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# Presence-at-hand

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Washington University in St. Louis  
Graduate School of Art

*Presence-at-hand*

Eric Lyle Schultz

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A thesis presented to the Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts  
of Washington University in St. Louis in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

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## Abstract

The writing that follows is intended to provide a theoretical framework for the motives behind my practice. The primary concerns addressed are the reception, transmission, and physical shape of knowledge. I will discuss a human condition that exists as a byproduct of both the legacy of representation as well as the innate biology of the brain. I will argue that as a society we are governed by the residue of an extreme logic, and that this condition places severe margins on our potential for creative solutions. I will propose that our ability to create meaning is stifled by the nature of representation itself—and that the overwhelming presence of logic in the mind fosters an unfavorable environment for radical ideas to occur. Through focusing on the limitations of language and habits of the mind topics will explore my work, and the role of art, as a site for the emergence of an unconventional kind of relearning.



## Introduction

The vitality of art is located in a question. Not in any particular question, but in the ability to ask a question. The function of creative practice is to explore ideas that would otherwise be swallowed up by the efficiency of living. Art operates today within a culture of extreme reason. When I say reason I don't mean empathy or understanding, I mean to say that we create art in an environment that is both overly efficient and oppressively logical. The environment I speak of is not a physical location per say, though it does exist as a reflection in the spaces and objects that we create. The site that I am interested in is the place where meaning is made, or where reality takes its form.

The mind is a kind of utensil that has been shaped in some partial manner to make sense of our physical environment, and to do so it relies on an intense amount of efficiency. The quicker our mind defines its surroundings, the more successful it is at navigating them. This advantage is apparent in everything from basic interactions to the structuring of social hierarchies. To me this is a great point of intrigue. The implication is that success, in some way, is hinged to how well we know and communicate through systems of representation.

Art predominately functions within the realm of communication. It has everything to do with representation—how we represent ourselves, others, and the form of ideas. My interest is in pressing the role of art and the artist to consider the shape of knowledge. If knowing is tied to representation, whether in the mind or through physical contact, the innate function of art practice is to take part in questioning the way we know.

## An Inheritance of Logic

A condition of extreme reason exists today as a by-product of a long history of critical inquiry into the foundations of knowledge itself. As far back as Plato and the origins of metaphysical exploration thinkers of the Western world have toiled over the notion of meaning. From religion—to rationality—to religion and back, we have prioritized a search for significance.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Descartes introduced the prospect of individual sovereignty and his study of objectivity brought about an assertion of a *first truth*.<sup>\*</sup> He proposed that meaning began through the acknowledgment of an internal self and was not determined through some external source.<sup>1</sup> When Descartes established the grounds for a formal existence of objectivity he determined a separation between objects in the world and the mind of the individual. It can be thought of in terms of two separate environments, a first and a second one. A first environment is one that simply exists; it is the world of objects, everything outside of human consciousness. The second environment is the world constructed in the mind through systems of representation.

As a model, the function of representation is to create a system for defining everything we come into contact with. It structures our interpretations, the way we think, and it communicates our ideas, feelings, and emotions. In short, representation is the culturally constructed filter through which we process and convey meaning. Objects, ideas, and actions take on significance through the agreed upon terms that we've developed for them and in turn they create normative ways of thinking. This obstructs the possibility for

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<sup>\*</sup> A *first truth* was Descartes notion that truth occurs first in the individual, and is then applied to larger concepts like politics, religion, etc.

locating meaning beyond the boundaries of representation. For instance, when we see something that appears to be a book, the normative assumption is that it can be literally read or that it has a spine, pages, etc.



Figure 1-2. Eric Lyle Schultz, *Plumbwall*, plumb bob, wallboard, wood, 2014

Objects and materials are imbued with a sense of purpose. We clearly manufacture them to provide their function, but they also acquire a mysterious truth about the culture that creates them. My work finds motive in sometimes the most mundane materials and investigates the flexibility of the logic they possess. *Plumb Wall*, 2014 (fig. 1-2) takes the extreme rationale of two tools, a plumb bob and a sheet of wallboard, and introduces a level irrationality to their otherwise rigid purpose. By replacing the obedient cotton thread of the plumb bob with a rigid steel wire and inverting its orientation to find the center of gravity above the object as opposed to below, I am looking for a new truth that this tool has to potentially offer. Somewhere between the inherent logic of the plumb bob and the

organization I have asked it to perform within, I arrive at a new schematic from which to build my wall. Asking a tool to behave with a newfound non-logic, so that I may create an object on this basis, allows me to think about new models that work against conventional standards. For me, this exertion of effort toward an unrealistic end allows the ability to identify the possibilities that representation can take—beyond its matter-of-fact foundations.

Modern society functions through reason and logic, as opposed to emotion and subjective expression. The presence of meaning today has become synonymous with the presence of logic. Within dominant culture, we value rational acts, and those acts become proof of a *realistic* cultural outlook. Facts, as summations of reason, serve as tools to organize a pragmatic foundation for social, political, and economic constructs. On the other hand, actions that seem to function against fact-based reasoning appear deluded, improbable, utopian or merely fantastical. This situation could be thought of as a cultural condition of factual action—or, the favoring of cultural action rooted in facts.<sup>2</sup> This favoritism presents a problem both for the development of creative solutions and for the progression of cultural thought in general. A society that champions a *realistic* attitude is one that is confined to its current definition and falls victim to a kind of cyclical thinking and acting.

In Western culture, having a preference today for rationality over irrationality may have developed from the emergence in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century of a deep distrust in larger systems of meaning. With the subsequent introduction of self-government, we carry the trend of favoring personal convictions along with a general disbelief in narratives outside of our own. Essentially a postmodern condition, the inability to believe in over-arching

truth systems is a product of intellectual work that has deemed pan-cultural narratives to be irrational themselves. Deconstructing the lack of equality, of efficiency, in governing systems has become a societal tendency, and the recognition of subjective realities represents a new kind of logic.

In an effort to deconstruct dominant systems of knowledge, philosophical works of Jean Francois Lyotard and later Jean Baudrillard among others would come to challenge the specifics of reason itself. They arrived at this conclusion by contending that all discourse including that of logic is dependent on some outside narrative and therefore unverifiable. Narratives, they argue, as forms of truth are unverifiable because they are constructed by shared experiences and therefore limited to the group that makes those agreements. Ultimately, Lyotard made the case for all logic to be dependent on and be split up into a variety of narratives—being particularly concerned with the legitimacy of dominant narratives.<sup>3</sup>

Take Language as a dominant story for example. If narratives are created and utilized for their ability to compare and contrast experience, in small or large groups, they are stories that are handed down in order to develop a collective understanding of cultural form. Dominant narratives are ones that envelop multiple sub-culture groups in order to distill meaning and create common ground. The legitimacy of language as a dominant narrative comes into question when we consider its limitation on the production of meaning.

Language is a system of shared symbols and signs. Like any discourse it requires a past, present, and potential future. The special function of language is that it supports the existence of so many smaller, albeit important, micro narratives. Building on

these ideas the French philosopher Jacques Derrida points out that all forms of communication, which rely on signs and signifiers, are only partially present because they also exist in the past. Simultaneously they are absent of full meaning because they cannot be absolutely present. He states that every expressive act in the present refers to both the past and the present through a dependency on a previously constructed framework of signs and symbols. Elaborations on his term “Differance” claims that theories, which seek validation through either verbalized or written language, cannot not succeed because they will always work within language and therefore be susceptible to the same *slippage*.<sup>4</sup> By slippage he meant the inability of any system of representation to be wholly accurate.

*I Forgot to Remember, 2014* (fig. 3-4) is a series of visual texts taken line for line and rewritten from a children’s book by Mercer Mayer. Committing one page for each single sentence, I transcribed the manuscript in its entirety repeating each line over and over until it filled a standard 8.5 x 11 sheet. I then went back in and isolated one word per page to start a descending scale of fonts until the letters disappeared—and repeat. The result is a kind of aberration where text becomes something more than symbols. Words on a page equate to a collection of marks, and move into a visual field of textures. By filtering the text through the structure of a presentation tool and exploring the nuances of that tool, slippages occur where representation meets the brains ability to reason with the logic of its form.



## Habits of Mind

There is much that recent studies in science, and more specifically neuroscience, can illuminate when pairing psychological responses with those of a physiological nature. The ability to perceive and communicate meaning through art, with few animal exceptions, is largely an activity that occurs in the human brain.\* By and large what separates the human brain from the animal brain is the difference between modes of perception and communication. Animals, by nature, communicate through directives; it is a kind of command-oriented language where signals are received at face value—this sound means danger, that movement indicates safety. For better or worse, the human brain sends and receives these same types of signals, but with another level of complexity. For Humans, communication is not just about receiving messages, but also to do with processing the information encoded within those messages.

Our experience with the world is derived from the cooperation of the mind, the brain, and a context. Experience is shaped through reasoning, between a physical encounter and a higher-level cognitive framework. The brain is merely a physiological tool. It is a biological organ that perceives and relays objective or tangible information from the external world. The mind on the other hand is a uniquely human capacity. The distinction between the mind and the brain defines the separation between objectivity and subjectivity—between perception and cognition. Were it possible to separate the two; objectivity, or the brain, is simply about taking in information, whereas subjectivity, or the process of the mind, is to filter that data into a form of meaning. In the case of an

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\* The bowerbirds of Australia, whose males build wooden structures and uniquely decorate them with colorful debris during mating season, provides a rare example of subjective presence in a non-human species.



experience with art, images, and maybe even the external world in general, the relationship between these two systems, the mind and the brain, makes up more or less the entirety of our encounters.

Not unlike animals, the goal of basic human communication is the coherence of the message. For animals, the need for clarity in communication is as dramatic as the difference between life and death. If evolution is what you subscribe to, our story is not much different. For animals and humans alike, coherence amounts to understanding, and the ability to constantly *know* our surroundings is what keeps us alive—if even in a slightly insular manner. Maintaining a state of knowing, which is essentially a survival mechanism, is defined by what we are able to understand. And, on a basic level, that works out for us pretty well.

For my own work I am interested in how this state of lucidity does, or maybe does not, function. Coherence, as a form of knowledge, means that our beliefs are rooted in our ability to understand. The brain perceives information with relative ease, and the mind is instinctively shaped to make sense of it at a similar pace. The ease of comprehension is a facet of the mind-brain relationship that is designed to protect us, in a way, from an unsafe environment—or more simply, of a place we do not know. Subsequently, our interest in ideas, objects, or encounters is instinctively tied to this evolutionary habit.

Studying the brain, neuroscientist Daniel Berlyne developed a theory of arousal in relation to art that proposes our interest in works of art are attached in a complex way to a kind of pleasure system in the brain.<sup>5</sup> Interest is arrived at through a psychobiological response to variables present in works of art. This response, according to Berlyne, relies on the presence of three variables: psychophysical, ecological, and collative. Psychophysical

variables are ones that refer to the actual physical properties in a work of art, which elicit psychological responses in a viewer. Ecological ones refer to the properties of the work that mirror relationships to our shared idea of a social context and collative ones refer to the amount of variables present in the work that can be stitched together to create a larger concept or meaning. The idea is that through sensory, cognitive, and contextual encounters, the collection of structures that make up the reward system in the brain are triggered through works of art and the perceiver becomes stimulated while they grapple with the variables.

Berlyne suggests that as arousal increases through prolonged stimulation, we reach a tipping point, at which time we retreat due to overstimulation. The perceiver moves from pleasure to disinterest when an attempt to collate these variables proves either too laborious or altogether improbable. These variables, which to Berlyne seem to be the most important, are closely tied to a perceivers expectations of what they recognize in a sensory encounter—i.e. how similar they are to a previous kind of representation. When the mind is able to collate the variables of a given context into a larger concept, we are in essence learning from our ability to recognize previous forms of representation. When the variables fail to collate, typically because they have no precedence, either we become disinterested, or we have a kind of mental crisis.



Figure 5-6. Eric Lyle Schultz, *Slow NO Wake*, Lamp, Trashcan, Water, Paint, 2014

*Slow No Wake*, 2014 (fig. 5-7) is a work that aims at testing the mind's ability to assemble a familiar scenario from an unfamiliar set of variables. The object depicts a lamp resting on an end table in a fairly straightforward domestic encounter. The work itself is designed to emulate a familiar environment—the kind that has so firmly rooted its image in our knowledge base as to disappear from question. The fact that the lamp is actually a buoy, and the end table a trashcan full of water, only becomes apparent upon closer inspection (fig 7). Objects of familiarity act as beacons of our knowable environment. They reinforce the hold we have on our surroundings and are organized to reflect their meanings.



Figure 7. *Slow NO Wake*, Detail

The construction of meaning, on a basic level, relies on the ability to recognize and formulate universal concepts into thoughtful arrangements in the mind. We require a level of familiarity with these concepts not only on a practical level, as in the desire to communicate while being understood, but also in terms of our uneasiness for grappling with mystery and the unknown. We prefer to have an idea of the way things ought to be. Not only does this rational mind state drive our interest in things, but also it provides us a comfortable amount of mental stability.

The notion of Fluency theory refers to a known tendency to prefer things that we find exemplary or prototypical to our cultural regions.<sup>6</sup> Signs and symbols, concepts and ideals are easiest for us to comprehend when they have been collectively validated as correct or useful. As a result we are increasingly exposed to them and this amplified exposure fosters a solidified framework of familiar concepts, which define our mental

vocabulary. Juha Varto, a Finnish philosopher on art, aesthetics, and knowledge, discusses familiarity with regard to his idea of *amplification*, as a process of forming and maintaining habits. He states “amplification is a kind of safety, it blocks out anything new and unpredictable. It is a habit-forming phenomenon. Habits are a way we learn, but they also prevent us from experiencing new phenomena”.<sup>7</sup> What I take this to mean is that while a cultural familiarity with certain concepts allows us to communicate and provides a framework from which we can learn, it progressively restricts our capacity for recognizing something unfamiliar.

A habitual state of mind could describe the perseverance of things overly familiar to us. It could also describe a kind of behavior that we participate in, likely from a subconscious position, to create and maintain structure in our lives. Part of the mind's efficiency when operating with the brain is its ability to hold and apply schemas, or preformed concepts of things that the brain comes into contact with regularly. We do this, on an evolutionary level, to quickly make meaning out of an encounter. Living beyond mere hunting and gathering, the need for rapid processing is relatively negotiable, yet we retain this biological trait and the tools we develop reinforce it. A habit of mind presents the possibility that encountering the world is a matter of filtering experience and constructing ideas through a framework of preformed images.

The split between the mind and brain, as discussed earlier, defines the separation between subjectivity and objectivity. If the brain perceives objectively, and the mind superimposes subjectivity onto those perceptions, then the capacity for the brain to perceive an unmodified image is inhibited. Evidence shows that we in fact need little visual or sensory information of any kind to complete images in our mind. We are equipped to

take in the most crucial details and construct full definitions in our imagination. The experience of a familiar smell, or of noticing the vague shape of resemblance in a low hanging cloud triggers concepts in the mind and the experience becomes captured with an object or idea. The perceptual nuances that might emerge from such an encounter are supplanted by the mind's persistence to recognize the experience.

We are biologically wired to use our mind in as efficient a way as possible. This efficiency manifests itself as a kind of habitual behavior. This habit is a process through which the body's sensorial encounters are ultimately overridden by a higher-level form of cognition in the mind. The problem here is that if our only source of encounter consists of those with already formulated systems of representation in the mind, we are essentially subject to crafting a thought, an expression, from a preexisting model. We become tied to a cyclical pattern of thinking. I can say with real certainty that there is no escaping this cycle—as we are bound to some sort of representational framework. I am, however, mystified by the relationship between the mind, the brain, and its reliance on representation. I am mystified by how even in small mundane encounters we often fail to consider the role that representation plays in constructing, and in some cases maintaining jurisdiction over our collective ways of knowing.

The desire to perceive a meaningful environment seems obvious. Since the beginning of consciousness we have relied on representation to provide us with that meaning. We do not live in a desolate cavern for one; therefore agreed upon systems are required so that we may determine the conditions for a shared space. This is important, and on the other end is some kind of hallucination—a primordial existence with no object, no subject, no meaning. What we encounter is that more or less from birth we develop a

cognitive construct that favors the habit of knowing over experiencing, and strips the brain of the freedom to recognize phenomena outside of a preformed structure of meaning. We are simultaneously stifled by a lack of unrepresented terrain, and comfortably situated within a framework that washes over our physical environment.

Like animals, we rely on a habitual state of mind in order to most successfully negotiate our surroundings. What separates us from animals, and an environment that is purely objective, is the ability to perceive both what symbols denote, as well as interpret for ourselves what they connote. It is the difference between simply recognizing what symbols stand for, and having the capacity to interpret subjectively what they might imply. We have seen that the human mind is more than the brain. It is a unique ecological entity. A theory of mind is the concept that we are able to attribute mental states, beliefs, and intentions to others—and ourselves.<sup>8</sup> It is the idea that we formulate a structure of mind, from near birth, that allows us to interpret the implications or meaning behind basic symbols of representation. This skill is evidence that even before we are able to comprehend higher-level concepts, we adhere to a system of logic. We have always possessed what is only recently called a theory of mind and this addition to our brain is what gives us the ability to think rationally, and to question rationality itself.

If we have established that the brain is a receptor tool and the mind a framework of universally familiar concepts, how is it that our experience is anything but predetermined? If cognition is so dependent on shared systems of representation, so aware of this framework, how does a physical encounter with new phenomena stand its ground? In an instance where the habitual behavior of the mind overrides the brain's ability to perceive

we are relegated to thought that is not only stale, but also potentially indoctrinated by the shape and form of current systems of representation.



## Presence-at-Hand: The Broken Hammer

Works of art take place in the brain. Whether they are overly aware or not, both a perceiver and an author utilize basic sensory functions \_vision, touch, auditory, etc.\_ in order to receive and transmit ideas. Semir Zeki cites in his *Statement on Neuroesthetics* the idea of an artist playing with the jurisdiction of the brain. Taking as his example a great renaissance artist:

“In executing his work, [even] Michelangelo instinctively understood the common visual and emotional organization and workings of the brain. That understanding allowed him to exploit our common visual organization and arouse shared experiences beyond the reach of words. It is for this reason that the artist is in a sense, a neuroscientist, exploring the potentials and capacities of the brain, though with different tools.”<sup>9</sup>

Zeki’s statement makes reference to the artist as a kind of neuroscientist. He makes this claim with the understanding that there are methods, either innately or consciously applied, that the artist implements in order to illicit or convey an emotional response in their audience. Understanding the relationship between cognition and perception is not only at the heart of all artistic encounters—it defines our ability to apply concepts to our physical experience with the world. It is the basis through which we shape our model of reality.

Though the logic of representation maintains jurisdiction over the tools we have to construct meaning, it is not to say that we don’t possess the ability to see beyond its limitations. The ability to interpret, which comes from acquiring a theory of mind, means

we also have the ability to ask questions. Unlike the animal brain, the human mind is a subjective organism. Given the opportunity, or the conditions, it possesses the skills to breakdown communication and reveal gaps in the logic of representation.

Disturbing the framework of concepts that are a part of our consciousness seems to me to be a difficult task as it requires a willingness to break with habit in hopes of a high risk high reward type of outcome. The risk is that we might ostracize ourselves from some culturally developed concept of reality, but the payoff is potentially a more inclusive way of knowing the world. Juha Varto talks about this idea of risk and reward in terms of learning. He states:

“when learning (skills) people have these intense moments when they come face-to-face with a new requirement, and see it juxtaposed with their habits...(in) moments like these people’s readiness for something new is tested. In most cases learning is so tempting that the new can defeat the habit, because they consider this deviation to be rewarding, however, it is equally possible that peoples development stops at a this moment, as this requires a break with the past”.<sup>10</sup>

What I gather here is that true learning comes from a break with habit. In the most extreme sense breaking these habits of mind require a break from our sense of reality, otherwise we ultimately cycle back to fill some small void of newness with a comparison to something familiar. This kind of full departure is most likely implausible and potentially problematic, but what does strike me as important is the desire to make a gradual impact on the conditions of the arrangement. If we can influence the way the brain is allowed to perceive, by maybe fooling the mind into taking a less aggressive role, we may be able to open up opportunities to reposition the minds contract with the conventions of representation.

In *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger makes reference to the habitual behavior of the mind in his metaphor for the hammer. Like most tools, we understand their purpose—a hammer is for hammering. When functioning, a tool (or concept) has explicit purpose. In the moment that a tool loses its ability or is broken, it becomes briefly mere material. We see this as a kind of crisis and are thrust into a momentary state of anxiety.<sup>11</sup> Objects, as systems of representation, convince us of our surroundings and when they fail to coalesce we witness a gap in the utility of representation.

Jean Baudrillard pointed out in his 1968, *System of Objects*, that objects are not inert forms and in fact present a kind of slippage. From consumer goods to systems of architecture, objects like any model, share a similar relationship to language and the past.<sup>12</sup> Through this relationship they take on a cyclical representation, similar to that of language, in order to reflect a dominant societies' needs and desires. Objects assume *factual* definition through common language and become targets of repetitive judgment. Heidegger makes reference to this repetition in his development of the terms *Ready-to-hand* and *Present-at-hand*.

*Ready-at-hand* describes a thing with an unflinching awareness of purpose. It describes our action toward, and implied valuation of the things we encounter on a daily basis. On the contrary, *Present-at-hand* describes the brief condition that arises when an awareness of purpose becomes momentarily lost, and before a desire for resolve takes over. Heidegger's example of the hammer delineates between these two states. When the hammer is broken our sheer awareness of its readiness as a tool provokes the immediate response to fix the hammer and carry on, avoiding crisis. Because of our conditioned state of readiness we are not comfortable spending time with the hammer. Evolutionary biology

tells us that spending time in this space, because it makes us less capable of negotiating our surroundings, is a fragile place to be.

Heidegger summarily states that “objects are invisible, wrapped up in a context of functionality and use”.<sup>13</sup> The lack of visibility he is referring to could be equated to a lack of *presence-at-hand*. The nature of representation, which relies on functioning tools in order to operate, overrides our ability to sustain a state of presence.

The Desert as both a metaphor and a location has come to occupy a place in my practice. My work plays at constructing the conditions for a middle environment; an intermediate space between the language that structures our subjective experience and the origins that might have prefaced it. I have described this location for myself as a kind of desert where actions unfold at a prolonged pace, where things grow in a harsh environment, and reveal themselves slowly. The desert embodies a sense of time and rhythm that is foreign or even frightens the efficiency of the mind. It is a place where things die of thirst, hallucinatory phenomena occur, or where people go to get lost.

The ongoing series *Desert Music* (fig. 8-12) is an effort to present works as part of a composition. Each assemblage is seen as a kind of player in a larger arrangement. The work contrasts the symbol of *desert* with the cadence and perceptual phenomena of *desert*. Bringing into concert the sensory encounters that may or may not be present in the work, with the viewer’s expectations of representation. The outcome is a build up of events that alter our desire to read the environment through symbols, and slowly moves us toward a reading of the tactile qualities present in the experience of the work.



Figure 8. Eric Lyle Schultz, *Desert Music: Fantasea*, sand, inflatable raft, metronome, water, 2015



Figure 9. Eric Lyle Schultz, *Desert Music: Half-life*, sand, heater elements, glass, wood, water, pails, balloons, color acetate, 2015

*Desert Music: Fantasea*, and *Half-life* 2015 (fig. 8-12) make up a theatrical installation that borders on a spiritual experience. Make shift representations of cacti function like props while light cast through warm yellow and red filters provide a kind of aura that is evocative of the desert. The installation has a temporal quality, in the way that each component seems to be performing an action. The role of the objects performance is actually what is on display. In *Half-life*, balloons anchored to cactus forms sway and deflate altering the lighting conditions and releasing drops of water from a pail. The pail of water transforms into a different kind of receptacle, a stand in for the water collecting characteristics of a cactus. In *Fantasea*, a raft taken out of action by its position in a block of sand slowly leaks water from one side to the other, ultimately spilling over the edge onto the ground revealing the imperfection of the sloped concrete floor.

The conflation between what the objects are actually doing, and the environment that they represent exposes a gap in the construction of meaning through seemingly

straightforward representation. Slowing the pace at which we collate the conditions of the encounter creates space for the brain to experience the act without prejudice. The

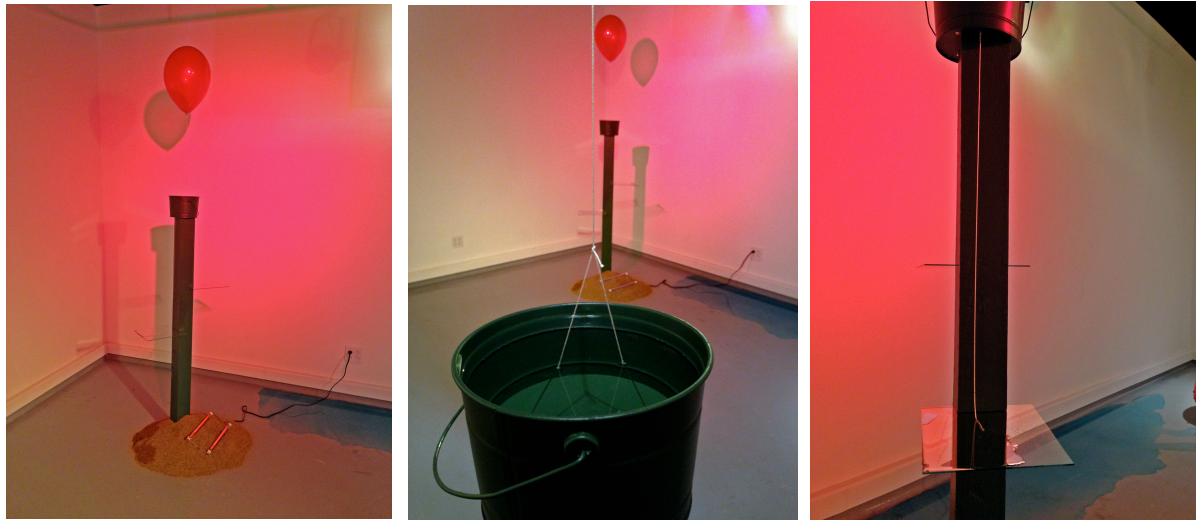


Figure 10-12. Eric Lyle Schultz, *Desert Music: Half-life*, details, 2015

complexity of the work is in its ability to present logic without locating meaning in a rational form. Giving the brain time to contend with familiar yet contradictory arrangements of information can rattle the foundations of logic and point to a generosity of implications in representation.

The history of Conceptual Art in the nineteen sixties and seventies saw artists elaborating on the developments of minimalism. Through focusing on an objective account of language, the main purpose of Idea Art was to further remove emotion and feeling from the realm of the art. The work produced in this period sought to demonstrate that language had become the only source material to rely on, as language most clearly represents the construction of meaning. Their beliefs were rooted in theories that came to suggest that the system of language, not objects, was the place where *factual* experience was represented—however grim the reality may be.

Language utilizes a logic that provides symbols for things based on what they most clearly represent. We reach definition by supposing predetermined relationships that allow us to most clearly define the tenets of ideas, the characteristics of words and objects, or the plausibility of facts. In most systems of representation, the accuracy of a statement is measured by defining what it is not. A dichotomy is used to offer the greatest level of contrast as a kind of validation by opposites. Because we know representation relies on models that adhere to the past, we know they have a limitation to the amount of truth they can have in the present. If our only way to construct knowledge is formed around the ability to compare and contrast preformed concepts, what does that say for the limitations of knowing?

In line two of Sol LeWitt's *Sentences*, he makes one of a few statements that overreach the original goals of Conceptual Art—"Rational judgments repeat rational judgements".<sup>14</sup> The focus of Idea art was to emphasize the rationality of representation through the use overtly rational systems. While this approach is successful in exposing the structure of language, it simply repeats the condition through an unwillingness to think irrationally. My work is concerned with picking up the tenets of conceptual art, its focus on exposing the nature of representation, but with an element of fantasy and play. The introduction of wonder into such a rational landscape provides an opportunity to presently investigate a subjective experience while still navigating the conditions of representation.

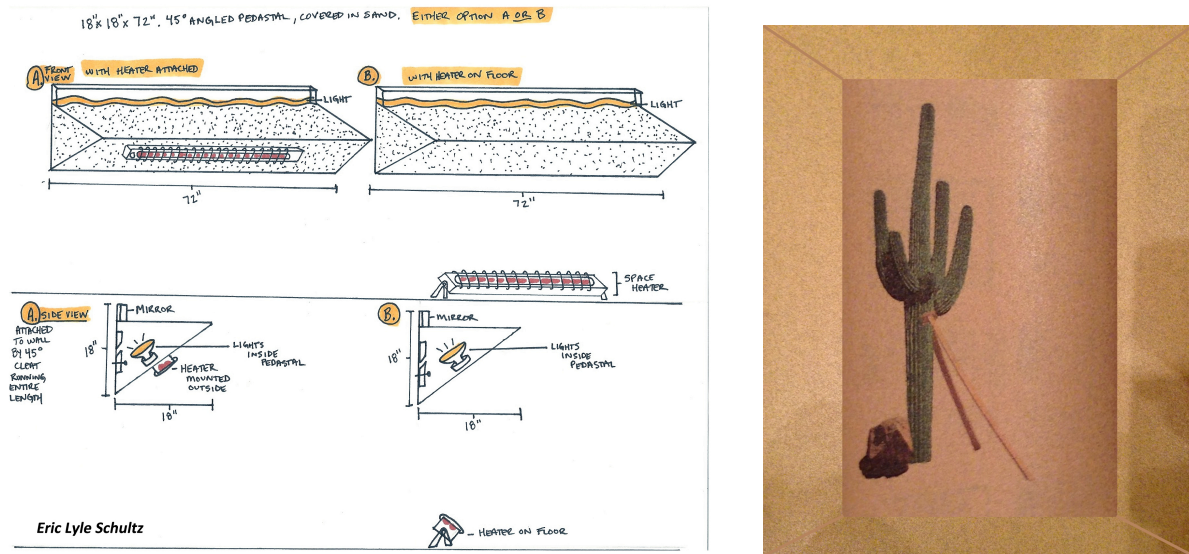


Figure 13-14. Eric Lyle Schultz, Sketch for *Desert Music: On the Bridge, Between Juarez and El Paso*, 2015

*Desert Music: On the Bridge, Between Juarez and El Paso*, 2015 (fig. 13-14) takes the shape of an ordinary household shelf covered in sand. From its simplicity and its place on the wall it resembles a kind of minimalist object. The surface of the shelf takes the form, both literally and figuratively, of a barren desert landscape. Red and yellow light emanates from a crevice where the shelf meets the wall, and on the protruding end heat radiates from the sand. As an object of representation, the work attempts as clear a definition as possible—it is a shelf, a desert horizon. Hidden in the moment where the horizon of the shelf meets the wall, a landscape emerges lit up in the reflection of a mirror. An austere representation of *desert* becomes activated through the reveal of a source-less environment. In the space where these two representations meet one landscape extends into another and the concept of environment is broadened by our proximity to the horizon.

*On the Bridge*, like the other works in the series, is an exploration into the poetics of representation. The work functions like an obscure diorama whose job is to transport the viewer into an alternate narrative. The plane of the wall becomes the plane of the shelf, the



shelf becomes a plane of sand, and the sand becomes the reflection of a desert expanse. It is a build up of metaphorical and tactile language that overlaps to assist the viewer in the same way that a cast assists the mending of a broken bone. The work is designed to accommodate the perception of a new kind of symbol, one that oscillates between definition and experience.

*On the Bridge* challenges the governing language of the mind by combining the logic of representation with a paralleled sensory encounter. The two battle for jurisdiction and the source of implication comes into question. Fabricating a separation of the mind from the brain for even a small moment complicates the way we form ideas, and creates room for an experience to emerge that has the potential to enrich the way we understand representation.

There is another kind of knowing found in the space between ideas, between representation and physical experience, not in their mere juxtaposition but in the discovery of what nuances emerge from their relationship. Finding a new concept, at the threshold where preformed ones intersect, can foster a new way of thinking about transmitting and receiving information altogether. If *truth* is a measure of knowledge, then locating the moments where previous systems of knowing fail might reveal gaps in our definition of truth. Playing at the boundaries of representation incites the mind to interpret alternate explanations. The more we interact with these kinds of territories the better opportunity we have to rile the inheritance of an excessive logic.

Werner Herzog writes, in his *Minnesota Declaration*, two things that seem to have relevance here. First, that “[knowledge has] a strange and bizarre power that makes

inherent truth seem unbelievable.” And second that “facts create norms, and truth illumination.”<sup>15</sup> What I take this to mean is that while the very nature of knowledge and truth are almost irreversibly woven together in a kind of entropic state, they are not always simultaneously present. And while systems of representation depict what we know, insofar as they demonstrate the limitations of our mental vocabulary, it does not guarantee that we find any kind of present truth there.

My work relies on this important distinction. While it often presents a kind of *Ready-to-hand* truthfulness, or an oppressive sense of logic itself, it suggests a tension in its own facticity. The evolution of representation and the biology of the mind have fostered a dependence on preformed concepts. Extreme logic is not a trait it is a condition. Reimagining the structure of representation requires working within the framework that governs our thinking in order to raise questions about the possibilities for new poetic encounters.

Art practice is a collaboration with archetypal forms, whether it is objects of the built environment, the world of images, or the architecture of representation itself, artists interact with a preexisting model. In evaluating the limitations and the presentation of those models, my interest is primarily in poetics. My work is a rearrangement of symbols within a given system that push at the boundaries of its representation. Intervening in the logic of these archetypes, which form and reflect the structure of thought, my practice is to play with the repetitive expectation found in systematic thinking. Presenting facts, through an irrational or unreasonable lens, excites our inclination for reason, staunchly highlights the inner workings of a system, and creates a space to evaluate our relationship with representation.

## Conclusion

The nature of creative practice is to question conventional modes of being. In essence creativity is about imagination. It is in this quality that art finds its greatest strength. Convention is a product of efficiency. Animals survive through efficiency, and at times it is both an inspiring and unforgiving environment to participate in. Though we are wired biologically to operate along the same principles, our ability to question meaning is what restructures our behavior entirely.

I have argued that as a society we live in a condition of extreme logic, and that this condition places limitations on our potential for creative solutions. The overwhelming presence of logic in representation fosters an unfavorable environment for radical ideas to emerge. Our ability to create meaning is stifled by the nature of representation itself. Through an understanding of the way the mind and brain operate, art practice has the potential to ignite a way for us to reinterpret our agreements with conventional systems of knowledge.

The creative process today is fueled by a tendency to deconstruct the ideologies that came before us. My work is interested less in the deconstruction of discrete systems, and more so intrigued by the possibility of shifting the way our brain perceives. If art has the power to modify the way we experience representation then I believe this is the greatest opportunity we have to be truly creative.

## END NOTES

1. Rene Descartes, from "*Meditations on First Philosophy*" translated by John Cottingham (1996) (11-18)
2. Jan Verwoert, from "*Above the Fold*" essay "*Object Reference*" (2008) (59-72)
3. Honi Fern Haber, from "*Beyond Postmodern Politics*" "*Chapter 1: Lyotard*" (1994) (2-30)
4. Jacques Derrida, from "*Margins of Philosophy*" "*Chapter 1: Differance*" (1982) (1-28)
5. Stephen E. Palmer, "*Visual Aesthetics and Human Preference*" (2012). (97)
6. Stephen E. Palmer, "*Visual Aesthetics and Human Preference*" (2012). (97)
7. Juha Varto, "*Otherwise than Knowing*" (2013). (76)
8. Alvin I. Goldman, "*Theory of Mind*"(2012). (1-4)
9. Semir Zeki, "*Statement on Neuroaesthetics*" (2014). (webpage)
10. Juha Varto, "*Otherwise than Knowing*" (2013). (85-86).
11. Stephen Muhall, from "*Heidegger and Being and Time*" "*Chapter 3: Language, Truth, and Reality*" (1996) (89-105)
12. Jean Baudrillard, from "*The System of Objects, 1968*" Introduction, translated by James Benedict (1996) (1-11)
13. Stephen Muhall, from "*Heidegger and Being and Time*" "*Chapter 3: Language, Truth, and Reality*" (1996) (89-105)
14. Sol LeWitt, from "*Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*" "*Sol LeWitt, Sentences on Conceptual Art, 1969*" (1996) (822-827)
15. Werner Herzog, from "*Herzog on Herzog*" Appendix "*Minnesota Declaration*" (2002) (301)

## FIGURE LIST



Figure 1. Eric Lyle Schultz, *Plumbwall*, plumb bob, wallboard, wood, 2014





Figure 5. Eric Lyle Schultz, *Slow NO Wake*, Lamp, Trashcan, Water, Paint, 2014





Figure 6. Eric Lyle Schultz, *Slow NO Wake*, Lamp, Trashcan, Water, Paint, 2014





Figure 7. Eric Lyle Schultz, *Slow NO Wake*, Lamp, Trashcan, Water, Paint, 2014



Figure 8. Eric Lyle Schultz, *Desert Music: Fantasea*, sand, inflatable raft, metronome, water, 2015





Figure 9. Eric Lyle Schultz, *Desert Music: Half-life*, sand, heater elements, glass, wood, water, pails, balloons, color acetate, 2015



Figure 10. Eric Lyle Schultz, *Desert Music: Half-life*, sand, heater elements, glass, wood, water, pails, balloons, color acetate, 2015



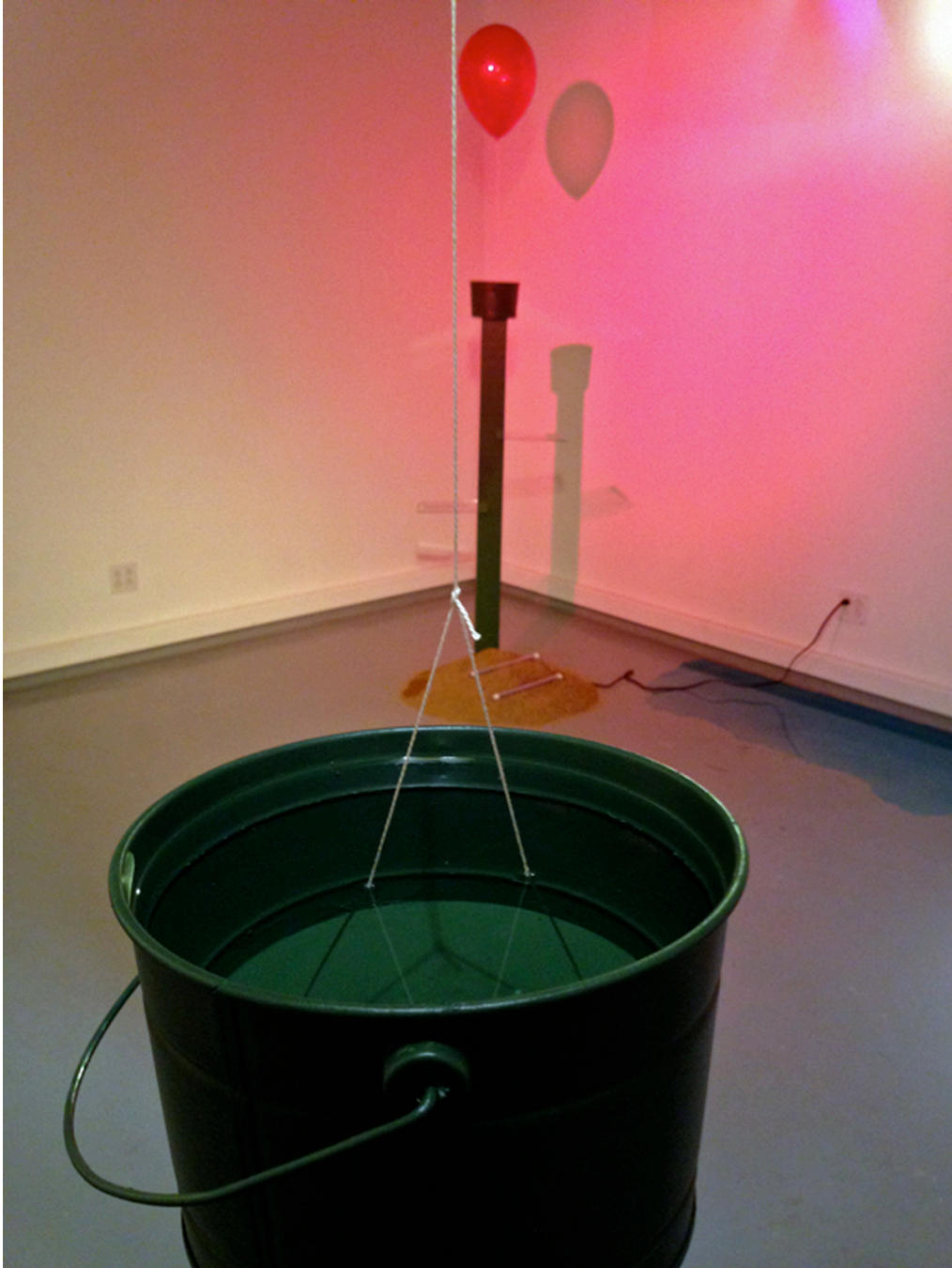


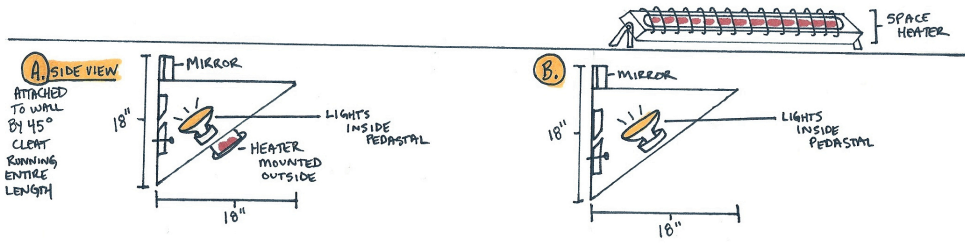
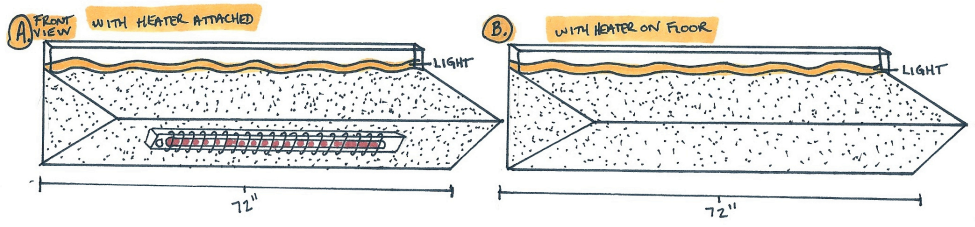
Figure 11. Eric Lyle Schultz, *Desert Music: Half-life*, sand, heater elements, glass, wood, water, pails, balloons, color acetate, 2015



Figure 12. Eric Lyle Schultz, *Desert Music: Half-life*, sand, heater elements, glass, wood, water, pails, balloons, color acetate, 2015



18" x 18" x 72". 45° ANGLED PEDASTAL, COVERED IN SAND. EITHER OPTION A OR B



Eric Lyle Schultz

HEATER ON FLOOR



Figure 13-14. Eric Lyle Schultz, Sketch for *Desert Music: On the Bridge, Between Juarez and El Paso*, sand, heat, light, mirror 2015

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