THE GRAVITY OF THE ORDINARY

THESIS

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Abstract

This text is a supplement to my installation- and sculpture-based practice. My graduate thesis work deals with finding the extraordinary in the ordinary and calling attention to connections between us based on what we all hold in common—our relationship with the earth and our surroundings. My work questions how we can hold a universal system in our hand, observe the microscopic in a gallery space, and see the simple beauty in our everyday lives that is too often overlooked.
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my family whose constant love and support have been invaluable to me in any and all of my endeavors.

Thank you.
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I want to acknowledge the help and encouragement of my professors, colleagues, and mentors during my tenure at Ohio State. They and their art practices have contributed greatly to my growth as an artist and the completion of this work.
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Chapter 1: The Gravity of the Ordinary

In an auditorium there are multiple shadows on the floor. They are cast from different parts of chairs and overlap in some places to produce unexpected shapes. In an office there is a glass of water, full of tension, and quiet as the table on which it sits. In a sun-filled room, shifting shapes of light draw lines across the space. My attention is drawn to ordinary moments like these, and my work begins with the recognition that every instance of the ordinary might hold the possibility of the extraordinary.

I explore how familiar and tangible materials can be used to make evident physical systems that exist on a smaller- or larger-than-human scale. We are affected by and are part of earth's gravity, wind currents, the water cycle, the passage of time, and relationships like that of water and salt that support life. I am interested in the common experience and awareness of these phenomena. Time and motion are materials common to many of my works: yellow balloons react to a warm and windy environment with melting ice and erratic movement; hanging black balloons create tension with their stillness and potential for motion; a duration of time is defined by the movement of sunlight around a space; lines are
erased with the removal of material; and a cavity is created over time as an ice ball is absorbed into a volume of salt.

The work is most successful in moments when the attention of the eye is drawn to an object and the attention of the mind becomes aware of something larger. My practice is to cultivate seeing this possibility in ordinary events.

For example, on a city corner, people pass through each other’s lives momentarily and draw intersecting lines in their wakes. Their paths constantly intersect, diverge, join, and split, and sometimes can interrupt each other’s predetermined course. *Intersection with Black Balloons* illustrates a relationship that is similarly subject to change. In a dark space, two black balloons hang down motionless from the ceiling. Each has a light directed towards it, creating each its own shadow. The balloons’ projected shadows overlap each other and invoke an image of a lunar eclipse. Their still and backlit forms depict those of dense and mysterious celestial bodies. When there is movement around the space, the balloons are affected by a change in airflow and are animated to reveal their lightness. The shadows slide along the ground and their intersection morphs and shrinks, disappears and returns. When the room is still, the balloons’ relationship stays intact; when people

Figure 1, *Intersection with Black Balloons*
enter the system, the intersection disappears and the clarity of their relationship is compromised. On a human scale and a molecular level, relationships change constantly because of outside influences. There are always other forces, objects, and intersections interfering with these connections. The balloons show us a simple relationship that can represent a micro- or macro- system.

*Intersection with Light and String* continues this exploration with a static demonstration of an intersection. In this room-sized installation, a projected horizontal line intersects a vertical string at a point in space. Because of the projection, one point of intersection becomes two: one is the point of light on the string and the other is the shadow of the string on the wall on which the line is projected. This piece simply emphasizes these points of intersection.

In Kandinsky’s 1926 influential writing *Point, Line, and Plane*, he states: “The geometric line is an invisible thing. It is the track made by the moving point; that is, its product. It is created by movement...Here, the leap out of the static into the dynamic occurs...” (Kandinsky, 56) When line is thought of as “created by movement,” it is in this movement that we understand time. If our bodies are merely points in space, then our movement is represented by line. Our
conversations and relationships, whether they are instantaneous or life-long, are points where the lines intersect.

Intersection with Light and String, Miniature became an experiment with scale. I created a model of the original installation, Intersection with Light and String, that would fit into a 12”x12”x16” wooden box that sits on a stand at eye level to accommodate limited space in a gallery. The viewing box is enclosed and has a window to view the projected line and string inside a volume just larger than a one-foot cube. The viewing box adaptation of Intersection with Light and String questions how scale changes meaning: where does an idea exist in site-specific installation? And what is the difference between viewing something externally and internally: being inside a space with freedom to change your perspective or being kept outside a space with a designated point of view? Although the system and mechanics are visible in the box, the simple relationship between a projected line and a physical line is still present. The idea stays the same, but the experience is changed.

While a shift in scale can translate a room-sized installation into a box, it can also emphasize the presence of a universal system in a gallery space. The movement of the earth around the sun provides us with a shared temporal system on which our lives rely. We are aware of the passage of time when shadows gradually inch along the ground and when we observe the sun rising and setting on the opposite sides of our horizon. The gravity of the earth also offers us a common
experience: the upward force of the ground under our feet and the awareness that an object released from one’s grasp will fall to the ground.

Figure 3, 9 Frames from *Installation with Sunlight and Water* documentation

*Installation with Sunlight and Water* demonstrates this shared time and energy structure on which our lives depend. In this work, a circle of sunlight moves around the space, travelling slowly but consistently, mapping the movement of the sun. A bowl of water sits just above the ground and is suspended by cables that extend to the ceiling. Over the course of a few days during the installation, the circle of sunlight passes through the bowl in its path, and the circle of light meets the
surface of the water. When water evaporates from the suspended bowl it settles with different centers of gravity and, however imperceptible to the eye, is constantly shifting. While the water’s surface will always find the horizontal, the relative slant of the bowl reveals forces of adhesion and gravity: the same forces that hold water to the ocean floor. In this installation, I work with and against gravity to illustrate the tension between the weight and the suspension of materials. As a force that we are always affected by but never able to see, gravity constantly shapes the form of the earth, our materials, and ourselves over time.

Time is a material that we are always suspended within and measured by. An event’s duration can be lengthened by intensity or shortened by familiarity. A moment can last a year or an instant. We experience indefinable time intervals while we live by a fixed numerical timeline. Time prevails outside of our control and we are subject to its endurance. Like the progressing of a filmstrip, we understand time by observing change. In 350 BC, Aristotle wrote on this enduring phenomenon in *Physics*, his seminal and philosophical account of nature:

> [T]ime is not without change. For, without any change...in our minds, time does not seem to pass...There would be no time if there were only a single now, rather than different nows, and by the same token, if the difference between the nows is not noticed, the time between them seems not to exist...It is clear then that time is not change, but at the same time that it does not exist without change. (Aristotle, 11)

I am interested in how we observe the passage of time. If things change, then return to their original form, has time passed? Is change able to happen without the passage of time? Can we know for sure that time has passed if change is not observed? In pre-Newtonian thought, motion was described as anything that
changed. Aging, ripening, and falling were all forms of change, and therefore, considered forms of motion. In *Black to White, Print Series* and *Black to White, Animation* I explore this idea of change over time and variable interpretations of duration.

Over a two-year period, I pulled 2291 relief prints from a single linoleum block. I carved the block using a continuous line that curved in a circular pattern until it covered the printing surface. At each point that the line grew half an inch longer, I made a new print. The first print was made when the block was intact and the last print was made when the block was nearly consumed. *Black to White, Print Series* and *Black to White, Animation* show this single process manifested into two distinct forms. In *Black to White, Print Series*, the prints taken from the linoleum block are installed in a horizontal stack and show a heavy, dense volume of paper and process. The cards are set up to suggest the facility of flipping through them like a card catalog, and the ability to control which frame is present and available. In *Black to White, Animation*, however, the same prints are scanned, stitched together, and compressed into a short time span to create a quick, non-laborious, effortless transition from black to white. The materiality of the prints is not accessible here, although the images of the hundreds of sequential moments are
presented like a film with immediacy and ease. The works share the same process but result in very different expressions of time, weight, and material.

Figure 5, Black to White, Animation; Frames: 0009, 0278, 0630, 1093, 1605, and 2282

While many of my works primarily employ movement and time, I search for ways to further explore scale, gravity, and space in other works.

In Five Catenaries, thick ropes hang from the ceiling of a vast, tall space and their weight pulls them down to create five parallel catenaries with walking space between them. (One of the many amazing feats of nature, the catenary is a curve described by a mathematical function that every linear material will assume when hung from two...
points.) The five catenaries each meet the ground at exactly one point, closing off towering delineations of space along the walls. The rope-drawn, 2-dimensional shapes group together and build a nave-shaped volume in the center of the room that fills the space, and creates an immersive environment.

Just like the catenaries fill a large space using a relatively small amount of material, *Egg, Suspended with a Glass of Water* uses string, an egg, and a glass of water to command the space. This installation focuses on an egg nested in a triangle of string across the room from a glass of water that is supported by a slender stand that precariously bears its weight. The vast surrounding space seems it could envelop them, although they are objects of focus, strong in their stance.

The egg sits at a precise location that seems to pinpoint an exact point in space and time. The threadlike strings that support it reach the walls at invisible points.

![Image of Egg, Suspended and Glass of Water](image)

*Figure 7, Egg, Suspended and Glass of Water*
and appear to vector outward to infinity, commanding the space around them. The triangle of string is depressed by the egg’s weight, showing its downward pull and its relationship to a larger gravitational system. Commonly held in one’s hand, the egg is now the origin and the infinite in one.

The water, taking the form of its container, alludes simultaneously to its importance on a small scale as drinking water and its larger presence as a necessity of the earth. The glass of water sits atop a teetering, top-heavy steel stand whose instability creates a repelling energy around it that is hard to disrupt. The ordinary glass of water, when presented at eye-level, now becomes a lens to view the egg, and the world, through it. This water can sustain life and be the cause of death. It can have terrific forceful energy or it can embody a calm tranquility. It can evaporate and fall, and is subject to gravity. We share a common need for it but each have a different relationship to it. Some of us drink it, swim in it, run it, and waste it. Some of us rarely encounter it. In time, the water that we drink will be that in the earth and our perspiration will become rain.

The point that an egg indicates—the juncture at which time, space, and gravity meet, the weight that pulls ropes into catenaries, the force of gravity that keeps hanging balloons still, and the rotation of the earth that results in the duration of our days are all occasions to consider the systems that we are part of on a microscopic and grand scale.
I have always been captivated by the work of Eva Hesse. Her process revealed honesty and an acute awareness of her material. I feel that the intuitive nature of her work is one that we both share. She chose material with unique character and engaged in dialogue with it. She wasn’t interested in controlling the material, but she wanted her hands and the material to have equal ownership of the form. In works like *Expanded Expansion*, and *Repetition 19*, Hesse lets latex and fiberglass react to gravity and age over time.

Hesse was cognizant of the fragility and ephemerality of her materials and related her process to her truncated life. In reference to these choices she said, “Life doesn’t last; art doesn’t last. It doesn’t matter.” (Nixon, 8)

Her work is also constructed in such a way that its form would change each time it was installed. Hesse was one of the first artists to embrace the idea that art could reflect its environment and adapt to its surroundings. Hesse used subject matter from her life, although it is not autobiographical. She made her sculptural work live as though it would someday be gone, much like a human life. Hesse’s work is minimalist with regard to its elements, but expressive in regard to its form and concept.

Although my practice began with a mathematical and numerical context, like Hesse, I am now more engaged with how particular object relations might express broad scientific concepts like gravity and the passage of time. I am interested less in
the fact that each falling object has a constant and measurable acceleration due to
gravity, but more in the common awareness that an object will fall.

In his 2001 book Postproduction, Nicolas Bourriaud writes,

The artistic question is no longer: “what can we make that is new?”
but “how can we make do with what we have?” In other words, how
can we produce singularity and meaning from this chaotic mass of
objects, names, and references that constitutes our daily life?
(Bourriaud, 17)

The works that I have discussed show a range of exploration of intersections
and relationships, stillness and motion, time processing, and the physicality of
material. The context for the work is found in our world and surroundings. I am
interested in the recognition and distillation of this singularity and meaning from
our everyday lives. Although I do not consider my work in the realm of
Postproduction (a term used in relation to artists referencing other art and culture
often using technology), I find myself combing our world to acknowledge and draw
attention to certain perfect qualities and moments of beauty that we might overlook,
such as the intersections that might change our day, the constant motion of the sun,
or the way gravity holds us to the earth. I search for timeless elements of life and
truth that have been and will continue to be relevant to many. I put common
elements like gravity, water, and time in an art context with the goal of making them
objects of focus. Perhaps the materials can help us understand our own lives as we
observe a rare stillness in our faced-paced and digital world, simpler interactions in
the age of technology, and think about time and the endurance of relationships
within busy lives filled with uncertainty. These moments of life that make us question our existence are also the moments that connect us.

I continue to observe the world around us and search for beauty in our common experience. The forces that we are affected by change our understanding of the world and we are constantly reminded that we could not exist without them. With my work I strive to call attention to these immense and countless elements of our world and explore how we can grasp them on our human scale.
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