

*The Re-examined Life*

An Exhibition of Multidisciplinary Art

by

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## **AUTHOR'S DECLARATION**

This thesis consists of material all of which I authored or co-authored: see Statement of Contributions included in the thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners. I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

## **STATEMENT OF CONTRIBUTIONS**

I would like to acknowledge the contributions made towards this thesis by co-author and fellow graduate candidate Timothy Walker.

## ABSTRACT

*The Re-examined Life* is an interdisciplinary exhibition of contemplative and interactive artworks that use the expectations of conventional belief systems to question widespread perceptions and value judgments of our current culture. Each piece is created collaboratively, beginning with dialogical investigations that attempt to clarify what it means to be-in-the-world. These inquiries take us beyond accepted models of social organization and lead us to question and uncover the illusions of our current systems. The result is an exhibition of five modules: a *Social Bank*, an *Identity Centre*, *Reflective Sculptures*, *Community Tables* and a *Listening Lounge*. Each module reimagines familiar objects and settings, revealing the unstable nature of human knowledge. Visitors are encouraged to interact and openly reflect on how the authority of physical space and social systems shape who we are in the world.

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## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to Tom and Lynn St Marie, who have been an unwavering pillar of support and inspiration. This work could not have been accomplished without everything you have done for us over the years. We also dedicate this work to all the strangers and people we've encountered who have reminded us that life is meant to be lived with curiosity and genuine values.

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*“The individual has become a mere cog in an enormous organization of things and powers which tear from his hands all progress, spirituality, and value in order to transform them from their subjective form into the form of a purely objective life...”<sup>1</sup>*

## **Introduction**

A built-in feature of any belief is that one believes it to be true whether it is or not. *The Re-examined Life* is an interdisciplinary exhibition of contemplative and interactive modules that use the expectations of conventional belief systems to question widespread perceptions and value judgments of our current culture. Specifically, we challenge the relationship these qualities above have with how society is structured, how people choose to live their lives, and the ethical concerns that emerge from these choices. Furthermore, we examine how these different qualities are manifested in the objects and structures that create our world, how they take on ideological meaning, and how they reinforce our preconceived sense of being. In short, we are interested in how objects and structures participate in what some theorists have termed “representational economies” (Keane, Kroskrity, Appadurai). For example, consider how clothing and brands act on a semiotic level as extensions of identity, or how money is used as a measurement of value.

At the root of these examinations are verbal exchanges that compare perceptual differences of reality (and illusion). As a collaborative duo, these conversations are often between ourselves, though we readily engage with anyone willing to discuss the concepts and ideas that support this work. By explicating the cognitive and social qualities of personal experience we begin to understand our own biases and beliefs, in addition to those we encounter in others. With these insights we reevaluate the lifestyles that are predominant in today’s North American culture, and how these settings and expectations create assumptions regarding meaning and value.

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<sup>1</sup> Simmel, Georg. *The Philosophy of Money*. 2nd ed. Ed. David Frisby. Trans. Tom Bottomore and David Frisby. London: Routledge, 1990.

*The Re-examined Life* questions the foundations of our shared beliefs and values by examining the physical, psychological, philosophical and sociological constructs that are embedded into our shared modes of thinking. Reality presents itself as prepackaged, already complete with objects, languages, social structures and socio-economic ranking. The work unravels the perceived rational nature of each by using familiar objects and systems (like a bank, lounge, shopping centre, etc.) as a way to blur the lines between the stable and the imagined. This is a similar tactic taken by artist Agnieszka Kurant in her recent body of work *Phantom Library* (2011–12). The piece consists of a collection of hardcover books on a shelf. These books contain mythical titles that “use material from fictional or invisible constructions of social, economic, and political systems that produce a form of value.” (Kurant) Using books for their recognized quality as credible objects of knowledge, Kurant provides credence to her alternate histories, theories and possible futures. Similarly, our body of work provokes ideas about what is real. It challenges the viewer to grapple with the seemingly unknowable questions about truth, human nature and politics.



(fig. 1) Agnieszka Kurant, *Phantom Library* (2011-12)

## **Collaborative and Studio Methodologies**

The entire exhibition is the result of our collaboration. Every idea begins with our attempts to find clarity in what it means to be-in-the-world. Thus the work we have created first takes shape conceptually. As mentioned in the Introduction, the work emerges from our shared desire to understand big questions. These conversations happen multiple times spontaneously throughout the day. They can span from an hour to an entire evening. We continually challenge each other's insights, generating debates that push us deep into realms of uncertainty. Our ideologies and experiences are examined and re-examined, often dissolving our initial intuitions.

Some of this process has been drawn into *The Re-examined Life* as a podcast and a fabric sculpture. Further developed contemplative text pieces and social-situational sketches emerge from this process. The ideas that surface are habitually written down, sketched out, and then left to rest. This process allows for some distance from our ideas. The nature of our practice is iterative and reflective. Thus, the recorded ideas are regularly re-examined and re-worked. This re-evaluation process also takes on a dialectical character. Each potential idea is often re-imagined in numerous ways, debated upon and investigated for its salient qualities. The work is then planned and replanned, made in theory and then remade in hand-drawn sketches. Next, it is rendered digitally, tinkered with and rewritten multiple ways. It is then made as a proof-of-concept or mock-up and redesigned before ever becoming whole. Even after the work is physically constructed it is often remade again at some point in the future with further modifications. Thus the work is always in flux, never seen as finished and is always looked at as an iteration of what might come next.

Our method of collaboration involves continual renegotiation, as no terms have been set or best practices consulted. We try to take on roles that suit our own skillsets, but tasks become fluid depending on need. Any new skills are shared with each other as they are learned and

developed. We always stay informed and look for each other's feedback and consultation on all tasks, preferring to talk out strategies of execution. Our methodology helps us to keep each other motivated with a push-pull momentum that regulates our conceptual and material output.



(fig. 2) St Mare  $\phi$  Walker, Reiterations of maquettes (left, 2017);  
Studio shot of work at various stages of development (right, 2017)

## Outline of Exhibition

Each artwork is set-up as a module that reflects a different kind of social environment through the use of known objects and framing. There are five modules in total: a *Social Bank*, an *Identity Centre*, *Reflective Sculptures*, *Community Tables* and a *Listening Lounge*. The gallery visitor is both witness and ideally cooperative participant. The hired actor who plays the role of *Teller* greets visitors, encouraging them to play with the puzzles, listen to the podcasts, withdraw money from the social bank, flip through t-shirts, and reflect on the meditative kinetic sculptures.

Each modular area is delineated and defined by our customized, slot based furniture. Constructed from a high-impact recycled cardboard called *Falconboard*, the material is a half-inch thick, white on both sides with a brown, honeycomb core structure. Both functional and strong, the material is light and modular, making it easy to assemble and disassemble. This ease of built-in, ready-to-set-up aesthetic is reflected further in the slot design, which uses tension to keep the pieces together (as opposed to screws or other types of fasteners). The readymade construction and use of cardboard (a material which is both recyclable and ubiquitous) also references activities of temporary play (i.e. the cardboard box that can be transformed into a spaceship or dollhouse, and games such as *Giant House of Cards* made by Charles and Ray Eames, 1953).

## Module 1 – Social Bank: A Critique of Value

Module 1 employs the dynamics of a bank, and is where we distribute our social currency. The currency is a set of bills that imitate the aesthetic of legal tender, while denoting intrinsic human values. The bank is branded under a company called the *Value Investment Alliance (VIA)*. A banner hangs behind the desk advertising “VIA” as a social bank that is “accounting for the unaccounted.” The social currency is stacked inside a “safe” that is beside a desk, chair and two stools. Currently there are seven bills available within our banking system: Knowledge, Compassion, Laughter, Social Good, Patience, Acceptance and Courage.<sup>2</sup> Visitors can make withdrawals from an actor who plays the role of a *Teller*. The bill encourages people to distribute the money to anyone displaying the value depicted or to anyone in apparent need of a particular value. Each bill is serialized for the future development of a tracking system that will display the unique history of each bill, once registered by the receiver.



(fig. 3) St Mare & Walker, Final design of ‘Knowledge’ from Social Currency (2017)  
(1 of 7 newly printed social currencies)

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<sup>2</sup> Fourteen additional values were developed during research, which represent the future of this project. These include Kindness, Care, Absurdity, Playfulness, Creativity, Innovation, Apology, Thoughtfulness, Sharing, Community, Justice, Truth, Trust and Honesty. (Please note some of these values may be substituted or further developed in the future.)





(fig. 4) St Mare φ Walker, Social Bank: A Critique of Value (2017)

Several contemporary artists have used money as a means of questioning the nature of value. For example, American artist J. S. G. Boggs (1955-2017) is known for his elaborately drawn banknotes, often called 'Boggs bills'. Using these handmade notes, Boggs entered coffee shops, diners, clothing stores and other public establishments bartering with cashiers for the value denoted on the 'Boggs bill'. He never claimed these notes were real money, specifying that the bills were art when asked. Yet the quality of his work was so well executed, so stunning

and alluring, that many people accepted his bills. From first class airfares to luxury hotels, to dinners, Boggs spent millions beginning with his first dollar in 1984 (Weschler, "Comedy of Value" 42).

Boggs' bills question our social system of exchange and our beliefs in what constitutes value both within the art market and everyday life. In some cases dealers paid several thousands of dollars to attain a unique bill from the place where Boggs just spent it. Thus, the value of the bill that initially paid for a meal was now worth a hundred times the original tendered amount (Hoeller, 123). As Boggs remarked, "it's all an act of faith. Nobody knows what a dollar is, what the word means, what holds the thing up, what it stands in for. And that's also what my work is about. Look at these things, I try to say. They're beautiful. But what the hell are they? What do they do? How do they do it?" (Weschler, *Boggs* 12)

Boggs reveals the contingent nature of money's value. The value of a twenty-dollar bill is not intrinsic to the bill itself; it only holds its value to the extent that we believe it does. It is no longer representative of any physical object like gold. Yet, the perceived value of currency remains largely unquestioned, while economic ideology continues to broaden its influence, determining what is deemed important in all areas of life. In short, currency has grown to become a prosthetic for our sense of value. Theorist Franco "Bifo" Berardi notes that "the economy has achieved the status of a universal language, of the ultimate standard of choice, whereas economics should be just a branch of knowledge among others" (Berardi). The perception that the best value is financial value has grown to become a sovereign belief system that now attempts to filter all experiences through it.





(fig. 5) J.S.G. Boggs, Example of a Boggs Bill (1995)

This filtering has profoundly impacted how we socially organize ourselves and what we privilege and prioritize. This trend is explored in *Being an Artist in Post-Fordist Times*, which looks at how economics has transformed politics, art, and how society is structured. In the introduction Pascal Gielen and Paul De Bruyne focus on society's transition from Fordist to post-Fordist economics. Fordism refers to the classical industrial factory model, including mechanized mass production, the rise of specialization (i.e., division of labour), standardized working hours (i.e., 9-5) and the standardization of products. Post-Fordism on the other hand describes a shift in industry that privileges the kinds of immaterial labour found in the arts and creative fields. Gielen and De Bruyne characterize this kind of labour as being primarily cognitive and that a successful immaterial worker possesses a great deal of creativity, flexibly and communications skills (Gielen, *Being an Artist*, 8,9). Just as our valuation of currency changed from material-based to belief-based, so too did our valuation of labour. Furthermore, they argue this shift corresponds with the rise of political neoliberalism, which favours private sector, free-market solutions over governmental interventions. This perspective is so deeply entrenched that the supremacy of economic ideology is rarely questioned, especially in political

forums where systems of governance ought to be thoroughly and frequently examined for improvements. This means traditional political solutions do not offer much help for anyone looking for new ways forward. As Gielen and De Bruyne argue, “politics has marginalized itself, as it were, or at least partly pretends to be doing so, by responding only to market forces or merely vouchsafing their optimum effect. For economic politics is still politics. However, when nearly every political structure supports the same perception, the need for a dispute based on ideology disappears” (Gielen, *Being an Artist*, 10). The broad acceptance of this particular view of political economy within our social structures means that it evades serious fundamental challenges to its perceived value and importance. Unchallenged, these principles are destined to govern the future trajectory of our society.

There is reason to be concerned with this future. Sociologist Georg Simmel’s words still ring true today:

Money is concerned only with what is common to all: it asks for the exchange value, it reduces all quality and individuality to the question: How much? All intimate emotional relations between persons are founded in their individuality, whereas in rational relations man is reckoned with like a number, like an element which is in itself indifferent. Only the objective measureable achievement is of interest. (Simmel, 176)

From this understanding we are measured by a singular value. The emotional complexities that create the human experience do not get properly accounted for. Humans are not considered for their true value but by their numerical ranking. Compassion, Social Good, Laughter, and other intrinsic goods are devalued due largely to their intangible (and therefore difficult to capitalize) qualities.

Thus, money does not capture immaterial value and the results are no better even when it tries. This is well argued by Gielen when he describes the new tensions forming with immaterial labour, which is said to embrace qualities like creativity, innovation and sharing. For

example, since the labour is primarily cognitive, workers can easily take their work home with them. Gielen argues that this obligates the worker to know when to draw the line between work and home life. Not setting (or being able to set) the right boundaries can lead to depression, burnout and even psychosis. (Gielen *The Murmuring*, 19) Michael Hardt is similarly concerned with the problems that are arising with this shift to immaterial labour. Hardt warns that "these newly dominant forms of production bring with them sometimes new and often severe modes of suffering, alienation and exploitation, which all require fresh analyses and organized strategies of resistance" (Gielen, *Being an Artist*, 51). One example is the rise of precarious labour conditions that coincides with the transition from material to immaterial labour. Jobs are becoming less 9 to 5, but with that flexibility comes a lack of security. We need to look critically at the way our society is taking shape and what tools are being used to shape it.

Our social currency is designed to look critically at money's incomplete measurement of value. The bills materialize a hidden economy that cannot truly be captured financially, one that operates on a different system of exchange, a social economy. The currency depicts the intimate emotional relations described by Simmel and the qualities that are becoming exploited by post-Fordist industry. Most of all, our currency reminds people that there are values that money can't account for. The dominance of economic ideology creates a system that can only contain what is deemed valuable by its logic; intrinsic values that sit outside of this system become incalculable and thus devalued in the process.

Artist Blake Fall-Conroy similarly materializes a failing quality of our economic system in his piece *Minimum Wage Machine (Work in Progress)*. He created a machine with a crank that, when turned, will distribute one penny every 4.97 seconds. This equated to the New York State minimum wage (\$7.25) when the piece was made in 2008 (Maguire). Fall-Conroy's piece materializes how little one actually makes for their time working minimum wage. By reducing

this exchange to its smallest increments Fall-Conroy makes the abstract concept of \$7.25 per hour more tangible and concrete.

The social currency also provides an object of exchange during the moments depicted on the bills. Used as a spontaneous gift, the bills recognize these values by enhancing the experience for those involved. This is akin to *Monies*, a project by an artist named The Work Intern, which recognizes any unpaid labour you have done by paying you in “monies.” You simply just email the number of hours you worked and you will be mailed your *Monies*, which are ink prints on newsprint (The Work Intern).

Lastly, our bills can act psychologically, as a symbolic collectable. For example, consider a person who has been gifted ‘Patience’, and doesn’t wish to ever part with the bill. For the recipient the bill still symbolizes the act that plausibly prompted its gifting. Speculatively, simply carrying a value like ‘Courage’ in one’s wallet could remind the carrier to be more courageous, or more readily recognize acts of courage around one’s self. Returning art to a portable, intimate, gift-able object, the bills rekindle community by way of human value recognition. We believe that melding a value into an object like currency can reaffirm the worth, meaning and importance of such ideals.

## **Module 2 – Identity Centre: A Critique of Consumption**

Module 2 loosely reflects the structure of a retail space. Three clothing racks, each five feet in length, hold a total of 60 T-shirts and a full-length mirror to complete the scene. Visitors can flip through the shirts on the rack as if they are shopping, and even hold them up to model in front of the mirror. The shirts' colours are soft pastels ranging from peach, green, blue, yellow, pink and pebble. Each shirt has different text applied on the front where logos are typically found, making for 60 different statements. Examples include:

- THIS EXPERIENCE WILL NEVER BE WHAT YOU REMEMBER
- THE WAY YOU FORM YOUR EXPECTATIONS INFORMS YOUR EXPERIENCE
- EVERY ACT ASSUMES A FUTURE
- WE CREATE ILLUSION TO CREATE MEANING

The statements are self-reflective in nature, communicating psychological and philosophical precepts. The material of the text is also reflective, printed in a mirrored gold vinyl. Thus, the text illuminates both literally and figuratively the human experience of being, time, the connection to objects, identity and the constructed nature that build our abstract understanding of the world.

Jenny Holzer explores similar themes in her work by applying her aphoristic text to consumer products. She has explored various relationships between her truisms by printing her text on hats, cups, stickers, posters and T-shirts. Holzer's text changes as it is applied to various objects; varying meanings can be found in these relationships. As Roberta Smith observes, "On a golf ball, "Torture Is Barbaric" seems practically trite, but "Lack of Charisma Can Be Fatal" somehow fits. "If You're Considered Useless, No One Will Feed You Anymore" seems perfect for a Styrofoam cup, while "The Future Is Stupid" might work just about anywhere, given your mood" (Smith).



(fig. 6) St Mare φ Walker, Identity Centre: A Critique of Consumption (2017)

*A Critique of Consumption* departs from Holzer's work by focusing on the symbolic nature of T-shirts specifically as a prosthetic to self and the various inner psychological dialogues and personas one can experience. As discussed in the previous module, our society is favouring a world where physical labour and relations are giving way to abstract forms of work and social life. We use mirrored text to reflect the internalized, complicated psychological states of being-in-the-world, not just alone, but with others and our social environment. Capitalism sells you an external identity, which then becomes internalized. The *Identity Centre* looks to externalize and communicate these latent qualities and our affliction for seeking identity through objecthood. Being-in-the-world is inexplicably tied to our sensations and our innermost mindsets that rely on various social systems that we have been conditioned to accept and have





(fig. 7) St Mare  $\phi$  Walker, beginning of the Identity Centre (left, 2016);  
Jenny Holzer, Protect Me From What I Want (right, 2014)

constructed for ourselves. Thus, the text points to both the social and self-reflective.

This relationship between psychology and value that we explore in our work is further complicated by the modern affirmation of identity through products, branding and consumerism. Marketing researchers Claudia Townsend and Sanjay Sood argue this in their text “Self-Affirmation through the Choice of Highly Aesthetic Products,” in which they outline the complex relationship between identity, consumers and the consumed item. Their research shows that consumers look to change their identities through experiential purchases. This means our purchases do not simply reflect, but can also have a direct influence on our identity. In a particularly powerful statement, Townsend and Sood state, “it is evident that there is a more personal element that goes into thinking about the way a product looks—whether consumers are aware of it or not. It is so innate in us to appreciate beauty that the mere choice of a more

attractive item can lead us to feel better about ourselves and, in turn, act in a less biased manner” (Sood, 425).

*A Critique of Consumption* appropriates the structure of consumer products, of something attractive, to achieve a more open perspective from the witness. From this openness we hope to affect their sense of self by allowing the text pieces to integrate into their identity. The text itself is interested in all the various realities of being-in-the-world; they range from complex existential states (e.g., WE ARE ALL THAT WE REMEMBER WE ARE) to the physical (e.g., OBJECTS ARE NARRATIVES TO WHO WE ARE), the psychological (e.g., WE ALL BELIEVE OUR BELIEFS) and our social relations (e.g., YOU MISUNDERSTAND HOW MUCH YOUR MISUNDERSTANDING AFFECTS ME). In short, this module is our way of removing the superficial identity that one buys with highly aesthetic clothing by embedding our own philosophical and reflective aphorisms.



### **Module 3 – Reflective Sculptures: A Critique of Binary Beliefs**

*“If you want the truth to stand clear before you, never be for or against. The struggle between ‘for’ or ‘against’ is the mind’s worst disease.” ~ Sen-t’s’an<sup>3</sup>*

The third module deals with binary beliefs and takes the form of two text-based kinetic sculptures. Each sculpture is a mechanical pendulum, approximately 4’ by 4’ that hangs on the gallery wall. They are modular, primarily constructed from a fresh green poplar wood that is left untreated. The pendulums loosely resemble the shape of a metronome, an instrument that demarcates time and rhythmic repetition. Our experiences unfold across time, and only over time do the mechanics that create our lived experience reveal themselves. Thus, truth is difficult to achieve and rarely assured. Existential disorientation can ensue and binary modes of thinking have an intuitive seduction. For this reason the pendulums were also designed to loosely resemble a sextant, a mirrored instrument (part telescope, part curved ruler), which helps orient a person in the world (usually at sea). The simple principle of combining text with the motion of a pendulum only begins to point to the complexity of truth and human experience. Like a sextant, the pendulums orienteer the mind by revealing the dualisms of habitual thinking.

The text has been laser etched on the face of the pendulum and on the backboard behind the pendulum’s swinging path. The statements change as the pendulums oscillate. Each pendulum is as follows:

Pendulum Etching:

I PERCEIVE  
MEANING  
BIAS

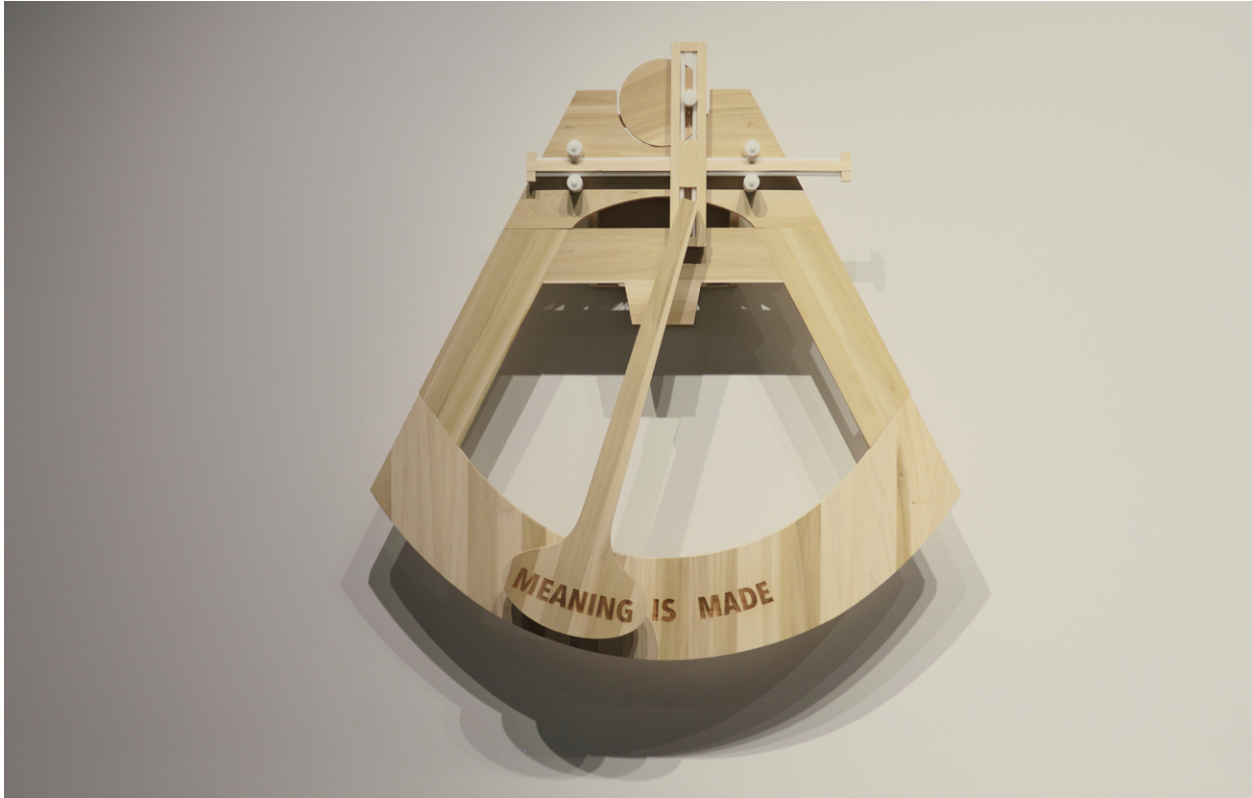
Backboard Etching:

I BELIEVE WHAT I BELIEVE  
BEING IS MADE  
ILLUSION SHAPES CHOICE

The first pendulum changes from “I BELIEVE WHAT I PERCEIVE” to “I PERCEIVE WHAT I BELIEVE”, the second pendulum from “MEANING IS MADE” to “BEING IS MEANING”, and the

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<sup>3</sup> Taken from Jonathan Haidt’s *The Righteous Mind*



(fig. 8) St Mare  $\phi$  Walker, Reflective Sculptures: A Critique of Binary Beliefs (2017)

third pendulum from “ILLUSION SHAPES BIAS” to “BIAS SHAPES CHOICE”.

The dualistic tendency of Western thinking is a well-documented phenomenon. Numerous theorists have written on the problematic nature of distinctions like subject/object, mind/body, reason/emotion, culture/nature, thinking/feeling, etc. A common objection is that these distinctions attempt to smuggle in a value judgment, privileging the former term over the latter term (i.e., we assume that reason is superior to emotion). Additionally, these beliefs are foundational, meaning they colour a large degree of our perceptions of the world. American philosopher John Dewey makes this point in his book *Art As Experience*. Dewey argues that art has become largely isolated from contemporary society and thus many theorists develop

aesthetic theories to reflect this isolation, creating further division.<sup>4</sup> Dewey believes this development has blinded us to the basis of aesthetic experiences that are found in everyday settings. He writes:

[My purpose] is to indicate that theories which isolate art and its appreciation by placing them in a realm of their own, disconnected from other modes of experiencing, are not inherent in the subject-matter but arise because of specifiable extraneous conditions. Embedded as they are in institutions and in habits of life, these conditions operate effectively because they work so unconsciously. Then the theorist assumes they are embedded in the nature of things. Nevertheless, the influence of these conditions is not confined to theory. As I have already indicated, it deeply affects the practice of living, driving away esthetic perceptions that are necessary ingredients of happiness, or reducing them to the level of compensating transient pleasurable excitations (Dewey, 10).

Dewey's second point that "it deeply affects the practice of living" is an important one. It's not just a matter of reframing our understanding of art while everything else remains the same. The psychology behind something tangibly affects that thing and everyone who is involved with it. In short, Dewey's argument exemplifies how dualistic thinking can have wide-reaching effects that significantly impact our socio-political condition.

In *The Righteous Mind* New York University Professor Jonathan Haidt tackles the psychology behind two of the most divisive issues: politics and religion. He builds his theory from the "intuitive-rational" distinction that was the basis of Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman's book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. The major premise of this model is that the brain uses two "systems" of thinking. System 1 is intuitive, producing quick decisions, while System 2 is deliberate, rational and thus slower (Kahneman, 21). Many of Haidt's psychological experiments demonstrate that we are primarily intuitive animals, and only rational conditionally. He uses the analogy of an elephant (our intuitive side) and a rider (our rational side). The elephant largely

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, the special, precious status of art objects compared to other objects, or the artist as an eccentric, aloof self-expressionist versus a "regular" person.

goes where it wants and the rider's job is to guide the elephant there more effectively, while accounting for its decision (Haidt, 82-3). In other words, people exhibit a good deal of *post hoc* reasoning; we act, then try to justify our actions after-the-fact. More alarmingly, Haidt's research shows that our minds have evolved to group people into "teams" that are either "for" or "against" you, particularly when it comes to divisive issues like politics and religion. He writes, "Morality binds and blinds. It binds us to ideological teams that fight each other as though the fate of the world depended on our side winning each battle. It blinds us to the fact that each team is composed of good people who have something important to say." (Haidt, 366)

We learn from Dewey, Kahneman and Haidt that dualistic thinking is a default human quality. It is pervasive; found in the assumptions on which other beliefs rest. Most importantly, the simplifying quality of dualistic thinking does not leave us well equipped to tackle our most pressing socio-economic and political issues. These arguments reveal the need to "think slow" about this problem and modify our social structures to avoid the pitfalls of human fallibility. *A Critique of Binary Beliefs* uses the scaffolding of Kahneman's model of the mind. The mechanized, kinetic element appeals to our fast-thinking nature. Yet the repetitive, time-based quality of the sculptures persuades the viewer to remain. This allows for the text to begin appealing to our slow-thinking side. The nuances of the oscillating statements, combined with the motion, create a meditative and reflective quality.

## **Module 4 – Community Tables: A Critique of Certainty**

*A Critique of Certainty* is represented by a set of four tables with different puzzles on each table and a pin board behind with hand written statements on 8 x 10 pieces of paper. The community tables, the puzzles, and the written statements are all designed to be arranged and rearranged with multiple possible configurations. The puzzles are created from untreated maple, with laser-etched text. Two of the puzzles are a classic, rectangular-shaped and one is circular. Unlike the traditional ones, these puzzles do not have definite solutions. The final statement depends largely on the perspective of the person solving it. For instance, one puzzle uses the words “change”, “see”, “you”, “what” and “will”. These pieces/words can be placed on any line within its rectangular frame, allowing for several meaningful “solutions”:

CHANGE WHAT YOU WILL SEE  
SEE WHAT YOU WILL CHANGE  
SEE WHAT WILL CHANGE YOU  
WHAT CHANGE WILL YOU SEE  
WHAT CHANGE YOU WILL SEE  
WHAT YOU SEE WILL CHANGE  
WHAT YOU WILL SEE CHANGE

WHAT YOU CHANGE WILL SEE  
WHAT WILL YOU SEE CHANGE  
WHAT WILL SEE YOU CHANGE  
YOU SEE WHAT WILL CHANGE  
YOU WILL SEE WHAT CHANGE  
YOU CHANGE WHAT WILL SEE  
CHANGE WHAT WILL SEE YOU

The other rectangular puzzle asks for the words “illusion”, “valued”, “is” and “choice” to be arranged and rearranged in the same manner. The circular puzzles provide visitors with the opportunity to consider the relationship between different kinds of psychological concepts concerning belief and perception.

This work plays within a construct (i.e., the puzzle) in order to present/highlight a false reality that problems possess singular solutions; the truth is all outcomes are mutable. A similar puzzling logic can be seen in Matt Donovan & Hallie Siegel’s piece *Haikube* (2005), a poetry machine employing the format of a Rubik’s Cube to effectively write thousands of haikus with just a rotation of the wrist/form (another nod to the object as prosthetic). As Donovan states: “The Haikube is a poetry-generation machine, so you don’t have to solve it back to the original

poems, you can write your own poems with it. That duality is kind of fascinating, and working with constraint-based poems, coming up with a prescribed set of rules – there’s something very fascinating about that move back and forth between rigid and creative” (Thorpe). Our work, much like the *Haikube*, uses the boundaries of a jigsaw puzzle that historically has one resolution or goal to reconfigure it, resulting in multiple perspectives, resolutions and nuanced ways of seeing within the same structured framework.



(fig. 9) St Mare  $\phi$  Walker, beginning of community tables (left, 2016);  
Matt Donovan & Hallie Siegel, Haikube (right, 2005)

In 2011 former Ad Executive Rory Sutherland delivered a talk for TEDx in Athens, Greece titled *Perspective is Everything*, where he argued the psychological quality of a moment is what constitutes its meaning. Meaning can also be influenced by the intuitive appeal of objects, as was highlighted by Townsend and Sood (in Module 2), and the sway of groups of people we self-identify with as per Haidt’s analysis of divided minds (in Module 3). It is an important distinction that Sutherland echoes when he says, “One of the great mistakes, I think, of economics is it fails to understand that what something is, whether it’s retirement, unemployment, cost, is a function, not only of its amount, but also its meaning” (Sutherland).

Sutherland advocates for a broader acceptance of what he calls “psychological solutions” to problems. By this he means we ought to be more open to solutions that use our

latest understanding of human psychology instead of traditional measures (e.g., focusing on the enjoyment of your drive to work versus the time it takes to get there). Sutherland declares that things don't actually “depend on what they really are, but on how we view them.” (Sutherland) This echoes the guiding principle behind *A Critique of Certainty*.



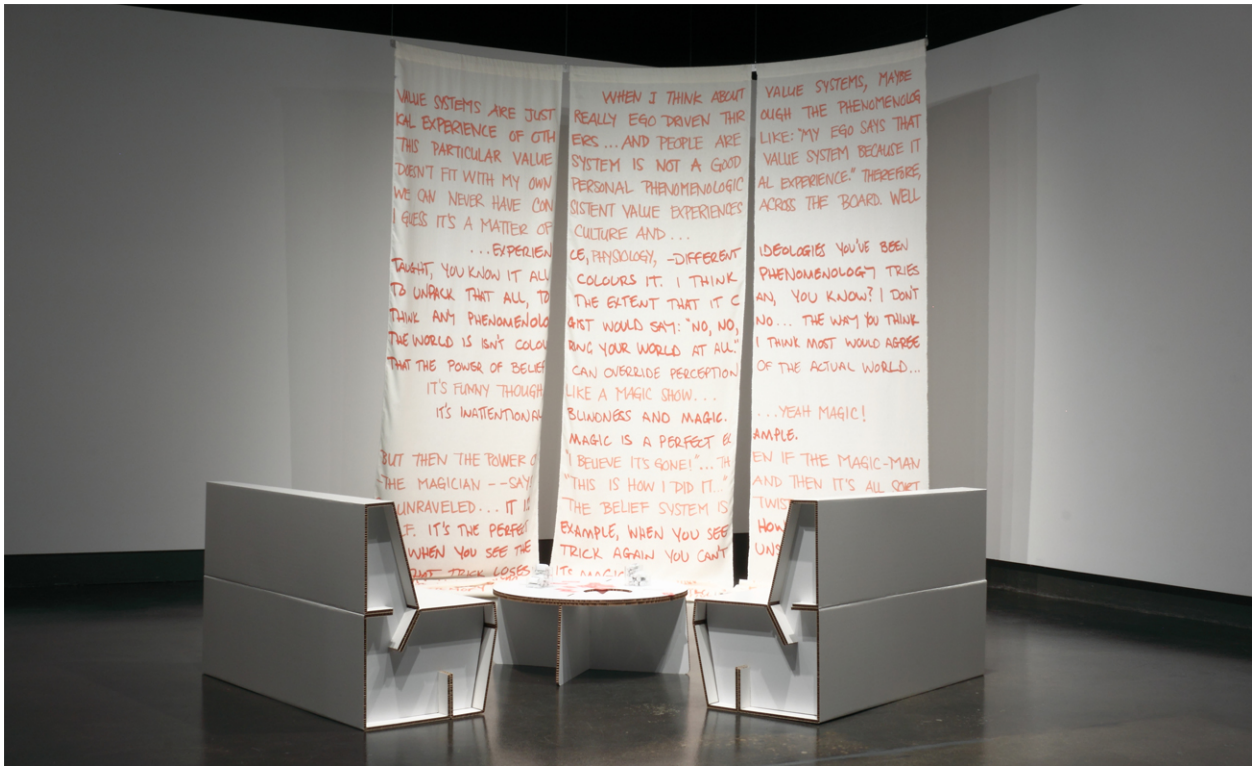
(fig. 10) St Mare φ Walker, Community Tables: A Critique of Certainty (2017)

## **Module 5 – Listening Lounge: A Critique of Rationality**

The fifth module is a lounge entitled *A Critique of Rationality* furnished with two cardboard sofas that visitors can sit on. A coffee table is located in front of the sofas with a hole cut into its surface. The hole is lined with fabric, which holds a bundle of cards promoting our podcast called *Unpolished and Unprepared*. Also on the table are pairs of complementary earbuds, available in a clear acrylic container. The podcast is a series of impromptu conversations that we recorded from Dec. of 2015 to the present. These discussions address existential questions and our failings to make sense of the world, despite our genuine curiosity. The lounge is framed by a large textile sculpture. This piece is made of three panels of fabric, each 52 inches wide; they hang next to each other in an arc, forming a quarter circle. The panels are suspended 10 feet above the ground, stretching to the floor, where extra fabric pools. A written excerpt from our podcast extends across all three panels. The text, a hand-written dialogue, discusses the nature of perception. The beginning is easy to read, but quickly becomes harder to follow due to the divisions and rough edges in the fabric panels. These divisions create idiosyncrasies due to the ways each panel falls. The outcome is that sentences become misaligned, and the dialogue becomes illegible by the time it touches the floor. The implication is that conversations of this nature are invariably disjointed and muddled. We often communicate past each other without reaching any kind of resolution. Truth remains out of reach despite our earnest attempts at being rational.

Daniel Kahneman (author of *Thinking, Fast and Slow*) has conducted a tremendous amount of research that demonstrates the limits of rational thought. He details several heuristics and biases that point to the broader concerns that influence our decisions. For example, people are more likely to opt for surgery if you say “the survival rate is 90 percent” versus “the mortality

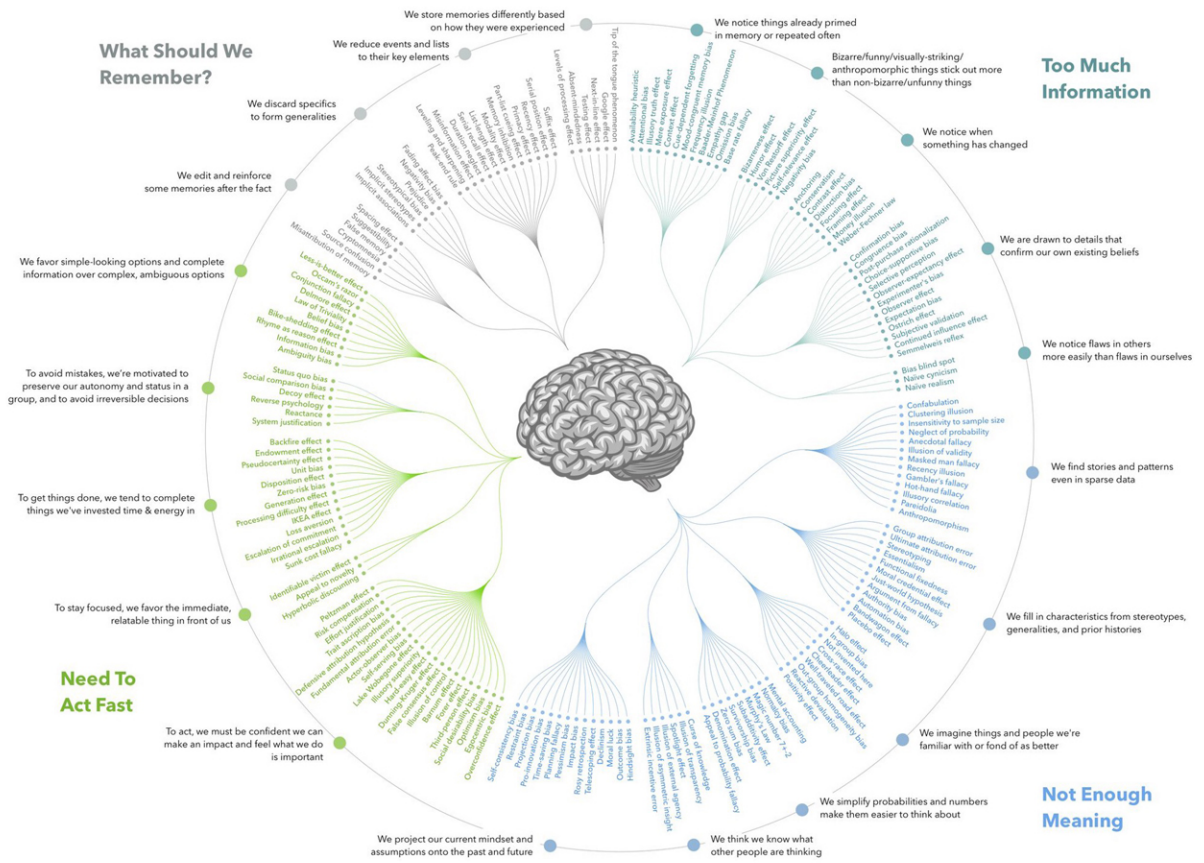




(fig. 11) St Mare & Walker, Listening Lounge: A Critique of Rationality (2017)

rate is 10 percent” (Kahneman, 367). Both statements express the same degree of risk, but the framing has changed. We are fallible, meaning not just that we are capable of making errors, but that mistakes are inevitable. When a false assumption goes unnoticed it becomes difficult to remove, and other beliefs are constructed on top of it. Kahneman’s work reveals that we are influenced by considerations beyond reason. And yet his very act of researching reflects the benefits of thinking “slow.” His work, a cataloging and indexing of all the ways we catalogue and index the world incorrectly, hopes to avoid these false assumptions. But even if a complete understanding of cognitive biases could be achieved, guarding against hundreds of potential errors would be excessively demanding. Fig. 12 gives you a sense of what that would mean.

# COGNITIVE BIAS CODEX, 2016



ALGORITHMIC LAYOUT + DESIGN BY JMS - JOHN MANOGIAN III // CONCEPT + METICULOUS CATEGORIZATION BY BUSTER BENSON // DEEP RESEARCH BY WIKIPEDIANS FAR + WIDE

(fig. 12) Depiction of all known cognitive biases as of 2016

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this research and resulting exhibition is ultimately designed to reflect and critique different conditions of our contemporary social life. We described how our work develops from investigative conversations that attempt to clarify what it means to be-in-the-world. Our shared passion to look beyond accepted models lead us to question and uncover the illusions of our current systems in both society and the self. Our collaborative effort reimagines objects and schemas revealing the unstable nature of human knowledge. This can be seen in our Social Bank, which explicates how money is incapable of capturing intrinsic human value. Economics as a tool of value measurement discludes many hidden economies, thus devaluing them by default. These same problems have also been observed in our Post-fordist economy where creative and cognitive work are often unpaid, underpaid, and undervalued.

These systems that shape our sense of value and meaning extend into personal identity as well. Our identity centre uses a mock consumer setting to amplify how clothing (and its capitalist apparatus) is not a separate entity from us in the world. Instead the consumer world we have created and occupy becomes an extension of our sense of self. We have reshaped this structure to better reflect the existential thoughts one grapples with when trying to find meaning in a world more interested in appearance and economic value. This leads us into the nature of the human mind, which is addressed through the pendulum sculptures, puzzles and listening lounge. The pendulums aim to reveal our dualistic modes of thinking and the problems these can create when projected onto the complexities of reality. The puzzles point to the mutability of abstract concepts, challenging the degree of certainty we feel about our thoughts and beliefs. Lastly, our podcast and corresponding fabric sculpture addresses language's ability to both raise deep questions about our being while not providing us with the necessary tools to answer them.

The essence of these conceptual inquiries have a long and storied history, dating back as far as the trial of Socrates, where he famously stated “the unexamined life is not worth living” (Plato, 33). Our decision to title this body of work *The Re-examined Life* was intended to recognize our affinity to this history. Similarly, we framed each module as a “critique” in part as a reference to Immanuel Kant’s magnum opus *Critique of Pure Reason*. However, it is apparent with close reading of our work that we do not hold the same kind of idealism towards humanity’s rationality as did Kant. This should not be read as a rejection of reason; rather our work acknowledges our shared limits and failures to act as rationally as we think we can. We realize the beliefs we believe are as changeable and illusionary as the world they’ve created. In *The Re-examined Life* we have ventured to uncover these certain uncertainties.

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