

## **These Inadvertent Marks**

By Thomas Wilder

## **These Inadvertent Marks**

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Photography in the Department of Photography of the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island.

By

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2020

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**Abstract**

*These Inadvertent Marks* is a photographic investigation of scuffs, stains, residue, scratches, holes, and blemishes as a complex set of inadvertent marks which possess an inextricable relationship to the human intention to find and make meaning in the world. Excluding marks that are clearly the result of highly substantial accidents, I look to consider those which are largely deemed trivial and peripheral as a means of renewing perception and surrendering to the unconsidered. The photographs included are the result of a process of discovery and close consideration through wandering in my local surroundings: urban streets, private homes, airports, bathrooms, alleys, and storefronts. These spaces, frequented by people, are full of inadvertent marks which are the byproduct of our intentions. Catalyzed by existential boredom as a mood that compresses perceptual discrimination, my examination considers these marks as signs that invite interpretations of past actions and human imprecision. This artistic and theoretical inquiry revolves around themes of the semiotic, autonomous, contingent, and meaningful status of these marks as they obstinately stand against the human desire for cleanliness, inerrancy, and a visual cohesion of surfaces; it asks questions of the constitution of signs, establishment of meaning, excess of intentions, and interpretive instability.



## **Preface**

This thesis essay runs alongside the writing that sits inside my thesis photobook. It is written in accordance with the thesis essay requirements for the MFA in Photography at RISD. Where I aim with the writing in the photobook to establish a poetic, philosophical, and imaginative relationship between text and image, I want this essay to create a higher degree of transparency regarding my practice, goals, motivations, methods, decisions, and influences.



(Fig. 1) Thomas Wilder, *Untitled*, 2019, 21"x28", Inkjet Print

## Introduction

During my first year at RISD I dedicated myself to questions related to what I call inadvertent marks. These are marks, which from my view are born from a lack, primarily of intention. Yet, despite the idea that no one meant for these marks to exist in the way that they do, I found the marks theoretically poignant and philosophically puzzling as well as beautiful in their form. It seemed that there was something backwards about the ontology of these marks and the experiences I had with them. When I'm alone, walking through the city, the majority of the things that I pay attention to are not those which have a high degree of human intention behind them. The objects that I appreciate aesthetically, philosophically, and conceptually are not the buildings, roads, cars, or even works of art I might encounter on the street; items which from first glance one can identify the incredibly large investment of time, artistry, ingenuity, money, craftsmanship, and other resources with which they are imbued. Rather, the phenomena I find myself compelled by are marks, surfaces, and spots which seem to lack all aforementioned intention and investment. These marks appear as a mere byproduct of other intentional actions; they are the surplus of people's movement through, and actions in the world, but never the object of them. Thus, when appreciated, they have the potential to defy a common way of thinking about the construction of meaning that disregards or denounces any and all "accidents" as gratuitous, interferential, or regrettable. These marks interfere cohesive, clean, and designed surfaces, and yet, they are not merely the product of age, use and entropy, but rather of our intentions. But instead of demonstrating the success of our goals they show their imprecision, barring the possibility that the production of these marks were included in the intention of the action.

This project, then, revolves around the production, discovery, and transference of values, goals, and desires through close consideration of these marks. As we move through the world, attempting to make meaning, we leave incidental traces of our actions. This is a surplus of intention.

We intend one thing, maybe we will get it, but we will also produce another. Those who come after us, attempting to find meaning in the world, struggle to interpret what we left behind. These traces, or marks, bear a weight of symbolism: they demonstrate the difficulty in accurately producing and discovering stable occasions, objects, or actions of significance. Through an investigation of these inadvertent marks, I look to highlight the uncontrollable flux, turbulent drift, and recalcitrant shifting of the status of meaning.

## **Boredom**

I've been fascinated with marks of this nature since I was young. However, during my time at RISD I've established a firmer category for them in my mind; I've strung them together as a type—a genre or category of things. Part of the reason I was able to do this now and not before is due to the fact that I've been severely bored. However, the kind of boredom I'm referring to is not one stemming from a lack of activity. Rather, this comes from a long-term state of being unmoored. This is a mood of detachment from most senses of meaning and import. In *A Philosophy of Boredom*, the philosopher Lars Svendsen distinguishes between two types of boredom: situative and existential.

Situative boredom is a state one finds themselves in during a lecture one loses interest in, waiting for the bus, or while stuck on a plane: types of boredom that are bound to, and do not outlast immediate and finite circumstances. This boredom is also defined by the fact that the subject experiencing it has a clear object of their desire: for the circumstances which inflict the boredom to abate, i.e. for the plane to land.

Contrastingly, existential boredom is a longer-term mood where the only desire one experiences is to desire anything at all. Svendsen writes: "A way of distinguishing between situative and existential boredom would be to say that while situative boredom contains a longing for

something that is desired, existential boredom contains a longing for any desire at all” (Svendsen 78). Thus, this existential genre of boredom is marked by a lack of desire and of meaning.

Svendsen claims that no act of will can remove oneself from this mood because it occurs within a larger condition of boredom; attempts to escape it will only result in an analogous mood. He claims that in order for someone to have a consistent possession of personal meaning, “...one has to be able to place oneself in the world and build a relatively stable identity. The founding of such an identity is only possible if one can tell a relatively coherent story about who one has been and who one intends to be” (Svendsen 78). The lack of an ability to form an identity based on an autobiographical narrative is one of the primary ways in which I relate to these marks.

As I walk through the world, existentially bored, I see buildings, surfaces, and objects which are designed. These things have a purpose, which is usually clearly legible for most people, going about their daily lives. I perceive their intended meaning and place in the world as they offer clearly designated use and telos. However, while I move through the world in this condition, these designed objects hardly interest me. They do not stimulate desire within me. What draws my attention instead, are these marks, for they are not clearly designed nor have an immediately apparent purpose.

I cannot access a clear narrative of these marks’ past, present and future. From this position, which is limited in its interpretative ability, they are uprooted from any highly specifiable history. I infer that they were unintended in the first place, and their future will likely be effacement. Svendsen proposes that the ability to tell a cohesive narrative of one’s life is necessary in order to lay claim to existential and personal meaning. These marks—or at least my experience of them, and my life alike—are characterized by a difficulty in telling such a story.

There is an important distinction to make here between the way I am attempting to tell a narrative of the marks and of my own life. Within my life, I have a swath of resources to draw upon in my attempt to tell a cohesive autobiographical narrative. To begin with, it is my life in which I am

attempting to find meaning. Thus, I can consider my own psychology and ask questions of my intentions. I can employ my memory to recall experiences, choices, and desires of the past as I look to construct a narrative. Of course, my self-analysis and memory alike are equally prone to subjective error. But neither the likelihood of being wrong, nor the difficulty of constructing an autobiography, thwart my attempt to do so.

These resources (e.g., self-reflection, memory, and authorship) which are present in my endeavor to make meaning of my own life are not available in my attempt to make sense of these marks. When I look at these marks, I do not know their author, nor have access to their intentions. All I possess is the material existence of the marks, and the context in which they sit. But similar to my own life, I do not let these impediments prevent my attempt to interpret, draw conclusions, and make sense of it all. As I look for meaning in my own life through attempting to construct a coherent narrative and identity, I encounter these marks, and try to do the same for them. Yet it is in the difficulty to make sense, both of my life and of the marks, which constitutes our connection.



(Fig. 2) Thomas Wilder, *Untitled*, 2019, 21"x28", Inkjet Print

### **A Score**

The majority of this tightly-composed photograph is filled with a dark brown cement brick wall, a small intrusion of an asphalt grounding with a vibrant yellow parking line, and the bottom portion of a window and a metal ventilation panel. The window, asphalt, and parking line appear to be in good condition, however, the brick wall holds many marks demonstrating age and wear. On the bottom portion of the wall, we see a series of stuttering inscriptions, the density of which slowly abates, imitating the appearance of splattering paint. Near the center of the image lies an incisive score into the brown brick that spans the width of the image. Due to their multiplicity and indeterminate texture, the marks at the bottom of the wall seem as though they were produced from

many actions. Contrastingly, the primary engraving in this image ostensibly originated from a single event given its uniformity and singularity.

There is a lack of exaggeration or stylization in the operative photographic style. This image emphasizes subtle textures, materials, and variation in pattern through a high degree of sharpness, low-contrast, medium focal-length, and evenness of light. Although we do get some sense of space, as we perceive the two main planes (ground and wall) collide, the manner of depiction, in conjunction with the overcast lighting, flattens things out, removing most sense of depth.

When I look at this photograph, and particularly the surfaces and marks therein, I make inferences, conjectures, and ask questions. First, I infer that both the series of marks on the bottom of the wall, and the large incision running through the center, are not of the same author as that of the brick wall. These marks interrupt a sequence of discrete and repeating painted bricks, which together make up a surface. Based off the repeated pattern of the bricks, along with the unifying color and layout, I conjecture that this wall was *designed*. The wall can then be considered as a counterpoint to the marks which sit atop it. It is the grounding which underscores the marks which do not possess the same repetitious, unified, nor uniform qualities. Given this fact, I read these marks as *undesigned*, or lacking in design; I read them as inadvertent. But my reading of them as inadvertent does not satisfy my curiosity regarding their place in the world. In fact, it is precisely due to this reading that I am led to ask: how is it possible that a mark, which was never intended to exist, could carry any meaning, beauty, or intrinsic worth whatsoever? How do these inadvertent marks exert a much stronger hold on my attention than the highly designed and intentioned surfaces on which they sit?

These are the ways in which I experience the marks within my daily life. If I'm walking alone, I look at these marks, which are ubiquitous within the urban spaces through which I move. I see them on the sidewalk, on the street, on the walls of parking garages, storefronts, and institutional



facades; on street signs and signposts, on the steps of an apartment complex, on the oversized support columns on the exterior of an O'Hare airport terminal, on the interior of the same airport terminal, on the inside of an abandoned commercial building window, on the brick, on the pavement, on the grass, on the asphalt, in bathrooms, in alleyways, on doors, on elevator walls, on cars, in empty parking spaces, and on abandoned storage containers. I see these marks, not as aberrations to be ignored, but as pointed and divergent objects of beauty. I attempt to view these surfaces as repositories of marks which can be read as one reads a score. But the difficulty is that this score, and its proper reading, have no precedent. These marks, read as notes on a page, do not correlate to a strict set of tones, intervals, and volumes. I believe that these marks, or notes, can be read as we probe them with questions. It is this kind of speculation and process of inquiry that interests me with these marks. They provide fodder for enjoyment through ontological theorization and aesthetic delight.

### **Photography and Phenomenology**

Phenomenology, in a highly reductive sense, can be understood as a discipline of philosophical consideration of our experience of situations, objects, and facts. The important idea that distinguishes the field of phenomenology from those of science and other areas of philosophy is that it pivots its focus from the objects *as we believe they are* to the objects *as we experience them*. Writer and professor of philosophy, David R. Cerbone, simply writes, “The word ‘phenomenology’ means ‘the study of phenomena’, where the notion of a phenomenon coincides, roughly, with the notion of experience. Thus, to attend to experience rather than what is experienced is to attend to the phenomena” (Cerbone 3). He claims that phenomenology “...invites us to stay with...’the experience itself’” as opposed to the objects of our experience (Cerbone 3). To illustrate what it means to stay with “the experience itself,” Cerbone gives the example of considering the ways in which wearing

glasses shifts one's experience of the world. If one were to attempt to explore the answer to this question by looking to the physical structure of our eyes, or how the makeup of glasses reduces blurriness one would not be engaging in a phenomenological endeavor, for these considerations lead us away from "the experience itself." To do so, we would need to attempt to consider our experience without glasses, and then our experience with them as a wholly novel set of experiences. Rather than examining the reasons *why* they are different, we simply would examine *how* they are different through a descriptive analysis of the experiences themselves.

The 20th century philosopher, Edmund Husserl (reputedly the founder of phenomenology) has a concept of the "natural attitude," a stance we hold toward the world which takes for granted the givenness of objects. This is a naive position we hold with respect to the world which overlooks any question of how our experience is *of* or *about* objects. Its being naive is not to say that it is anyway incorrect, rather, that it is merely limited in the things to which it has access. Husserl claims that this natural attitude is incompatible with questions about discerning the essential structure of experience and achieving epistemological certainty—questions which are central to Husserl's larger project. This fact is precisely what calls for *another kind* of project, distinct from naturalism. This other kind of project, Husserl claims, requires phenomenological reduction, something that occurs when certain questions or aspects of our experience are "bracketed," or placed "in parentheses." In order to remain with questions regarding "the experience itself" one needs to abstain from considering the source or success of said experience, an act of exclusion which can be achieved through bracketing them. At times, Husserl refers to phenomenological reduction as a kind of mediation. Cerbone notes that "...the principle change heralded by the performance of the reduction is a shift in attention on the part of the one whose experience it is" (Cerbone 23). So, we can also understand phenomenological reduction and the act of bracketing as kinds of shifts in attention, and as a certain genre of meditation. Where Husserl offers the idea of bracketing as

something necessary for a phenomenological consideration of the world and consciousness, I am interested in how the exclusionary act of bracketing is an integral part of not only the act of photographing, but also the resulting photographs.

In a naive sense, camera and lens-based photographs, which are normatively exposed, framed, etc., can be thought of as “views” of the world. They are ensconced in and created from a *point of view*, which, when looking at the photograph, is unchanging. With this understanding of a photographic image in mind, we could consider photographs as pre-phenomenologically-bracketed objects. Even though within phenomenological discussions, bracketing is a kind of a mental operation, as opposed to something which can occur within an object, there is an analogical way in which photographs are bracketed views of the world; a fixed-point perspective which presents portions of the visible world and abandons others.

Likewise, the act of photographing, when performed with a camera and a lens, almost always involves a certain kind of bracketing of the world. The photographer must tune out sets of objects, thoughts, and experiences as they prioritize and seek out others. Whether it is in the act of looking, framing, or exposing, the photographer engages in bracketing. It is precisely this kind of behavior that is necessary in attending to inadvertent marks. I bracket the values which keep me from listening to these marks. My photographic process within this project is an act of phenomenological reduction as a meditative act which allows me to consider these marks outside of the normative and highly utilitarian fashion they typically are. Ultimately it is through consistently tapping into this alternative bracketed experience through this act of photographing that has allowed me to experience, question, and take notice of these marks as philosophically, poetically, and artistically fascinating.

## Deadpan

Where I used to scan a room and see a book worth reading, a pencil worth using, or a coffee worth drinking, I now see an array of phenomena: qualities of light, color, and texture. Objects which once held a steady position within a hierarchy of value now recede into an undesignated conglomerate of matter. In many ways (e.g., personal relationships, professional life, artistic practice) operating from a mood of existential boredom is something that I'd rather avoid. It flattens experience; it reduces the contrast—or difference—between all things. It produces a sensation of being detached from almost everything that I once found meaningful.

When one has a stable hierarchy of value, one consistently sees and pays attention to those things which align with the hierarchy over all others. When this hierarchy is compressed or confused, the people, objects, and surfaces one used to look to for meaning fundamentally shift. This condition of detachment can be such that one closes oneself off from meaning in the world. But alternatively, through a neutralizing of all experience, and an embrace of such a condition, one's capacity to recognize the extraordinary in the ordinary is, or can be, renewed.

In a piece titled, "Ed Ruscha, Heidegger, and Deadpan Photography," Aron Vinegar thinks through the idea of the deadpan in photography, specifically in relation to Ed Ruscha's photo books, and applies Heidegger's writing on mood and attunement as the primary medium—i.e., cognitive, psychological, emotional disposition—through which we engage our world. He argues that Ed Ruscha's stylistic deployment of the deadpan is one that delays—or even refuses—the judgment of good, bad, best, or worst objects in the world. In this way, the deadpan is not just a mode of rhetorical delivery, it is a fundamental mood that motivates our being-in-the-world and increases our openness towards the previously unseen parts of our surroundings. There is a comparison to be made between the mood of existential boredom and that of the deadpan. If we understand moods and attunements as media through which we experience the world, both boredom and the deadpan

produce temporary moods where aesthetic judgments are delayed or more democratic. Within these moods, intentionally or not, I set aside the hierarchies of value to which I used to lay claim.

Appreciation for alternative objects, things, experiences becomes possible. Although stylistically, many of the photographs in this body of work would not first be considered as deadpan, it is a mood out of which I make work and one I want to elicit in a viewer.

## **Apophenia**

However, there is a danger here. To flip normative value systems too much on their head might lead to a kind of insanity. To allow things which are normatively thought of as “meaningless” to trickle up into a category of “meaningful” might challenge the very foundations of one’s common sense. In his book, *Photography and the Art of Chance*, Robin Kelsey cites the Victorian art critic John Ruskin on recognizing meaning in the ostensibly chaotic and meaningless aspects of our world. According to Ruskin, to entirely abandon these parts of our surroundings is also to leave behind a vast potential for beauty and meaning. “To fail to recognize [pictures and scenes in the clouds] was...to remain incomplete in one’s humanity.... To see too much in the sky...is a kind of mental illness, but to see too little, according to Ruskin, is a kind of depravity. For Ruskin, in other words, a certain degree of *pareidolia* is required of those who would find beauty and meaning in the world” (Kelsey 115). *Pareidolia* is the tendency of seeing meaningful images in seemingly random visual patterns (*Merriam-Webster*). Where a skeptic of Ruskin’s view would relegate the meaningful shapes, objects, patterns that one might see in the clouds to the status of random and meaningless, a follower of Ruskin might say, “why would you sever yourself off from such beauty and meaning?”

*Pareidolia* can be considered a subcategory of *apophenia* which is the more general propensity of finding meaningful connections between apparently unrelated phenomena. In a sense, my finding meaning or beauty in these inadvertent marks could be considered a symptom of an *apopheniatic*

disposition. However, the very definition of this term is controversial in that it assumes a stable category of the relation between things, their meanings and representative qualities. We cannot so easily assume that any given phenomena related to another are so easily designated as “unrelated.” People have often said of my work that I am bringing meaning to meaningless things. I’m not comfortable with defining these marks as meaningless. I don’t deny that my artistic gestures infuse meaning in these marks, however, I believe they possess a level of meaning intrinsic to themselves. One of my chief goals in this project is to challenge the idea that categories of meaningful and meaningless are stable rather than fluid, elusive, and tumultuous.



(Fig. 3) Thomas Wilder, *Untitled*, 2018, “42x42”, Inkjet Print, Installation view

### **“A Threshold of Marks”**

One of the very first things I made while at RISD was a series of photographs of my studio floor—#604b in Fletcher studios, 169 Weybosset St, Providence, RI. The floor of this studio was

significantly distinct from the majority of the other studios on the sixth story. Mine had a layer of slightly lighter colored paint than the previous coat, meaning that every scratch, scuff, scrape, and score had a high degree of legibility, since they revealed a darker color beneath. This surface made visible every hasty, aggressive, or violent action that befell it. Because of this, there was a wealth of marks which laid bare the history of this space. I was enthralled, and knew that I had to respond in some way to this richness. I made a series of photographs taken from directly above of a two-foot square region of the entry to my studio. In order to achieve a higher level of detail, I created a composite image from these photographs. I then installed a 42"x42" Inkjet print of this composite photograph—a photograph that depicted, in great detail, the section of the floor on which the print was installed. In other words, it was a photograph which concealed precisely all of the depictive content from which it was sourced.

I kept the print affixed to the same section of the floor for the entirety of my first semester. Over time it became a palimpsest of its own image, the actions which created the marks which its picture shows, and the movements which produced new marks on its surface. Even more, it served as a protector of its own depicted subjects. As the human activity upon the threshold continued, the print suffered all of the wear which the floor would have, had it otherwise been absent. At any point, it was possible to remove the print and juxtapose it with the floor in order to examine every mark which the floor would have sustained if it weren't for the print's protection.

One challenge that is posed by this work is against the idea of perfection in relation to the photographic print. There is a long-standing assumption, made on the part of artists, conservators, and viewers alike, that the clean, damage-free, perfect surface of a print ought to be maintained at all costs. The smallest of scuffs, scratches, or pieces of dust on a print warrant a host of concerns and are meant to be avoided. In this work, I openly invite a deluge of tears, scratches, dirt, and dust upon the print, challenging basic ideas of the fixed and spotless state of a photographic print.

**“A Meaningless Mark”**

*“Let us be realistic: there is nothing more meaningful than a text which asserts that there is no meaning”* (Eco 7).

These concerns were developed and active in my installation titled “A Meaningless Mark” where I covered the entirety of my studio floor with inkjet prints displaying a photograph of a single 1”x1” mark on said floor. The size of the prints ranged from 1”x1” to 42”x42”—or in terms of ratio to the mark, 1:1 to 40:1—and were arranged in a way where they appear to be radiating from the mark that the photographs depict. In this work, I was attempting to experiment with the versatility of the inkjet print. This installation remained in place for nearly an entire year. Anyone who came into my studio was required to stand and walk all over photographic prints that depicted the floor below them. In this piece, I was curious about what would happen when one single mark came to occupy an entire space. The work created a way to force myself and others to reckon with the particularity of *each* mark on the floor by recognizing the existence of *one* mark. There is a way in which the diversity of marks on this floor operate as mutually supportive camouflage. But when I take one mark and replicate it, transforming diversity into uniformity, one cannot so easily ignore the marks which constitute the floor, as they are forced to look at one mark.





(Fig. 4) Thomas Wilder, *A Meaningless Mark*, 2019, Inkjet Prints, Installation view

This piece was also an attempt to return—or to recognize—the autonomy this mark could possess on its own. I intended to photograph this mark with a high level of attention to accuracy and detail. Furthermore I wanted the photographic prints to match the mark in color, value, and contrast. I intended for the prints to operate in an illusionary way. They invite a viewer to imagine that the mark has replicated itself, emanating the subsequent duplicates outward, which increase in size in organic concentric semi-circles. I offer a viewer the opportunity to enter this world and consider a mark; to ponder its symbolic, theoretical, and aesthetic potential.

One could also say that the meaning of this mark, and their subsequent prints, are bolstered by the context in which they sit. Because I created this installation in my studio within an art and design institution of higher education, it is difficult to make any claim to the meanings or autonomy of the marks themselves, as their interpretation as art is categorically bound by the fact that they

already sit inside such an institution. In the work, *Kunsthalle Bern 1992*, the installation artist, Michael Asher, relocated all of the radiators within the Kunsthalle Bern to its entryway gallery. Through his installation, Asher lays bare some of the indispensable objects which make the very space in which the work sits possible. These are objects that are rarely considered crucial to the possibility of such a gallery space, let alone are they looked to as objects worth one's aesthetic attention.

Similarly, the marks that sit on my studio floor, are in a way, essential to the existence of such a studio. In my installation, I look to consolidate, expand, and call attention to the inadvertent marks on my studio floor, highlighting something that is always present in my studio, but is rarely given aesthetic attention. However, both Asher's installations and mine cannot be thought about apart from the spaces in which they exist. Radiators, as they are regarded in the context of an appliance store, do not hold the same meaning as they do within a museum. Similarly, marks on the floor of an artist's studio cannot be considered in the same light as the marks on one's kitchen floor. Thus the eventual significance of both installations alike are bound to the art institutions in which they sit.

### **“Every Pre-Existent Hole Equal or Greater Than .81mm in Diameter”**

Like the floor, my studio walls also contain a variety of marks: scratches, dents, excess paint, holes, dirt, pencil marks, etc. While solely examining the holes on these walls, I became deeply curious about the multiplicity of histories which produced them. I surmised that the numerous holes of roughly equal width were created from the same engagement with the wall with which I am most familiar: pinning and sequencing paper prints for viewing. However, even if I was able to make a (conceivably) correct judgment regarding the general reason for the marks' creation, I was incapable of asserting a history with a higher level of specificity.

Assuming that my general theory is correct—that these holes were produced from humans pinning things up—within this singular use there exists a great diversity of ontologies. With the knowledge that I made many of these holes (for the purpose of hanging prints), I infer that others have engaged in a similar process of sequencing prints: I pin up three photographs, decide that the two on the right need to be swapped so I take them down and re-pin them; they live in that position for a week. Is there a difference in the first set of holes, which were produced by the prints on the right, from that of the second? With the first set, I aimed to sequence the prints as such and wanted to pin them as I did, but as it turned out, I deemed this arrangement “worse” than another. This means that *those* prints hung in *that* way wasn’t what I wanted. Yet, I did intend it this way initially, but it felt inaccurate. Another example: I arrive at my desired sequence of the three prints but they aren’t level. I re-pin them with great care so as to arrive at my desired result, and yet it still feels imprecise. Once more and “voilà!” Is there a difference between the leftover-holes from crooked prints in the correct sequence, and leftover-holes from level prints in the incorrect sequence? Formally, they are indistinguishable. But the actions which caused their being, and what they represent, are entirely distinct.



(Fig. 5) Thomas Wilder, *“Every Pre-Existent Hole Equal or Greater Than .81mm in Diameter.”*, 2019, Music Wire, Installation View

It is in response to the heterogeneity of these holes’ geneses, masked by their formal indistinguishability, that I produced another installation titled “Every Pre-Existent Hole Equal or Greater Than .81mm in Diameter.” To create this work, I filled every single hole on one of my studio walls with a three-foot long and .81mm wide piece of music wire. It required over 600 wires. The process of filling each hole was tedious, time-consuming, and highly meditative. The ends of the wires fit snugly into each hole allowing for the rest of the wire to move freely without falling out of the wall. This resulted in every wire having the capacity to become a percussive and melodic instrument. If one were to run a hand or body through even part of this installation, each wire would hit against the others producing a sound like a metallic variant of crashing waves, or wind

rushing through leaves of a tree. My initial aim with this piece was to extend the space which the holes occupied, thus giving them a higher level of agency. I wanted to bring attention not only to their existence, but also their uniformity in contrast to their disparate points of origin as some of them arise from imprecision, and others from exactitude.

These installations demonstrate the artistic experimentation to which I was dedicated during my first year at RISD. One of my goals when coming into the program was to dig up as many artistic, personal, and intellectual pathways as possible, which I would return to in the years following graduation. Whether I was aware of it or not, this desire to experiment led me to a position where I was, in a lot of ways, re-inventing my practice every time I walked into the studio or put a camera in my hands. I am thankful for this approach, and the variety of work I produced. But, following the conclusion of the past spring semester, I realized that I wanted to use the thesis book and exhibition as opportunities for dealing more exclusively with a singular set of formal decisions, concepts, and methods. I had a strong desire to commit to one thing for a longer duration and build a more cohesive body of work during the rest of my time here. Much of the work I had made pre-RISD was typological, meaning that the way I was most comfortable with building a series of photographs was to establish a set of formal rules which remained consistent, while the particular object among a type changed from photograph to photograph. I realized that this was the only way I was comfortable making work, and I wanted to push myself into unknown territory. Therefore, part of what I committed to at the end of my first year was to attempt to make a body of work, within fairly traditional photographic bounds, which was not typological. Rather, I wanted to create something that allowed for more variation and would therefore rely more heavily upon selection, sequencing, and diversity of subject matter as major contributors to the content and effect of the work.

## On Style and Revisitation

Even though these installations provided meaningful experimentation and conversations around these marks, where I became dissatisfied was in how few marks I was actually pointing to. I didn't feel as though these installations, which focused either on *one mark* or *one kind of mark*, invited an application to the marks outside of my studio and in all of our environments. I realized that I wanted to create a body of work which pointed, in a more direct fashion, to the marks in these urban environments that are available to anyone.

In light of this desire, at the conclusion of the spring semester of 2019, I looked to make photographs of these inadvertent marks as I encountered them in a more diverse section of my local surroundings. These spaces are those which hold a multitude of these marks, but this genre of mark is not limited to the spaces depicted in my photographs—meaning, they don't solely reside in those spaces. I claim that in every space in which we act, these marks are necessarily produced, whether they are in the form of a shoe mark, wall scuff, or the tiniest of stains.

As I began photographing these marks, I quickly developed a certain style and grammar for the project. I looked to establish a style which, in some ways, embodied and evoked the feelings I had when viewing and photographing these marks. Thus things needed to be flat, deadpan, but also, elevated, sublime. I made photographs that felt both detached and invested, boring and intriguing, deadpan and expressive, for these are the ways my experience of the marks changes overtime. On some days I see them everywhere and they both inspire and intrigue me. On other days, I have little interest in them and they make me feel irrational, bored, and improper.

The act of revisiting marks began when I repeatedly and serendipitously encountered marks that I had already photographed. Because I photograph in the spaces I frequent everyday, these marks naturally presented themselves to me after having photographed them. I found that while coming across these marks again, they possessed an even stronger power over me than the first time.

As I saw the same marks over and over, their visage and the spaces in which they sit became iconic. My personal attachment to them grew; I could no longer walk past one of these marks without being overtly aware of it and enticed to stay.



(Fig. 6) Thomas Wilder, *Untitled*, 2020, 21"x28", Inkjet Print

This intensification of their impact upon me and my experience of their spaces led to a desire to launch a more focused investigation of a smaller set of marks rather than a larger exploratory project of discovery. I believed that a strategy which emphasizes a select few marks would further urge viewers to confront and inspect them as opposed to easily moving on to the next



and the next. Moreover, I was no longer satisfied to go out and find new marks for photographing but rather felt a strong need to further scrutinize the marks that had the greatest impact on me.



(Fig. 7) Thomas Wilder, *Untitled*, 2020, 21”x28”, Inkjet Print

In re-photographing the marks I wanted to do something distinct from what I had already done. As the power that these marks had over me began to change, I looked to use photography as a tool to renegotiate my relationship to their marks, and their inherent meaning. Photography as a medium allows me to prod and press upon the marks, their existence, and visage as a means of pondering their significance and place within a world. I attempt to photograph from up close, far away, through objects, at varying times of day and in different kinds of light so to better understand, and ultimately ask a viewer to consider these marks.



One thing that a normative use of camera-based photography requires is placing oneself in the world. It does not allow for the simultaneous contemplation of many viewpoints. Rather, it demands and specifies one point of view and none other. Out of an infinite number of places from which an image can be made, a photograph, ultimately, is made from one. Through this decisive and immovable ensconcing which the photograph allows for and ultimately dictates, the medium of photography brings to the fore an unalterable truth of human existence: our subjective, imperfect, and fractured perspective of our surroundings. Photography, in this project, is not merely a way of “documenting” these marks—this is the verb that some attempt to use with my photographs—rather it leans into the fact that a point of view dictates the kind of knowledge that is possibly produced.

In revisiting and re-photographing these marks I aim to give and remove context. I want to simultaneously allow for a mark to be familiar to a viewer, while also removing much of the context which allows for the mark’s existence. Through this push and pull of giving and denying contextual clues—which, ultimately dictate a large portion of the “meaning” of anything—I want to call attention to the slippery position I understand these marks to hold, in their ultimate defining “significance.”

### **Jane Bennett: Vibrant Marks**

The American philosopher and theorist, Jane Bennett, beautifully describes the potential autonomy of objects in the first chapter of *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. She espouses a view of objects in the world as things which are active, alive and independent from human subjectivity; the thing-power of objects. She writes, “Glove, pollen, rat, cap, stick. As I encountered these items they shimmied back and forth between debris and thing—between, on the one hand, stuff to ignore, except insofar as it betokened human activity...and, on the other hand, stuff that

commanded attention in its own right, as existents in excess of their association with human meanings, habits, or projects” (Bennett 4). Put slightly differently, humans possess and develop particular meanings around these objects in relation to our world; a reality into which these objects must fit or from which they must be excluded. Bennett remarks, however, that these objects she encounters don’t comfortably sit within or outside the worlds we create for them. They somehow command their own thing-hood, demanding a right to be seen apart from any given use a human might have for them. I claim that Bennett’s remarks about objects can be extended to inadvertent marks in the world. I experience these marks similarly to how Bennett describes her experience with the objects she lists: as constantly oscillating between nothing and something; between meaning-abundant and meaning-deficient. They at times seem to beckon my attention and, at others, demand to be ignored. And yet they exist and seem to persist over and against any act of human’s attempt to ignore or erase them.

### **Marks: Autonomous or Contingent?**

The question of these marks’ vitality begs a further one: are these marks—and their existence, lives, and meaning—autonomous from or contingent upon human conditioning, interpretation, or use? As Bennett remarks above, these objects defied clear and easy classification as meaningless nothings, but is this defiance reliant upon one’s posture towards said objects? Is their being vibrant, alive, and active in the world a product of something which is specific to their being or a consequence of one’s ability to ascribe these attributes to the object? One might argue that Bennett’s belief that these objects commanded attention in their own right, outside of the uses humans have for them, reflects more about her beliefs, mood, cultural conditioning, or inner psychological state than it does about the objects themselves. Furthermore, one might argue that the same thing is occurring in me and my experience of these marks.

People often remark regarding my work that I am bringing or giving these marks meaning, that it is solely my artistic gesture and manner of speaking about the marks that creates something meaningful, and that without this they are meaningless. These kinds of comments invite an open ended question of whether or not it is merely my subjective experience of these marks, and subsequent artistic gestures which offer these marks a place of significance. In response, I want to simultaneously affirm the limitations of my experience of these marks as they shed light on the meaning of the marks, *and* state that their meaning in some way must be autonomous from my experience of them.

In *Gödel, Escher, Bach: an Eternal Golden Braid*, Douglas Hofstadter presents the “jukebox” theory of meaning, “...the doctrine that no message contains inherent meaning, because, before any message can be understood, it has to be used as the input to some "jukebox", which means that information contained in the "jukebox" must be added to the message before it acquires meaning” (Hofstadter 178). This theory challenges my claim for an autonomous meaning that these marks could possibly hold. According to Hofstadter’s view, any meaning offered by the mark is dependent upon the information already possessed by the viewer. But there is a paradox that Hofstadter points out: if the information in the message requires additional information, this second level information also requires a third, *ad infinitum*. The “jukebox” theory of meaning leaves no space for the objects which Bennett encounters to possess meaning *and* have this meaning arise from somewhere apart from a human project (i.e., the jukebox). I offer these two examples to demonstrate opposite ends of a spectrum of theories of meaning, between which I believe these marks live.

**Thomas Demand: A Blemish-Free World**

There is one reality in which marks such as those I photograph seem to be strangely absent: the photographic world of Thomas Demand. Working with images from the media—often of historic events or spaces as fodder—Demand reconstructs scenes out of glued paper and cardboard. Although often life-scale, the sculptures he creates are not displayed publicly. Rather, they are made entirely for the purpose of photographing. Given his meticulous process, the resulting images display no signs of human activity within the scene. They are eerily void of the traces which would exist in the spaces after which his constructions are modeled.



(Fig. 8) Thomas Demand, *BALCONIES*, 1997, 59"x50", C-Print

In *BALCONIES* (1997), we see a tight and slightly oblique view of the exterior of an apartment complex. We have the full view of two balconies and the bottom of a third, two larger sets of windows—perhaps a sliding glass door—within each balcony, and two more sitting on the wall to the right. The off white window frames, protective guard rails, and balcony platforms serve as light grey accents against the dark but rich mahogany color of the building. The main windows do not deliver the information we expect from such a surface. We can't gain access into the interior, nor see a reflection of what's behind us. The only reflection we do get is of a foreign pale blue light source, which sets the recesses of each terrace into dark relief.

Yet, these spaces have never been lived in—they bear no sign of human interaction whatsoever. Each surface depicted here is smooth, opaque, and flawless. In this sense, the spaces Demand creates sit so far from those that the models are built after. Michael Fried writes that “...the models themselves differ from their original, real-world...sources in that, by virtue of having been reconstructed in paper,...they have been divested of every hint of indexicality pertaining to those sources and their contexts—every mark of use, every trace of human presence and action...” apart from those which directly pertain “...to the physical construction of the cardboard models...” (Fried 268). He claims that because of this, Demand's spaces are devoid of all “...suggestion of pastness, of historicalness...” (Fried 268). In this sense, Demand's work offers a counterpoint to my own. The object of my attention is the exact element which is systematically excluded from Demand's models; our worlds do not belong to the same reality, they cannot co-exist. Fried ultimately argues that Demand replaces the original scenes which contain traces and marks of human activity “...with a counter-image of *sheer artistic intention...*” (Fried 271). That is, that the only human activity which is depicted in Demand's photographs is his own. If, in Demand's world, we can have confidence in the highly intentional status of the spaces, marks, and objects depicted, in mine we can have none. The spaces, marks, and objects I aim to present do not allow access on the part of the viewer to the

meaning of their intentions nor do the photographs themselves confirm the mark's intentional status.

### **The Constitution of a Sign**

One central question and concern within this project is the constitution of a sign. What is a sign? How does something become a sign? How do marks, shapes, pictures and letters come to form their relationship with what they represent? How does something come to be about something else? Or about anything at all? Is it due to a given attribute it holds specific to itself? Is something about something else because we “make” it about something? Or is it more of a relationship between a subject and an object?

What I hope to do with this work is to consider the semiotic potential of one of these marks as a means of challenging the meaning located in something most people would consider a sign. If these marks were not intended by their author, then they cannot hold the *same kind* of meaning a sign constructed by a human would hold. The stop sign (or any analogous sign) that is functioning correctly, communicates the information which it was intended to deliver. And yet, these marks that I photograph communicate, *regardless* of their absence of authorial intent.

The American Philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce writes that “A sign is something by knowing which we know something more” (Eco 28). Here, Sanders characterizes the sign as something which is primarily related to knowledge production. But the question to ask is what knowledge must be produced in response to a mark in order for it to be regarded as a sign? When I look at these marks, I don't know what else I know, but it feels like something. These marks offer me something more than just themselves but I don't know exactly what it is. They speak, but I don't understand. It's as though, when encountering a mark, I burnt out: “come again? I didn't catch

that.” But the lack of clarity in what these marks communicate to me does not negate the potency of their message.

### **Julian Montague: Against Taxonomy**

In his project, *The Stray Shopping Cart Project*, Julian Montague photographs stray shopping carts in a vast number of contexts and creates an elaborate taxonomy regarding their condition, relation to human intention, and potential for transition into another state. In a statement about the origin of the project he writes that in order to move beyond a genre of “conventional social documentary photography” he wanted to attempt to define the myriad states in which these carts could be found (*The Stray Shopping Cart Project*). Within Montague’s classification system he distinguishes class A, that of the “false strays”, from class B, the “true strays.” The primary distinction between the two classes is whether or not the cart has irreversibly moved away from its source—a source, according to Montague is “any business that uses shopping carts in a conventional manner.” Within both classes combined there are 33 types in which the carts can be found (e.g., plaza drift, remote false, simple vandalism, personal property). In his classification he is sure to demonstrate how a cart can be multiple types at a time, as they are rarely just one.

Montague’s work is a valuable parallel to mine when considering the inadvertency of both his stray carts and the marks of my photographs. Identifying both in photographs complicates ideas of original intention. The carts were purchased, maintained, and corralled by their owners in order to serve customers, but now fail to do so. Rather, they are put towards some other end. Likewise these inadvertent marks were in no way meant to exist in the way that they do. Both the carts and marks have strayed from their authors, refusing to achieve what they were meant to. In the case of the cart it is an object and its use which has strayed from an original intention, and we see the object as the evidence of this digression. But in the case of the marks, it is another kind of material, damage, or

residue which points us towards a previous action which lacked control or did not accurately achieve the end its author intended.

I could also attempt to classify every mark that I photograph under the broad heading of inadvertent, just as Montague has done for his carts under the umbrella of “stray.” However, this would run in opposition to my claim that in order to assert a more specific interpretation, or designate a cart to a class, they must be read as signs. But in examining these carts and marks alike, one sees that they refuse such elaborate expositions. Due to the absence of an identifiable author and formal ambiguity, these marks defy such explicit interpretations of their origin and, contrary to his attempt to classify them, I would claim the same of Montague’s carts. Where he is more comfortable asserting the specific circumstances which led to the stray cart’s current condition, I am uneasy in asserting the same for these marks. It is precisely their indeterminacy which allows for an uncircumscribed field of interpretation rather than a strict taxonomy which is subject to too much conjecture to be trusted.

### **Indexicality: Marks and Photographs**

Photography has been theorized through a large variety of lenses: mechanization, spiritualism, naturalism, psychoanalytics, politics, memory, aesthetics, for example. However, arguably the most significant discipline through which photography has been understood beginning in the mid-twentieth century is semiotics. To understand a camera and lens-based photograph primarily in terms of an index of the scene, set of objects, or phenomena which existed in front of the camera is not only the most popular theory of photography but also the most contentious. In this way, these marks share something in common with photographs—at least share something in common with the most seminal theoretical tenet proposed by photographer theorists of the late 20th century: indexicality.



Peirce defines three kinds of signs: symbol, icon, and index. Each kind of sign forms its relationship with its referent on different grounds. The symbolic sign establishes its connection with what it refers to relying on the conventions of its users. This kind of sign has an arbitrary link with its referent. Although the word “apple” and the series of letters which constitute it may share some phonic relationship with the shapes our mouths make when the word is said, but for all intents and purposes the connection this word has to the thing we know in the world to be an apple is arbitrary. For Peirce, the symbolic sign loses the character which renders it a sign when there is no interpretant (i.e., the idea produced in the mind of the interpreter). “Such is any utterance of speech which signifies what it does only by virtue of its being understood to have that signification” (*Peirce on Signs* 240).

The iconic sign corresponds to what it refers to because of resemblance. An example of this would be a naturalistic painted portrait of a friend named John. When we look at the painting, we can recognize by a matter of similarity that the image is of John. In order to understand an iconic sign does not require a set of conventions, but rather a familiarity with what John looks like.

The indexical sign forms its bond with its referent because it was directly caused by it. A footprint in the sand is indexical of the foot that brought it into being. What an indexical sign refers to is precisely the thing which catalyzed its being. However, the question of whether or not you can come to know what produced the sign does not negate its indexical relation with its referent. Peirce is explicit that the indexical sign does not become such by the nature of it producing an explicit idea in the mind of the interpreter. To demonstrate this quality he gives the example of a bullet-hole: “[F]or without the shot there would have been no hole; but there is a hole there, whether anybody has the sense to attribute it to a shot or not” (Peirce and Hoopes 240). Often times, the ability to connect an indexical sign to its causal agent must be learned. Smoke is indexical of the fire which

causes it, but in order to be able to recognize this fact one must be familiar with the producer of smoke.

Thus these marks and my photographs of them can both be understood as indices. As such, both these images and marks therein depict and bring to mind something else which is inextricably linked to pastness. The photographs point to previous manifestations of light reflecting off the world and the marks point to previous actions which leave their own traces. They're both fixed and yet sit in some porous relationship to their referent, simultaneously allowing and denying access.

### **The Question of “Just” and Inconsequence**

There are some inadvertent marks, happenings, and actions that are easily designated to the categories of “unfortunate,” “evil,” “horrific,” “painful,” “terrible,” etc. But what of those which are not so easily conscripted into such superlative classifications? What of a paper cut? A tiny trip on a step which does not lead to a fall? The mark a pencil leaves when it is accidentally dropped on an unimportant sheet of paper? These events can easily be ignored and yet have a veracity and presence in our lives which exists; through existence alone don't they beg for an account apart from the application of a dismissive comment e.g., “oh, that's just a paper cut—it's nothing.” I'm fascinated by these words “just” and “only”. What meaning do they carry? In this project I aim to turn all of my attention to the marks in the world that, to many, are just... I ask for, investigate, and attempt to offer an account of these phenomena.

But the reasoning for photographing the seemingly insignificant and trivial kind of mark, as opposed to the grand accident, also always stands in a dialectical relationship to the spaces in which they live. And this brings in a slew of questions concerning economics, infrastructure, and class. The spaces which are most full of inadvertent marks are those which are rundown, abandoned, or otherwise dilapidated. These are not the spaces in which I look to photograph because the

implication or significance of the marks in them are clear to most people. That is, that these spaces need resources, or at least come to symbolize a generic sense of scarcity, destitution, or hardship. Rather, I aim to discover and interrogate slight and trivial marks which sit atop surfaces that are meant to remain cohesive and spotless. This can be seen in the many photographs of graffiti cover ups, but due to the slightly off-colored paint these turn into their own kind of marks. They are instances where one intention to maintain a facade, lacking in interference, was corrupted by vandalism. However the intention to repair the surface to its original “purity,” a second mark is left, allowing for a viewer to entertain this kind of narrative. Thus, the marks which I search for are those which stand against the desire of the owner of the surface on which the marks sit who aim to maintain cosmetic cohesion of these spaces. And yet, because of the minutiae of the marks, frequently they are permitted to live on these surfaces; for they are so inconsequential they rarely reach the attention of nor warrant the application of resources from the caretaker of the surface. And ultimately this is what’s so curious about these marks. They are enough to draw the attention of those who look, but not enough to earn the application of labor necessary to provide the mark’s own effacement. Some are cleaned up, repaired, dealt with, while the majority are left. Left to live and breath, to sit and watch, to wait and be ignored.

### **The Naturally Unplanned: Towards a Collective Self-Understanding**

In a chapter of *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*, Pauline von Bonsdorff expounds what she calls the “naturally unplanned.” She states that in contexts of city planning, architecture is mostly considered as an “intentionally designed body of objects” (Bonsdorff 73). But this consideration, according to Bonsdorff, invites us to forget the elements of the built environment that aren’t the result of our intentions. Thus, she calls these elements, referencing weather, climate, and topography, the “naturally unplanned.” Giving an example of a specific phenomenon that fits inside

this category, she describes the way a building is “worn” through contact with human bodies. Bonsdorff makes strong claims about this aspect of our built environment: “By calling this dimension unplanned rather than contingent I want to stress that it belongs of necessity to any inhabited environment and is no less essential than the planned” (Bonsdorff 73). I think the inadvertent marks in my project easily sit inside Bonsdorff’s category of the naturally unplanned, and to which we can extend her claims.

By forgetting these “worn” elements of the built environment, we fall increasingly out of touch with the ways in which we are part of “nature.” We even frequently look for ways to distinguish ourselves further from “nature.” “We often speak of culture and nature as if they were opposed: nature is raw, while culture is cooked; nature is animal, while culture is human; nature is without sense, while culture is meaningful; nature is sensuous, while culture is spiritual” (Bonsdorff 76). As a result of these linguistically reinforced beliefs, we lose large portions of our self-understanding.

Bonsdorff offers an example of the difference between walking and driving as modes of transportation that allow for varying degrees of contact with our environment. She claims that although life becomes smoother with driving, we lose touch with the multi-sensuous engagement with our surroundings that walking provides. “Losing touch with the environment is not primarily a diminution [*sic*] of the amount of sensory impulses here and now. More importantly, it entails a disappearance of the subjective strata that give my environment(s) temporal depth” (Bonsdorff 80). It is in this loss of subjective and temporal engagement with our environment and an understanding of ourselves as subjects of nature that ultimately leads to a loss of self-understanding, according to Bonsdorff: “Here the loss in collective self-understanding comes hand in hand with a loss in our self-understanding as finite subjects of nature. That is a basis for the relevance, interest and reevaluation of the naturally unplanned” (Bonsdorff 80). Thus, extending her argument directly to

my project, to engage with these inadvertent marks could possibly bring a greater awareness of our own position as finite subjects of nature, and ultimately a greater kind of collective self-understanding.

### **Richard Wentworth: Shifting Conditions of Meaning and Intention**

My project shares much in common with Richard Wentworth's book, *Making Do and Getting By*, in its methods, themes, and form. Through 750 photographs, Wentworth considers the human repurposing of objects and materials perceivable in contemporary urban landscapes. When flipping through the images, we see things that are patched, fixed, jury-rigged, improvised, and in many instances, obvious or deadpan in the way in which these objects have been repurposed. In this sense the photographs are often humorous.

In his project, Wentworth grapples with the original intention of objects over and against how they are inevitably repurposed, due to secondary sets of intention. He situates his work at "...the limits of purposefulness," always perceiving "...the crack in the glass before...the window" (Bright 211). He states simply, "I have always had this 'sickness'. I am interested in the aberrant" (Bright 211). Many of the instances he photographs call attention to themselves by the fact that they depict an item within a pattern which is different from the rest. In many ways both of us seek out anomalies which sit atop highly designed surfaces—that which deviates from cogent and reasoned architecture. He is also documenting the happenstance or incidental. Many times they arise from the merging or collision of two design plans (e.g., a crescent-shaped slab of asphalt which has covered a portion of a man-hole covering, an athenian column painted half yellow and half blue because it is shared by two storefronts). But they also arise from seemingly highly accidental moments where one pillar is missing from a series, or the shadow of a tree is concealing the signage on the street.



(Fig. 9) Richard Wentworth, *Hastings*, 2009, material and dimensions unknown

Humans are almost entirely absent from Wentworth's images with the exception of one or two people (who are still not the main subject of the image) and at times the inclusion of what appears to be his own finger, used as a framing or pointing device. Despite this ostensible absence of humans, it's clear that this work cannot be read without thinking largely about them. Their material intelligence, desires, and intentions, as these qualities contribute to meaning-making, are all deeply embedded in the scenes that Wentworth gives us. He states, "What draws me in is how things are convertible and how humans give meaning. There is something about mutability that I have always been attracted to." Part of the motivating factor in the making of the work for Wentworth is how these quotidian yet wonderful moments allow for a consideration of meaning as

mutable, flexible, even transitory. Similarly, humans are entirely absent from my own project, and yet, in many ways they are the main subject. Both Wentworth's moments and my marks embody a collision of meanings and intentions. My project and his alike can be understood primarily through a lens of shifting conditions of significance as objects and surfaces are both accidentally and intentionally altered against their original ends.

### **Thich Nhat Hanh: The this and here**

I make photographs where I live. I turn to my local surroundings for the subject matter of my work, restricting the range of my artistic exploration to the places I occupy every day or are easily accessible depending on where I move. This stems from a belief that if I am unable to glean value, beauty, and artistic fodder in the location I happen to occupy, I will be unable to encounter them in any location. Submitting myself to this relatively arbitrary rubric for choosing the location of artistic production demonstrates the near-universal presence of my subject matter.

In a book titled, *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, the Buddhist monk and activist, Thich Nhat Hanh, introduces and expounds the tenets of mindfulness meditation and a mindfulness way of life. He stresses the value of attending to daily actions in and for themselves rather than as instrumental to achieving another goal. He writes,

“If while washing dishes, we think only of the cup of tea that awaits us, thus hurrying to get the dishes out of the way as if they were a nuisance, then we are not ‘washing the dishes to wash the dishes.’ What’s more, we are not alive during the time we are washing the dishes. In fact we are completely incapable of realizing the miracle of life while standing at the sink. If we can’t wash the dishes, the chances are we won’t be able to drink our tea either. While drinking the cup of tea, we will only be thinking of other things, barely aware of the cup in our hands. Thus we are sucked away into the future—and we are incapable of actually living one minute of life” (Nhất Hạnh 4–5).

Thich Nhat Hanh is positing a warning of engaging in actions merely for the purpose of some other thing. That is, doing something for the sake of something else. Rather, he’s claiming that one ought

to be present to the action in which they are engaging as means in and of itself. As an intrinsic good. He proposes a radical reconsideration of how one might engage in and perform the movements of utility and leisure. It is a kind of presentness to an action or object which opens up to the possibilities which transcend the given purpose of the action. This attunement towards the world is not only one out of which I attempt to create my work but also one that I attempt to elicit in a viewer. In a word, Thich Nhat Hanh supports the *this* and *here*. This concept is deeply embedded in my process of creation. Before going out into the world, seeking the *other* and the *there*, I stop and attempt to open myself up to my most local surroundings. If I sever myself off from a present condition I run the risk of falling victim to what Thich Nhat Hanh proposes: a complete incapacity of perceptual discovery of the miraculous. Ultimately, I believe this quality of engagement with the world has transformative power; if one is able to give oneself, attentively and expectantly, to something they previously believed to be mundane, instrumental, or banal, it might prove to be wondrous, alive, and intrinsically meaningful.

### **John Lehr: Advertising, Attention, and Mood**

John Lehr's book, *The Island Position*, presents a collection of unaffected, sunlit photographs of physical advertisements in the facades, entryways, and windows of storefronts. These advertisements slip into obliteration as people's capitalist activities increasingly shift online. This shift occurs simultaneously with an abatement of an economy of attention more generally, as our capacity to selectively attune our attention to *one thing* declines and digital realms ping us through our devices that rarely leave our sides.





(Fig. 10) John Lehr, 53, 2016, material and dimensions unknown

There is a strong connection Lehr's book has with my project and analysis of Thich Nhat Hahn. If we consider Lehr's words on his work, we can look to this book as a consideration of a shifting landscape as it correlates to a shifting attention and mood of a larger populous. Included in the back of Lehr's book is George Saunders's short story, *Exhortation*: an informal memo written from a divisional director to their staff, urging them to reconsider their position towards their work. This piece opens with the director reminding the staff that they have all agreed to complete a job, but pushes it further by outlining the importance of accomplishing the task with the right mindset. The director illustrates this idea with an example of a shelf which needs to be cleaned:

“We all know very well that that ‘shelf’ is going to be cleaned...either by you or the guy who replaces you and gets your pay-check, so the question boils down to: Do I want to clean it happy or do I want to clean it sad? Which would be more effective? For me? Which would accomplish my purpose more efficiently? What is my purpose? To get paid. How do I accomplish that purpose most efficiently? I clean that shelf well and clean it quickly. And what mental state helps me clean that shelf well and quickly? Is the answer: Negative? A negative mental state? You know very well that it is not. So the point of the memo is: Positive. The positive mental state will help you clean that shelf well and quickly, thus accomplishing your purpose of getting paid.”

There is a vast difference between the attitude which is embodied by this director and that which Thich Nhat Hahn proposes. The former’s sole goal is ultimately to get paid, whereas Thich Nhat Hahn suggests a turn away from the instrumental engagement with daily tasks. Where they are similar, however, is in the way they both underline the crucial nature of a self-reflective evaluation of one’s position towards, and interaction with the world. Holding this interpretation of Saunders’s short story in mind, we can view *The Island Position* as a consideration of shifting registers of attention, both in those who perceive the subject matter of his images—i.e., those who move through streets, full of dusty but endearing advertisements—and the attempt to grab attention within the advertisements. Lehr’s book is a look into how advertisements ask us to shift our attitudes (our moods toward the world) alongside the fact that they fail in doing so because our attention has already withdrawn.

The inadvertent marks in my photograph are in a similar position to that of the advertisements in Lehr’s book. I believe they invite a shift in attitude. That they call those who look, to slow and ponder. Indeed, they require it if one intends to look. There are other connections these marks may have to advertisements, however. The word, advertise comes from the Latin, *advertere*, meaning, ‘turn towards.’ Thus, when understood from the perspective of their authors, these marks may be “in” advertent, insofar as they were unplanned—that they were not “turned toward” when they were made. But understood from the point of the looker, they might definitely advert one’s attention. And insofar as they do this, they might invite a shift in how one looks at the world; for

these marks are an unplanned attribute of our environment, and to look at them would be to turn normative aesthetic hierarchies on their head. However, similar to the advertisements in Lehr's photographs, the attention of the audience of these marks has already withdrawn to other things. Neither to these ads or these marks do people look.

## Conclusion

Having written the above, I am now left to give a conclusive account of this integer of *These Inadvertent Marks* as a project. One of the things that has been most difficult about carrying out this piece of work is my inconsistent interpretations or understanding of the marks themselves. There are some times when I feel as though I have a firm understanding of how I want to think about them in my own life, and what I believe they could do for others who choose to pay attention. But at other times, I am not so assured of my global interpretations and return to asking questions; it is largely from this vacillation that I am continually captivated by these marks and the theoretical concerns regarding meaning, value, signs, interpretation, and human fallibility that I believe they provoke.

I still feel as though I am in a state of existential boredom, of being flattened out, and I still relate to these marks on this level. Looking back on the work I have done on these marks, I have a strong desire to have a versed and decisive opinion of them; to be able to outline in a succinct verbal or written form, my position and beliefs regarding their theoretical significance. But alas, this is not the case, and I am ultimately left with even more questions than those with which I started.

Nevertheless, beyond confusion, questions, and theoretical consideration of these marks, there is something of which I am unwaveringly sure: my experience of these inadvertent marks is one of the beautiful. My use of this term involves questions of taste, subjective experience, and formal properties of these marks as objects. However, I primarily intend to draw from the medieval

philosopher and theologian Thomas Aquinas's understanding of beauty. In *About Beauty: A Thomistic Interpretation*, the philosopher Armand Maurer expounds Aquinas's position on the subject. Maurer shows that, although Aquinas discusses beauty very little in comparison to truth and goodness, a close reading of his comments show that "...beauty, no less than truth and goodness, is ultimately grounded, not on the forms of essences of things, but on their existence..." ultimately claiming that "[A]bsolute Beauty is found in the pure act of existing that is God" (Maurer 4). Therefore, when I state that my experience of these marks is an experience of the beautiful, I mean that apart from their detail, color, delicacy, dimension, and physical relation to our actions, it is ultimately their existence alone that renders them beautiful.

I think it is fitting, therefore, to conclude with a quote from the philosopher and theologian, David Bentley Hart, on beauty. In this passage, Hart writes on the potency of the beautiful as such, and our experience of it. This, to my mind, is the only satisfying account of the ultimate relevance of these marks in my life, and possibly, in the lives of others.

"What transforms the merely accomplished into the revelatory is this invisible nimbus of utter gratuity. Rather than commanding our attention with the force of necessity, or oppressing us with the triteness of something inevitable, or recommending itself to us by its utility or its purposiveness, the beautiful presents itself to us as an entirely unwarranted, unnecessary, and yet marvelously fitting gift" (Hart 283).

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## **Acknowledgements**

With abundant gratitude, I would like to acknowledge a few of those who had an incredible impact on the completion of this thesis, and my personal, artistic, intellectual, and spiritual development that made it possible.

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My parents: Joyce Anne and Michael. My siblings: Karen, Nathan, Rachel, Krista, Carl, Daniel, Jacob, Andrew, Kathryn, and Olivia. My friends: Sadie, Tim, Jonny, Ellen, Ellie, and Thom.

# These Inadvertent Marks

Thomas Wilder





# **These Inadvertent Marks**

**Thomas Wilder**



To my parents, Joyce Anne and Michael.



“To live means to leave traces.”

Walter Benjamin



















































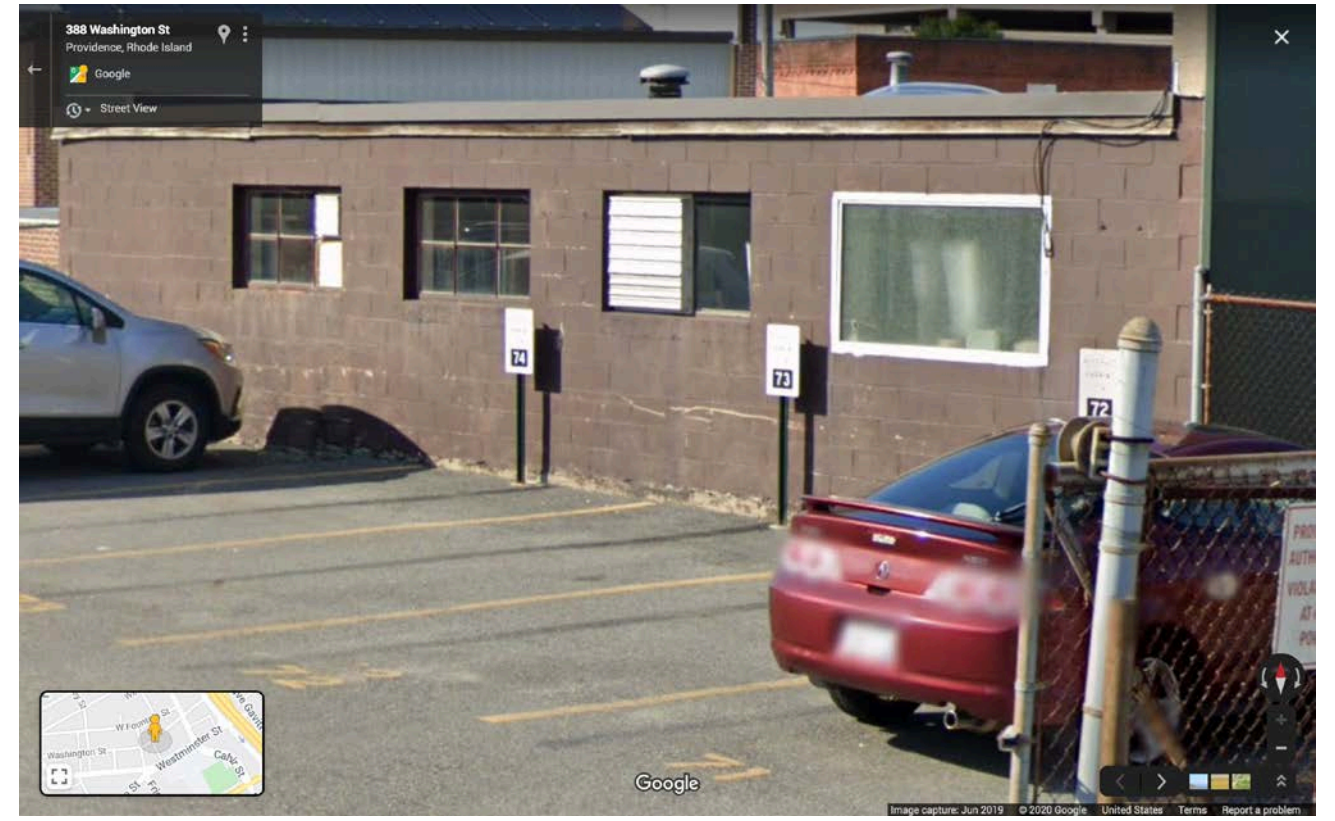






















































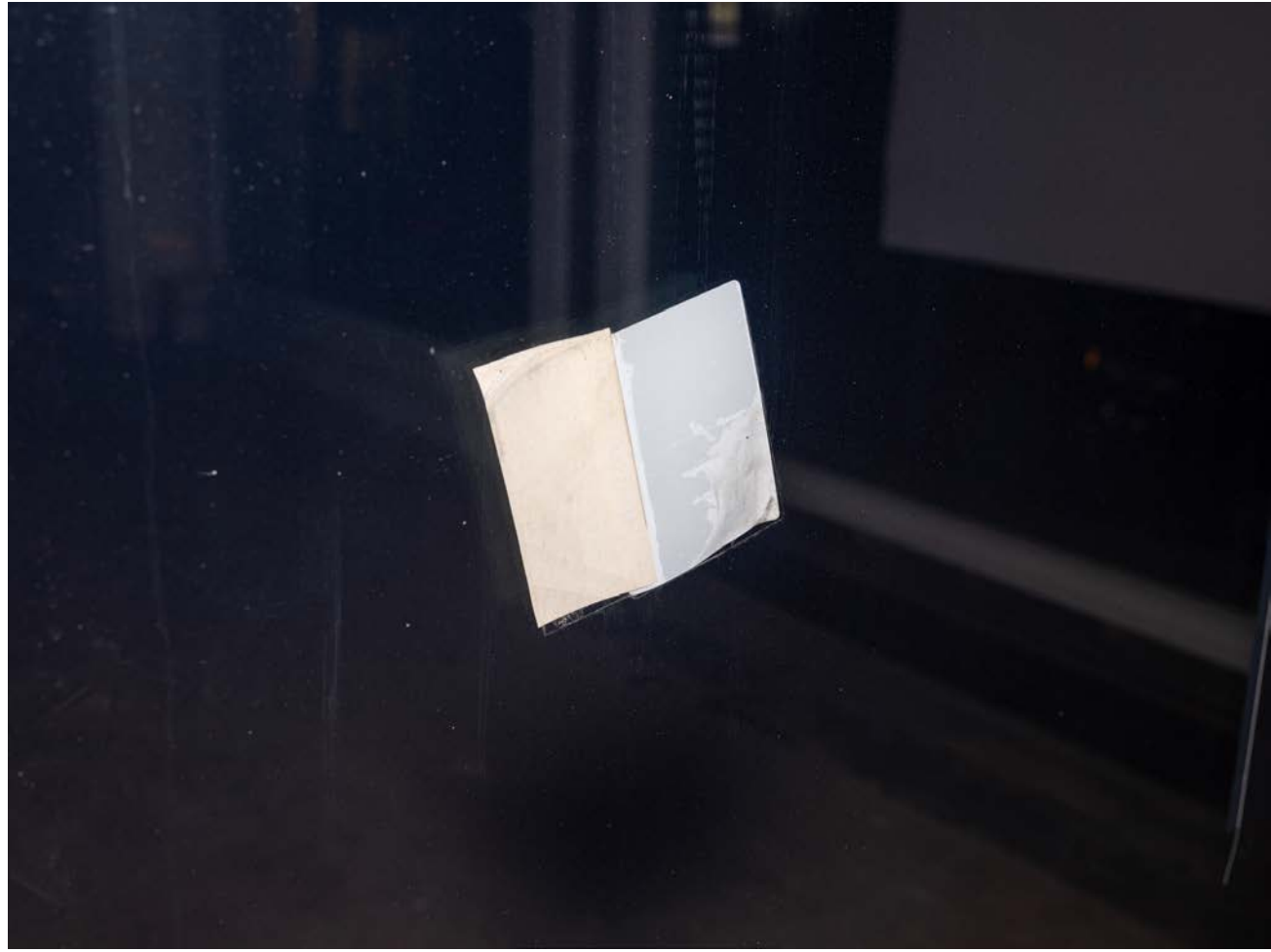






















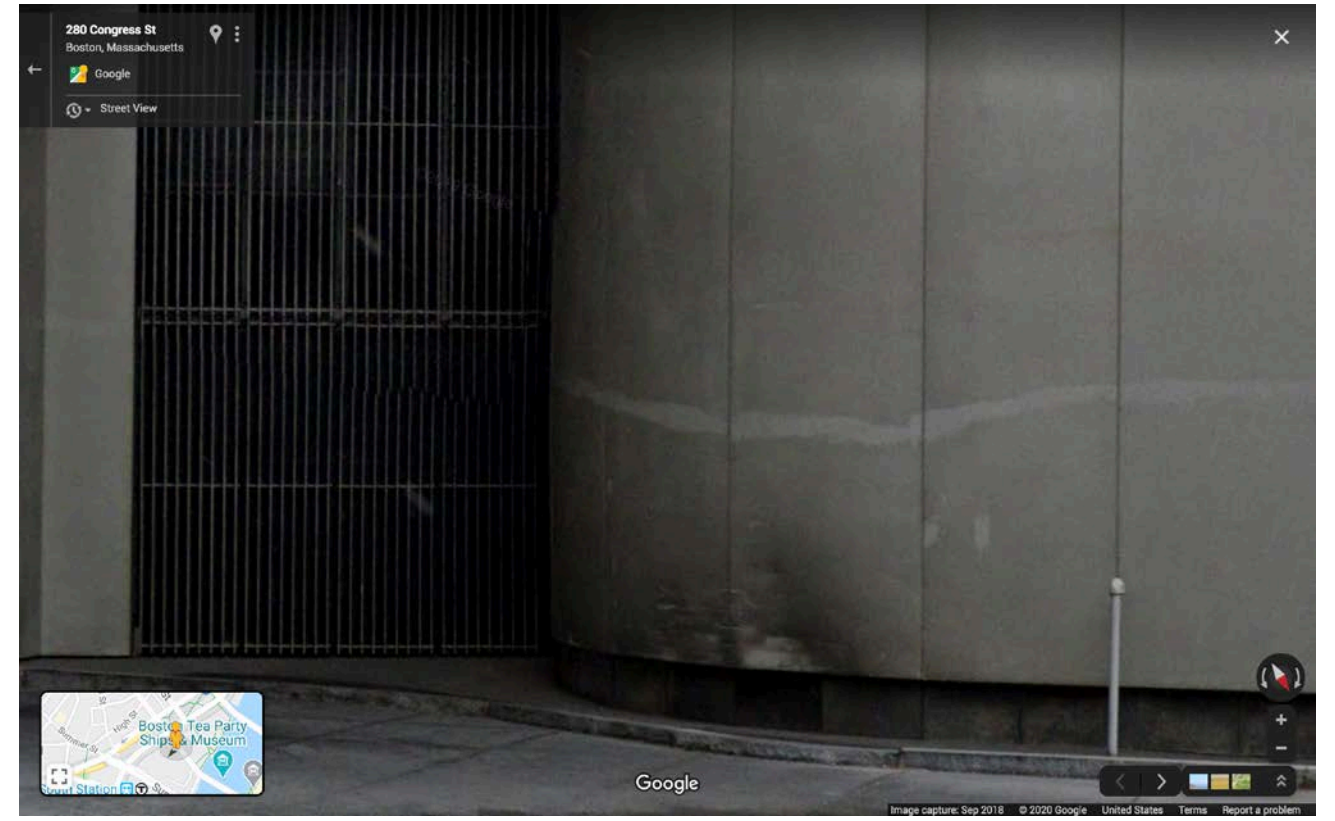








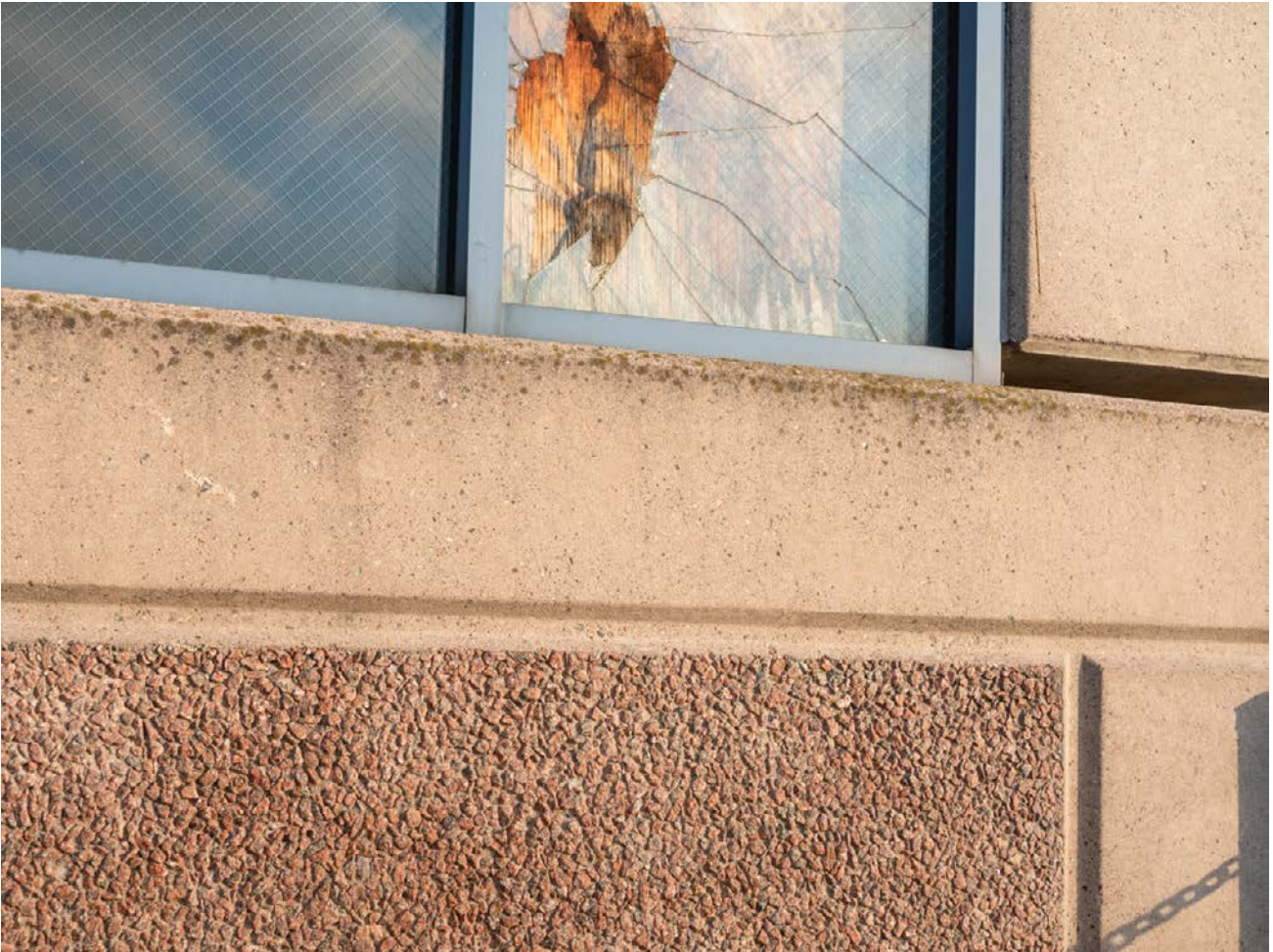








































The following is a collection of remarks, written during the years 2019 and 2020. The logic of some remarks follow directly from that of those previous; others sit on their own. Taken as a whole, they are a product of my theoretical consideration of these inadvertent marks. In no way do I intend for this writing to dictate interpretations of the previous photographs. Rather, I present it as an invitation into my thinking and motivation around the creation of this body of work.

- I look down at the keyboard on which I am typing and see the dirt on the edges of the right-shift key, forming a half oval. Based on my own common use of keyboards I infer that this instance of grime came from the extended use of the keyboard without cleaning. A series of individuals pressed this shift key in a way that felt natural in achieving their purpose in pressing: to deliver signals to the computer in order to achieve the further intention of writing, commanding, inputting, etc. I further speculate that these individuals gave little thought to how they were shaping the look of the right-shift key. I don't doubt that others have noticed, no matter how briefly, the dirtiness of this keyboard in general. Some of whom may have washed their hands before and after using it. However, through its use in any way, there is a resulting shift, application, and/or removal of dirt on the key.
- It's possible that I am being fooled in this line of thinking; maybe it turns out that I am the first person to use this keyboard as such; someone came in and quite purposefully planted this dirt in order to trick me into thinking of its origin as incidental to a purposeful action.
- This potential of being wrong or tricked is always a possibility. The attempt to infer a particular intention and set of actions to the smallest of visual marks in the world always includes the potential for error. This further signifies the elusiveness of the eventual meaning of intentions in general. I approach this shift key and interpret its makeup as the resulting residue of intentional acts upon the keyboard. I could be wrong. Yet, I make interpretations based off of how I believe the keyboard is *typically* used.
- But is *meaning* bound to *typical* use?
- Even if I am not being tricked and I am correct in my inference of how this dirt came into being, is the meaning of its presence limited to solely testifying to human action? Can these marks do nothing more than this?
- To many people, and in many contexts, the inadvertent marks caused by continual use or a singular accident signify a necessity for restoration; for many, the dent in one's car can either be ignored, or it ought to be fixed.
- In opposition to these normative modes that respond to these marks with ignorance,

indifference, or effacement, I look to embody a philosophical, meditative, and aesthetic based exploration of these inadvertent marks.

- I stare at the wall in my bedroom. I perceive it's delicately dimpled texture—not dissimilar to the shell of a chicken's egg—and its soft-white paint. From a small distance, the wall appears incredibly smooth, even seamless. But as I scan across its surface, my eye gets caught on the subtle, and foreign scuffs, holes, and lines, which punctuate the wall's initially apparent coherence. From here on, I cannot drive these marks, which break the consistency of the wall's texture, from my mind.
- These marks break the presiding “rule” of the wall: textural consistency.
- There is no verification of the causal history of these marks. However, regardless of their origin and (un)intentional status, they have *autonomy*. I perceive them alone, without the presence of their author nor the verification of their intention. I approach them and read them as independent signs.
- In *The Imaginary*, Jean-Paul Sartre writes, “When we interpret a spot on the tablecloth, a motif on a tapestry, we do not posit that the spot, the motif has representative properties. Really, that spot represents nothing; when I perceive it, I perceive it as a spot and that is all.”<sup>1</sup> What is keeping Sartre from seeing the spot as representational? Or is it better to say, what is keeping the spot from representing something? What kind of spot would have representative qualities for him? One might state the same for the marks on my bedroom wall, and yet, as soon as one claims an origin point for these marks, they posit representative properties.
- Peter Geimer in *Inadvertent Images* has a different take on the spot, “Looking at a spot, we are, as a matter of principle, at liberty to confer the status of a representation on it.... Nothing can prevent someone contemplating this spot to read its outlines as a representation in spite of all—even if its presence was never ‘meant’ to be understood that way.”<sup>2</sup> Geimer allows an interpretive approach towards the spot,

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1 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination*, 2015.

2 Peter Geimer, *Inadvertent Images: A History of Photographic Apparitions* (Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2018).



regardless of the initial intention behind it. What, in essence, distinguishes these two positions? Sartre draws a hard line, claiming that the spot fails to represent anything and cannot point beyond the boundaries of its own form. Contrastingly, Geimer invites viewers to interpret at will, paying no attention to origin or intention.

- The difference between these positions is twofold: the possibility in considering the spot as a sign, and the rights of its interpretation.
- But what constitutes a sign?
- Is it in its ability to point—to spur in the mind of the viewer a mental concept that is not located in the sign itself? Would the sign have to do this successfully and dependably across all audiences: producing the same or comparable mental concept in each perceiver?
- What if the spot successfully and dependably produces widely disparate mental concepts in each respective viewer, is this a sign?
- What if it engenders many different mental concepts which change over time in the same viewer?
- What if it occasions a mental concept in one viewer that no one else is able to see or understand?
- According to Charles Sanders Peirce, “a sign is something by knowing which we know something more.”<sup>3</sup>
- When I look at these marks, I don’t know what else I know but it feels like something. These marks offer me something more than just themselves but I don’t know exactly what it is. They speak, but I don’t fully understand.
- These marks strike me, but don’t offer a method for interpretation. Or, they strike me, but do not offer a pre-designated meaning.

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3 Charles Sanders Peirce, cited by Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*, Advances in Semiotics (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

- The meaning of a sign depends on the manner of approach on the part of an interpreter; it is inextricably culturally and contextually bound.
- Yet, how can we hold this as true without also upholding complete relativism? Does this claim necessitate the support of a version of subjective materialism (i.e., to be is to be perceived: if no one heard the tree fall in the forest, did it fall?) with regards to meaning? Put slightly better, if no one finds a mark to be meaningful, is it meaningless? If this were the case, is one person encountering meaning with something enough to inaugurate it into the hall of meaningful objects?
- Can someone ever say, with confidence, that something is meaningful or meaningless?
- Is there any amount of meaning that is purely located in an object? The other way around, is there any amount of meaning that is solely located in a subject?
- Even if the subject is hallucinating, dreaming, or fantasizing, aren't these illusions still based out of reality to some degree?
- Umberto Eco writes, "The limits of interpretation coincide with the rights of the text (which does not mean with the rights of its author)."<sup>4</sup> But who decides what in fact are the rights of a text? If not the author, who has the authority to judge? Based off of what criteria?
- Where human intention ends, these marks begin; they flourish at the limit of a singular semiotic or gestural aim.
- These inadvertent marks sit where the birth of the accidental and the death of authorial intention come into contact.
- One can consider these marks as accidental in multiple respects. They are accidental insofar as they are inessential to the objects on which they live. And they are accidental in that they are unintended visual manifestations of human action.

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4 Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*, Advances in Semiotics (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

- At what point does the accidental become the essential?
- When we say after a car wreck, “my car was totaled,” do we mean that the accident became the totality of the situation? Better: did the accident (the event) and the accidental rise to the level of the essential? One can no longer ignore or forget the accidental qualities of the vehicle as they transfigured into the necessary. Now, they *must* be addressed.
- If it’s the case that these marks are indeed inadvertent, then considering them could invite a re-evaluation of our values. They are things, which through no active intention by a human, arise and find their way into our visual field; and yet they remain unseen. If we do see them, we are not taught to; we are maybe even taught to ignore them. If you were taught to see them, chances are you have a profession of erasure; repairing, eliminating or renewing these blemishes of reality. Your duty is to rid our surfaces of their history; to act as though this place *has no history*.
- As we move through the world, attempting to make meaning, we leave incidental traces of our actions. Those who come after us, attempting to find meaning in the world, struggle to interpret what we left behind. Ultimately, I understand these marks to demonstrate the difficulty in accurately producing and discovering stable occasions, objects, or actions of significance.
- Someone has a value → they *act* in accordance with said value in order to *make* meaning → these inadvertent marks are left as a product of their actions.
- Someone has a value → they *read* in accordance with said value in order to *find* meaning → these inadvertent marks are read as signs of previous actions.
- In both of the above narratives, people are producing or discovering meaning in objects which were never intended to be meaningful. These marks are the noise, static, and interference that buzzes around our imprecise action, communication, and interpretation. And yet, when we unknowingly produce marks or read meaning into them, we transform static into signal.
- Through an investigation of these inadvertent marks I look to consider the uncontrollable flux, turbulent drift, and recalcitrant shifting of the status of meaning.





## **Acknowledgements**

With abundant gratitude, I would like to acknowledge a few of those who had an incredible impact on the completion of this thesis photobook, and my personal, artistic, intellectual, and spiritual development that made it possible.

My thesis committee: Dr. Anne West, Dr. Doug Nickel, and Prof. Stanley Wolukao-Wanambwa. My professors: Prof. Brian Ulrich, Dr. Odette England, Dr. Foad Torshizi, Dr. John Walford, Prof. Greg Schreck, Dr. Matthew Milliner, Prof. Joel Sheesley, Prof. Cherith Lundin, and Dr. Sarah Borden. My cohort: Jessina, Lily, Keavy, Han, and Charlott. My MFA photography colleagues: Viktor, Rachael, Armando, Andong, Dylan, Michelle, Steph, Shterna, Izabela, Mei Mei, Steffanie, Chance, Leah, Meg, Camilla, Erick, and Amber.

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A special thanks to Nick Bridges for the fabrication of this book.

Thomas Wilder  
These Inadvertent Marks

Images, Writing, and Design by Thomas Wilder

Limited edition of ten

Printed in New Jersey by Conveyor

Typeface: Garamond

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