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ABSTRACT

Our lives seem to have grown increasingly dualistic in nature: Physical experience takes place alongside and often secondary to digital interaction. Modern platforms delivering instantaneous visual and audio communication have made the distinction between the two states all the more ambiguous. Whether or not such mergence of being renders an existence closer to or further from essential truth is debatable. Futurists tout the evolution to be a step closer to a liberated utopian world¹, while the technophobic condemn the proliferation as a falling of humanity into enslavement by tools.

I am critical of such absolutist thought and challenge those views with the assertion that we are in the *same state* as ever—we have always deluded ourselves with imagery and the only change over time has been the degree of sophistication by which we achieve this. Such delusion exists out of the human necessity to communicate in the physical that which hails from the inner realms of being. Paper in itself serves as an anecdote for this argument, as the advent of the printing press more than half-millennia ago created a situation “analogous to the ‘information overload’ of our own time”².

The paradoxical role of paper, both as tactile fiber and container of expression, is the primary vehicle through which I am exploring this liminal state. My objective is to convey through paper the indeterminacy of experience when we attempt to assign a hierarchy of authenticity to our world through visual perception. Paper’s evolution from plant fiber to abstract manifestation and back again to bodily association, reflects our continuous balancing act with the world as we live with and create from it.

Techniques may change with time, but the condition of a liminal existence remains constant. Our need to dwell in both requires that there be at least an apparent reconciliation between the physical and metaphysical, not unlike the transcendence between holding a sheet of paper and the experience of the content it presents. When paper seems too mortal and limiting we turn to infinite and theoretical data bytes, and when those grow foreign we again seek the physicality of paper. Like an undulating wave, we are ever-shifting between states, and it is in that sinusoidal form where we continue to exist wholly as skin, paper and pixel.

¹ Richard Coyne, *Technoromanticism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 4.

² William Powers, “Hamlet’s Blackberry: Why Paper Is Eternal” (Shorenstein Center Discussion Paper Series, Harvard University, 2007), 24.

Sisyphean Pursuit: Paper, Pixel, Unity of Being

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The art of papermaking was a profound discovery for me this past year. I reject the term *rediscovery* for the rationale that, like digital technology, paper has remained near-invisible to daily perception. It is not until you actually make paper, undergo its intensive process, taking the raw plant fiber and creating something new, that you become aware of the interaction between the paper surface and content. This awareness has altered the way I perceive just about any paper I encounter, be it bath tissue, stationery or packaging material. As an artist who makes collages with found paper, this ability to *make* paper has expanded the spectrum with which I can create. It has also made me realize the blindness that results from paper's prevalence. Writing upon such thin translucent sheets certainly had advantages over alternatives such as carving into stone or writing upon animal skin, but every innovation is subject to the demands of change and modernization. Paper has met its match with computer.

Digital experience permeates daily life and does so at exponential rates. Synchronization and the capabilities of devices to generate complex data streams have made what once seemed science fiction now plausible. Like fragments of light within a coordinate plane, these pixels have become the new atom and we the new creators. Pixels do not discriminate. They sit beside one another without complaint or resistance. Hydrogen, carbon and oxygen are not so liberal in their conduct. A sheet of paper can be rolled or ripped apart, but its molecular structure remains

the dictator of behavior. It is in the creation of pixels that we see our latest attempt to recreate the world in an image more convenient and suitable for fusing our inner and outer states of being.

As an artist, I am drawn to this paradox in which we use our visual perceptions to assuage our dualistic condition. How can a technology simultaneously unite individuals across cyberspace while isolating them? We break the rules of physics when we Skype[™] one another thousands of miles apart, and yet to subscribe to a digital environment is to accept operating in a space comprised purely of mathematical rules and restrictions. It seems for every step in one direction, there is an equal reaction or consequence in the other. This inflection between materiality and indeterminacy, subject and subjugated, beckons for discord. The resulting tension, while constant, is particularly acute whenever we find ourselves in the midst of a new technology. Guttenberg's printing press did not eradicate the art of handwriting; in fact more people began to write than ever before. Photography did not render painters useless, just as television did not kill the radio. Computers may have severely threatened handwriting as evidenced in any samples of my penmanship, but the continuing consumption of paper as well as revival of old-world crafts like papermaking confirm the push/pull relationship we have with our technologies.

While reading, I encountered the writings of the early Renaissance philosopher Nicolas of Cusa. Although he wrote of man's relation with God and the infinite, I was particularly interested in his famous geometric metaphor of singularity versus unity:

No matter how often the number of angles of the polygon will be increased...it will never coincide with the circle. The circle is not simply the polygon with the highest number of angles, it is the absolute limit of the polygon, the polygon of the series, the polygon without any angles (Bocken 180).

I feel this comparison can be applied to the case of digital experience and an ideal unified state. We are literally attempting in vain to square the circle with our technologies, and just when digital seems closest to duplicating the physical world, it only does so by means far removed from anything organic or tangible. For me the contradiction of feeling isolation amidst connectivity stems from this observation. Our path seeking unity is like a curve approaching an asymptote, and we forget that no matter how close the two may seem in proximity, they will never cross.

I tell this story through my art, and have challenged myself to find ways of merging tactile media with digital projection. The interaction between tangible and ephemeral imagery parallels the confusion as to just what is real in this Age of Information. I embrace that indeterminacy rather than lament it. The series of experiments between contradictory

materials not only pushed me as an artist into the realms of the conceptual and abstract, but has also led me to break away from seeing merely the expressions themselves upon the media. I recognize the media itself as an entity. My earlier works included projecting images onto half-paintings, entitled Symbiotic Collage, but those fell victim to representational imagery. Caught up in the aesthetic design aspects, I lost touch with the concepts I had set out to address. Dejected, I cast away imagery for the time being to experiment with light itself upon objects. The work was awkward, and reflected my uncertainty. I felt aware of my naivety and required some guidance.

The artist Robert Irwin coined a phrase for this which I have adopted, and that is “overcoming pictorial biases”. As an abstract expressionist in his early years, many would characterize his work as far removed from traditional art by the obvious aesthetic departure from recognizable imagery. Irwin, however, felt these paintings were still restricted by the arbitrary requirement he had placed for there to be an image—why must there be an image? Following a series of line and dot paintings, Irwin left rectangular planes all together as a means to challenge the necessity of the frame itself. His series of discs, built of aluminum and painted white, raised questions of tactile presence and permanence of state. “The real beauty of those things,” remarked Irwin, “was that they achieved a balance between space occupied and unoccupied in which both became intensely

occupied at the level of perceptual energy” (Weschler 108). It is a strange feeling to encounter an artist who has worked for a long time with so many of the same questions and ideas which compel me to create art, and not to have known of his work before.

Learning of Irwin’s philosophies and processes, I found we shared a knack for over-thinking things nearly to the point of pain. The process of trying the bizarre and unknown comes with a risk, and Irwin remarks, “During the question period, I don’t perform that well, or my performances are awkward or stilted or not resolved...” (Wechsler 90). For the duration of my advanced studio work, I found little satisfaction with the resulting aesthetic quality of my pieces—they were not like the paintings I had made in previous years. And yet, my advanced studio pieces carry a charge that gives me the endless agonizing churning along the threshold of what Irwin describes. While the subject of my thesis is the seeking to express ideas of dual existence, my maturation as an artist has also been at the heart of the process.

Confident about my work’s validity, the blockages of what is *acceptable art* were replaced by an interest of experimenting with methods entirely foreign to my background of graphic design and traditional painting. I knew what I wanted to say, and my myriad thoughts demanded an outlet or some kind of outward implementation. However, my extensive reading and introspection had resulted in neglecting much of the

empirical aspects of my process: experimenting with objects and *making art* to test out these concepts. I was once again dwelling in my thoughts rather than synchronizing ideas with bodily expression.

One of my turning points, and what helped to further break my pictorial biases was the creation of diagrams and chalkboard drawings. A class demonstration last semester by performance artist Aki Sasamoto included the scribbling of diagrams with a marker as visual aid for the monologue she performed. Her sketches seemed works that could stand on their own, so I tried similar methods to brainstorm and diagram out my ramblings of dual realms, asymptotes, and so forth. It was with my schematic Chalk I that I discovered the asymptotic tendency of our path to ideal truth through technology. Undercurrents of math and science from earlier school years were suddenly resurfacing into my art. This was exciting if not a bit strange, as can be seen in Chalk II. Electromagnetic frequencies when applied to an artistic medium, such as paper rather than physics, brought up new connotations. The chaotic lines and associations conjured through their implementation perhaps best reflect an unmitigated flow between thought and the visual plane. I too used the drawings as supplemental aids, and did not fully recognize power as images until I received strong responses to the markings during a class critique.

Upon suggestion, I looked up the works of artists Rudolf Steiner and Joseph Beuys. Not only did their implementation of conceptual drawings ignite aesthetic interest, but the ideas they communicated resonated with my own understandings. Untitled (Sun State) by Beuys is the result of a lecture in which he drew on disciplines ranging from alchemy to biology to convey an ideal order of the universe, in which the terrestrial is reconciled with cosmic energies. The play of the spiritual and scientific worked upon a chalkboard, as if there were a concrete answer to prove, adds to the weight of these drawings. In these scribbles of abandoned expression, urgency and the need for understanding echo the thought processes of the effort to enlighten. The process, visual weight, and raw manifestations of thought, triggered within me the need to execute comparable representations.

Through the development of my concepts with chalkboard drawings, I was able to set the grounding for the ambitious sculpture I constructed. My final work, The River Sisyphus, is the largest and most time-consuming piece I have created to date. This swirling river of handmade paper, assuming an infinite shape derived from one of the chalkboard drawings, is the synthesis of my conceptual findings with the papermaking process.

As I stated earlier, paper has been a relatively recent discovery, and I have come to see its transient state as an anecdote to my argument: We create technology so as to erase the lines between the physical and

ephemeral. To reflect the alterations of paper from organic to mechanical and back to the tactile, I have created an object that shows the process of refinement by the presence of human interaction. This continuous trail of paper, glued and sewn together sheet by sheet, reflects the evolution from plant material into a highly constructed state. The trail begins on the right end of the sculpture, with the fraying Thai kozo plant fiber appearing as if it were just gathered like a handful of straw. Looseness of fiber and chaotic appearance alludes to its untamable temperament—a reflection of nature with limited human manipulation. Continuing along the trail, the fiber transforms into a raw pulp as happens in the process of soaking and boiling the fiber into pulp. Sculptural qualities are more pronounced and exude an almost rebellious nature, with lumps and arches in opposition to the two-dimensionality we normally associate with paper. This pulp consists of the traditional type of atoms—those organic pixels that I am unable to fully control. As an individual with more experience manipulating pixels than fibers, I must remind myself of this condition every so often.

This battle for control amidst chaos occurs quite literally with the necessary pounding of the kozo plant fiber before it reaches a pulpy state. Mallets are implemented to apply sheer force to separate the fibers from one another. Hours of labor go into this process of deconstructing the plant so as to make anew. In a way, we are physically increasing the

resolution of the vessel. The more fragmented the fibers, the smoother the paper; the more pixels upon a screen, the smoother the image. Only when every last fiber is severed from its neighboring strand can a clean sheet perfect for writing upon be created. Once the paper reaches such a flawless state, we are satisfied. Blank sheets in repetition and number are so far removed from the gnarled stalks of plant material that they have essentially been reduced to rectangular surfaces. This disintegration of physicality can be witnessed in the behavior of the refined paper further along the sculpture's trail. While at the beginning the sheets are thick and have a character of their own, the later sheets are thin and more compromising to the helix form of the sculpture. When installing the work it felt as though this half of the sculpture were lifeless, and ironically turned out to be more difficult to install than the untamed portion. This finding confirmed in the physical concepts I had conjectured as to what becomes lost when achieving perfection, and that is the spontaneity and vivacity of nature. The left side of the winding sculpture, compared to the gnarled and dynamic right half, demonstrates the consequences of our attempts to gain inner-dominance over materials.

Just when paper seems to have been manufactured to a point of perfect efficiency, time and the asymptotic curve require more. Paper was once seen as an agile device, convenient, and disposable. When compared to data bytes transmitted at the speed of neuron impulses, paper appears

slow, old-fashion, fragile and too constrained by physical boundaries. Our senses sharpen and we seek more fluid ways to transmit outward.

This shift in materiality can be seen in my sculpture with the transition from bits of paper to digital projection. *Going paperless* is a term used frequently as of recent, an irony I find perplexing given that computer technology is at the crux of the highest consumption of paper in history. Again, the push/pull tendencies are glimmering through.

On the far left of the sculpture as it begins its return to the right lies the transition of a trail of paper into a trail of digital projection. To visually execute a transition between materiality that is both believable and elegant, I chose to cut my most-refined smooth paper into increasingly smaller squares. Pixilation of the paper creates the illusion of a seamless shift from fiber to pixel. With every iteration the squares shrink in size and are more difficult to distinguish from the projected squares. As I cut the paper into hundreds of tiny pieces, I cannot help but feel I am further erasing its identity in this physical world. Where is the line drawn between the physical object and its transcendence as a geometrical shape? Pixels are fragmented photons of light, are they losing physicality as well? Do we fail to see pixels just like the fibers of paper?

This procession of digital light has an eerie quality, in that we begin to question its presence in this tactile world. Vertigo of perception takes place—we lose our sense of proximity and the exterior being falls out of

place with the inner. If the goal is to achieve a balance between one's states, then this portion along the path reflects my own vertigo of being. To operate primarily in the ephemeral state of pure information without perception of physicality engenders a sense of aimlessness and confusion. I enjoy the art of illusion with computer technology as if it were a game, but the more you know how easy it is to deceive in a world democratized by rational pixels, the more clearly you can see the remaining gap between reality and illusion. It is because of this attitude that I named my sculpture The River Sisyphus. Paper and pixel conveys the futility of trying to overcome our condition.

Where do we as a society reside on this continuous path between materiality? The personal computer, at least for the proletariat, is a fairly new phenomena having been commonly available only for the past twenty or so years. It may be among the most revolutionary inventions of the millennia, and yet it is endearing when one hears of stories such as the Amazon Kindle™, whose success lies in its likeness to paper rather than its divergence from the older technology. It becomes ironic that the future of advanced digital experience will be characterized by its ability to mimic tactility and imperfection. It seems Cusi's polygon continues to gain edges.

In a short story titled *The Shadow*, Hans Christian Andersen describes the transcendence of a philosopher's shadow from specter into a man in his own right. The shadow is able to affect the transformation when he hides himself along the walls outside the Room of Poetry:

I tell you I have been there, and you may be sure that I saw everything that was to be seen. If you had gone there, you would not have remained a human being, whereas I became one; and at the same moment I became aware of my inner being, my inborn affinity to the nature of poetry (Andersen 339).

Expanding that Room of Poetry to a space encompassing all of the arts, I am lead to an interpretation of the aforementioned: Art serves as the intermediary point between subject and shadow, allowing access between realms. We may not ever be able to merge our states, but art provides the outlet for us to lament, embrace, or challenge our condition. In the end, Andersen's shadow actually killed the philosopher, which would bring a twist to this interpretation of digital and physical—perhaps foreshadowing a future with digital hybrids threatening the human race... It is yet another peculiar idea, and beckons me to diagram it out for further development.

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CD-ROM Information

1. *Symbiotic Collage*
2009 multi-media 12"x36"
projected light on acrylic and cardboard
2. *Chalk I*
2010 schematic drawing 18" x 24"
chalk on paper
3. *Chalk II, detail*
2010 schematic drawing 36" x 72"
pastel on paper
4. *The River Sisyphus* 5' x 8'
2010 assemblage
Handmade paper, acetate, light projection
5. *The River Sisyphus, detail right side*
2010 assemblage
Handmade paper, acetate, light projection
6. *The River Sisyphus, detail left side*
2010 assemblage
Handmade paper, acetate, light projection
7. *The River Sisyphus, detail of pixilation*
2010 assemblage
Handmade paper, acetate, light projection
8. *The River Sisyphus, detailed view from side*
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9. *Ruminations, after Chalk I and Chalk II*
2010 schematic drawing 48" x 72"
Chalk on blackboard