



2011

# Alge Mist

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ALGHE MIST

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Masters of Fine Arts  
at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by  
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## **Abstract**

PAPER TITLE

By Jeffrey Kenney, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts at  
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Virginia Commonwealth University, 2011.

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This is an overview of the source material, methodologies, artistic influences, and conceptual decisions that inform the sculptural and the photographic means of production that characterize my art practice. Research topics include model-making, the indexical relationship of the photograph and object, and a brief phenomenology of accidents, alchemy, and ambivalence in relation to specific artworks. Particular works by Sigmar Polke and Thomas Demand are used as primary examples of influence and entrance points to my conceptual interests. Finally a brief outline of the principles of scientific management will point to ways in which my, deliberately unstandardized sculptural process and multi-variant attitude toward photographic output, can be viewed as reactions to the discipline's fetishization of technology, efficiency, and accuracy.

## Introduction

Between April 22nd and May 1st 2011, my work was included in a group exhibition at the Anderson Gallery in Richmond Virginia. This exhibition was part one of two rounds that included the work of Master of Fine Arts candidates at Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts. The wall space I was assigned for the installation of my work occupied half of the first room on the second floor of the gallery. The wall space included two 16 foot walls and one 20 foot wall. The room had high ceilings, no windows, two doors and adequate lighting.

For this exhibition I included two large black and white photographs, three medium-large color photographs, a small photographic diptych in black and white, and a large gridded composition of thirty-six xerox copies adhered directly to the wall. Besides the xeroxes, all works were framed in simple white frames without border or glass. In this account, I will give an overview of the source material, methodologies, artistic influences, conceptual decisions and general ruminations that informed this particular presentation of my ongoing artistic project.



fig 1. Jeffrey Kenney, VCU MFA Thesis Exhibit, Anderson Gallery, 2011



## The Fabricator

*“...The fabricator... gropes his way, in partial blindness and aided only by the handrail of proper scholarship and the white staff of his imagination with which he taps his lonely way, feeling for such tussocks of probability as may bear his weight. Perpetually at risk from quagmires, which could drag him down and drown him in ridicule, he explores this landscape, the duckboard of his imperfect memory squelching ominously beneath his wary feet. Upon his wayward journey he may find himself manipulating the known to serve as markers in the unknown, however rebelliously he may mutter of pedantry to his accusers who practice the high calling of historiography itself. Nonetheless the fabricator’s self-imposed duty is to convince sceptics of his claim that where he ventures in not demonstrably a mirage and that where he lies prone he at least extends experience.”<sup>1</sup>*

*Michael Aryton*

As an artist, I have often shifted between various media, methods, and subject matter, aided by an attraction to novelty, experimentation, and intuitive discovery. This restless mindset has often caused a certain amount of artistic and professional anxiety in that it can prevent a sustained investment in a particular material, craft, or point of view. Accepting this inclination toward the restless and temporary has fueled a practice that is part sculptural handicraft, part painter, set designer, and photographer. I experiment constantly, always looking for exciting analogies between studio, hobby, handy materials and the appearance of the larger world, for instance by attempting to mimic the qualities of concrete in Styrofoam, or exploring an unexpected mirage in a wad of toilet paper. My means are multi-valent and concentrated somewhere between my hand and eye, the tactile and the optical, the sculptural and the photographic. This open ended approach allows for accidents, misjudgements, misalignments, strategic failures, and failures of strategy to play catalytic roles in the generation of forms within my art practice.

Many times I find source material for projects in the dramas of bad judgement, deadly accidents, and misplaced strategic thinking that make up much of human history. Similarly, my own attempts to make things spontaneously, quickly, and crudely from materials as wide ranging as Styrofoam beads, clay, a solution of borax and glue - or tissue paper, finger lights, and an Epson scanner - often result in unintentionally ambiguous or mildly disastrous results. This groping through the spontaneous act of experimenting with materials, manipulating surfaces, and creating photographic images is becoming a slippery sort of methodology which despite being made up fairly consistent elements, such as objects composed before a camera lens, is intentionally unstandardized.

1. Aryton, Michael. *Fabrications*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1972. 220



fig 2. Jeffrey Kenney, *Paraffin and Gasoline, July 1944 I*, inkjet on paper, 50"x40" 2010

## Just Plain Wrong

*“So, after abstraction, the monochromatism of, say, Yves Klein and the advent of an imageless painting, when nothing more can get to us, really touch us, you no longer expect some brainwave of genius, the surprise of originality, but merely the accident, the catastrophe of finality.”<sup>2</sup>*

*Paul Virilio*

*Paraffin and Gasoline, July 1944 I (fig.2)* is one of two large black and white inkjet prints that shared a wall in the recent exhibit. This 50 inch by 40 inch print is an explosive composition of varying gray and black toned rectangular bits of material interspersed with white spheres, dots, and the occasionally apparent diamond pattern of a screen or gauze-like material. The depth of field in the photograph creates blurs in areas and in contrast to other areas of intense visual articulation, the overall effect of which identifies a recognizable scale of the material and yet amplifies the ambiguity of its depth, as well as the out of frame expanse, and location. The scene is cosmic in suggestion but rather quaint in construction. There is just enough mystery as to its construction to lend the image some suspense and a shifting sense of its actual dimensions.

The “paraffin” and “gasoline” of the title relate suggestively to the material in the photograph but act as improper names or stand-ins for what one sees. The material that makes up the photograph is hobby foam, Styrofoam polyfil, and a kind of tulle fabric product called *Illusion*. In one sense the picture is to be taken as a model, where the material on display is analogous to that of its name, in this case two materials used as liquid fuels, paraffin and gasoline. If viewed as a photograph of a model describing some property of either paraffin or gasoline, the look of the materials used in the model would suggest that of the very small, maybe atomic or molecular level, and the composition might be illustrating some aspect of their combustible nature. On the other hand the ambiguous date in the image’s title suggests that maybe this is not an illustration of some hypothetical atomic or molecular reaction but rather a photograph of an actual occurrence.

In fact this particular photograph came from a session in which I was composing images very loosely based on a set of aftermath photographs of the circus fire that occurred in Hartford Connecticut in the summer of 1944. I had read a novel recounting the fire some years ago, as part of some research into the modern circus. The event was a horrific accident that took the lives about 170 people. What attracted me to the photographs of this event had little to do with its tragic implication and more with the ultimate cause of its devastating ignition. A mixture of paraffin and gasoline had been used to weather proof the canvas circus tent. Due to this treatment, when the big top caught fire it blazed extremely hot and fast because it was more flammable than it would have been with out the coating. The famed Hindenburg disaster was the result of a similarly flammable weather

2. Virilio, Paul. *Art as Far as the Eye Can See*. Oxford New York: Berg, 2007. 10.

proofing. The after images of this event show a ruin of a circus tent, poles and stands graphically etched against the land in a shape recalling a micro-organism or cellular structure. By conflating the abstraction of the constructed photograph with the suggestion of materials implicated in an event from half a century ago, the picture strikes a confused and ambivalent pose as an imitation of a historical photograph, an unusual model of an indefinite and problematic moment, and a still-life like collection of banal materials caught in a net-like structure.

*Paraffin and Gasoline, July 1944 I* shares a wall in this exhibition with an equal sized and similarly constructed black and white inkjet titled *Orgone Dispersion, November 1957 (fig. 3)*. Also constructed of mainly varying gray shapes against the diamond shaped layers of screen or scrim, this image is composed entirely of small spherical shapes in random distribution across the image. The title of this work is similar in structure to its companion on this wall but instead refers to a separate material and a different point on the calendar.

Orgone is the central material suggestion here and it refers to the massless substance theorized by Wilhelm Reich to be a universal life-force and present in the atmosphere. According to Reich, orgone energy was visible and could be used as a powerful aid in healing and energetic rejuvenation of the body through rectangular man-sized cells built of lead and fiberglass called orgone accumulators. The existence of orgone was quickly debunked by the scientific community but it did catch on as a sort of spiritual belief with a number of people through out the world. Reich passed away on November 3, 1957. His date of death is referred to in the title of my photograph and subsequently it suggests that a dispersion of orgone energy accompanied his departure. Whereas the paraffin and gasoline of the previously discussed photo alluded to actual substances that were ignited and hence transformed, the orgone dispersion of this title is a slightly romantic allusion to Reich's own perceived life-force being redistributed. Both titles link combustible or vital materials to specific points of combustion or transformation. Like *Paraffin and Gasoline...*, *Orgone Dispersion, November 1957* is visually indeterminate and relies heavily on its title's references to give it an identity and keep it from slipping too far into the territory of the purely arbitrary. The references of the titles also helps to reinforce a fragmented narrative dimension that conjoins the various suggestive abstractions within the exhibition.



fig 3. Jeffrey Kenney, *Orgone Dispersion*, November 1957, inkjet on paper, 50"x40" 2010

Thomas Demand's work presents an interesting comparison to the works I have just discussed. Demand is well known for his large scale photographs of paper models that are recreations of mainly interior spaces that have appeared in some sort of media and depict stripped down versions of various locations where historical events have transpired. Despite some superficial similarities, Demand's photographs of his sculptural constructions differ from my practice in both approach and intent. His work functions in the language of mimesis and reconstruction. His reconstructions rely heavily on the original or its original mediation in the press or a similar pictorial form. When photographed these constructions appear to be "real" until closer inspection reveals their fabrication. While he relies on almost hyper specific source material including location visits, historical background research, and matching photographic angles that have appeared elsewhere, his titles obfuscate and remove specificity of the events depicted. In effect, he is reconstructing as well as emptying out both the image and its significance. For instance, *Corridor (1995)* (fig. 4) depicts a banal apartment complex hallway reduced almost to its bare essentials including a few ochre doors, white washed walls, and bland florescent lighting fixtures. That the picture is a recreation of the hallway outside serial murderer, Jeffrey Dahmer's, apartment, is nowhere indicated. The image only gains significance if this bit of outside knowledge is obtained from some other source.

*Paraffin and Gasoline, July 1944 I*, from my exhibition uses a similar tactic by attaching an external referent to an otherwise opaque abstraction. But where Demand strips an existing image of its internal referents and uses the titles to further abstract the source, I use the title to give a false history to an image that is otherwise completely abstract. If Demand's images dovetail at all with mine it is through their suggestion that photographic reality is much less stable than it appears and that and the reception of an image can easily be altered through the corrective lens of language.

The question of the photograph's link to indexicality is problematized by Demand's practice. A similar phenomena unfolds in some of my pictures that play with the relationship of caption and abstraction. As Michael Fried points out in his discussion of Demand's pictures for his book *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, Demand's photographs

*"bear an indexical relationship to the paper models, Demand made, carefully lit, and equally carefully photographed. However, the models by virtue of having been reconstructed in paper, and also because the terms of that reconstruction are, in crucial respects, radically incomplete, 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, which also means of the least suggestion of pastness, of historicalness, of the "that-has-been" in which Barthes saw the noeme of photography."*<sup>3</sup>

3. Fried, Michael. *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008. 268

In other words, Demand is emptying the evidence of life from his images. His reconstructions resemble reality in color and proportion only. The anywhere and nowhere quality of his titles furthers this emptying. In contrast I use the titles of my large, but not monumental, black and white photographs of the quaintly constructed voids of hobby materials to invest these models with a life force. I use the historical and material allusions in their titles to suggest that these are models of real things that happened at a particular time and particular place. In a sense both Demand and I are using similar conceptual strategies, by willfully confusing the indexical functions of photography. In Demand's case he is reproducing a specific scene only to reduce it to a near abstraction, whereas I am starting from an abstract model and using the title to make it's appearance point to something more specific.



fig 4. Thomas Demand, *Corridor*, chromogenic process print with diasec, 183.5 x 270 cm, 1995

## A Model Picture

*“Only a photographic lens can give us the kind of image of the object that is capable of satisfying the deep need man has to substitute for it something more than a mere approximation, a kind of decal or transfer. The photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it. No matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discolored, no matter how lacking in documentary value the image may be, it shares by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it is the model.”<sup>3</sup>*

*Andre Bazin*

Both model making and photography have an interesting relationship to virtuality. The model (as in architecture diagrams, wax museum recreations, etc.) like the photograph projects itself as both the same as its real world counterpart but at the same time always different, in that it lacks the function or real time duration of the object it represents. It is always out of time either condensing a past state or projecting a future one. It is also an eternal present. Unlike the photograph, a model need not depend on another object’s existence to exist itself, or to be capable of persuading of a real potential or history. Like the present moment models are actual in that they can be held, touched, verified - yet since they are representations whose intrinsic identity may or may not lie elsewhere - they are always slipping out of their own physical skin, toward a virtual otherness, as memory, fantasy, desire, or potential/passing being.

For lack of a better description, the objects I construct for the camera should be considered models. Rather than simply document these models, I have become very interested in the way in which the camera lens manipulates the world of appearances and how this manipulation can act as a further form of model making, in which the purpose is to not simply make analogies to the real but to make visible the virtual space that exists simultaneous to our experienced reality. Clark Bailey paraphrasing Gilles Deleuze gives a great description of how one might conceive of this virtual space.

*“The virtual space is not an open space of preexisting possible ideas or preexisting possible worlds. It is the structure of a space of unactualized states lying alongside the actual present world, not the condition of possibility or ground of Being, but superficial extra-Being. It is built, created, and extracted step-by-step as an extension that “takes off” from the actual to go beyond it, yet whose reality is symbiotic with the actual and applies back to it. It is a strictly materialist conception of possibility.”*

4. Bazin, Andre. “The Ontology of the Photographic Image.” *Classic Essays on Photography*. New Haven: Leete’s Island Books, 1980. 241

5. Bailey, Clark. “Mammalian Mathematics.” *The Force of the Virtual: Deleuze, Science, and Philosophy*. Ed. Peter Gaffney. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010. 321



All that is made visible through photography can be thought of in terms of this virtual space, whether it be the freezing of an imperceptible moment in time, the magnification of a molecule, or the witnessing of cosmic events beyond our galaxy. Even the most banal snapshot can be seen as representing a reality separate from the one in which it was “taken.” This is one example of the way in which the virtual “takes off” from the real. The term “take off” is perfect for discussing the various virtual spaces that are made visible through the photograph. It implies a transformation, a going beyond, a taking flight. To take off can mean to literally become airborne. It can connote honesty because it suggests becoming naked, unmasking, or opening up, but paradoxically to take off can connote unoriginality or a deliberate falseness because it can also refer to the act of faking or producing a fabrication. The photograph can only “take off” from what it is given. Give a powerful lens an empty sky and it may expose a distant star, point it at the wall and it may record its own blurred vision. Both distant star and photographic blur are virtual spaces unique to the photograph and while both can be considered parts of reality they are parts that can only be accessed, revealed, or fabricated through the use of a photographic apparatus.

The photograph is powerful because of its ability to conjure visions that are not normally accessible, but it is important that these photographic realities are treated as a “take off” from our material reality and not simply as one in the same. I prefer a view of the virtual spaces opened up by the photograph to be viewed in a way that is phenomenologically similar to the way we approach the reading of an architectural or other small-scale model. In his essay “The Ruins of Representation” Christian Hubert gives a description of the architectural model’s relation to real buildings that could also provide a useful summary of the photograph’s relation to the reality it depicts.

*“The model purports to present architecture, not represent it. Unlike the signs of language, whose signification is primarily a matter of arbitrary convention, the relation of the model to the its referent appears motivated in the sense that it attempts to emulate or approximate it. Its adequacy is defined by resemblance...The craft of building models may be seen as the displacement and condensation of the craft of building, an attempt to recover the aura of the work by fetishizing the facticity of surrogate objects... Perhaps the model concretizes the ontic condition of the project. It exists as desire - in a kind of atopia, if not utopia. It holds the promise of inhabitation, even if it does not fully afford it... The desire of the model is to act as a simulacrum of another object, as a surrogate which allows for imaginative occupation.”<sup>6</sup>*

The lack of ability to physically inhabit a model is analogous to the lack that is involved in perceiving a photograph. Inhabitation is a key element of the nature of lived reality. Against lived reality all forms of representation, including photography, pale - for in the end they can only allow for an “imaginative occupation.”

6. Hubert, Christian. “The Ruins of Representation.” *Idea as Model*. New York, N.Y: Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies Rizzoli International Publications, 1981. 17

Redefining photography in terms of model-making is a useful and insightful tool for understanding how the photographic image operates as a virtual space that is parallel to lived reality. While this definition is definitely useful in understanding my attitude toward the images I make, it does not mean it applies in all cases. In fact I often find the most interesting images in my pursuit of questions as to the photograph's potential to break with what seem to be the inherent rules or defining characteristics of the form. For instance, besides the stated intentions of the photographs *Paraffin and Gasoline, July 1944 I* and *Orgone Dispersion, November 1957*, that I discussed at the beginning of this essay, I was also consciously attempting to forge connections between photography, model-making, and painting. Part of the purpose of the particle-based models used in these images was an attempt to make a simple physical material behave as kind of mark rather than an object. Or more precisely to model mark-making, physically and photographically. There is something perverse about this activity, because it would be easy enough to simply make marks, especially circles or brick-like shapes, and I could just as easily physically draw with the material, like in the mosaic process. But making this material become a mark photographically is kind of idiotic. If anything the photograph would reinforce the styrofoam's thingness rather than the material calling attention to the photograph's "ink-on-paperiness." While this conceptual analogizing between object and mark maybe intellectually flawed it is an example of the way a false hypothesis is sometimes the most credible and interesting way through which to discover new territory.

Question in the photographic process's relationship to the painting process was not without influence. When I began to formulate this process of modeling a mark or making a pixel physical, I was looking heavily at the work of Sigmar Polke. Polke worked mainly as a painter but also made significant works in both photography and film. Much of his work as a painter used the Ben-day dot pattern of offset printed material as a patterning, compositional, and conceptual device. I was interested in the way he used this grainy and grid-like structure as a signifier of the photograph or the mass produced image. By intensely magnifying the underlying structure of the commercial offset print through painting he could point to the artificial nature of the image as filtered through popular culture, history books, or advertising. This dot motif also acted as a sort of sub-atomic diagram, a perceptual camouflage, and compositional unifier of the figure and ground. The plasticity of paint in conjunction with the dot allowed Polke to suggest, gesture toward, or hint at, conjuring all sorts of alchemical visions without coming to full graphic resolution.

The three color photographs, *Chemical Mirage*, *Transient Fault Scan*, and *Alge Mist* that shared the longest wall in the Anderson exhibit are also indebted to the influence of Polke, but more so his photographic work, in that they deal with a process-oriented subject matter that is related to alchemy, pollution, and perceptual phenomena. If the two large black and white images discussed earlier alluded to historical and sub-atomic accidents and mistaken judgements, these images deal with a kind of image-as-side-effect.

In Polke's photographic works such as *Erscheinung (Pyramide)* (fig.5) and *Meteorenspane (Meteor Fragments)* he combines imagery that is at once cryptic and mundane. In these image series the quasi-mystical

images of a repeated pyramid shape or the symbol-like drawings in a dark, maybe meteor derived, dust is reinforced and extended by what appears to be deliberately uneven or murky development of the silver-gelatin prints. In the pyramid images it is difficult to tell whether the image is a real architecture, a small scale cut out, a photogram or simply the product of the development. The origin of the subject matter is intentionally uncertain as is its meaning. Obviously there are references to the occult in the shape of the pyramid and the symbols drawn in dust but they do not refer to any practice in particular. These images do not point out into the world but rather point to a certain realm of perception about the world. As Maria Morris Hambourg suggests in her essay for the exhibition catalog that accompanied the 1995 exhibition of Polke's photoworks at The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles,

*“Polke is interested in the fields of meaning and attraction that bind the world together, yet he cannot show us the invisible forces themselves. His problem as a visual artist is like that of the magician who wants to convince us of the power of the supernatural but can do so only by finding a blindspot in our perception, a place of entry into our disbelief.”<sup>7</sup>*

Rather than project an overly sincere attitude toward the existence of such supernatural phenomena and construct images that exploit the tired cliches of many Vegas-style magicians, he finds his evidence for the occult in the accidental and unintentional details of the everyday. His preference is “to collect the printing mistakes he finds in newspapers and magazines’ in a search for a sort of “fallen icon” or a “marvelous accident that has befallen reality.”<sup>8</sup> Like Polke, I am interested in the suggestive potential of an accidental mark or the optical excitement of a pattern that appears as an apparition in an unlikely material. I also share with Polke an interest in the legacy of alchemy, but I am less concerned with the occult or supernatural aspects of these practices.

The significance of alchemy to my work is in its placement of emphasis on qualities of ambivalence, projection, and opacity as opposed to those of purity, transparency, or objectivity. Normally when the alchemy is referenced in relation to artworks it is through metaphors of transmutation; the transforming a base or inert substance into a vibrant and valuable new form like turning lead to gold. I tend toward Karen Pinkus's idea of alchemy as she relates in her book *Alchemical Mercury: A Theory of Ambivalence*. Borrowing from Derrida she suggests that “ambivalence opens a way to undo the traditional “alchemical master narrative”- a narrative in which matter and man are finally redeemed and stabilized.” In alchemy “ambi-valence is not only a conscious sense of uncertainty, but also, more rigorously, the coexistence of two different and perhaps irreconcilable elements.”

7. Morris Hambourg, Maria. “Polke's Recipes for Arousing the Soul.” *Sigmar Polke : Photoworks, When Pictures Vanish*. Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1995. 55

8. Morris Hambourg, 55

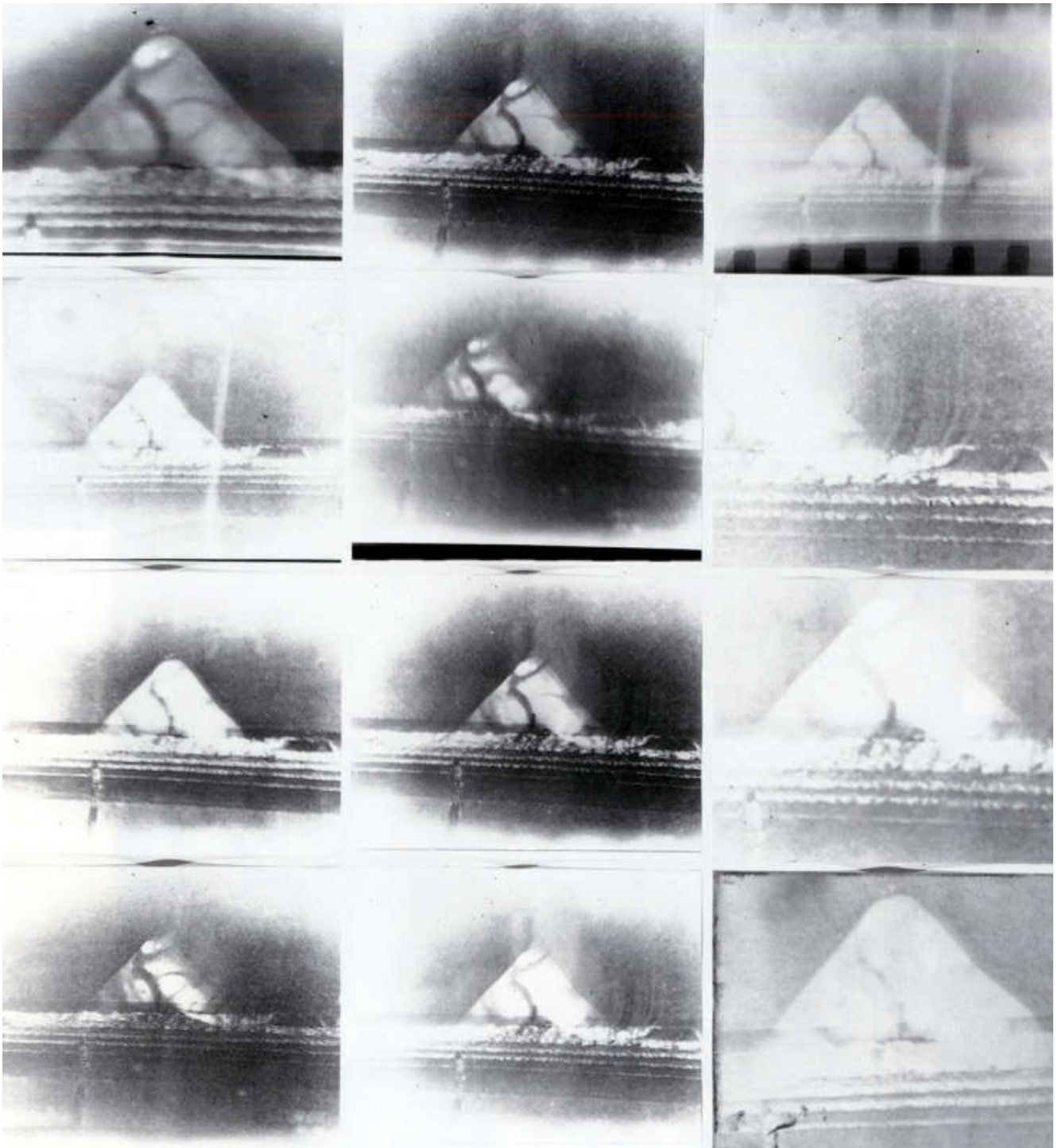


fig 5. Sigmar Polke, *Erscheinung (Pyramide) Apparition (Pyramid)*), twelve silver gelatin prints, 16" x 20" each, 1980/81

In my practice, alchemy is not used as a metaphor of progress - or a transforming of a base/dark/formless state into a enlightened/ pure/truthful state through a series of chemical, technological, or mystical rituals - nor as a synonym of dialectics, “which might represent a forced and pacifying synthesis,”<sup>8</sup> - but rather as a continuous process of pollution and redistribution incorporating an ever changing set of physical and optical procedures.

Traditionally alchemy connotes a wet process full of washes, baths, cleansing, purifying, etc. and subsequently has often been metaphorically linked to the arts of dark room photography, cooking, and action painting. My process, although messy, is generally dry, and does not incorporate the darkroom in development of the photographs. In the color photographs *Chemical Mirage*, *Transient Fault Scan*, and *Alge Mist*, alchemy is evoked through what appear to be digital printing errors including misregistrations, ink runs, or bleached exposures. For the most part these errors are not records of the printing process but are records of occurrences in the process of putting the image together.



fig 6. Jeffrey Kenney, *Chemical Mirage*, inkjet on paper, 24”x30” 2011

8. Pinkus, Karen. *Alchemical Mercury: A Theory of Ambivalence*. California: Stanford Press, 2010. 5

*Chemical Mirage (fig. 6)* for instance is a photograph of a bubble that occurred while experimenting with spreading various inks on paper. I became intrigued with the little bubbles that were forming through the repetitive action of moving the brush over inked paper. The quality of light and the way it shifted my focus away from my main activity intrigued me. I spent the next hour remaking it, and eventually expanding the small bubbles into a much larger singular dome, until it seemed ready to be photographed. I took two black and white negatives, one of the bubble and then after it burst. The negatives were outsourced to a local lab for processing and came back with some large scratches from the machine processor. I scanned the negatives and layered the before and after images in Photoshop after I had digitally tinted one layer red and the other green - a technique that was once used for early Technicolor films. The resulting image is slightly unregistered with varying red and green “shadows” and still bears the scratches from the processor. In the bubble we also see the lens of the camera that recorded it staring back. So while this image may at the descriptive level be no more than a picture of a bubble, if one invests themselves in unpacking the lines, reflections, and seeming mistakes that are preserved in the image, it may suggest another vision altogether. This image is simply an image of its arrival as an image. It is a marriage of binaries - the chemical and optical, analog and digital, red layer and green, sculptor and photographer, artist and contractor, the intentional and accidental. The way the photograph turned out also suggests another model, a miniature maybe, of not a bubble but a glass dome, the kind that Bucky Fuller proposed to place over cities. In this light the image is a fleeting and romantically utopian mirage, realizable only as a model or projection. Like the lens of the camera that it reflects back, it can only visualize and never actualize. It is only as real as the scratches on the negative, the colored ghosts, and the reflection on its surface.

This sort of meditation on surface and apparition continues through the other two images on this wall. *Transient Fault Scan (fig.7)* is almost a rocky mountain-scape interrupted through its bottom half, or foreground, with the narrow peaks and valleys of vertical RGB stripes. This image was made by placing a crumpled sheet of lightly inked tissue paper on a flatbed Epson scanner and passing small red, green, and blue finger lights over the surface as its backside as it scanned. The colored graph like lines at the bottom of the image are the record of the scanner’s motion as well as the lights passage. This process probably looked pretty stupid, like a sort of techno seance - man in a dark room wiggling and waving his hands like a raver with multi-colored finger lights over the slow white mechanical glow of a humming rectangular platter.

The suggestion of landscape in *Transient Fault Scan* is an illusion or perhaps more accurately, a perceptual error on the part of the viewer. The colored streaks at the bottom, suggest both a printing error, maybe a smear, or a graph of some kind of seismic activity, maybe pointing to a geological abnormality or surface friction. These suggested errors are the substance of this work and the reason for the title. A transient fault is another name for a slight disturbance in the transmission of electrical energy like in a power line. The title frames the image in both the language of technological interference and, through the scan, focuses the subject not only to the apparatus of its creation but also the different ways of looking suggested by a scan: to read over quickly,

to scrutinize, or to observe sweepingly as with large expanses.

Scanning material, not with the “scanner,” but looking intensely at a substance, an artifact, a something that has been brought, stored, or managed by accident to wind up in my studio occupies a great deal of my thought if not practice. The world is of constant fascination, not the common world, the one of the social, political, commercial etc. that is encountered in everyday life, but a slightly perverse, magical, or accidental one that occurs on the surface of the things, the junk, the fashions, or products that surround us. This holographic world that reflects, absorbs, projects, or teases. It is an unreal, seductive and matterless, world-void of adjectives loosened from their nouns, of styles denying their substances. It is the end of natural things, their extremities; the image-skin of a peopled world.

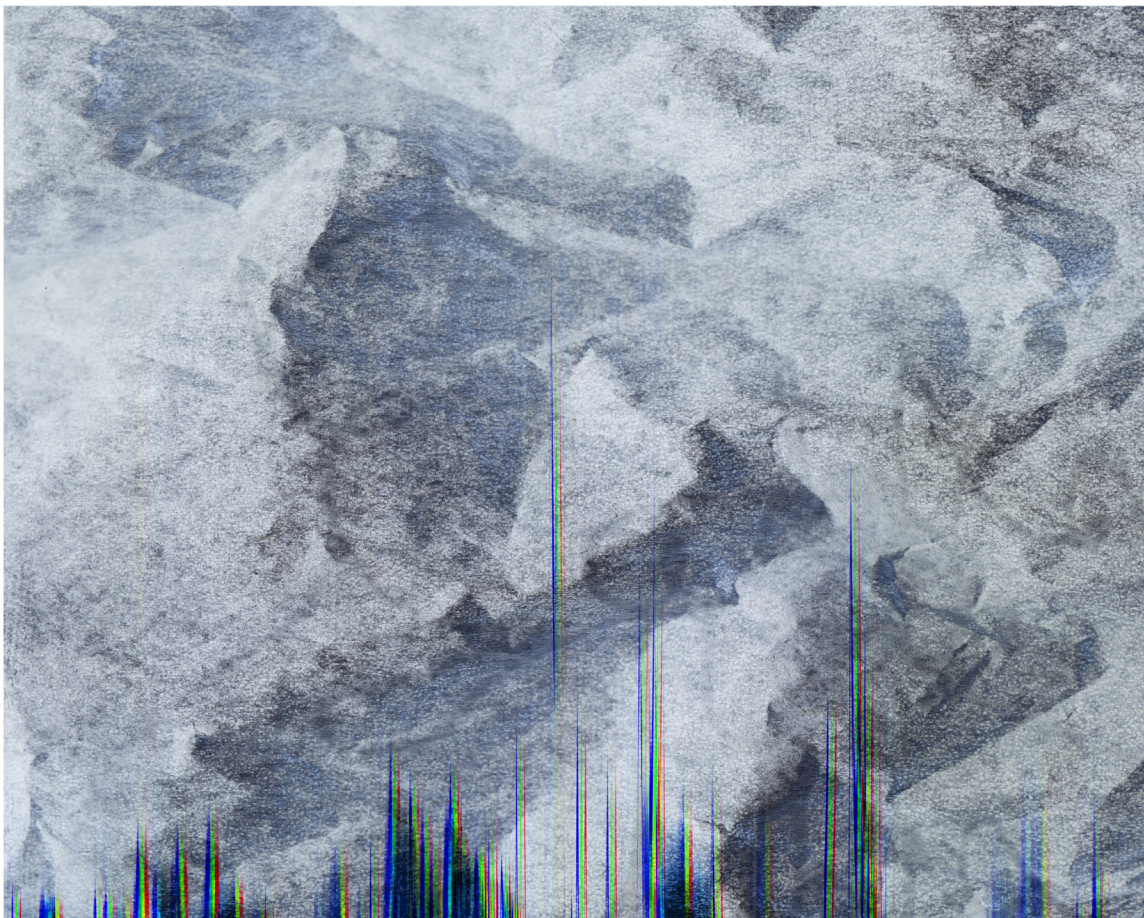


fig 7. Jeffrey Kenney, *Transient Fault Scan*, inkjet on paper, 40”x50” 2011

*Alghe Mist* (fig.8) is perhaps the most ephemeral of the color photographs included. Literally a photograph of a reflection on a holographic surface, like *Chemical Mirage* and *Transient Fault Scan*, I used the methodology of making a model for the camera in which the model was exceedingly sleight, more like the simplest material prop necessary for the a close-up magic act. In this case a couple of pieces of origami craft papers including a kind of screen or mesh and an assortment of simple iridescent or holographic surfaces. When photographed, the reflection of the screen pattern in the spectral colors of the hologram paper creates a luminous but ambiguous landscape-like image or mirage. Its washed-out appearance suggests either a scene veiled in a mist or, reinforcing the show’s leitmotif, another set of either printing or photographic exposure errors. Furthering another theme, the title, *Alghe Mist*, is a Flemish pun on the alchemist’s practice, dating back to the days of Albrecht Durer; essentially translating to “all is rubbish.”



fig 8. Jeffrey Kenney, *Alghe Mist*, inkjet on paper, 32”x40” 2011



## The Fifteen Unnecessary Motions of a Kiss

*“It is a sailor’s credo that there is a generic difference between himself and a landlubber... there exist fundamental differences between the practical requirements of the sailor’s and the landlubber’s lives. By exigencies, sailors have come to be the only men of commerce dealing directly and daily with the mechanics of the stars.... Without thinking of themselves as cosmogonists, sailors naturally develop a spontaneous cosmic viewpoint. They view the world from outside; they “come upon” the land.”<sup>9</sup>*

*R. Buckminster Fuller*

Evident in this show’s emphasis on the accidental, the alchemical, and the expressive force of the print, my photographic work is not interested in consistency of product nor the systemization of process. I am concerned not only with making images but also with exploring and questioning the machinery, processes, and standards that accompany the medium. As many have noted, photography represents an extremely powerful and cynical form of vision. It is not troubled by sentiment, deterred by conscience, nor swayed by ideology. It has for most of its lifespan, been strongly associated with truth and objectivity. Coupled with the power to access spaces normally off limits to human sight such as the cosmic, molecular, thermal, or ultraviolet zones of reality, the scientific perspective that the photographic image has come to represent can not be over stated.

To conclude, the images that make up the final portion of this exhibit use photography’s relationship to the scientific examination of reality as a starting point. First there is a small diptych, each black and white framed inkjet print is roughly 14”x20”, hung closely together, titled *Between Stomach and Tongue* (fig. 9). The pictures show a sort of fluid substance that seems to be drawing or outlining organic shapes. The first is a small white wishbone-type shape against black while the other print shows a larger more bell shaped form against the dot-matrix of an offset print. Each print also includes many superimposed black rectangular redaction marks which appear to be laid over areas that may have named the various parts of the picture, like a scientific diagram of an internal organ.

As the title suggests, this diptych is a meditation on between-ness. Between articulation and redaction, dimension and flatness, abstraction and indexicality, or the scientific and the absurd. In fact, the source image from which I began this piece was a scientific diagram of the human vocal chord. What I found interesting in this diagram was the difference between the abstract and universal quality of the vocal mechanism and yet how essential it can be to the articulation of distinct identity among our fellow humans. The voice is obviously not simply the mechanics of the vocal chord but something much more indefinite, dislocated, and slippery in definition. I attempted to re-model this scientific model in a slippery homemade material that is a solution of glue,

10. Krausse, Joachim and Claude Lichtenstein. *Your Private Sky: Discourse R. Buckminster Fuller*. Zurich: Lars Muller Publishers, 2001. 106

that is a solution of glue, borax, and water, commonly referred to as homemade silly putty. This material has non-Newtonian properties, meaning that it is essentially liquid but will hold a shape in a fairly solid form for a short time before reverting back to its viscous state. So the photographs represent only a segment, or slice of time in the flow of this abstraction: the point at which it takes the shape of the instrument that generates a voice.

The redaction marks in these images were used to both point out that it was originally based on a scientific diagram but also to further accentuate the diptych's interest in between states. The redaction lets us know that language is present but its is not visible or readable. Like the image of the vocal chord, the redaction marks are connected to language, in this case the written word rather than the voice, and similarly the little black rectangles strip the word of its capacity for identity and specificity, transforming the concreteness of language to the speculative and viscous ambivalence of abstraction.

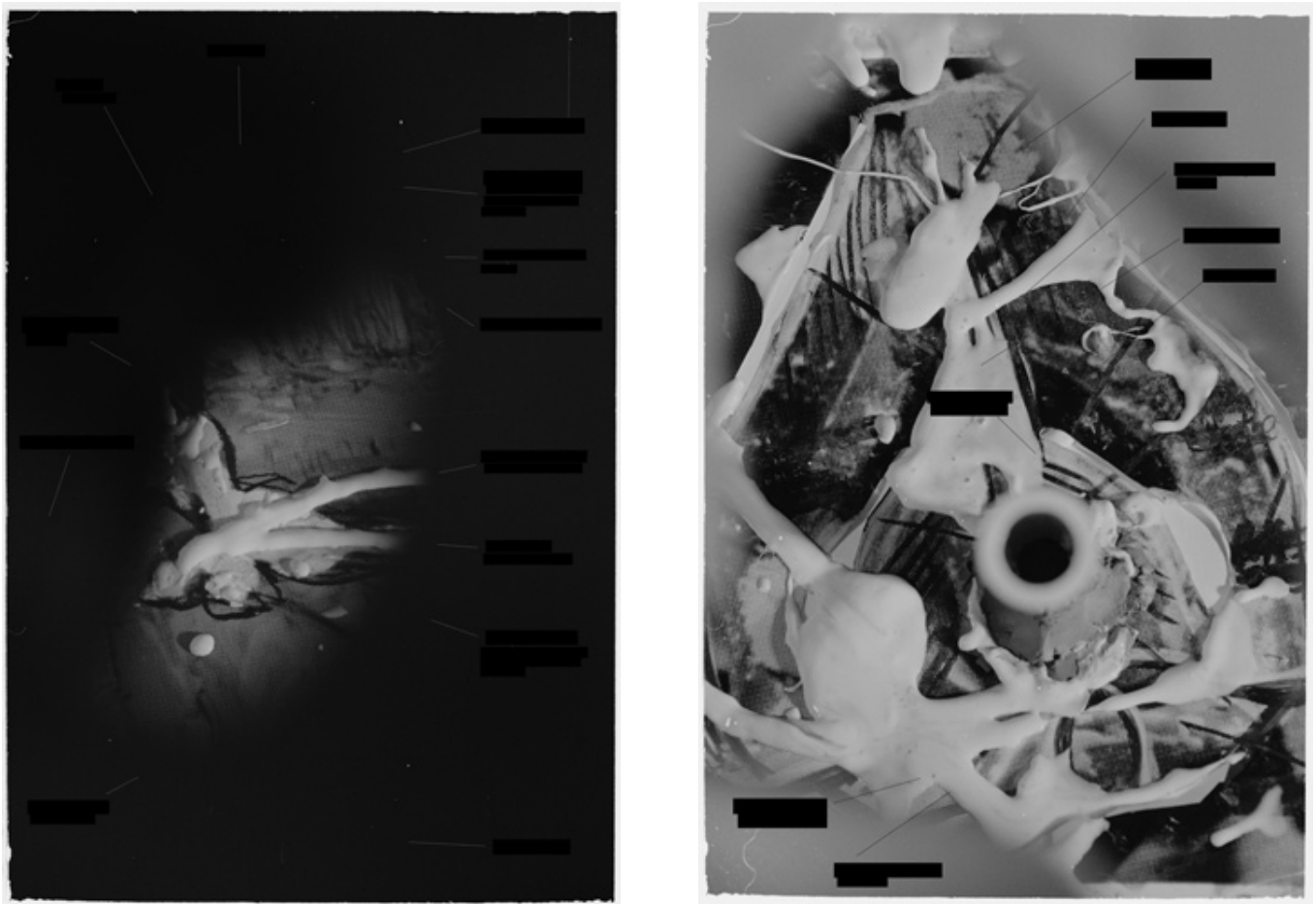


fig 9. Jeffrey Kenney, *Between Stomach and Tongue (diptych)*, inkjet on paper, 14"x20" each 2011



fig 10. Jeffrey Kenney, *The Fifteen Unnecessary Motions of a Kiss*, 36 photocopies, 66"x51" 2011

*The Fifteen Unnecessary Motions of a Kiss* (fig. 10), continues this exploration of between states; of fluidity and abstraction versus the concrete and scientifically determined. This work is an ongoing performative work that is represented in this show by 36 black and white photocopies laid out in a grid and adhered directly to the wall. The photocopies depict two figures in aprons interacting with a large amount of the semi-viscous silly putty-like material used in *Between Stomach and Tongue*. Rather than using the material as a model making substitute in these pictures it acts as a kind of shape shifter, its varying appearance and the way the figures interact with it, continuously transforms the reading of this ambiguous substance and the accompanying activity sometimes reading like washing with exaggerated soap and mop, sometimes conjuring flesh or fire from a pale, sometimes cooking an octopus or disemboweling some sacrificial creature, and sometimes merely playing with an unruly and otherworldly substance.

The deliberately ambiguous nature of this performance and its treatment as a photographic sequence, like a perverse instructional manual, is a satirical take on the artistic process and a deliberate refusal to address the artistic process as a sequence of conscious choices that lead from a formless material state to a resolute, finished, and meaningful product. The title and the visual style of the images are drawn from research into scientific management practices in the early part of the 20th century. This period and these practices form a model or set of conventions through which my slapstick interpretation of artistic production is directed.

Scientific management is a system of management devised by Frederick Taylor in the later part of the 19th century and became most prominent in the factories and industrial shops of the 1920's. The system, also called Taylorism, sought to standardize the operations of manual laborers through the analysis of their methods and the experimentation with different time-saving, production increasing, methodologies. Taylor's method relied heavily on strict time management which sought to eliminate inefficiency in the workplace by standardizing the particular timings needed to complete an operation and then placing an expectation, or time quota, upon the workman so as to make sure these standards were kept. This method of standardization was extremely effective and profitable for the companies that implemented it, and it allowed the managers and overseers control over even the most basic routines of their workforce.

These strictly managed time standards replaced the natural tempos of the work place, as a result, a regime of knowledge once possessed and controlled by the worker was overturned and placed in the hands of the observer, the manager, and the stop-watch operator. These top down standards transformed the skilled trades into a form of reproduction akin to that of the machine. The title of this photographic sequence, *The Fifteen Unnecessary Motions of the Kiss*, comes from a satirical political cartoon from a 1913 issue of *Life* magazine that gives a sense of the controversy that accompanied the implementation of scientific management. The cartoon shows "a man and a woman in an office, their workplace embrace broken up by the "Efficiency Crank": "Young man, are you aware that you employed fifteen unnecessary motions in delivering that kiss?"<sup>10</sup>

11. Kanigel, Robert. *The One Best Way : Frederick Winslow Taylor and the Enigma of Efficiency*. New York: Viking, 1997. 514

Continuing to use the general framework of Frederick Taylor's scientific management but adding to it an important photographic element, were Frank and Lillian Gilbreth. The husband and wife team sought to not only increase the speed and efficiency of the workplace but to do so by dissecting not just the time it took to complete a process but also the movements essential to that process. This dissection of process, in the tradition of motion study pioneers such as Edward Muybridge and Jules Marey, was aided by the camera, the studio, and a scientific methodology. Beyond their original scientific function, the photographic documents that the Gilbreths produced are extremely interesting from a purely aesthetic point of view. Many of them consist of a series of grids used as back drops and foreground transparencies that act-like map coordinates to the abstractions of light streaks and blurs that resulted from attaching lights to the hands of workers and photographing them working in long exposures. The light streaks represent their movements and the grid allows the manager to dissect and reorganize these movements according to their photographic path. It was generally assumed that the more fluid the path appeared to be, the more efficient and well organized the motions of that activity would be.

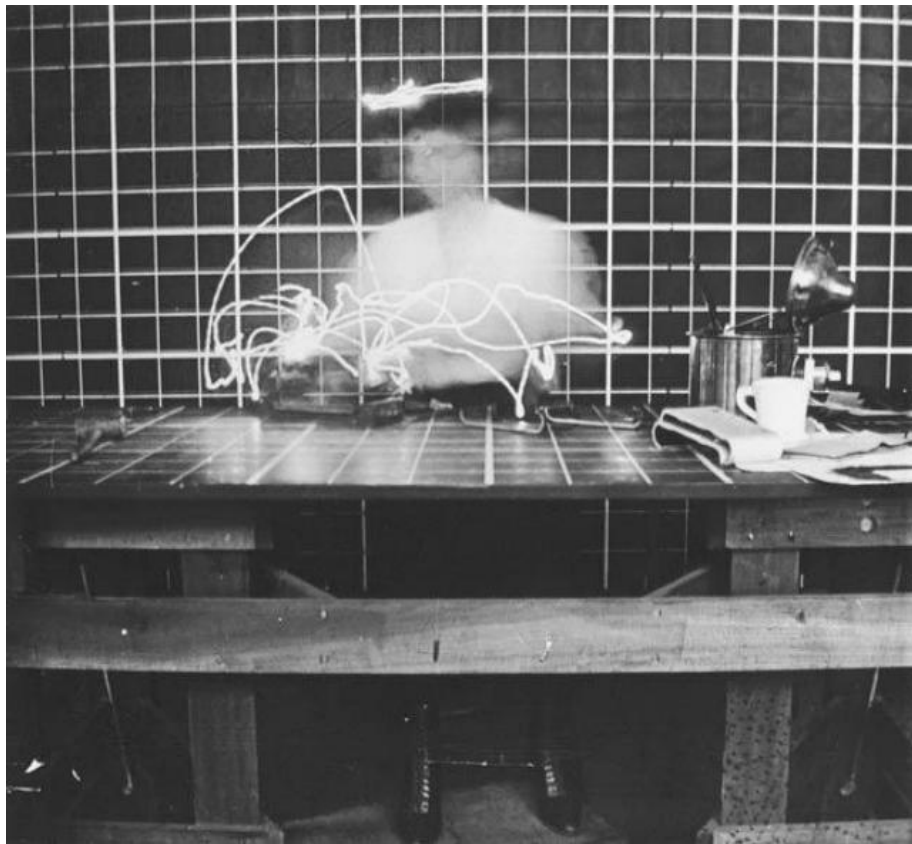


fig 11. Frank Gilbreth, *Motion Efficiency Study*, c. 1914, Gelatin silver print, National Museum of American History, Behring Center, Division of Work and Industry

My performance documentation uses some of the parameters of the Gilbreths, including a set composed of a consistent geometric pattern, in may case the series of vertical lines are analogous to the Gilbreth grid, and the highlighting of a fluid white shape against this ordered backdrop. While the Gilbreth's use the photograph to document the fluidity of motion in order to access and control its organizational potential, my series uses the photograph to document the fluidity of a material as a way to access its image potential. In both cases the photograph acts as a conjuring devise that creates an image of a reality that would not be visible with out its means. My slapstick image sequence attempts to humorously undermine the surveillance power of the camera by allowing the viewer access to a artistic process but never allowing that process to become anymore than the creation of an image for the camera. If the viewer attempts to read the sequence with the expectation of beginning and end they will be frustrated, for each image is concentrated purely on its own being, its own ability to become a photograph. The depiction of workers grappling with the viscous material is both an objective subject of the photograph and a self-reflexive allusion to the photographic mechanism's primary function: its ability to hold reality's visage in a permanent and stable pose despite the perpetual momentum of time and motion.

This sequence may in fact be both a summation of the essential questions of my photographic process and a statement of my artistic purpose. Besides the optical illusions, distorted perspectives, and dialectics between indexicality and abstraction, and beyond flattening the real, freezing the fleeting, or building a fiction, my work is at its root an expression of anxiety and ambivalence toward photography's intrinsic conceptual properties and a presentation of its capacity to create moments of simple wonder by distorting, disturbing, and delighting in the appearance of things.



fig 12. Jeffrey Kenney, VCU MFA Thesis Exhibit, Anderson Gallery, 2011

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