PAUSE/TABLETOP/PAUSE

THESIS

Presented in Partial Completion of the Requirements for

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By

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ABSTRACT

Modeled after a process of painting, this text is organized by a loose framework of concerns that lie just outside of such a practice. These subjects include the influence, use, and limitations of sound in a practice of painting, a look into the organization of the surface of a table as a site for painting and thinking, and finally thoughts about objects in relation to expanded notions of painting. Through these instances, a discussion of distance begins to articulate, not a theory or painting, rather a marking off of its territory and its intersections with various modes of thought and material. The absence of a conclusive anchor leaves this text open and malleable like a fraying edge of canvas.
Dedicated to my mother

In memory of my father
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Expanding the strategies employed in my work, my approach to this text will be through the construction of a disjointed framework. For the task at hand, I am interested in approaching writing as if painting; that the treatment of language and structure will form in the way I would approach materials and questions about painting. I will unfold and set into motion a structure comprised of four signposts, pauses, or distractions to indirectly arrive at periodic questions about my work and artwork in general. I will assemble a series of interruptions and insert notions of painting within them to see how concepts may develop, or not, how they will unravel and what new ideas may be born out of these pairings. With the intention of arriving at a discussion of my own process of painting, I also acknowledge that issues of over-determination and problems of description and declaration are a necessary yet often contradictory and misleading expectation. This is why I choose a path that does not form a straight line but wanders through a set of outside influences, interests and prompts.

The question of how to start a work is an important and perplexing one, present in this painting/thesis (certainly here, at the beginning). The question of describing a painting in a meaningful way, both in its physicality and proximity to other work, is equally elusive and will enter into this discussion of my work in relation to the markers
that I set in place. Beginning a work, I will demonstrate, is a moment of thought and action brought together by automatic systems. These automatic systems exist within actual processes that are set into motion, and emerge from external influences such as music and objects. For me, entering into the complex initial moments of a painting require an elaborate strategy of setting up a work, pushing it slightly, and then letting it play out over a course of events. By collapsing this mechanism and employing it repeatedly in an action unconcerned with an interaction or acknowledgement of previous instances, I establish a working process. What follows is my address to the nature of letting go, the starting point, the blank support and the successive stages of working through a painting.
CHAPTER 1

SOUNDS 1: THE ADMIRAL HAS FOUND NOTHING

In 1916, Tristan Tzara published *L'Amiral cherche une à louer* in the first Dada publication *Cabaret Voltaire*. The score for the poem consists of three blocks of text appearing as three iterations of the poem in French, German and English. The poem is meant to be performed on a stage with three speakers, each simultaneously reciting the text in a different language. Tzara’s poem is an example of a two-fold articulation of an idea in which the printed version is incapable of fully expressing an experience of its auditory referent. This experience is in the reading of the score, the actual sounding of the work itself, the mixtures and stacking of language to the point that it become an abstraction contingent upon a specific moment. A published score is an instance of a work outside of itself. It is a visual description of sound as text. *L'Amiral* spoken is an aleatory collage formed out of cancellations of sound, overlapping with breaks and crescendos that modulate an overall perception of something unintelligible. *L'Amiral* read from a page of text is an impossible match to this perceptual experience. It has no function other than to document and instruct for reenactment at another time.
Figure 1. Tristan Tzara. Score for *L'Amiral cherche une à louer*.

The score is also a visual marker, an indication toward something. It is an image with a function that it cannot ever hope to fill. Although it is an instruction, the specific nature of *L'Amiral* is a melding of sound art and poetry. Its hands are tied. Its form demands that time be broken into segments and slowed down through the act of reading. Reading a poem offers us a linear and visual composition of elements. A score is an instruction meant to be enacted, interpreted or otherwise performed. In this regard, T.J. Demos observes the following aspects of *L'Amiral* in relation to the wide range of typographical experimentation at the start of the 20th century in his consideration of the work of Mallarmé, Marinetti and Sophie Delaunay:

In contrast, Tazra’s poem looks commonplace. But perhaps what explains its restrained appearance is the fact that the poem would achieve its impact not through it’s contemplation as a visual object by an individual viewer – one who
could never realize its simultaneous effects; rather its dutifully conventional form awaited explosion in its collective performance.¹

Is it possible to model a practice of painting on this distance between the language and paper of a score and both its near and far, bouncing and colliding, sound waves?

CHAPTER 2

PAUSE/ TABLETOP

The tabletop of the studio is a canopy over the floor and a site in which the intersection of nearly all aspects of ideas, questions and materials surrounding my work occur. It is the site of initiation, an organization of tools and an elaborate space in which they function. The tabletop, unlike the easel, is a visual obstacle, a distortion of the frontal view offered by an upright work. The view of a work in its making is foreshortened and subject to blinding glare and falling dust. The tabletop locates itself in a relation to gravity such that it allows pooling, the slow movement of liquids, and drips from above. Because of this orientation, other objects, such as stencils, edges and templates, can be rested on the surfaces of both the tabletop and the support of a painting. The tabletop is unable to accommodate a large canvas and the table itself nearly takes up the entire room, leaving not much more room on the floor. The tabletop is within a fixed range of sight and reach. Often standing on a chair, I am able to view a work at an alternative distance from which the work was created. As paintings and objects pass over the tabletop (in a carefully observed and noted fluctuation of durations, each different
from the next) the organization and use of tools (organization and use being nearly the same function), mirror the stages of accretion, removal and compositional strategies as they unfold on a particular surface. An exhausted tool and surface apparatus leaves behind a set-up space and a vacant area into which arrives a work in progress or an initial point of departure.

Figure 2. Studio Tabletop
CHAPTER 3

SOUNDS II: EARLY MINIMALISM

In 1972, Tony Conrad and the newly formed German rock band Faust inaugurated a dynamic fusing of the New York based “early minimalist” music and a new form of music developing in Germany in the wake of 60s musical experimentation and the dominance of British and American rock music called Krautrock. It was anticipated by the record label Polydor that Faust would be the equivalent to the Beatles in fame and sales. In order to foster such high hopes, the label provided them with a state of the art studio in Wumme. There, Faust occasionally produced melodic tunes indebted to bands like The Velvet Underground and Frank Zappa but mostly spent their time, and the record company’s money producing wild experiments with sound editing and collage combined with extended freak-out noise sessions.
Figure 3. Tony Conrad performing with violin, filmstrip and shadows.

Years earlier, Conrad had participated in the seminal Theatre of Eternal music which Deitrich Deidrichsen seeks to define in the following passage:

It is clear that some of the impulses of early minimalism and rock music are rooted in the same confrontational vision of the world. According to this vision, both the traditional and the more highly elaborated avant-garde forms and their syntax contain a lie, which conceals another, more authentic world. The mission is to break through that lie by reducing these forms or by intensifying the purely material, sonic properties of music by making them denser and or lengthening them to the point of formlessness.²

² Diedrich Diederichsen, “The Primary”, 118.
A single steady bass drum beat together with a single bass note in precise syncopation form the backbone of the segmented, unchanging rhythm or pulse through which Conrad’s droning, mathematical pitches weave. The presence of a drum beat and bass line offer some semblance to rock music. However, it is also a singular unbroken work of churning drones as the rhythmic structure mimics, on a much different scale the pulsing of Conrad’s finely calibrated overtones. The segmented beat merges with the drone in a way that, to my mind, is indescribable beyond abstraction. Conrad discovered, years earlier, during his training in classical music that the physical and mechanical nature of his violin could sustain a long tone almost indefinitely, while precise pitch was derived through explicit slowness.³

Conrad writes:

“I had a dream that I shared a space with every living thing. Huge and waiting in the even light there stood a wall covered with windows and doors variously labeled with animal spoors and marked with names. As soon as I focused it clearly, each ancient door mysteriously became open, and a sound current flowed out all over the infinite plain.”⁴

The primordial “sound current” that Conrad describes is the drone. Susan Delehanty, in her non-linear history of sound art describes “a new realm” emerging in the early 20th century beyond the plastic arts that runs counter to the joy and lament of song. Noise, in


⁴ Tony Conrad, liner notes from The Japanese Room At La Pagode / May, Table of the Elements, Cu 29, 1995, LP.
its wrestling free from the oppression of Pythagorean cosmic logic, held an initial paradigm of abstraction by virtue of its temporal and immaterial nature.\textsuperscript{5} The visual link between sound and painting belongs, for me, at a distance, melded with references to popular music and seemingly unending in duration. The distance I am referring to comes out of attempts to place visual work in support of sound and sound in support of visual work. The negative space created in this distance of thought, process, and influence, is a vague form. The relationship is anti-synaesthetic. However, it lies beyond a simple matter of categories: painter and sound maker, image and music.

My working with a musical or auditory material is distinct from my practice of painting in that there exists a material separation, diverse technical modes and means of dissemination for each. However, the approach remains identical in that I am interested in building into objects of sound, paint, or otherwise, a movement away from a unified approach to a given material. Central to each practice is a thought process that relies on an improvisatory mode with its roots in music. For instance, recent work with objects, as they relate to my process of painting, incorporate organic materials that carry with them specific acoustic properties. The sound of working becomes an act of listening. This lends an inherently non-visual aspect to the work. Therefore, the distance I am referring to is linked through process and a behind or between mode of influence, similarity, and an inherently mechanical process driven by response and decision rather than the implementation of a pre-determined course (or thought). While the paintings find form as concrete objects and establish particular relationships with walls, spaces and people,

the structure of sound and the element of time dramatically shift the perceptual
limitations of static objects. Avoiding distinctions between two modes of working and, at
the same time, avoiding attempts to bring sound and visual elements together, temporally,
is a means in itself of sustaining each practice, like taking a walk with no purpose.

Speaking or writing about music and painting is an opportunity to evaluate this
distance, but to not come any closer to manipulating it or discovering new ways to bring
these two distinct activities together. Likewise, Conrad produced the *Flicker Film* in 1965
as an attempt to approach a harmonic relationship in optical perception analogous to that
of his ongoing work with minimal music. His conclusion is as follows:

The key to it turned out to be an understanding of musical pitch in terms of
frequency ratios, and the whole idea of harmonic structure in music, which goes
directly back to the time of Pythagoras, and is thus one of the most enduring
principles of the entire western cultural panorama. It is somewhat problematic in
that this number relationship that is obtained between pitch and consonance,
doesn’t seem to pop up in any other fields of experience. Its seems that its
possible to structure music according to some kind of arhythmical principles. If
you look at a comparable way of understanding experience in visual terms, or in
terms of touch, taste or other modalities, you just have a lot of trouble locating
anywhere that makes sense.6

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6 Tony Conrad, interview by John Geiger, February 28, 2002,
http://tonyconrad.net/geiger.htm
CHAPTER 4

OBJECTS I: THE BACKROOM

In the photograph below, objects are collected together as if pushed out of the way and consolidated so that some predominant activity may take place around or past them. Some are leaning, some are propped up on pedestals or are partly formed of pedestals. Some are resting on the floor entirely. We know from the caption that the objects are being held- or held up- waiting, on their way from somewhere, to somewhere. Where, exactly, is not important. The organization of these objects constitutes an articulation of these works in the world beyond the regulated and mediated space of the *Cubism and Abstract Art* exhibition. I am not interested in the situation under which these objects became ensnared in this particular formation or the situation in which the *Cubism and Abstract Art Exhibition* occurred, but rather, that this situation has produced a photograph that can serve as the documentation of an automatic exhibition or an un-exhibition. In this fixed moment, I view these works as banal objects in an ordinary space or a cluttered worksite, a back room, a storehouse. Although the space depicted suggests the neutrality of an exhibition site they are also in a state of being in-between, of traveling, pausing and being examined. We know this from the caption, and suppressing the historical details
enables any number of possible elaborations on the status of these objects. My interest in the in-between is that it lacks a formal organization: the objects appear incidental.

Figure 4. Nineteen Sculptures Intended for Exhibition in Cubism and Abstract Art that were Refused Entrance to the United States as Artwork by Customs Examiners, 1936.

My initial thoughts concerning painting have come out of this in-between state and rarely through contemplation in the space of a formal, structured exhibition—unless, of course, as the person responsible for the maintenance of that formality. I have learned about painting in the back room and literally through the back of the painting, the apparatus, the hardware, the staples, as well as the stacking, sorting and logging necessarily attached to its travels and existence in the world. The organization of my work, from the construction of the support to the working of a surface to the placing it on a shelf to begin something new, stems from the same activity and the same thought process. The movement of paint occurs the same way the movement of paintings occurs:
stacked, leaning, balanced. The organization of the studio, in order to walk in a clear path from one location to another, to access tools or to step back in viewing a work in progress, influences and mirrors the organization of materials in a given work, the organization of works in groups, and of groups in relation to groups.
CHAPTER 5

OBJECTS II

The objects are their own colors and have not been colored. They have depth beyond the illusion of depth and beyond the standardized depth of a canvas, and the effects of the brush. They tip and slide on surfaces. The materials of these objects are lathed, sliced, bleached, yet they are not synthetic. They represent a shift within my practice of painting. On the surface, the objects fall within a scale that can be assigned to the realm of easel painting. The activity of collecting is made present in the placement of objects in the space of an exhibition. Therefore, the works are gestures that would otherwise be limited in the sense of a traditional painting practice. I am interested in the setting into motion, with least possible force, the transformation between an object as it exists in the world; a bird feeder, dried root mass, extraneous packing material, and the object as it occurs in the hanging or placement within an exhibition. The objects embody this displacement through their un-altered structure, their folding, wilting, or crumbling substance and the rotation of their original orientation.
The objects take on the role of the tabletop and are themselves sites for the organization of tools, and become actual tools in this process. The objects are invested in the creation of each other, borrowing parts, measurements, negative spaces. To clarify, the tools and apparatus of painting, as played out on the tabletop and in the objects, are of an elementary and mutable nature. A narrow block of wood provides both an edge to be traced, an edge with which to create an impression, a surface with which to apply pressure, a surface from which to transfer another material, and so on. On a line that extends from the painting to the object, the block of wood performs these actions on its way to becoming a work, working its way into a work, producing sound, improvising.
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