehow. Another subroutine could be applied to ensure success: for example, Habermas’ analysis to do with how romantic art has a “secret tie to the classical” (Cazeaux 269)—that is the hidden but always-present historical-mindedness within the avant-garde. What about a program that connects the impressionists’ substitution of the unmixed materiality of paint for chiaroscuro in a singular work of collapsing opposites? Or a recombination of the isolated figure of Francis Bacon with Neo-Geo? The settings of the program could be highly-ordered, and individuated externally, through determinations tied to other kind of sorting system, from chance shamanistic procedures involving a pendulum, to outcomes of a conversation at a specific time of day, to ones that are read about.

Of course the revisionist implications of this approach are slightly more serious for historical reportage than for painting, which requires, more than accuracy, the discovery of ways to break with habits and clichés. It is a way of making paintings, and mining painting, where making and thinking conflate the old notion of a final answer. Coming out of this interactive realigning of the past with the present is the still basic requirement that a work exhibit an investment in a particular make up or structure of an idea. The
program structure will have integrity if the inner-relations have been considered according to the matrix of containment, where the parts must add up, as in the structure of an essay—not in the terms of a narrative thrust, but rather according to an internal cohesiveness:

The focus of...an essay predicts its structure. It dictates the information readers need to know and the order in which they need to receive it. Thus an essay's structure is necessarily unique to the main claim you’re making... there are no set formulas.

(http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr/documents/Structure.html)

Such modularity implies eclecticism, a both/and trick of the postmoderns. However, a program, with its checks and balances occurring at both the micro- and macro- level requires a certain internal integrity to "work." In this way, and depending on its level of sophistication, the program is able to surgically avoid pitfalls while yielding novel forms. To wit, the thinking experiment as rhetoric-potentiate, and micro/macro program as clairvoyance-container, together perform the function of an integrated user interface. Each part serves a framing function with spheres of influence intersecting in a figure-8 arrangement. The struggle to define the parameters of this experiment-program is more than analogy: it is the essence of the struggle born of the studio.

The Studio Itself as Clairvoyant Program, Oracle?

Perhaps we can stretch this analogy further to envisage the studio as operating according to this logic of the clairvoyant program? But first, a note on clairvoyance. The extra-perception of the program has to do, as has been suggested, with the potential of complex programs to arrive at the threshold of intuition, and then further, that thinking experiments can alleviate certain anxieties associated with “not knowing the future ahead of time” (Hubert 3). The thought experiment as soliloquy for text/platform for preconception and a program of emergent intuition has the combined effect of precognition—an oracle capable of seeing the future, if only for a split second, depending on focus or, conversely, openness to chance.

Of course it is easy to ascribe this effect of oracle to the studio. It is the space that contains all matter for translation, and is itself a site in constant transition in terms of what can be seen, sensed, and imagined. The studio inscribes the look of things to be,
even as it takes shape under these very conditions. Critics will cite Daniel Buren’s *The Function of The Studio* in order to show how the “archetypal studio” is complicit in an insular art system designed to gather and distribute works according to hegemonically-decided tastes. And who would fault him for this analysis: he himself had not yet been canonized. But notably, Buren’s insights came about because of a genuine disillusionment with how studio works are destroyed by displacement from their original context:

> [W]hat most surely got lost was the work's reality, its 'sincerity', that is its connection to its place of creation, the studio—a place where finished works intermingle with works in the process of being made, works that will never be finished, sketches, etc.. All these traces, visible at the same time, allow the comprehension of the work underway, which the museum definitely extinguishes in its desire to 'install'.

(http://portablework.org/gallery.org/2011/06/the-function-of-the-studio-daniel-buren/)

Born of the politics of the sixties and an attendant dissatisfaction with institutions, the critique of the studio by such artists as Buren and Bruce Nauman seems to originate, perhaps surprisingly, out of a sense of romantic lament, and of heightened mysticism about the studio, respectively. Nauman’s cultivation of boredom in the studio has a zen-like quality, and his film productions of the time attest to the fact. He makes a keen observation shortly after finishing art school in 1966:

> If you see yourself as an artist and you function in a studio and you’re not a painter... you do all kinds of things – you sit in a chair or pace around. And the question goes back to what is art? And art is what an artist does, just sitting around the studio.


It is clear that the studio has the desired effect on Nauman for the present study: it is the kind of space that very quietly speaks of possibilities when one is bored enough to listen. Toward Buren’s concern for the displaced work of art, this problem continues to be dealt with through a variety of means, from installation, to performance, or any other configuration of devices meant to inspire a certain spirit out the work, and that arguably re-inscribes the sensual connections of the studio environment. At the same time though the materialization of the spirit of the work within the exhibition space can be seen as an opportunity to coerce another kind of reading of the artwork—as alienated or
differently-charged, again speaking, through a perceived absence, of the work’s origins within the strange energy of the studio space. Post-post-studio artists understand the critique of the studio as a place where conventions are replicated, and the dangers of complicity in the system means one must work even harder to extricate oneself. Full of limitations and fraught with contingencies, the studio is a crucible of platitudes and sincere-ironic switchbacks that makes the connection of thinking to making all the more important.

The Problem of How to Actually Say All This Out Loud OR to Pretend to Be Tal R in 2006

The monster of painting absorbs you with lightning speed; the great, embracing and possessive mother of painting. Even street art is roped in—for better or for worse. And in there you will meet all the others, all the other artists that you thought you rebelled against. You will meet all the old cousins, all the old arseholes and ghosts. It is a scary place, and it is here, that The Battle takes place. But it is here you should be. You will end up as a diehard if you try to stay on the periphery. The challenge is to be in the centre where the others are sitting.

(Tal R, interview in Politiken 2007, Larsden 9)

In 1990 Martin Kippenberger described paintings as part of a much larger world: “…the whole network is important! Even spaghettini . . . .When you say art, then everything possible belongs to it. In a gallery that is also the floor, the architecture, the color of the walls” (Goldstein 316). Revolutionary as this idea might have been, (David Joselit suggests this was the “most important problem to be addressed on canvas since Warhol”), this view of a painting as part of a vast network still only goes half way in addressing what a painting is. The companion to this notion of the network might be if a painter were to also go over every step taken to make a painting, exposing their process as in an instructional video, outlining historical precedents and contexts along the way, so that a complete, narrated picture of the painting could emerge. Of course one could still argue that a painting is greater than the sum of its parts, or that this process would be impossible for a painter to accurately describe, and so on. But to continue along the lines of a thinking experiment, let us attempt to do this very thing by pretending to be Tal R narrating the making of the painting Model Alone in Studio:
I began with a square because of course I wanted to avoid a landscape or portrait reading in this case. Maybe to conform to certain Modernist expectations or have a joke with this. And then I drew it in lightly beginning with the model’s face, then the tall ship, then the blanket pattern and plant to the right and the two pictures to the right of the tall ship. The whole thing came out of images I had previously stored and arranged ahead of time but with some looseness given to the process. The browns of the hair and tree trunks behind came next. Then beneath the bed. I already knew I would limit my colors to brown, yellow, red, yellow, forest green, pink, and the white of the gesso. That way no one can accuse me of being overly-enthusiastic! The picture began to emerge as a drawing moving between colors quickly as the picture progressed. Why did I change colors at certain times? I don’t know. Rhythm, a sudden sense of lack, what was needed from moment to moment. I’ve been told there is something infantile about my paintings. Perhaps I try to channel this spirit of not-knowing. It is the painting of leftovers. There is nothing too finicky—I seldom go over the same place twice. This alludes to a drawing aspect of my painting that for some is taboo. Perhaps I try to elaborate or complicate this notion of naivety with the specific compositional decisions: for example, to create a reflexive frame to acknowledge the edge and then fill it with motifs taken from the center, as though the content of the picture was somehow dictated externally and vice versa. In terms of space I tilt it forward like Van Gogh or Cezanne to ensure this is not the illusionistic space of painted pictures. I try to contrast drawn areas with areas that are dealt with as planes, without contour. I look for cues in other parts of the canvas as I proceed. The ghettoblaster design came out of the floor rug for example. I am trying to deal with the figure as something devoid of narration. Maybe it is a statue. Perhaps the only narration is that one statue is looking at another statue (the one on the dresser). The dresser statue is tribal and so the rest of the painting is perhaps grounded in the primitive. I like the early Pollocks in this way. And they had painted frames too—like a carpet wall hanging.

This *thinking experiment* describes the reading of a painting according to a set of criteria that may or may not have something to do with what the artist was thinking. Set informally in the first person, this experiment is certainly a dubious conceit, and at the same time who would undertake such a thing seriously? But for the sake of elaborating on this treatment let’s consider this notion—to understand a painting from a step-by-step account of its making—to be a *program conflated with a thought experiment*, and with this, certain allowances can be made. What is immediately apparent from this kind of talking is that it quickly slips from a flow of process into an interpretation (of course there could be better and worse versions of this, but this, arguably, is the tendency). On the surface, this is, of course, due to the limits of knowing the process of another person.
But further to this is the notion that it is impossible to remain in the present of process for long before interpretation of what has already happened begins to take place. This is not only a problem of writing and language: it is also a clue of the process that takes place at every stage of a painting. The problem is not one of speaking out loud a flow of events as they occur within the inner mind: rather, it is a problem of actually thinking that something could happen independent of thought, in the first place. The concern should instead centre on how slow and inadequate language is in keeping up with the very fine thinking at the root of intuition—perhaps the most elaborate and detailed program ever made.

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One must become drawn, therefore, to paintings that establish this kind of thinking/making as a feature within the work itself. This is an exciting aspect of R’s paintings: they seem to be made out of their own making—a hallmark of a drawing approach that is deliberately left uncovered, and connected to this, an apparently always-present knowing of when to experiment and when to connect back to a program. The experiments seem to take place in the course of making, with this process regulated within a system of physical facts: the painting is made of seven unblended colours. It is square. It acknowledges the edge through a frame that references the centre zone. The interplay of program and experimentation takes place on a moving stage that constantly responds to the past states of the painting. If there is a preconceived element of this painting, it hard to say whether it be a preparatory drawing or design, worked out ahead of time, or whether it was made up in situ.

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This essay began by insisting that a preconceived moment of painting be framed as a thinking experiment, thus conflating in a deliberately extra-painting way, the first stage of painting with the problem of how to stage intentionality. Why? In the end this is really not so different from how all painters work. To begin a painting one may concede that Tal R does much more than make a preparatory drawing: his entire oeuvre depends on a specialized working out of formal problems that relate to conceptual concerns surrounding the kinds of paintings he feels will put him “in the centre where the others
are sitting.” And so it is that a certain kind of hypothetical writing might stand at the beginning of another’s process, just as there are other varieties of thinking too that, hopefully, spill over into how things are made.

A Final Note on Structure as a Series of Stages on the Way to the Future

Today we can relate [painting] to the sonorous example of synthesizers. Analogical synthesizers are “modular”: they establish an immediate connection between heterogeneous elements, they introduce a literally unlimited possibility of connections between these elements, on a field of presence or finite plane whose moments are all actual and sensible. (Deleuze 116)

Deleuze’s “field of presence…whose moments are all actual and sensible” is slightly at odds with this study which seeks, because of the very limitations of writing, to use language reflexively in order to outline these limitations as a problem of how writing, and therefore thinking, constantly refers to the past—to the story thus far—even as it tries to imagine a future free of such encumbrances. In this scheme painting is not that much unlike writing: it may operate in a different mode, too embodied to be metaphorical and too dispersed to be truly symbolic, but the modes appear to run along side one another not quite parallel, so that they bump into one another occasionally, getting tangled. This is to say that thinking may always be, in some way, part of the act of making. But this does not mean one must relegate all making to thinking in order to verify it in some way: at the very fine, discrete level of thinking-intuition, connections are constantly made that are not easy to see.

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In this short study, an outline has been produced for making paintings that involves thinking experiments and programs. These have been variously referred to as: “the thought experiment as soliloquy for text/platform for preconception and a program of emergent intuition [that] has the combined effect of precognition,” and “the thinking experiment as rhetoric-potentiate, and micro/macro program as clairvoyance-container”. These devices have been said to frame the structures of thought that surround a painting and that also elaborate of how the painting is arrived at through a process of complex interactions involving, at the highest level of complexity, intuition. Another
aspect of this story is how the studio is the oracle-situate of the clairvoyant program. Perhaps this goes without saying. Obviously there is more work to be done in these areas. For example, if not in language, how might we characterize the connections that are made at the finest levels of thought, and might the macro-model of program then be substituted for the audio signal processor as a container that works beside a wave/particle model of micro-decision-making? Closer to the arts one might look at film montage as a periodization of the time based effects of painting. Perhaps it is time for a truly comprehensive study of anxiety in relation to painting. One can only speculate. But the idea remains that in order to evolve the prevalent reflexive/historical framework of painting, one must allow for thinking to be part of making, and for the attendant forms of experimentation that come with this, even if this does lead to a more complex, perhaps unwieldy, picture of what a “good painting” is.
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