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The Feeling of Foam & Other Essays

Ryan Erickson

ryan.erickson@wustl.edu

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Washington University in St. Louis
Graduate School of Art
Spring 2021

*The Feeling of Foam
& Other Essays*

By
Ryan Erickson

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

Chair of the Master of Fine Arts in Visual Art Program
Lisa Bulawsky

Thesis Advisor
Monika Weiss

Primary Advisors
Michael Byron | Jack Risley

Committee Members
Ila Sheren | Richard Krueger

I dedicate this thesis to all the people who doubted me along the way.

Without them, completing this degree wouldn't feel so good.

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Introduction

I am not in the business of constructing meaning, at least not in the semantic sense. The author has been dead for over 50 years, and I think it is one of the greatest gifts that critical theory has given to artists.¹ I do not have intellectual control over my work, nor do I want it—I am not trying to communicate a direct message. In my work, I juxtapose signifiers and render them incoherent. By doing so, I lead viewers down a false trail, destabilizing any clear interpretation or conclusion, leaving them to question how human language, formal methodologies, and social institutions function. I want people to come up with their own interpretations to enrich this field of discourse—in short, I want open conversations about meaning rather than controlling them.

Through my rational visual aesthetic, I draw people in, yet offer nothing coherent. I disrupt the logical flow of thought with abrupt moments of absurdity. By working in a variety of mediums and maintaining a highly refined, systematic presentation, I disrupt viewer's expectations leaving them perplexed. They may find this humorous, uncomfortable, or possibly frustrating. All of which are perfectly acceptable. Ultimately, it is up to them what they do with it.

Over the last two years, my drawings, collages, sculptures, and installations have evolved alongside my project of *Foamalism*, in collaboration with linguist and musician Jon Lindeman, and to this end, we co-authored *The Foamalist Manifesto* (see appendix 1). *Foamalism* is an aesthetic theory that calls on artists to reveal transcendent artistic meaning to society through a dialectical approach that seeks a balance or at the very least a middle ground, between structural and post-structural thought—or, in our wording, between systemization and disintegration.² As a

key example, the name *Foamalism* itself accomplishes this, by first presenting itself as a joke or wordplay, but then functioning as a trojan horse for a deceptively refined set of ideas.

In the first chapter, *The Feeling of Foam*, I acknowledge the theoretical and historical precedent of my conceptual framework and contextualize it through a *foamal* lens. This is followed *Self-Deprecating Objects*, a *foamal* analysis of a series of my sculptures. Then, in Chapter 3, I invite readers into my process and decision-making through a short story titled *Don't Trust Caterpillars*. Last, and quite possibly least, I end with *Words, Words, Words* where I take a deep dive into the concepts and process for the text-based aspects of my work.

The Feeling of Foam

In my work, I take a dialectical position by proposing a thesis as a rational visual aesthetic, and then undermine it with its absurd antithesis, thus creating a synthesis of *foam*. *Foam*, as discussed in the previous section, refers to the “abstract ontological referent for the space between systemization and disintegration” as defined in *The Foamalist Manifesto* by Jon Lindeman and myself.³ I source the objects and subjects of my practice from the everyday world to challenge notions of certainty—and reveal the absurdity—of the world around us. Or as stated in *The Foamalist Manifesto*, “to always be mindful of the strangeness of the world.”⁴

I believe strongly that humor in art can be used to draw attention to the ideas and values that comprise a joke, and in doing so present an efficient and accessible avenue for more profound artistic analysis. As Jennifer Higgle states in her introduction to *The Artist’s Joke*, “if humour has one common characteristic, it is to thumb its nose at pigeon holes.”⁵ But if anyone (other than myself) has experience rubbing their nose around a pigeon’s nest, they also know there are other ways to be humorous. To Higgle’s point, humor’s ability to complicate and elucidate leads me to employ it as a primary strategy that calls unique attention to the quotidian objects and subjects of my work.

I drew a void in my room (figure 1), a 4-foot-wide circular gradient comprised of marker dots along the back wall of my bedroom. From down the hall, it appears to be a blur floating in space. But as I step into the room, a cloudy effect emerges and slowly morphs into individual dots when arriving at its face. Its centermost 3x3 inch circle is filled in black which gradually radiates out until it blends in with the wall. When face to face with the abyss, my eyes continually bounce between the center and its faded edges. This all happening simultaneously while stepping back and forward again where it transposes between its blurred and refined forms.

In other words, the experience of seeing *The Void in My Room* (2020) is a highly perceptual one. The photograph stands only as an artifact of its existence. I present the cold, formal nature of the void in the personal space of my bedroom evoking a question about the relationship between the two.

Figure 1



Ryan Erickson, *The Void in My Room*, 2020. Marker on wall, 4 x 4 feet, photographed by the artist.

I present my work rationally, but with underlying absurdity—the pursuit for meaning yet the inability to find it. In his landmark essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus assures us that, “man stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world.”⁶ While literature and art on the issue developed over the course of the 20th century, I see this as an unresolvable concern that can manifest in different ways and can only be questioned and investigated. This is why I live with *The Void in My*

Room—I kiss it goodnight and wake up to it the next morning. I investigate absurdity by participating in the illogical—I take being silly very seriously.

The euphoric feeling of laughter creates an opportunity to reflect on the circumstances and underlying values that produced it. As Simon Critchley states in his book *On Humour*, “[a] true joke, a comedian’s joke, suddenly and explosively lets us see the familiar defamiliarized, the ordinary made extraordinary and the real rendered surreal”⁷ As an artist, I couldn’t agree more: embracing the ridiculous is my avenue to draw attention to absurdity. It is my method for questioning the easily unquestioned.

I see being silly as a powerful tool to challenge the commonplace thinking easily adapted on a day-to-day level. The more I think about anything, the less it makes sense. Participating in ridiculous behavior is an efficient way for me to disrupt an easily adopted autopilot approach to everyday life. As the philosopher and artist Alexi Kukuljevic observes:

As its etymology attests, from the Latin *ridiculosus*, the ridiculous is bound up with the laughable. Manifest in that which is out of place, the peculiar, the odd, the incongruous, the awkward, and all that lacks conformity, in the malformed or the deformed, the nonsensical and the absurd, that which is ridiculous suffers from an often sudden depreciation, a loss in value, or a lack in logical form, as in *reductio ad ridiculum*. Laying bare a void in the structural order of things or a deformation of an object’s appearance, the ridiculous punctuates the reduction of nothing of something with a large burst of laughter, that uneasy discharge that signals that something is awry.⁸

In my work, something is very much awry, I disrupt the functionality of everyday objects and places to interrogate our foundational understanding of them.

The ridiculous, or illogical, approach has been embraced by movements such as Dada and Surrealism in the early 20th century. These movements did so for different reasons—the former as a response to the horror and collective trauma of World War I, and the latter as a

means of tapping into the unconscious mind. I participate in a similar process to complicate systematized ways of understanding the world.

As a committed Foamalist, the *foam* in my work lies between the systematized presentation of everyday objects and subjects, which disintegrates through my ridiculous methods—complicating the lines between rationality and irrationality, understanding and confusion, so as to always be mindful of the strangeness of the world as stated earlier.⁹

Systems, while clearly powerful, are fallible. Whether it be language, institutions, or formalized methods of thinking, these systems provide efficiency and stability despite being riddled with contradictions, and the ever-present risk of inevitable breakdown. As addressed in the final point of *The Foamalist Manifesto*, the document's own precepts are not to be relied upon, recognizing itself as inherently unstable.¹⁰ I poke fun at art and its institutions, not to a cynical dead end, but do so while trying to imagine Sisyphus happy.¹¹ I draw attention to how language, institutions, and methodologies function by taking a highly systematized approach to destabilize these structures. In doing so, I practice the first two precepts of *Foamalism*—to recognize the communicative capacity of form balanced with an appreciation for pluralism.¹²

The quintessential proto-foamal artist is Marcel Broodthaers who, from 1968-1972, created and directed the *Museum of Modern Art: Department of Eagles* (figure 2).¹³ He said,

This is a fictitious museum. It plays the role of, on the one hand, a political parody of art shows, and on the other hand an artistic parody of political events. Which is in fact what official museums like Documenta do. With the difference, however, that a work of fiction allows you to capture reality and at the same time what it conceals.¹⁴

Broodthaers' tongue-in-cheek approach not only offers a critical commentary on the institution of the museum but also responds to the political landscape of his time. To create a museum dedicated to eagles, and then fully committing to it for several years, is in the first place

symbolic, but the nuances of the eagle displays within the context of the political and institutional atmosphere Broodthaers lived in create a complicated two-fold concept.

Figure 2



Marcel Broodthaers, installation view of the *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Section des Figures*, Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, 1972.

His witty approach did not come from a rational analysis for the viewer to follow. Rather it was leading the viewer's expectations along and suddenly disrupting them that calls the museum structure into question. *The Department of Eagles* strikes at the core of how museums function but does not stop there. Broodthaers also grapples with the complicated and oftentimes problematic symbol of the eagle in post-WWII Europe, ultimately reaching further than just cynically deconstructing museums as a social institution.¹⁵

Foamalism, on its surface, appears to be a joke riffing off of and mocking formalism, since the words *form* and *foam* are minimal pairs. And it certainly could be interpreted this way. But its content and critical aims are much wider-reaching. In a conversation I had with co-writer Jon Lindeman, he addressed the point saying, "Foamalism is satirical but not a satire."¹⁶ If one

replaced the word *foam* with something else, it would not be perceived humorously. Its precepts are expansive and inform an aesthetic viewpoint, but at the same time, it is self-aware of the pitfalls of its own mission. It is a systematized aesthetic perspective with the purpose of recognizing that *it too is subject to disintegration*. In my work, I pose a clean, highly crafted rational aesthetic that leads to an absurd conclusion. To return to my earlier point, I aim to skewer rationality and irrationality together as one cannot exist without the other.

Self-Deprecating Objects

In my series *Instruments of Logic*, I bring a sense of irrationality to rational objects, prompting questions about our arbitrary units of measure and methods of communicating them. I aim to reveal how these systems, while powerful, are inherently unstable.

In my subseries *Pencil Pusher* (2020), I broke ordinary, yellow pencils in half and carefully placed them into the wall (figure 3). Despite being made in a careful and precise manner, they appear as if I was trying to violently impale the wall. Behind the pencils, I transferred an image of the pencil directly behind it. This juxtaposition of the image and the physical object creates a visual experience in which it is difficult to differentiate the image from the object and vice versa. To put it another way, the *foam* in the *Pencil Pusher* series lies within repurposing the pencil as a dagger, the perplexing visual experience, and the connection this has to the wordplay in the title, referring to a boring (yet possibly very stable) job.

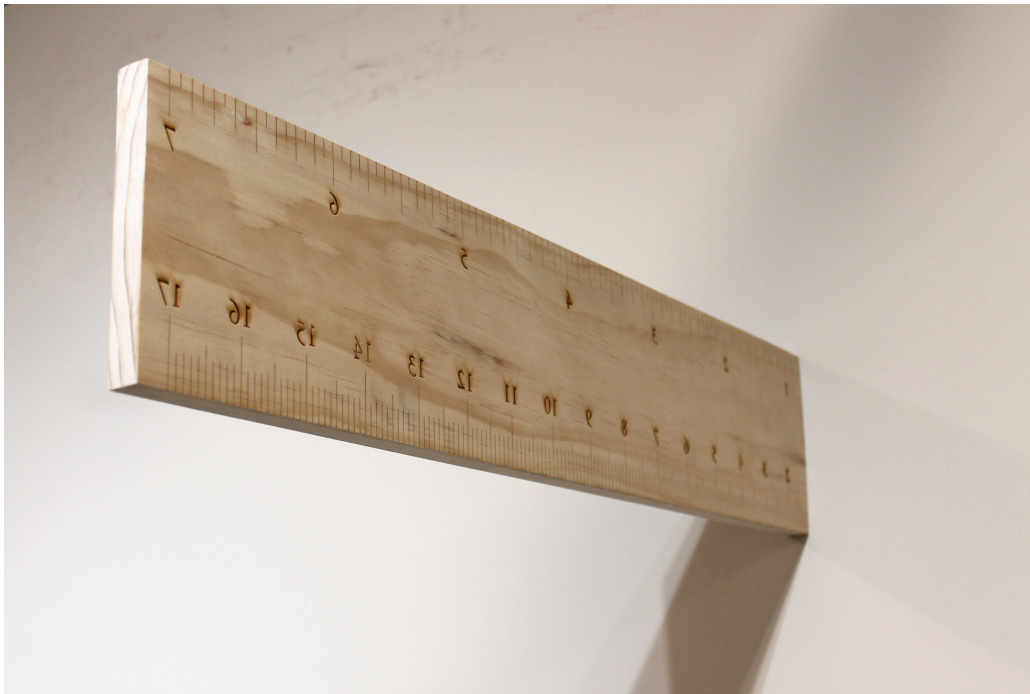
Figure 3



Ryan Erickson, *Pencil Pusher #1*, 2020. Pencil and image transfer on wall, 8 x 10 x 5 inches, photographed by the artist.

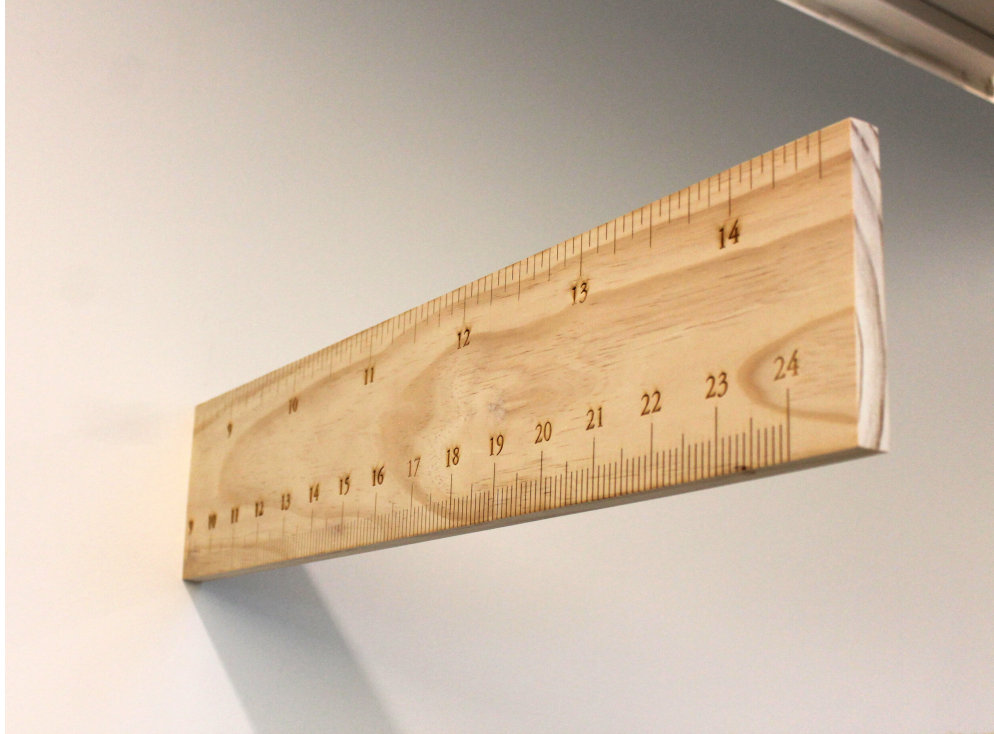
Other works in the *Instruments of Logic* series operate quite differently. In my piece *No Rules* (2020), viewers engage with a giant wooden ruler that cantilevers out from the wall in two separate locations (figures 4 and 5). I draw attention to the arbitrary nature of measurement systems by re-creating a ruler that corresponds to no known unit of measure. One-half of *No Rules* presents numbers inverted while the other side seems completely normal—with the exception being its enlarged scale. Upon closer inspection, the numbers on each half do not align or connect as a ruler should. The *foam* in *No Rules* lies between one’s understanding and experience of rulers as a rational and logical tool, contrasted with my subversion of this function. By inflating the scale of a ruler, I destabilize its communicative capacity. *No Rules* ultimately draws attention back to its syntactic structure—i.e., the agreed-upon distance of measurement, which—just like accepting the nature of inches or centimeters as a child must do in grade school—the viewer must accept the arbitrary nature of my destabilized ruler on its own terms.

Figure 4



Ryan Erickson, *No Rules* (side 1), 2020. Laser cut wood, 32 x 6 x .75 inches, photographed by the artist.

Figure 5



Ryan Erickson, *No Rules* (side 2), 2020. Laser cut wood, 32 x 6 x .75 inches, photographed by the artist.

The next piece in this series, *Sign Depicting Itself* (2019)—a pop-up folding sign with its own photograph on it—functions in much the same manner (figure 6). In daily life, the pop-up sign is typically used as a syntactic structure for an individual, business, or institution to communicate with passersby. It carries signifiers, or full sentences, making the physical object an identifiable syntax. By taking and attaching a photograph of the sign onto it, I disrupt its communicative role by drawing attention back to the syntactic structure itself. The *Sign Depicting Itself* is reflexive, perplexing, and reveals the *foam* in the very communicative mode it exists within.

Figure 6

Ryan Erickson, *Sign Depicting Itself*, 2019. Vinyl print on sign, 3 x 2 x 2.5 feet, photographed by the artist.

After altering and/or recreating these quotidian objects, I realized that to further engage with the communicative capacity of objects, the next step would have to be inventing my own logical instruments. Around this time, I had also been reflecting on the history and evolution of Western knowledge. Take for example the book of Genesis: Eve eats an apple when she shouldn't have, which explains why the world is the way it is, and contrast this with the lore of the empiricist tradition, when Sir Isaac Newton observed the behavior of a falling apple, thereby

prompting his ideas for the laws of gravity. It came to my attention that fruit, humble as it may be, must play a fundamental role in human understanding of the world. Thus, I decided to create the *Fruit Study Field Kit* (2021), or *FSFK* for short, an all-encompassing device contained within a wooden briefcase to reveal and explain the secrets of the world buried within the sweet and juicy treats we call fruit (figure 7).

Figure 7



Ryan Erickson, *Fruit Study Field Kit*, 2021. Computer, scale, external battery, wood, foam, and stand, 27.5 x 15.5 x 55 inches (standing), 27.5 x 15.5 x 6.5 inches (collapsed), Photographed by Gaoyuan Pan

The *FSFK* is designed to look like a researcher's kit. It is presented as though it can be taken out into the wilderness, into the "field," for practical, analytical purposes. Its exterior is intentionally simple with only two latches on the front, a handle in between, a long piano hinge on the back for the lid to prop open, and a two-inch-wide insert on the bottom. Upon opening this wooden case, one finds its collapsible stand, a small five-pound scale, and a computer with a

seven-inch screen. The case is designed so that when out in the field, one can remove the stand, expand it, and mount the case on top. This makes it an easy all-in-one device for fruticulture (the empirical study of fruit) in addition to being able to shed light on the world's more complex questions.

I see the *FSFK* as a pataphysical device and myself as a pataphysical inventor—'Pataphysics being "the science of imaginary solutions" or "a science of that which is superinduced upon metaphysics" as coined by writer Alfred Jarry.¹⁷ The *FSFK* reveals answers beyond the limitations of science and philosophy, thus shaping users' thinking of the world and their position in it.¹⁸

To use the kit, simply place a piece of fruit on the scale, and one-sentence answers will appear on the screen to the right. These sentences range widely in terms of their content. For example, one may place an orange on top of the scale and a sentence appears on the screen stating, "You don't need milk to understand onions" or "Eggs don't have doors."¹⁹ Either way, it's as though the *FSFK* is providing answers to things that were not in question to begin with, yet now are.

Each piece of text within the *FSFK* is a declarative statement that does not always reveal something to be true. Sometimes illogical sentences are spit out such as "If turtles made cream, they wouldn't be extinct." I want viewers to consider how one would reach this conclusion—to imagine a turtle producing cream, something a reptile cannot do, and to identify the fallacy that turtles are not extinct. Collectively, I intend for the sentences presented in the *FSFK* to ask the viewer to rationalize without purpose—to ask them to reconsider things they do not normally need to question.²⁰

In the essay *Sartre, Wittgenstein, and Learning from Imagination*, Kathleen Stock writes that a common method for conceptual art, “is to present to the viewer a prompt designed to make her think of some absent thing.”²¹ In the *Instruments of Logic* series, I create something that prompts an image of the circumstances around an object’s function. I imagine the moment that led up to a pencil being stabbed into a wall, how I reflect on my experience using rulers to measure things and consider the role and function of everyday pop-up signs. In the case of the *FSFK*, I wonder how, and to what end, such a device operates in the field.

The *Instruments of Logic* set up an expectation or defies a previously existing one. *Pencil Pusher* serves as an index for a violent action asking the viewer to consider the circumstances that led up to it. *No Rules* and *Sign Depicting Itself* each riff off their everyday function ultimately ending in contradiction. And the *FSFK* presents itself as providing empirical knowledge and then undermining this by asking the viewer to reconsider the very nature of knowledge and certainty. It is presented as an empirical device but actually functions more like a magic eight ball—this would be, as we can now identify, the *foam* of the piece.

Don't Trust Caterpillars

On November 26, 2020, artist Ryan Erickson found himself in a peculiar situation. He had a solo show at Semi-Gloss gallery the following week, but as he stood in his studio, he realized the wood panels he had been making weren't going to cut it. He had nothing else to fill the space and only 72 hours until it was time to install.

The next day, Ryan went to the gallery to look at the space thinking he would try to install the wood panels and figure out how to make it work. He mapped out where each piece would go, and in considering the layout and lighting, the work didn't seem to agree with the space. It was dim, very dim—the lighting looked as if it was designed for a David Lynch film, and there was no changing it. It was at that moment he realized he had to abandon ship. Why settle for something that doesn't seem to fit? With three days left, Ryan had no time to lose. He grabbed his X-ACTO knife and headed home where an old stack of mail awaited him.

You see, Ryan had accumulated piles of old junk mail over several weeks thinking it would make a great source material for some collage. He figured if he didn't know what to make, he may as well just start working with what was around. He decided to keep it simple—just make a series of collages, scan the good ones, and print them larger for the install space. He knew the variables—he had five slots on the wall where halos of light cast down each ready to illuminate a piece. The only obstacle would be the gallery director Adrian Gonzalez who was expecting a traditionally hung show, but Ryan figured if he showed up with an entirely different body of work Adrian would have to settle for it.

Ryan began cutting. He went through the fruits and vegetable section from the grocery store, some dental ads, and *BOOM!*—he found the images for his first piece. He made use of his razor blade and a glue stick and had one finished (figure 8), although he wasn't sure what it

meant. Part of him thought it was a great promotion for eating healthy snacks, and the other part of him found it uncanny. It made him uncomfortable enough that he didn't want to consider eating anything in its presence. He wasn't sure what it was doing. But that's the beauty of collage—it doesn't have to make sense.

Figure 8



Ryan Erickson, *There Will Be No Questions*, 2020. Collage on wall, dimensions vary, photographed by the artist.

He shuffled through some more ads and found a few pages full of construction materials to fix things up around the house. The images were perfect. Without any text interrupting the visual, they were uninterrupted signifiers. He could cut and paste them next to an array of others that met the same criteria. He found a ceiling fan which he was able to fit as the head of some utility coveralls. All it needed was some feet, so he found some shoes in an interior décor ad and *BOOM!* —the second piece was done (figure 9).

Figure 9

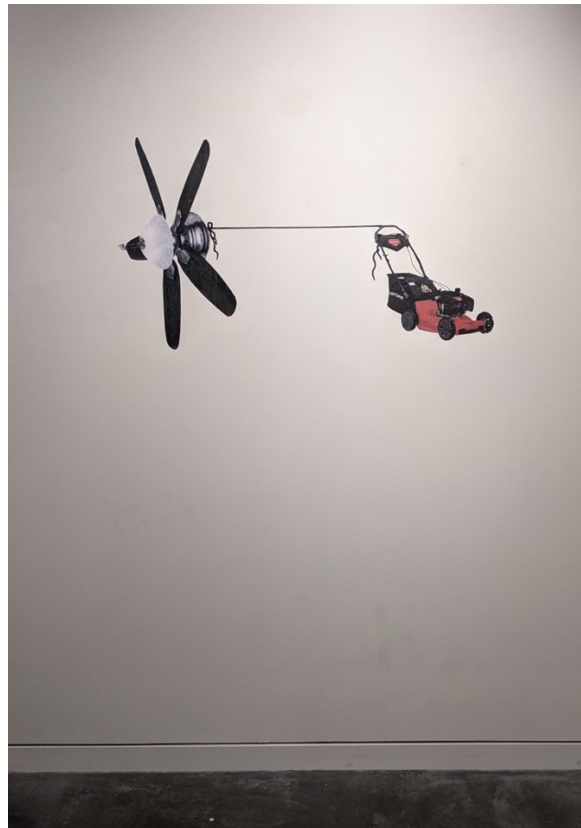
Ryan Erickson, *There Will Be No Questions*, 2020. Collage on wall, dimensions vary, photographed by the artist.

Things were going well. Ryan had two pieces together but still needed three more. That's when a potent worry started to sprout in the back of his mind, "*What am I going to say about all this?*" He knew people were going to ask but didn't have time to deal with those concerns now. He still had to round up the body of work first.

Ryan flipped through a few more papers and found duplicates of one brochure. It had an ad for a hearing aid with a hand pointing. On the tip of the finger was a hearing aid. *Slice!* The hearing aid was gone. Now he had the finger pointing and knew he could do the same to the duplicate copy. *Slice Again!* The two perfectly lined up culminating in a kaleidoscopic juxtaposition. But what else? It still needed something. He didn't know what, so he decided to put it on the backburner while he got some others sorted out.

He remembered several months earlier he had made some collages which he never did anything with. So, he began digging through a pile of old sketchbooks and found them. But most of them didn't work. Only one met the criteria (figure 10). The lawnmower and ceiling fan playing tug-of-war was perfect. Now it dawned on him, he needed something to thread this together, but he was done for the day. He knew he needed to make one more collage and finish the kaleidoscopic hands in progress, but it would have to wait for the next day.

Figure 10



Ryan Erickson, *There Will Be No Questions*, 2020. Collage on wall, dimensions vary, photographed by the artist.

Ryan had 48 hours left and started flipping through his few remaining collage materials. His archive was dwindling. He had run out of ads for all the junk pushed on him. All he had left were some catalogs from the Saint Louis Art Museum and the Missouri Conservationist. He

decided to give them a try and ended up striking gold. He found a Roman sculpture: a bust of a boy's head. He slapped it on the tip of one of those fingers and *Boom!*—he had another finished (figure 11) and only needed one more.

Figure 11



Ryan Erickson, *There Will Be No Questions*, 2020. Collage on wall, dimensions vary, photographed by the artist.

The Missouri Conservationist was great to Ryan. With an exposé on caterpillars, he knew he would have no issues wrangling one last piece together. He cut several caterpillars out but found one that looked like a larva. It was gross and weird—a perfect candidate. He pictured it standing up speaking into a microphone, so he sourced one from the internet. A caterpillar with a standing mic, what could be better? Now he really started to worry about what he was going to say about all this stuff. He knew people were going to ask. That's when it occurred to him. He'll have the caterpillar, the ringleader of this motley group, announcing, "There will be no

questions.” He broke out the rubber stamps and *Boom!*—the last piece was finished (figure 12). It was foolproof. If anyone asked him something, they would be disrespecting the art.

Figure 12



Ryan Erickson, *There Will Be No Questions*, 2020. Collage on wall, dimensions vary, photographed by the artist.

At this point, Ryan only had 24 hours left. He scanned each of his collages and ran over to the print shop and had them printed at 3x4 feet. When he came back a couple of hours later to pick them up, the man behind the counter opened one up for his approval. It happened to be the caterpillar. The man looked at it, then looked at Ryan with a smirk on his face, and Ryan said, “this looks great, thank you.” It was a critical first test to see if anyone would ask Ryan anything, and he passed. With some relief, he paid, rolled up his freshly printed images, and headed for the nearest pair of scissors.

When Ryan got back to his studio, his heart racing, he started cutting out each of the images. He had to get rid of the white background. The idea was for the images to function as an installation, so he couldn't have a rectangle around them. That's what the white walls of the gallery were for.

After a couple of hours of slicing and dicing, he had to figure out how he would get these things to stick to the wall. A quick google search solved the problem. All he needed was some liquid starch—as often used for putting up wallpaper—so he ran off to the store without hesitation. He had less than 10 hours left and no time to lose.

When Ryan arrived at the gallery, Adrian was there taken aback by the last-minute arrival to install the show. There were only four hours left. Ryan apologized, letting Adrian know he had experienced some hiccups while preparing the work. They walked to Ryan's super cool car, a green 1994 Honda Accord, to unload and Adrian was caught in disbelief. There were no wood panels like he had been expecting, just some rolled-up images, a 2-inch brush, and a bottle of liquid starch. Adrian turned to Ryan speechless waiting for an explanation. Ryan said, "the wood panels weren't going to work, so I took some liberties with the direction of the show." Adrian responded, "You Bozo! You can't just flip the script like that, but I guess we'll have to install what you have."²² So, they unloaded the car and got straight to work.

The pasting didn't go as easily as Ryan had hoped. But with only a couple of small tears from the paper getting wet, they were okay. He was able to finish installing the show with less than an hour to spare. The installation as a whole got along with the lighting as he had hoped (figures 13 and 14). Ryan was finally able to take a moment to experience and consider the space they were in. They were uncanny, disorienting, and absurd. But most importantly, he found a way to dodge the painful questions about their meaning and intent.

Figure 13



Ryan Erickson, *There Will Be No Questions* (installation view), 2020. Collage on wall, dimensions vary, photographed by the artist.

Figure 14



Ryan Erickson, *There Will Be No Questions* (installation view), 2020. Collage on wall, dimensions vary, photographed by the artist.

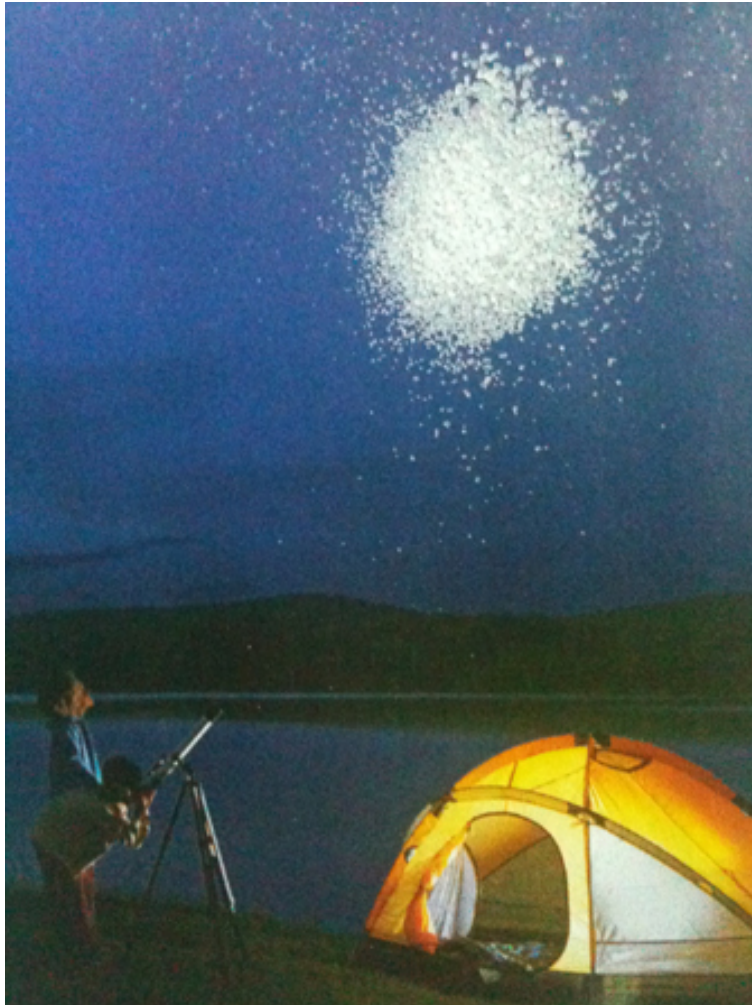
There Will Be No Questions was an exercise in creating something with what's available. Ryan identified a space and created a body of work to install within it, instead of making work to fit into a standard white wall gallery. By identifying the number of slots for work in the space and committing to a restrained set of source material to collage, he was able to quickly and efficiently produce a body of work.

Ryan had recently been studying Nina Katchadourian's series *Seat Assignment* (2010-present) (figures 15 and 16).²³²⁴ As curator Veronica Roberts observes of the series, "turning the airplane into her studio, [Katchadourian] finds inventive ways to reimagine items in her carry-on bag, in-flight magazines tucked into the back pockets, and whatever snacks come down the aisle and then uses her mobile phone to document the results."²⁵ Ryan finds this method of working to be a generative process. It creates an opportunity for a great deal of work to be produced without the pressure or time commitment of a longer project, thus allowing a constant flow of ideas. The trick to this method of working is curating what is eventually shown and finding the best way to present the work in its final form.

Collage is an ideal medium for this. Images can be collected without searching them out. Then, they can be cut and pasted into a notebook without taking too much time or money. Collage streamlines the conceptual development of artwork too. To grasp its content, one doesn't have to look much further than where it was sourced from. It allows the collagist to play with style and composition with an interwoven content from the images chosen—this discovery then led Ryan to ask the now-infamous question, "what if I were to do the same thing, but with words instead of pictures?"

Well Ryan, let me tell you.

Figure 15



Nina Katchadourian, *Seat Assignment: Landscapes*, 2010 and ongoing.
Digital photograph, dimensions vary.

Figure 16



Nina Katchadourian, *Seat Assignment: Proposals for Public Sculptures*, 2010 and ongoing.
Digital photograph, dimensions vary.

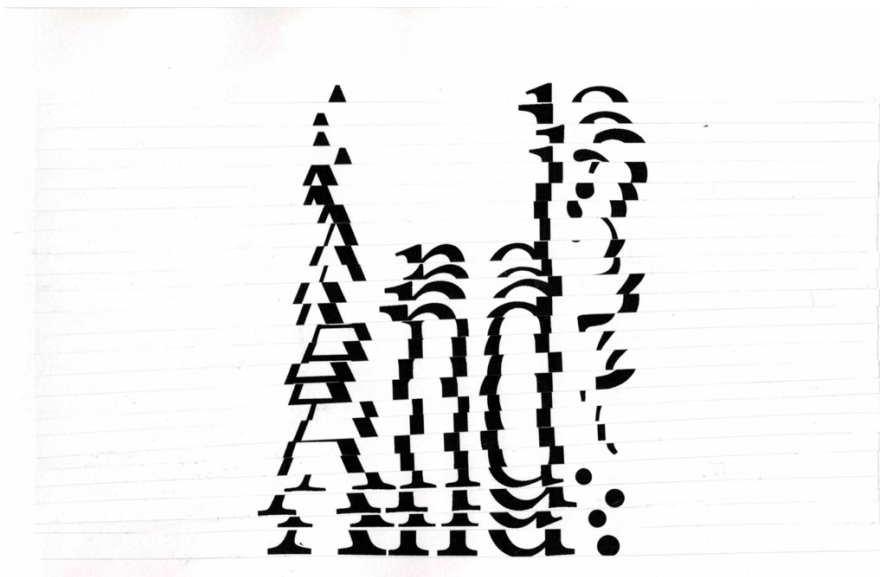
Words, Words, Words

Why text?

I start each piece in my series *The Shape of Language* as a classic cut and paste collage. I print out the word of choice in various sizes, slice them up considering the anatomy and typography of the letters, and start rearranging. Sometimes I cut through the intersection of a *t*, between the top and bottom of a *B*, or above and below the dot of an *i*. These decisions impact the visual effect once they are reorganized. I puzzle them together in various ways and often make several versions of the same word.

Once I have a composition I'm pleased with, I paste them down in my sketchbook and the blueprint is born (figure 17). I see this collage as a blueprint because as I will either redraw or paint it again. I redraw these in pencil on paper (figure 18). Depending on time, space, and opportunity, I'll project and redraw them on walls (figure 19). Here they engage with the architectural space as its own medium, as well as the viewer's position and scale.

Figure 17



Ryan Erickson, *And?*, 2020. Collage on paper, 24 x 18 inches, photographed by the artist.

Figure 18



Ryan Erickson, *And?*, 2020. Pencil on paper, 24 x 18 inches, photographed by the Gaoyuan Pan.

Figure 19



Ryan Erickson, *And?*, 2020. Charcoal on wall, 37 x 34 x 12 inches, photographed by the artist.

The words I select for *The Shape of Language* come in three categories. The first denotes objects and/or things that do not carry an overt set of connotations—at least in General American English, the main language I happen to speak. My piece *Oranges* (2020) denotes a simple thing from everyday life (figure 20), while also engaging with issues surrounding the ontology of fruit like we dealt with earlier in *Self-Deprecating Objects*. Undergirding all of this is the initial question that prompted this work, “what is the difference between representing something as text vs. as an image?”

Figure 20



Ryan Erickson, *Oranges*, 2020. Pencil on paper, 24 x 18 inches, photographed by Gaoyuan Pan.

If I imagine a still life painting of oranges, the colors and place are foregrounded and the visual is presented to the viewer. As text, I think it functions quite differently. It does not present any immediate context for the viewer. As writer and art historian Jenny Wu writes in an essay analyzing this particular body of work,

Ultimately, the act of collaging and redrawing words in pencil speaks to a practice of austere diligence. That one would take the time to arrange and reproduce the word “oranges” speaks to one’s dedication not only to the written word but to the concept of oranges, and what stays with the viewer of *The Shape of Language* is a pleasant sense of this diligence, an aftertaste of the words.²⁶

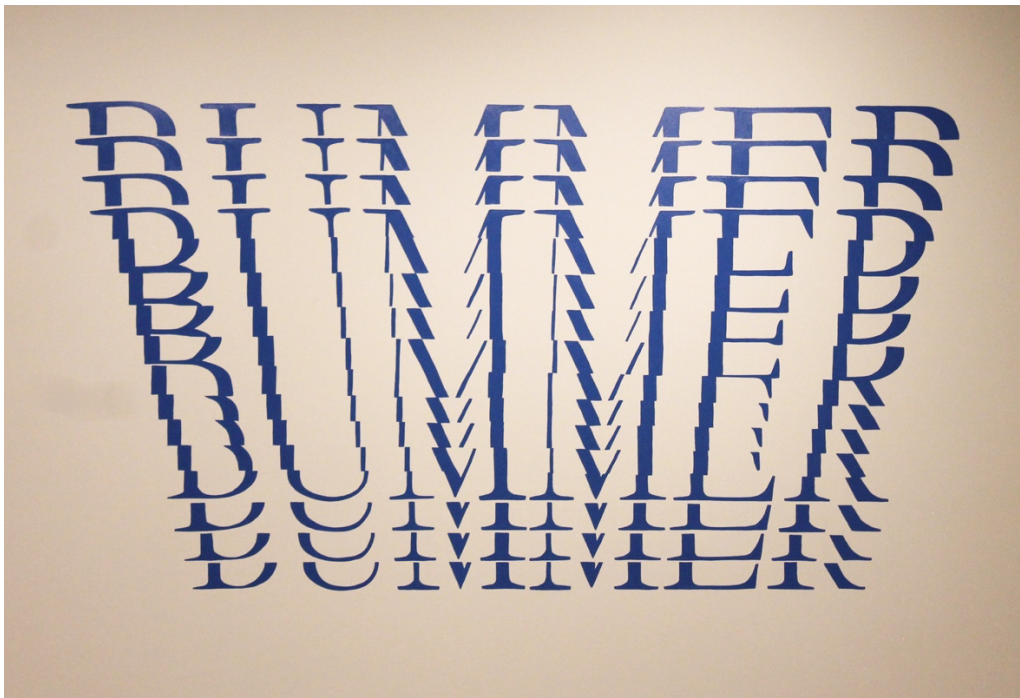
The concept of oranges may sound strange. But generating a concept of a simple object is part of my artistic inquiry. It gets to the heart of how words function. If I had chosen words that denote abstractions such as life, death, beauty, or boredom, the work would consider these concepts directly. *Oranges*, on the other hand, asks one to consider why it is being called attention to in the first place—what it means to represent something as text.

The second group in *The Shape of Language* are reactions—conversational pivots. They are semantically ambiguous since they are removed from conversational context. My piece *And?* (2020), shown previously, does this (figure 20). With the question mark at the end, it comes off as a response to something said before it. I chose to project and draw this at the corner of two walls. In doing so, I placed a grammatical conjunction at the conjunction of two walls to engage with the architectural space.

The piece *Big Bummer* (2021) in the Kemper Art Museum also engages with the space of the gallery. It is painted high on the wall, in a pleasing shade of blue, at 8x14 feet in scale, so it can be read from across the gallery (figure 21). Its shape pops out at the viewer as if it is the epic crawling sequence at the beginning of a Star Wars movie. This is undermined by the word itself, being a slang term for disappointment and dejection. The *Big Bummer* is vague. It could be

interpreted in many ways. Some may read into it as commentary on the museum due to the context it is in, others may consider it a glib response to the challenges of the year 2020 CE, or people may relate it to something going on in their own life.

Figure 21



Ryan Erickson, *Big Bummer*, 2021. Paint on wall, 8 x 14 feet, photographed by the artist.

It is helpful at this point to consider Jenny Holzer's critical role in developing text as art. Her truisms are ambiguous leaving viewers to consider a specific subject. Her piece *Abuse of Power comes as No Surprise* was displayed in Times Square in 1982 (figure 22).²⁷ The piece is vague. It does not provide any image or information outside the text to provide context. This approach makes it open to viewers' interpretations. One could understand this statement to be a response to the political climate of the time, but it could also be related to anyone who has experienced an abuse of power, arguably us all. By not providing a specific reference point, one

can apply this truism to something like a problem at their workplace, within their family, or a historical event they reflect on regularly.

Figure 22



Jenny Holzer, *Abuse of Power Comes as No Surprise*, 1982. Times Square, New York.

The third category in the series is sourced from spoken conversations. I look for lexical innovations when new words and phrases are coined. These are the hardest to come by since they rely fundamentally on serendipity. I had a conversation with my former Peace Corps colleague Kyle Seasly about the demand for sand developing into a global ecological and human rights issues.²⁸ Partway through this conversation, Seasly used the phrase “Big Sand” to refer to the markets and firms at the root of the issue—much like talking about Big Pharma or Big Tech. This linguistic moment prompted me to turn the phrase into an artwork (figure 23). The phrase “Big Sand” removed from its conversational context is perplexing—a linguistic twist that doesn’t make grammatical sense.

is ambiguous and doesn't mean anything specific, but despite this it leaves viewers with a particular feeling of unease.

Figure 24



Ryan Erickson, *Saliva Station*, 2020. Pencil on paper, 18 x 24 inches, photographed by Gaoyuan Pan.

In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein writes about the incompleteness of languages. He addresses how the symbolism in chemistry and infinitesimal calculus are suburbs of language.³⁰ “Our language can be regarded as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, of houses with extensions from various periods, and all this surrounded by a multitude of new suburbs with straight and regular streets and uniform houses.”³¹ To me, this analogy speaks to how elastic language is over time. Parts can be torn down and redeveloped just as a city can. My small conversations about Big Sand and Saliva Stations may merely be bricks in such a vast city, but they do play a role in its development. By

drawing these phases, I contemplate their meaning, use, and overall place within the language as a whole.

The Shape of Language series overtly draws attention to the physical shapes of text—due to it looking like the product of Op art and Conceptualism mashed together. But in reflecting more on the words selected through the process, I see the series as a contemplation of the roles and limits of language. Whether they denote quotidian objects, mark a reaction to an unspecified conversation, or present a freshly coined phrase, *The Shape of Language* is my process for considering not only the physical shape of text, but also the shape of the whole language as an abstract, unstable entity.

Conclusion

My work aims to destabilize human language, formal methodologies, and social institutions by interrogating their definitions and value. By identifying the underlying structures of these systems, I strive to impose absurdity upon them to draw attention to how they function. *The Feeling of Foam* establishes the conceptual framework of my practice and methods by walking through the dialectic of *Foamalism*. In the second chapter, I apply this dialectical approach in an analysis of the individual pieces in the series *Instruments of Logic*. This is followed by my third-person short story *Don't Trust Caterpillars*, where I provide insight into my working process and decision-making through a fictional narrative. And last, I discuss the process and concepts behind my text-based works in *Words, Words, Words*. I present my drawings, collages, sculptures, and installations rationally despite their ultimate conclusion of absurdity. Moving forward, I plan to found and direct *The Institute of Foamal Studies* with my co-conspirator Jon Lindeman, to create a space for humor and art to coexist in the pursuit of knowledge without having to bear the burden of explanation and rationality. This will coincide with the publication of our lodestar treatise *The Critique of Pure Foam*, further establishing *Foamalist* thought and discourse as a productive contribution to conceptual art. In addition to this project, I will continue adding to *The Instruments of Logic* and *The Shape of Language* series whenever appropriate. I plan to develop more absurdist technologies for the former, specifically exploring how they can exist in film, and to seek out more mural or billboard scale presentations, in addition to small-scale drawings, for the latter. Thank you for your time and attention, and as always, never stop asking yourself, "Where's the *foam*?"

Notes

- ¹ Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Critical Theory: A Reader for Literary and Cultural Studies*, trans. Steven Heath (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 83–87.
- ² Jon Lindeman and Ryan Erickson, “The Foamalist Manifesto,” 2020.
- ³ Lindeman and Erickson.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Jennifer Higgle, ed., *The Artist’s Joke*, Documents of Contemporary Art (London : Cambridge, Mass: Whitechapel ; MIT Press, 2007), 12.
- ⁶ Albert Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus,” in *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O’Brien, 1st Vintage international ed (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 1–137, <https://read.amazon.com/?asin=B009UAO2H8>, 27.
- ⁷ Simon Critchley, *On Humour*, Thinking in Action (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), <https://read.amazon.com/?asin=B006LMPI9O>, 9.
- ⁸ Alexi Kukuljevic, *Liquidation World: On the Art of Living Absently*, Short Circuits (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017), 52.
- ⁹ Lindeman and Erickson, “The Foamalist Manifesto.”
- ¹⁰ Lindeman and Erickson.
- ¹¹ Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus.” 122.
- ¹² Lindeman and Erickson, “The Foamalist Manifesto.”
- ¹³ Marcel Broodthaers, installation view of the *Musée d’Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Section des Figures*, Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, 1972, accessed April 29, 2021. <https://medium.com/signifier/the-artist-as-curator-d634f4100b08>
- ¹⁴ Marcel Broodthaers, “Musée d’Art Moderne, Département Des Aigles, Section Art Moderne et Publicité,” in *Marcel Broodthaers: Collected Writings* (Barcelona: Ediciones Poligrafa, 2012), 354.
- ¹⁵ Thierry De Duve, “This Wouldn’t Be a Pipe: Magritte and Marcel Broodthaers,” in *Magritte and Contemporary Art: The Treachery of Images* (Ghent, Belgium: Ludion, 2006), 95–107.
- ¹⁶ Jon Lindeman (musician and linguist) in discussion with the author, April 2021.
- ¹⁷ Alfred Jarry, *Exploits & Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (Boston: Exact Change, 1996), 21-22.
- ¹⁸For further reading see Christian Bök, *Pataphysics: The Poetics of an Imaginary Science*, Avant-Garde & Modernism Studies (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2002).
- ¹⁹ The phrase “Eggs don’t have doors” was contributed by Glacier Sharan Mani.
- ²⁰ This idea shares similarities to Zen Buddhist koans. For further reading see Steven Heine and Dale S. Wright, *The Koan: Texts and Contexts in Zen Buddhism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000),

<http://web.b.ebscohost.com.libproxy.wustl.edu/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/ZTAwMHhuYV9fMTQzOTgyX19BTg2?sid=900c1960-4bde-4d8b-9d71-861801689252%40pdc-v-sessmgr03&vid=0&format=EB&rid=1>.

²¹ Kathleen Stock, “Sartre, Wittgenstein, and Learning from Imagination,” in *Philosophy and Conceptual Art* (Oxford: Claredon Press, 2007), 171–94, 171.

²² Gonzalez did not actually say these words as such, although he has called me a bozo on many occasions. Gonzalez is an artist as well as the founding director of Semi-Gloss gallery.

²³ Nina Katchadourian, *Seat Assignment: Landscapes*, 2010 and ongoing, Digital Photograph, Dimensions Vary, Accessed April 29, 2021. <http://www.ninakatchadourian.com/photography/sa-landscapes.php>

²⁴ Nina Katchadourian, *Seat Assignment: Proposals for Public Sculptures*, 2010 and ongoing, Digital Photograph, Dimensions Vary, Accessed April 29, 2021. <http://www.ninakatchadourian.com/photography/sa-publicsculpture.php>

²⁵ Veronica Roberts, “Seat Assignment: Art in Airplane Mode,” in *Nina Katchadourian: Curiouser* (Austin, Texas: Blanton Museum of Art, 2017), 13–39, 13.

²⁶ Jenny Wu, “Ryan Erickson,” *A Transitory Space*, 2020, <https://atransitoryspace.myportfolio.com/ryan-erickson>.

²⁷ Jenny Holzer, *Abuse of Power Comes as No Surprise*, 1982, Times Square, New York. <https://artreview.com/news-30-oct-2017-open-letter-we-are-not-surprised/>

²⁸ For further reading on global sand markets see Vince Beiser, “Why the World Is Running out of Sand,” accessed April 27, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20191108-why-the-world-is-running-out-of-sand>.

²⁹ Jessica Bremeher is a painter and sculpture from St. Louis, Missouri.

³⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein et al., *Philosophische Untersuchungen =: Philosophical investigations*, Rev. 4th ed (Chichester, West Sussex, U.K. ; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 11.

³¹ Wittgenstein et al, 11.

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Appendix 1

THE FOAMALIST MANIFESTO

here declared this 14th day of November 2020

by J. L. Lindeman & R. M. Erickson

The stated purpose of this manifesto is to [1] introduce the reader to the critical, theoretical and methodological perspective of Foamalism and [2] define and defend the objectives of same.

WHEREAS there is a tension between Structuralist and Post-structuralist thought and aesthetics that has never been properly resolved; and

WHEREAS this lack of resolution hinders the discovery of transcendent artistic meaning; and

WHEREAS it is the duty of art and artists to reveal such meaning to society;

THEREFORE we propose these ten founding precepts of Foamalism, enumerated below in no particular order but in all particular arrangement.

AS FOAMALISTS, OUR MISSION IS:

- i. to reject the myopia of pure form, but recognize its communicative capacity;
- ii. to recognize the importance of plurality, but always position it within a set of empirical parameters;
- iii. to define foam as an abstract ontological referent for the space between systemization and disintegration, as well as the quotidian physical material;
- iv. to expand and uphold this definition of foam to include all objects, materials, representations, and compositions that operate within the above-mentioned space;
- v. to emphasize that foam is sufficient content on its own—it points to no further truth than itself;
- vi. to acknowledge that no separation exists between art, foam, and truth, only complete reciprocity;
- vii. to assert that people should interact with foam constantly, unceasingly, so as to always be mindful of the strangeness of the world;
- viii. to be aware that this strangeness is truth, and that the truth is strange;
- ix. to take comfort in this awareness, and apply it at all times in all systems; and
- x. to always reevaluate these precepts, in our own time and place, since they are highly unstable and not to be relied upon.

TREATISE I: *The Critique of Pure Foam*

TREATISE II: *Foamal Music*

TREATISE III: *Foam & Society*