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A Search Based Practice: a question of middles

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A Search Based Practice: a question of middles

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts by Mike Calway-Fagen

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2012
The thesis of Mike Calway-Fagen is approved and it is acceptable in quantity and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Chair

University of California, San Diego
2012
For those who will always be missed
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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

A Search Based Practice: a question of middles

by

Mike Calway-Fagen

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California, San Diego, 2012

Professor Anya Gallaccio, Chair

I am exhausted

This bit of text will bring language up as close as possible and nearly touch its
destination before it drops off and dematerializes. I will attempt to describe an in
betweenness that exists in and around all things and their relationships; animal, vegetable,
and mineral. What good does expanding the middle do? What is there to decode, unearth,
and unpack?

Please bear with me.
I am exhausted

This bit of text will bring language up as close as possible and nearly touch its destination before it drops off and dematerializes. I will attempt to describe an in-betweenness that exists in and around all things and their relationships; animal, vegetable, and mineral. What good does expanding the middle do? What is there to decode, unearth, and unpack?

Please bear with me.

Jan Verwoert, in his essay Exhaustion & Exuberance, describes the “I Can't” as distinctly different from “I won't”. I can't is the willingness to perform despite impossible odds. It is the emptying out of fatal finitude and resignation to believe and carry out. It is a defiant optimism, an imaginative declaration of “yes”. Verwoert offers us more lingual insurance by not deviating from the words themselves in saying, “a way to interrupt the brute assertiveness of the I Can through the performance of an I Can't performed in the key of I Can.”
In my artwork this *I Can't* is in the unwillingness to fully spell out the meaning of something that cannot be forced into the open. In fact this *I Can't* is the tacit revelation that the work is alive, speaks, and has agency.

Pontypool is a strange Canadian movie that follows a radio personality through a daily broadcast in rural Ontario. As the day progresses, an inexplicable phenomenon slowly reveals itself as the root-cause of a ghastly mutation that leaves all residents of Pontypool as zombies. The mutation is ultimately communicated through language, more specifically, the linear cause and effect of words and their meanings.

![Film still from Pontypool](image.png)

*Figure 1.3: Film still from Pontypool*

The fix presents itself as a relatively simple creative unsticking of concrete representation. Kill becomes Kiss. Kiss is Kill. Again a strange middle is established an affective comparison that opens up language, more to unlearn and untwist permanence. I find it also of interest that the film portrays the English language as the infected language and while I don't wish to directly speculate on what this means politically or culturally, I do think there is something to consider in terms of a conscious destabilization of one's own thinking, my thinking. Diane Cluck says, “Try to get out of the way of yourself”.
So the troubling tactic used in locating such a space is the same that dislocates it. Lingis sets an affective exterior boundary stating, “the polar claims of contentment and resentment have covered nature with their text”. “All the other animals and the plants, the savannas and the deserts, the oceans and the skies have been labeled, measured, inventoried along the coordinates drawn by the cravings and exactions of contentment and resentment. The contented mind views everywhere its own grids. The resentful heart finds the world a complex of threats, shelters, and compensations”.

And then:

The strong emotions seek out what is incoherent, inconsistent, contradictory, countersensical; they endorse what is unpredictable, unworkable, insurmountable, unfathomable.

Michael Taussig, the Australian theorist, is on the brink of understanding what he's witnessed in his candid book, *I Swear I Saw This.*

To have sworn to have seen something a person doesn't necessarily have to know what they're looking at. Oftentimes such an exclamation follows not knowing what's been seen. It's only through a real effort, a collective force of faculties of sensations. One doesn't arrive at understanding but leans closer with every fibrous particle and each cone of both eyes; everything in that direction with some form of witness bore on the individual as a resultant outcome. A witness is there. A witness is simultaneously the subject viewing and experiencing. So a witness is part of a continuum of objects and subjects acting on each other and stepping aside to let the other take over. The subject object relationship is a binary with very little merit here and always. You must look closer at what acts on what. What, which, or who is passive if anything or
either?

Don't both "subjects" and "objects" have agency?

What is really being said when Ted Nugent, the self-described “Motor City Mad Man” and the whole of the NRA proclaim, "Guns don't kill people, people kill people."?

Do they not inspire each others' actions?

What is Jimi Hendrix thinking when he asks, "Hey Joe, where you going with that gun in your hand?"- he, of course, suspects the two are in collusion.

To place each element of Nugent's statement in a fixed hierarchy is not just reductive and a massive oversimplification it sidesteps the real complexities and motivations of behavior and material's inseparable, reflexive, and fluid influence. The classic approach to understanding these relationships is exemplified in V. Gordon Childe's, Piecing Together the Past:

“...The archaeological record is constituted of the fossilized results of human behavior, and it is the archaeologist's business to reconstitute that behavior as far as he can and so to recapture the thoughts that behaviors expressed.”

Carl Knappet author of Thinking Through Material Culture points out that, “There are a couple of important assumptions within Childe's viewpoint that demand our attention. First, there is a clear hierarchy: thought is primary, behavior is secondary, and material expression is at the bottom of the chain. .... given that thoughts are separated from objects by behavior, it follows that the internal mind is buffered from the external world via the medium of action.

In other words, Childe advocates a linear understanding of relationships, one that progresses from material, to behavior, to thoughts.
The NRA mantra treats this complex issue in a similar state of codified threes. In actuality, and in all things material and human, there is a constant flow of energies that amount to gun violence, expressions of faith, reclining chairs, and business suits. This flowing triad is another middle, a transaction of agents, and a negotiation of phenomena.

Peter Schwenger in his book, *The Tears of Things* describes the state of having seen or seeing as a hallucination, that form of fantasm that is taken to be reality, pointing out that Merleau-Ponty speaks of hallucination as a sensation that “can have the value of reality only because in the normal subject reality itself suffers though an analogous process”. Seeing, by the human eye, brings things to existence and supports the people-centricity with which modern humans view the world. I have a hard time swallowing Schwenger's other assertion that “it is the eye that is mastered, that becomes the recipient of a vision that actively shows itself”. In actuality there is another exchange going on here, one that has no beginning, middle, or end. The gaze is a search, a process of looking at, being looked at, and watching. It's through this elusive simultaneity, says Schwenger in the same book, that we arrive at an understanding of the gaze.

![Figure 1.4: Installation view of Hell & High Water](image)
While different in scope, Carl Jung locates these *middles* as related phenomena through his concept of synchronicity: “a sequence of events that are causally unrelated, but even with the absence of any discernible cause or effect there remains an unmistakable simultaneity; a meaningful interrelation that cannot be stripped of its connectedness”.

Lastly to bring my arcing spectrum of middles to a resounding end, an end that in reality bookends this paper and should be considered less an end but another middle. So I'll begin and end with this: We, us humans, are animals. As much as we try and drive a wedge of culture and self awareness between people-animals and non-people-animals the fact remains. Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson and Susan McCarthy's book, *When Elephants Weep* works a simple and refreshing insight into this heated relation:

> Nonverbal communication among humans has sparked increasing interest among academics and therapists in the last few years. Many complex mental states are conveyed more conveniently by gestures than by sentences, while others appear to escape verbal language entirely. Attempts to convey subtle or elusive feelings leave everyone with a sense of the inadequacy of speech. Poetry, after all, is an attempt to convey feelings, moods, states, and even thoughts that are hard to grasp and seem to defy language in prose. And some feelings do in fact elude language, even poetry, altogether. The fine arts and silence pick up where words left off.

I must restate that last point: The fine arts and silence pick up where words left off.
I see a pattern within these examples.

Over the last decade, up till, and through now my artistic practice has been wholeheartedly dedicated to presenting questions. It is a continuous process of interrogation that looks at big ideas:

\textbf{Figures 1.5 and 1.6: In full sight #75 and From back forward to again}
Love
death, family, memory, myth, god, faith, goodness, authenticity, worth

Time
memory, myth, memory, death, authenticity, age, boredom, worth

Faith
god, spirituality, death, ideas, myth, hope, authenticity, worth

Identity
faith, myth, memory, love, race, authenticity, worth

Expression
emotion, affectivity, presence, absence

These term-things constantly collide, support, diverge, and straddle each other.
It's a process easily discountable and often discouraged by more concise and less potentially slippery points of departure. I want to always start at the beginning, maintain frustration, and avenge the soul.
I spent a number of hours trudging up and down a river in rural Vermont with a gang of flashlights hanging from my neck on a rope. I documented this activity with a video camera. The project built up and amounted to a kind of strategic confusion; strategic because it was not spontaneous but a result of years of thinking, years of acting, and seconds of decision. The video is these seconds frozen. It amounts to a colliding of personalities, schizophrenic perspectives acted on simultaneously.

Figure 1.7: still from video, *Listen Up ‘Em All*
Titled with the same name as the previously mentioned video, *listen up 'em all*, is a swell of moments. Two chairs lean in to gather something from one another and are held still by an oversized t-shirt. The t-shirt is stretched, its elasticity allowing a meeting but also disallowing either seat's departure. At the point of contact is a portal, a speaker. The sculpture, its electronics, form and function, breathe, allowing the piece to never quite sit still as it stretches and contracts in space.

My sculptures, videos, photos, collage, sound, and public projects are purposefully unconcentrated, and despite their seeming disconnection, revolve around a similar material language and a sense of magnetic conceptualism. I am drawn to materials, not to say that I have an affinity for anything specific, on the contrary, I am constantly collecting, looking, and testing, waiting for something to present itself as significant. What I collect is a constantly evolving and adaptive process dependent on mood, place, and people. Materials and processes are chosen based on what feels right, like it fits, and
will resonate within itself and outward. I'm trying to push closer to and into nature so that the work's naturalness allows it to then be presented back to art as something familiar but revelatory.

One way of accomplishing this is to make the source immediately available to the viewer and skip ahead to the ultimate finished destination or temporary static representation of the project. The final work shown is less a finished product and more a still stoppage in an expanse of time and potentials. In this way, photographs and sculptures have a distinct relationship as they both bracket time. The photograph arrests a moment, plucks it out of its natural environment, as the sculptures, similarly, become iconic objects frozen, in the midst of action.
They are momentarily inactive. They have stopped to rest. They are waiting. They will move again or are already doing so. In this way my work is time based. The labor, whether mine or mined, is compressed into them and allows them to work over time. The time it takes to make them is the time taken for them to mean what they do.

1) Even then at four years old and in Kindergarten I detested school
2) I carried a bottle of glue with me to recess
3) I coated my hands and feet with Elmers
4) I spent the next thirty minutes trying to permanently glue myself to the slide

What is in the beginning will be in the end.
Bibliography


Pontypool. Director Bruce McDonald. IFC Films, 2008. Film.


