INTENTION AND REALIZATION:
A STRUCTURAL APPROACH TO EXPLOIT
THE NOTION OF SHIFTING

A Thesis
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ABSTRACT

I choose to work through the supporting surface of the painter's materials - canvas and paper, to satisfying a few simple curiosities among others: What if a painting is stripped of its paint? What if a painting is made by plowing threads through the canvas? What if a painting is about cracking, and made by cracking the sealing medium? What if a drawing on paper is done by burning, cutting or scratching? What if an image is nothing but a laboriously building-up of physical reality? What if this physical reality displays nothing but a testimony of traces of events? What if by intending to do everything other than a painting, one ends up getting nothing but a painting? The searching for questions and playing with meanings are the very meaning I allow my work to be prepared for. In my sewing - painting, and my burning/cutting - drawing, I play with the contradiction between the perceptual and the logic, the slippage between the intention and the realization, with the same attitude I have toward my everyday existence.

I adopt the industrial sewing machine as my primary drawing and painting medium. I consciously play with chance: a strategy or a method that I use to outwit myself. I frequently take conceiving cues from an industrial sewing mechanism, such as the inevitable pausing - when the thread bobbin runs out. A momentary disruption occurs
during the fluid sewing process. The interweaving of canvas and sewing threads sets up a real space, where the taken-for-granted relationships between the figure/ground, the above/underneath, the regular/irregular, and the coherent/disruptive become oscillating and blurring. What makes art continuous with our experience of the world is its ability to articulate the provisional unity of the identity of structural oppositions. Thus, it embodies the constantly changing relationships among its elements. Paradoxically, the plowing/sewing marks exhaust their own material tactility due to massive repetition. They nominate a past, an emptied trace, a dematerialized sensibility, should you expect it or not.
Dedicated to my parents:

Qi-wen Yin and Long-jun Ran
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INTRODUCTION

Ever since the self-critical and the self- evaluative became the site of modern painting, artists in general, and abstract art practitioners in particular have been constantly confronted with the issue concerning the meaning or significance of their work. In the present cultural moment, pivotal concepts of fluidity, chaos and changibility have been the major contexts of contemporary discourse. Those concepts are not only highly observable from literature of literary criticism, the critical theories of sociology, but also increasingly become the focus point of art criticism.

Theoretical poststructuralists put forth urgent claims for fragmentation, discontinuities, and local differences. Cultural poststructuralists champion the disruption of totalized forms and rationalized structure [1]. The efforts are to allow historically oppressive constructs to be deconstructed and replaced by new kinds of entities. These entities are supposed to be more open to the expression of difference. The issue of drawing or constructing an appropriate model, for painting, particularly for abstract painting, has not only been a methodological concern in the activity of the conceptual
refinement, but also a theoretical formulation which is largely positional and discursive.

In this thesis, I would, first of all, make an attempt to assess two viewpoints, namely, of structuralism and of post-structuralism/deconstruction, when dealing with the issue of meaning. The intention of doing this is to lay out theoretical and methodical underlines for my undergoing thesis research: to problematize the one-way approach when engaging in the critical practice of undoing the hierarchical oppositions; to articulate the provisional unity of the identity of the structural oppositions; to play with the contradiction between the perceptual and the logic, the slippage between intention and realization.
STRUCTURALISTS / POST-STRUCTURALISTS

Structuralists have taken linguistics as their model. They have attempted to develop "grammars" -- systematic inventories of elements and their possibility of combination. Critical attention focuses not on the thematic content that the work presents, but on the conditions of signification, different sorts of structures and processes involved in the production of meaning [2]. Since structuralists distance themselves from the meaning of a work, as well as its implications or its values, the projects they carry on enable them to concentrate on the structures or the forces of the work. Meaning, for structuralists, is only identified as effects of the play of language. The affirmation of art's linguistic basis, which includes a flexible grammar, enables structural artists to deal with an amazingly varied, and at the same time consistent phenomenal world.

If structuralists are optimistic about the possibility of systematic knowledge, then practitioners of poststructuralism/deconstruction claim to know only the impossibility of this knowledge. For deconstructionists, meaning is context-bound, and context is boundless. Once the lack of original ground has been postulated, "iteration" becomes an appropriate methodology for deconstruction. The iterability manifested in the inauthentic,
the derivative, the imitative, and the parodic, is what makes the original and the authentic possible. Through this iteration, deconstruction enables itself to focus on critical practice of undoing the hierarchical oppositions.

Given the current interest in alternative paradigms, the preference for interpretations seems to be influenced predominantly by a commitment to the values of a non-authoritative cultural or more narrowly political kind. Despite the compelling radical force of indeterminacy implied in both structuralism and poststructuralism, there is the irony of arguing that “fluid,” “chaotical,” and “local” knowledge is always better than “static,” “ordered,” “global,” because it creates a new kind of globalizing or totalizing imperative. To some, poststructuralists with their rejection of “grand narratives,” their political pluralism and their dread of totalizing discourses, look suspiciously close to the very metanarratives they want to rule out of court [3].
REGISTER OF INDEXICAL PRESENCE

In my own work, critical attention is not given to the semantic side - namely, to describe the relationships among signs and objects they represent. I strongly believe that painting as a discipline should not be dissolved or reduced into merely semiotical studies [4], not only because it is vulnerable to the political threat of populism, but also it is an inappropriate and inefficient site for engaging in social, political and cultural discourses. The necessity of maintaining a site where painting in general, and abstract painting in specific would be able to continue is vital - the site for allowing meaning to be played out. I believe that the indexical presence of interplay of material evidence is the place where the very meaning of abstract work exists. The working surface as register of the indexical presence and of relations among the indexical presence [5]. The implication of this is that there is no convention for meaning independent of or apart from that presence. According to Krauss, meaning cannot be simply visualized as the result of a positive value of A, but only as A’s relation to B, and with this system, which has been characterized by Saussure as “difference without positive terms,” A is more accurately characterized as not-B.
Again, meaning, for structuralist artists is only identified as effects of the play of language or as effects of the play of the structural relationships in abstract work.
THE MEANING OF NOISE

Besides my intense interest in theoretical structural linguistics, and my enduring curiosity in chaos theory and information theory in science [6], my studio practice has a stronger lineage to Roland Barthes’s structural linguistics than Derrida’s deconstruction practice. The information theory and chaos theory seek to wrest order out of chaos in order to preserve message from the noise. Both of them value chaos as the engine that drives a system toward a more complex kind of order. Chaos makes order possible. Contrarily, Barthes seeks to liberate the noise from a message, to release chaos from order, and to overturn the hegemony of received interpretations [7]. I do find these theoretical perspectives arousing a compatible degree of interest, in the sense that chaos and noise are weighed as important “excess” [7], and they are “aesthetically extraneous” things, a ghostly aspect of presence is its excess, and its supplement [8]. And one would never know the marked presence (absence) of those extraneous things unless one has the presence (absence) of their counter partner.

In one of my cutting-drawings, “72004200cuts” (Plate 3.1), the overall scheme of the work is the even cuts along the grids drawn on paper by pencil. However, the ultimate
goal for this drawing lies elsewhere: namely, to exploit the inescapable slipping cuts by hands - the errors, the noise. The miscuts are the quintessential components of the visual structure. In another words, the miscuts, here as the “noise,” corrupt the initial gridding scheme, and present an interplaying effect among constituents. In one of my sewing-paintings “78126234one” (Plate 1 and Plate 1.1), I consciously employ a similar strategy to exploit unavoidable pauses of sewing mechanism, such as running out of bobbin thread. The pauses and the enhancing efforts of picking up new thread heighten the “noise” structure during the fluid sewing process. To push this case to an extreme ending, I made another “mirror” painting “78126234two” (Plate 1 and Plate 1.1) of the identical dimensions and substrate that differs from the previous one only in that it retains the skeletal structure induced by “noise” while stripped away of massive repetition of sewing threads. In other words, the appearance of the later painting is a skeletal structure composed of all the pauses and enhanced sewing lines.
SYSTEM AND CHANCE

I have been trained, for years, in the field of probability statistics in social behavior research. In the pure statistical sense, the term “system” or ordering can be used to describe a sequence or arrangement of data information, or we mean certain sequences of information can be expected to occur to show the property of a structure. I always had an interest in visual graphs of data distribution: e.g. a peculiar spacing between homogeneity of a large random distribution and disarray of outlyers or deviant data. I find myself constantly asking what’s going wrong with those “outsiders”? Where do they belong to? What is the condition of their existence? Consciously, I play this mental curiosity with the operation of a visual equivalency. I insist on working on a conceptually based grid system. I take grid as a constant variable or occasionally as a dependent variable. I take the process or procedural oriented operational activities as independent variables. Most of the time, the force or effect of interplay among those variables is my work’s work!

I consciously play with chance: a strategy that I use to outwit myself. I adopt the industrial sewing machine as my primary drawing and painting medium. I frequently take conceiving cues from sewing mechanism, such as the inevitable pausing - when thread
bobbin runs out, a momentary disruption, an event occurs within the events, a record is made. I also adopt soldering gun for burning through gridded and rolled-over drawing paper and matte knife for cutting through drawing paper. On those occasions, I control the operation through a series of self imposed rules, such as folding / sewing, rolling / burning, and gridding / cutting, etc. in the name of searching for inevitable discrepancy in the work. In my sewing - painting, and my burning/cutting - drawing, I embrace the contradiction between the perceptual and the logic, and I play with the shift between the intention and the realization. The aspiration toward exploiting the system and the measurement, is the desire towards probing the conditions of and the limitations of our very existence in the world.
THE MATERIAL PROCESS

I choose to work through the supporting surface of the painter’s materials - canvas and paper, to satisfy a few simple curiosities among others: What if a painting is stripped of its paint? What if a painting is made by plowing threads through the canvas? What if a painting is about cracking, and made by cracking the sealing medium? What if a drawing on paper is done by burning, cutting or scratching? What if an image is nothing but a laboriously building-up of physical reality? What if this physical reality displays nothing but a testimony of traces of events? What if by intending to do everything other than a painting, one ends up getting nothing but a painting? The searching for questions and playing with the meaning is the very meaning I allow my work to be prepared for.

My studio work operates around and through a conceptual-based system. The material process of constructing a work of art has pivotal importance in my studio practice. I believe that the truth of the abstract work lies in the presence of the detail of the signifier, in the tangible part of the work.

The interweaving of canvas and sewing threads sets up a real space, where the taken-for-granted relationships between figure/ground, above/underneath,
regular/irregular, and coherent/disruptive become oscillating and blurring. Special
attention is given to the process or procedural of a work as a place of becoming or
formation, prior to its effects. A gridded raw canvas is usually the default for further
operation. A grid may involve, not necessarily a rejection of illusion, but a re-appraisal of
spatial organization. A grid acts as the module available for matters’ continuous unreefing
into atemporal, nonspatial order. It invokes variable readings without sacrificing a
consistent structure.

The schematized canvas has been reiterated by plowing/sewing threads through its
very weave. Each plowing/sewing has no meaning except in relation to the one that
precedes it, each succeeding one acts as the force to efface the projection of the preceding
one (Plate 1.1, Plate 2, Plate 4, Plate 5, Plate 6, Plate 6.1 and Plate 8). There were few
instances when I decided to bring back paint (either oil paint or layers of rabbit-skin glue
paint or latex paint) to the sewn canvases (Plate 2 and Plate 5). I anticipate a different kind
of effect by painting-off massive sewn surface. During this removal process, I allow myself
to cautiously preserve the “noises” by isolating out the enhanced sewn “pauses.” The
consequence is a peculiar kind of interaction between threads and paint skins: the shifting
holding moments between threads and paint. I take this as the epistemological moment of
the technique, where invention and thought take place hand in hand.

What makes art continuous with our experience of the world is its ability to
articulate the provisional unity of identity of structural oppositions. It embodies the
constant changing relationships among its elements, such as lines become color, color
becomes field, and matter becomes light, eventually, material takes over the space, space
is taken over by events, and the space present complex temporality, by means of a concentration of the visible. Paradoxically, the plowing/sewing marks exhaust their own material tactility due to massive repetition. They nominate a past, an emptied trace, a dematerialized sensibility, should you expect it or not.
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   *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts*. edit. Peter Brunette and
   David Wills 1994 pp.47
[5] Krauss, Rosalind E. *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and
   Other Modernist Myths* pp. 238 -239 The MIT Press 1996
   *Bell System Technical Journal* 27 (July and October) pp. 379-423, 623-656
LIST OF WORKS IN M.F.A.

THESIS EXHIBITION

Waste in time
Raw canvas, sewn blue thread
76" x 72"
1995

72004200burns
Burns through paper
72" x 42"
1995

72004200cuts
Cuts through paper
72" x 42"
1995

72004200prints
Graphite, industrial tape on paper
72" x 42"
1995

White
Raw canvas, sewn thread, oil
65" x 46"
1996

Red
Canvas, red pencil, rabbit-skin glue
60" x 60"
1995

78126234(one)
Raw canvas, sewn black thread
78 1/2" x 62 3/4"
1997

78126234two
Raw canvas, sewn black thread
78 1/2" x 62 3/4"
1997

38003800doublesquares
Raw canvas, sewn raw canvas thread, rabbit-skin glue, oil
38" x 38"
1997

View
Raw canvas, ink, sewn raw canvas thread, latex
65" x 50"
1996

Green
Canvas, green pencil, rabbit-skin glue
65" x 46"
1995

Black
Raw canvas, sewn black thread, rabbit-skin glue, graphite
71 1/2" x 70"
1996

40003200(blackscratching)
Black ink, scratching, cutting on paper
40" x 32"
1995
Plate 1: Exhibition installation overview
Plate 3.1: "72004200cuts"
Plate 3.2: "72004200burns" - detail
Plate 4: "38003800doublesquares"
Plate 5: "Black" - detail
Plate 6: "Waste in time"
Plate 7: "Green" - detail
Plate 8: "View"