Location and Constellation in Two Recent Artworks

Thesis

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Abstract

This paper will consider the concepts of location and constellation as they function in the viewing experience, described specifically in the development of two artworks. It is the chronicle of a path toward coherence in the making of one performance and one sculptural installation. These artworks similarly evidenced attempts to connect nodes of meaning into formations of animate power, through selective arrangement and inquiry. Consistent within all of these mental engines is a persistent but shifting paradox, a seductive formation of simultaneous opposites which can be designated as functionality and non-existence. A constellation functions as a repeatable reference for orientation, but has no true existence as an autonomous thing. The identity of a constellation indicates the necessity for a synthetic view, dependent upon location for functionality. No reference to larger meaning is possible without association and projection. Starting from the premise that, like any mental construct, an artwork’s constellation within a viewer’s mind to some extent mirrors self-awareness in the viewer’s daily consciousness, this discussion concerns subjective experience and remains largely anecdotal.
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Chapter 1: A Constellation of Terms

In a description of the culminating works I developed in the past year, four terms recur as versatile nodes for conceptual orientation. These are: location, constellation, projection, and activation. Some development of these terms will be helpful at the outset.

Location implies context, even if inexact, and thus hints further at conditional autonomy, by virtue of the need to designate relative specificity. When a description of location is reduced to information only, such as a graphic coordinate or a statistical focus, the disembodied identity thus generated is an agreement. That understanding is a kind of constellation.

The term constellation is useful in parsing the experience of art because it suggests agreement around a mental construction, as does any shared sense of compared meanings, such as expressive attributes, postured intent, or qualified delivery. Experience can be mapped as a scheme of nodes and connections. As a mental construction, in addition to its elements and codes, the map itself becomes a carrier of larger meaning. When these meaningful connections are shared, multiple agreements occur.
As a picture superimposed upon stars from afar, for which only a shared vantage is relevant, a *constellation* can be called an agreement serving a larger understanding. The function of a constellation in the viewing experience can be called applied coherence, which is not to say artificiality. All manner of natural drift may be said to consist of agreements in the form of statistical tendencies. Nevertheless, as raw information becomes meaningful, the location of meaning becomes something new, a *view*. If not an understanding, it is at least a true coherence. When multiple agreements function in a larger scheme, such as a map or an index, a synthesizing view is *expressed*.

A necessary component of a synthesizing view is *projection*, which in psychological terms refers to the addition of memory to perception, informed by associations and expectations. A generic description of projection might be any transfer of information from generator to field. Coherence may or may not function on either side of the transfer, as intention, understanding, or misunderstanding. Coherence may or may not persist across the transfer. The phenomenon of projection is evident at multiple levels in the process we identify as thought. Ideas appear, superimposed upon awareness, as are the impulses and sensations that qualify our understanding of the world and how we might act. Projection is what allows a child to have a relationship with a teddy bear.

To parse our description of these mental events to an even finer degree, we can consider *activation*, the sparkplug on which the engine of meaning depends. In activation, we can refer to the event-zone in which data becomes information, something greater than raw stimulus. Activation closely anticipates coherence, but what these terms share may not
require more awareness than a bacterium or a small robot, and possibly no self-awareness whatsoever. For such structures to function at all, however, suggests a spectrum of intelligence. In activation we find criteria for sensitivity and selectivity, and thus the options for agency open to unfolding complexity.
Chapter 2: The Constellation of a Self

My earliest memory is lightning striking a tree outside the window of a room where I lay in a small bed as an infant. The room’s shadows, shapes, and colors were suddenly thrown before me and then gone again. More than the explosion itself, I remember the brief illumination of the room and the sense of sudden awareness. As a teenager, when a friend’s father explained to me how the beauty of music had saved him from suicide, I understood that appreciation can be a life saving enterprise. At around the same age I experienced deep reverie in the presence of a mysterious painting in a museum, and deeply desired to play with the same forces. As an undergraduate painter, an epiphany occurred when I saw the colored lights of Dan Flavin spilling out of the gallery at night onto fresh hills of record-breaking snow. These events instilled conscious interest in the transformative potential of activation in the experience of art. I draw living connections between them in an important constellation of early inspiration.

As a young adult, my relationship to activation, and its close associate influence, shifted considerably. Diverted by survival instincts and material rewards, I thrived in early opportunities as an art director, calculating the ingredients of visual manipulation in what is euphemistically called the communications industry. I designed psychedelic propaganda for corporate interests peddling mass entertainment. In the process, but only gradually, I developed an abiding mistrust of persuasive language and candy for the eyes.
While I enjoyed activating visual grammar and exercising graphic codes of attention, I wrestled with the larger implications of my participation in the machinery of consumer culture. The intellectual posture became synonymous with the physical experience, and I grew averse to staring at screens from chairs. Eventually in crisis, I listed the attributes of my occupation that had become unacceptable, and wrote out the reverse of those qualities in order to generate a hypothetical description of an antidote.

Dominating the initial list of industrial liabilities was the incessant reward of short attention span, the essentially disposable nature of the information, and the tendency toward deception. Emerging in contrast as desirable states were the cultivation of sustained attention, a timeless quality to the coding and the encoded, and the demonstration of shared authenticity. In the interest of reprogramming, as a result of this formula I embarked on entry-level vocal training in classical Hindustani raga. I had no ambition to appropriate or even presume performance capability in this rarified and ancient art form. On the contrary, surrounded by masters and advanced students, I was thrown into confrontation with my own mediocrity. What held me in thrall, and offered a critical alternative to the mindset of commercial animation, was the profoundly contemplative relationship with sound and memory required in raga. My tendency toward suggestion had to be replaced with full attention.

I became aware of how useful the idea of constellation could be in the creation of meaning through the principals of Indian music. The raga system describes emotional colors in the specific combination of rising and descending notes in a given raga scale, of
which there are hundreds. Additionally, the nuanced transition between notes is where the skill and grace of the performer finally emerges, as the living raga is expressed. In a general correlation with this sonic formula, one could describe the experiential bridges between elements in any of the senses. Looking at raga suggested to me that such constellated structures - associations and relationships projected onto located nodes - described not only the nature of art and creativity but perhaps awareness and ultimately consciousness itself.

Years later, I found confirmation for these descriptions of sentience and reason in three bodies of writing. First, and perhaps most formally, Mahayana Buddhism describes a path toward ethics built upon a rigorous understanding of the nature of the mind. Buddhist psychology describes consciousness as a cluster of assumptions, and posits the very self as a tenacious construction without fundamental autonomy or independent boundary, which relies for its seeming existence on projected associations. Secondly, scattered readings in popular science repeat themes of aggregate components underlying perceived phenomena. Echoed in physics and neurology are observations of the composite nature of our sense-notions of physical and logical identity. And thirdly, a philosophical frontier for these ideas was registered with authority by Gilles Deleuze, in his descriptions of reality as a constantly fluctuating constellation of differences.
Previous to the two works to be discussed here, an earlier attempt to generate art from these concerns was clumsily handicapped by symbolism. It had occurred to me that I should include everything I had ever learned in a symbolic narrative, as a rite of passage as I turned my attention toward a personally expressive form. I would use movement, visual design, and vocalization in a theatrical representation of my conscious history. Thinking I could impose some kind of theatrical immediacy, I deliberately defied documentation with low lighting and gradual movement. The resulting performance was only partially successful, and forced me to confront weaknesses in the aspiration for the work. I summarize it here as prelude to the more effective performance that resulted from these considerations.

The early, failed performance consisted of four episodes, set before a continuous thirty minute video, which evolved from night forest, through a stormy cloudscape, to a full wall of orange fire. I emerged from a landscape and incorporated myself into the scene as a character, interacting with a sculpted animal, and finally positioning myself in the center of the projected flames. This progression of events was designed to recapitulate my own path into the room through study in the arts.
My emergence, in hunter’s orange camouflage, in a mottled set of branches and forest light, represented detachment and re-absorption, a genesis born from coincident separation and assimilation. Once fully standing, I painted a completion of the camouflage pattern onto my own skin, as a means of further integration. Turning my attention to an animal sculpture, I drew eyes on its blank face. This was a deliberate act of projection, for the purpose of activation. The viewer’s ability to project their own association with life onto the object was deliberately enhanced by the addition of eyes. I interacted with the animal by addressing it verbally, repeating variations on the question: “WHAT ARE YOU DOING?”

The direction of my address, from actor to object, was another attempt to activate an Other, a fictional but functional entity, giving it identity and the possibility of further activation. The sense in which a work of art is an externalization, a concrescence, and also an arena for mental constructions (i.e. meaning) was made obvious in the silence of the animal. In my interaction with the sculpted beast I treated it as an autonomous being. Depending on a viewer’s inclination, my actions and gestures could render life in the animal form, or perhaps betray it as utterly inanimate.

After an episode of address I approached the animal and caressed it in a dance-like turn. Then I paused, drew a knife, and gutted it. I bowed to the disemboweled heart in an act of impossible devotion, a hunter’s reverence for its prey. I rang a bell. After a period of stillness, I stood and faced the audience as a deep musical drone began. I maintained a posture requiring slight endurance, for a duration long enough to result in trembling.
While the overall mood of the piece was evocative, my intentions were lost for the work as a whole. A central problem was the reliance on overt symbolism and the containment of my voice within a fictional space. If too much is invested in a symbolic reading, the cost of misreading is failure. A related risk is disagreement. A symbolic action may be understood, but considered inaccurate or ill conceived. There must be a shared experience explicit or implicit in the action for an authentic connection to be made between the performer and a viewer.
In response to the problem of fictionalizing action while actualizing an unwanted separation from my audience, I designed a performance in which any symbolism would be subordinate to a more fully present significance of action. While still interested in an essentially theatrical presentation, I would have to *accomplish* rather than *portray*, and I would have to address my audience directly.

I limited the scripted action to two sections, acknowledging polarity as the simplest type of constellation. I intended the tension between the two sections to become the articulating carrier of layered meaning. I would create intensity in the space by pushing myself to a more suspenseful expressive extreme. I would find two distinct modalities for the delivery of vocal sculpture, delivered in real-time. Doing so would embody my actuality as a dynamic range. At one end of this duality I located raw nature and my inheritance as a sensate animal. At the other end I would produce the fully expressive voice, singing with intentionality and personality, in modulations of design and aesthetic gratification.

My physical voice was given the part of primary actualization in the work. In the first and longer section, the scripted action was to vocalize a gradually building cacophony of
animal voices. Starting from the quietest insects and small creatures, slowly adding midsize yips and barks, until reaching a crescendo of screeches and howls from larger beasts. I would move up the food chain in size and expressive ferocity. Underneath this chorus, I programmed a musical drone below audibility, which rose over thirty minutes from just barely audible until it reached full dominance in the room. When the drone and the cacophony of animal sounds reached sufficient volume, I would initiate the second phase of the performance and break into song, crooning my best possible baritone rendition of a great nightclub standard.

The song I wanted to deliver was “Smile”, made popular in the 1950’s by Nat King Cole. The lyrics offer the advice to smile toward adversity, in a kind of therapeutic paradox of self-healing and denial:

"Smile"

Smile though your heart is aching,
Smile even though it's breaking,
When there are clouds in the sky, you'll get by.  
If you smile through your fear and sorrow,
Smile and maybe tomorrow
You'll see the sun come shining through for you.

Light up your face with gladness,
Hide every trace of sadness,
Although a tear may be ever so near,
That's the time you must keep on trying...
Smile, what's the use of crying?
You'll find that life is still worthwhile
If you just smile.

Music by Charlie Chaplin, 1936
Lyrics by John Turner and Geoffrey Parsons
In the orange camouflage performance, the ringing of a bell introduced the ritual observance of repetitive ornamental sounding. The audience, however, was distanced from the potency of this action by its containment within an imaginary space. In hindsight, my investment was more in the true potential of the sounding than in any portrayed aspect of the context. I tried to locate authenticity in the action, but it was obscured by fiction. In planning the subsequent performance for the same physical space, I drew on a traditional resonance between theatrical events and communal magic. A potency resides in the combination of visual appearances and voices from an inner dimension. Vocal expression is arguably the most direct route from inspiration to manifestation, and the pathway from mind to uttered sound offers unique rewards. Constellations are drawn invisibly in sonic space, but substantially persist in the mind. From the harmonic structures of music to the syllables and syntax of the spoken word, mere vibrations in the air can describe rapidly unfolding intelligible structures.

It has been proposed that the charismatic adulation of music and entertainment stars can be traced back to ancient communal relationships with healers and shamans. It seems reasonable that cathartic and charismatic enthusiasms would become easily interwoven. We readily accept sheer pleasure an indicator of success for musical work. Collectively, we closely connect musical quality with pleasurable feeling, which allows music to be of real therapeutic value. Singers seem to draw a kind of worship, and models of intense aspiration thrive in fandom and karaoke. Significant economic energies are concentrated in the following of entertainers, and the transformational experiences they offer.
There are other purveyors of ritualized communal energy: spiritualists, clowns, fashionistas, and magicians. Contemporary visual art has walls acknowledged referents to shamanic practice, notably in Joseph Beuys, André Cadere, Marina Abramović, and others. The overtly shamanic constellation of performance energy is not so different from any artist’s ability to potentiate the viewing moment by establishing references around which a coherent experience can successfully evolve.

I wanted to undergo a significant visual transformation while vocalizing, addressing both my appearance and the voice brought up from inside. I would shed and reveal a layer before offering any sound. The animal energy intended for the opening portion was visually offset by a white lab uniform, a long coat worn over white bib-top overalls, snugly tucked into white military boots. The appearance was institutional, clinical, slightly martial, with a hint of fantasy ice-cream scientist. I began the action by standing at attention near the entrance, as the audience entered the space and seated themselves. The initial mood was anticipatory, a stage awaiting action, with a guardian near the door. I advanced to a small desk with an upright mirror. After hanging up my lab coat, I sat with bare shoulders before the mirror. I wondered if my bare shoulders and posture before the make-up mirror allowed a slightly feminized identity to emerge, but I made no effort to embody gender. The wardrobe un-layering was designed to transition directly from a guarded stance to a more exposed presentation.

As I intoned various small creatures, I began covering my shaved head with theatrical putty. Alternating my attention between animal sounds and my image in the
mirror, I built up three Klingon-like ridges of putty on my head and began to insert feathers, sticks of incense, and long fireplace matches. I ignited the matches and incense and allowed the sticks to burn as I built up the soundscape. Through the absurdity of this image I hoped to acknowledge that for a twenty-first century white male artist from the suburbs of North America to dabble in shamanic pretense may be viewed as problematic. On the one hand, why not assume integrity for any primal impulse toward inspiration and insight? The capacity itself is a human birthright. On the other hand, my culture has plundered and parodied cosmic paradigms in the form of comics, cartoons, science fiction, and blockbuster heroes. A level of spectacular absurdity would have to inform whatever transforming appearances I could negotiate. My motivation as an artist was neither to assume, nor portray, nor to displace power, but instead to approach such communal energies I viewed as appropriately within my exploratory art-form. To the question of residual primitivism or latent exoticism in my choices, I would offer Gilligan’s Island, Mad Magazine, and Alice Cooper as a constellation of indigenous cultural heritage.

Some of the matches on my head remained lit, and with the incense they created an expanding crown of little flames and curling lines of smoke. As the absurdity of my appearance grew, the vocalized soundscape became much more intense, culminating in fevered howls. Beyond even the mimicking of wolves, my wailing broke octaves and became an otherworldly yodel, reaching an intensity I had not planned. I had tapped into a reserve of anguish and passion and felt that I was in uncharted territory. I became aware of a primordial satisfaction expressed through the deep lung-shaking moans.
When the background drone fully saturated the noise, I rose and donned a crisp white short-sleeved lab shirt. I took up a microphone and turned to the audience in full headdress, and launched into the baritone croon. At the finish of the song I remained still for three full minutes, as the tonic drone and animal soundscape persisted, and finally fell to silence.

Despite my plans for two clear sections, the performance ultimately sequenced three visual manifestations across four sonic modalities. After silently attending the entrance as a guard, I shed dress gloves, coat, and hat to sit before the mirror as an embodied voice. Vocalization at the mirror table began with exploration (preliminary whispered sounding), then established location (active voicing and looping), followed by primal expression (peak howling). Finally I rose to assume the role of entertainer and offered the full pleasure of singing (melody, lyrics, and expressive delivery).
figure 2: Sequential images from the performance TRANSPOLYAMNESIA.  
(From left to right, the attendant in uniform, hanging up the accessories)

figure 3: Sequential images from the performance TRANSPOLYAMNESIA. 
(The assembly of the headdress)

figure 4: Sequential images from the performance TRANSPOLYAMNESIA. 
(The escalation of animal sounds)
The response I received from audience members fully validated my intentions. I was gratified to hear of complex impressions that reflected my aspiration for how the actions would manifest. My howling reached a level of intensity that hovered at the edge of discomfort for some viewers. Unknown to me at the time, my torso was seen to spasm and flush with each new howl. The cathartic release provided by finally standing to sing was greatly enhanced by the intensity of the howling episode. The song was delivered with near pitch-perfect timing. The unexpected transition to baritone singing was met with some bewildered relief. The dynamic phases of the performance served their
purpose as energetic nodes in the constellation of being. Cross-references between personae as locations of intent, from guardian to animal to singer, were established.

From my perspective, interesting riddles sprang from the question of authenticity. The singing was backed by an instrumental track buried in a drone of chords derived from the song itself which in turn was buried in the ongoing cacophony of animal sounds. The presence of this instrumental guide assured my accuracy and presented a deliberate nod to karaoke, a tradition where the aspirational lure of performer status is activated and made real, even if briefly, for the aspirant. If my singing was “real” in this sense, could this also be said about the howling, and the build-up of chirps and peeps and smaller voices? Did combustion make my headdress more real than before it was lit? Where was the guardian persona located after the uniform accessories were hung up on the wall?

The title of the piece, TRANSPOLYAMNESIA, was a neologism created for its multiple and provocative references. As prefixes, “trans” and “poly” have circulated recently in reference to sexual and gender identities, but also retain their general indication of crossing thresholds and multiple nodes. I was interested in the suggestion of shifting identity across permeable boundaries. The addition of “amnesia” also referenced shifting mental locations in the act forgetting, which can be said to impose its opposite, remembering. Semantic links further embedded in the title included Trans-am and Polynesia, suggesting Americanism and the problematic exoticism positioned within the ambitions for the work. This play on words served as a kind of foil against the possible critique of selected motifs as acts of appropriation.
The title, like the cluster of actions within the work, combined contradiction and synthesis. Between the character and action, cross-currents of location and activation promoted multiple readings which remained coherent even while in flux and contradiction. The picture given shape in the connections was not of fixed attributes, but of manifest potential.
Chapter 5: Apparatus for the Filtration of Cosmic Information

Before staging the TRANSPOLYAMNESIA performance, I had considered approaching the ideas of multiple nodes in constellation, and the location of an imaginative realities, in sculpture. Based on the success of the performance, I decided to return to the inanimate and fabricate an installation free from the theatrical gravity of personified action. In performance, the dynamic uncertainty of real-time behavior forces the audience into the drama of witnessing, qualified by attention to unfolding actions within narrative space. Sculpture exists in a dimension not bound in that manner by linear time. The viewer is free to navigate at their own pace, to turn away and look back again, to linger or to exit at will. I was also intrigued by the prospect of expressing my interest in the therapeutic or magical potential of art in a work fixed in space and time, using the traditional sculptural vocabulary of mass, shape, void, and position.

Preliminary considerations drew me to recall my childhood relationship with certain objects into which I had projected a kind of life. Unburdened by theories, open to the possibility of influence, and inventing responses to an imagined interchange, can such a relationship be called real? In sorting through memories I focused on one example that also pointed toward some of the questions of appropriation indicated in the singing performance. I remembered an object that I was able to invest with power only to be informed years later that my fascinations were misplaced. On a family trip through
national parks of the southwest I had purchased a small replica of a native-American
dream-catcher. During my early teenage years, this souvenir hung on the wall above my
bed and became an object of fixation for early adolescent mysticism. It would be decades
before my regard for the object would be modified by an understanding of kitsch, post-
colonial theory, and the problem of cultural appropriation. To the child, the dream-
catcher fulfilled a magical function, perhaps allowed by a naive exoticism, but answering
an appetite one could arguably locate outside of specific cultural limitations. As an adult
cultivating an artistic vocabulary, my interest in the dream-catcher was renewed as an
inquiry into whether I could again claim some legitimate approach to its power. If my
own culture did not provide me with such an artifact, could I manufacture my own?

In researching the origins of the popular item known today as a dream-catcher, I was
surprised to learn that it carries its own legacy of intra-cultural appropriation. The hoop
woven with concentric spirals and hung with beaded feathers has its origins in a cluster of
tribes native to the Ontario region, and only spread out to its near ubiquitous presence in
gift shops around the continent when tribal artisans from other regions became aware of
its popularity as a tourist souvenir. This history provided an indirect continuity with the
song that I sang in the earlier performance, which was originally written as an
instrumental and legally appropriated eighteen years later as a melody on which to base
the lyrics. While neither the original composition nor the traditional dream-catcher form
persisted into my work as found objects, both were realized and deliberately remade
through my direct action.
The traditional use of dream-catchers was for the protection of new-born infants as they slept. The device is a symbolic filter net, hung in front of sleeping babies in order to trap unwanted dreams. This artifact in its intended use already bears central relevance to my own pursuit of location paradox; its functionality is for the imagined protection of imagined information. In a pre-scientific understanding, the supposed source of dreams may be cosmic or otherworldly. My task in the sculpture would be to adapt these ideas to my own immediate milieu, using corresponding references drawn from my own upbringing as a suburban American. Over the course of design and fabrication I allowed these ideas to extend farther into related instances of a pop-cultural framing for the inspiration found in mystical ideas and dream states.

I wanted the work to suggest an impossible machine. As a machine-form, the sculpture would indicate functionality, but its purpose would be fulfilled in imagination only. The location of its activation would be mental, but tied to its manifestation in the world. Additionally, I wanted to the work assume the form of an apparatus that is recognized within my own culture, something approved for the reception of etheric signals. The obvious choice was the form of a radar telescope dish, an antenna. I would side-step overt simulacra by constructing the antenna entirely from organic and hand-crafted materials, using wicker baskets and rattan hoops mounted on a bamboo tripod. In addition to the central structure, I designed smaller satellite units as sub-stations, all connected to the tower by snaking lines of rope, standing in for signal and power cables. I maintained ambiguity in the implied direction of flow through these cables. Were they fed by the incoming signal, or providing some specific juice to the function of the whole?
I could see power being distributed out to adjunct elements, as well as modulations directed inward toward the central unit. These lines made visibly flexible connections. The apparatus itself was a constellation, each unit superimposing multiple identities in the composition of a connected whole.

Drawn into the grouping of sculptural units were conceptual polarities such as caution and empowerment, allure and entrapment, physical reality and mental construction, and the paradox embodied in a sculptural representation of energy. I considered all of these ideational spectra to be variations on the question at the heart of the work: whether I could successfully transpose a problematically located artifact into a personally meaningful imaginative space, and convey that meaning to viewers.

I wished to process through this sculpture some acknowledgement of my early career as an art director. Signal systems such as color coding, line weight, and contrasting fields were often part of our discussions with clients. Following in this tradition of graphic application, I used cautionary striping systems to mark the problematic nature of the dream-catcher. From several choices for codified hazard, I chose bright red stripes on a white ground. The covering of disparate raw materials in uniform white served to visually unify the mass, while emphasizing variations in relief on the surface. This also reduced each shape to a mark-making interface on which I could apply red stripes and perimeter details in a variety of configurations, including structural outlines, rhythmic stripes, and emphatic extremities.
Directly engaging literal caution, I first made a life-sized replica of a hazard cone used for traffic diversion. I allowed whimsy to influence the design by adding small spherical feet to the base, and reversing the normal color scheme, from white stripe on orange to red stripe on white. I placed it at the far left side of the assembly, in agreement with Western reading from left to right.

The next element in the apparatus would logically have to portray the nature of the hazard indicated. Since my ambition was to reclaim something that intellectual conditioning had warned me against, it seemed appropriate to depict the entire enterprise as a trap. Again drawing from the integrity of childhood enthusiasms, and locating the snare itself within mental constructs, I fabricated a box-trap of a sort I had seen in cartoons. A box large enough to enclose my own body was poised, semi-upright on a stick. Attached to the stick was a rope to be pulled when quarry entered the space under the box. The bait was a sculpture of an oversized crystal, the type prized by new-age alchemists, often seen in the same gift shops where dreamcatchers and other mystic paraphernalia were sold. By sculpting an imaginary crystal, I co-located its significance in external form and internal function. As a visual pun (another form of co-location), the rope tied to the trap stick led back into the apparatus, becoming one of the signal cables attached to the central tower.
figure 7: Apparatus for the Filtration of Cosmic Information.

figure 8: The Cone and the Trap.
Behind the tower and slightly to the side was a life-size sculpture of a campfire, set on a pedestal base of three concentric wooden discs. Stacks of discs became a recurring visual rhythm within the assembly, echoing the axial symmetry of the baskets in the main antenna, and served as elevating pedestals for some of the objects included in the array. The fire sculpture actually pre-dated the apparatus design, but was included because it anticipated some of the concerns, and provided a suitably figurative energy source. With a background in graphic design, I have retained an interest in the activating tensions between iconography and representation. The fire is, of course, a clichéd symbol for revelation and inspiration, but it also presents the sculptor with the challenge of fixing in time and material that which is in constant energetic motion. As the release of energy in rapid molecular oxidation, fire is an energetic exchange made visible. What began for me as an exercise in representation became a suitable fuel source for the machinery of psycho-physical constellation. Along the ambidextrous cables connecting the apparatus, the fire functioned multiply as energy source, pilot light, and vented burn-off for any excess energies in the system.

Near the front of the apparatus, to the right, was a stack of sixteen concentric discs of diminishing diameter, topped by an oversized human skull. The skull was sliced off below the eye sockets so as to appear embedded in its pedestal of discs. Molded into the skull’s forehead was a third eye socket, directly referencing the “third eye” now commonly mentioned in popular mysticism. Practitioners of yogic traditions describe the third eye as an energy center, one of several “chakras” which are governing nodes for
specific bodily energies, not acknowledged in textbook medical anatomy. The third eye is an organ of insight, sometimes associated with the pineal gland. My choice was to represent a skull cavity for a literal third eyeball, consistent with the cartoonism informing the overall installation. By portraying the anomalous third eye as a physical fact, I reinforced the configuration of my machine as a constellation bridging actual and imaginary dimensions.

Beyond the fire, to the far right, was a small round table on which two items sat: a wooden mallet and a basket of beaded feathers. The mallet was suggestive of a judge’s gavel but was in fact a shop tool, used for hitting objects that should not be subjected to the impact of metal. Multiple meanings converged in this hammer, including the role of discernment in any intellectual pursuit, and the empowerment implicit in the entire enterprise. The choice of a tool found in a traditional sculptor’s workshop was the perfect node for these channels. The table was balanced in scale and position against the hazard cone on the far side. To the cautionary marker it responded with direct empowerment. Next to the mallet was a small basket, painted to match the antenna, which contained feathers prepared with binding and beads, as used on a souvenir dream-catcher. The feathers in the basket offered the only direct visual reference to the object of my design. The word dream-catcher did not appear in my title or accompanying text.
Figure 9: The fire, the Skull, and the Side Table.

Figure 10: The Side Table with Tools.
The red stripe and white ground color scheme posed a visual problem. Installed in a traditional gallery setting, the sculpture’s complexity of almost monochromatic forms would be obscured in low contrast to the white gallery walls. The red marks would certainly predominate but a balance would be lost. The obvious solution was to paint the gallery wall a contrasting color. The dimensions of the assembly indicated also extending the background color forward onto the floor. Gallery usage parameters suggested containing the entire installation in its own area visual, which I defined as a huge solid dot, like the print of a spotlight. The new color would serve not only as a contrasting background, but would be a container for the imaginary world, and so become a part of it. With an existing pallet of bright red and white, and in reference to my roots in suburban America, the third color would be blue. From some vantage points elements of the installation would extend beyond the circular boundary, perhaps providing another layer of compositional gesture to the whole.

Mounted alone at the center of the wall, about nine feet above the floor, was a single wooden chair facing upward like an astronaut’s seat before launch. The antenna dish atop its bamboo tripod was centrally penetrated from front to back by a complex stack of nested baskets. Behind the front facing dish this axial structure tapered to a point, which was pointed at the area where the unseen sitter’s head might be. The chair remained contrary to the orientation of the viewer, providing the most direct possible example of an ambiguity to location in any complex mental system. Recognizable as a real chair, presented unoccupied, the seat presents a site of projection for the viewer. Whether
occupied mentally or simply considered as a ready location ready, the emptiness of the chair established, though arrangement and absence, the possibility of presence.

Figure 11: The Antenna and the Chair.
Chapter 6: Afterthoughts

What does it mean to say that an idea “exists” in the mind? Apparent coherence is the beginning of an actual presence. Mental structures can be said to exist not only within a thinker’s domain of sensation, but also out in the world, by virtue of their inseparable connections to myriad phenomena outside the apparent boundaries of the self. Suggested by the inevitable correspondence between physical and mental structures is the notion that the aggregate phenomenon that we refer to as the self defies any distinct location. We can only witness the effects of our ideas in retrospect, and even if we assert that thought resides somehow “inside” the brain, our activation in the world must occur through substantially externalized results. The two art works detailed here were attempts to approach and embody this paradigm through multivalent compositions in which the paradox of simultaneous identity and non-location could be felt by a viewer, perhaps inspiring reflection upon their own functionality as constellated beings.
References


