

STRUCTURAL LANDSCAPES

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I. Preface

In thinking about what is important in my work a few major themes come to mind. There is the immediate imagery which is primarily a fanciful landscape in which man-made and natural elements collide. There is the notion of subject, as in, the broader subject of my work; as well as questioning what constitutes a subject at all. Additionally there is the idea of enframing - what is found within the frame and what lies beyond, either outside of the frame or in the vast white spaces that I have left untouched. While the theoretical axis that drives this thesis is localized to discussing these ideas it also is based on the idea that every part of the piece or system is connected to every other part¹. In looking at my drawings this means understanding that every part, or element, of a piece may not have an inherent individual meaning. The ultimate meaning of a piece can best be understood when all of the elements are taken together, in relation to one another, and read as a unified whole. When discussing my digital art this notion is extended to include not only the individual elements of the artwork, but the elements of the technology used to create the artwork as well. In the paper that follows I will discuss how this interdependency plays out and is apparent in all of my work and inadvertently, has become part of the subject of my work.

I. Post Structuralism as applies to my practice

Poststructuralism is made up of numerous individual strands of thought woven together, much like the fibers that make up a cloth, to form a rich and compelling whole. However, like all theories before we can understand the complexity of its surface, we must first examine its root in order to understand how it came to bear the title 'post'. Ferdinand de Saussure, a structural linguist, tells us that language does not reflect a fixed meaning or given reality but instead constructs that reality. If meaning in the world is fixed then language would simply reflect that given reality. However, words can have different meanings depending upon the social, historical and cultural settings in which they are used. Take, for example, the word beautiful. What is understood as beautiful varies as we view it in different historical eras and different cultural contexts. Moreover, when taken in translation words may refer to something completely different rather than to a universally shared concept. Therefore, it is not the word that has meaning but the relationship of the word to its social context that generates a perceived meaning. Further, Saussure conceived of language as a chain consisting of “*signifiers* (sound or written image) and *signified* (meaning)”¹. Each glean meaning not only from its relationship to the other, but through its difference from the rest of the chain.² Meaning, therefore becomes relational as opposed to inherent.

In applying a kind of Saussurean logic to my art, meaning would be construed by both examining the concept attached to each individual image or element in a piece and by recognizing it as being different (and therefore having a different meaning) from the remaining elements in the same piece. Moreover, each individual element or image

would retain that same meaning or refer to the same concept, regardless of where it turned up. In many pieces I juxtapose elements of a man-made built landscape with those of a natural one for just this reason. By placing them side by side I am attempting to force the relationship to be viewed in its cultural context. Elements of construction (boards, barrels, ladders) can, of course, stand alone. However, when juxtaposed in this way it sets them in opposition to one another creating a kind of ‘mash-up’ that must be resolved. I attempt to provide resolution in many ways. One is by manipulating these elements in a somewhat playful and fantastical way. The earth is freed from natural laws and its gravitational pull so that it may take on a personality that moves to overtake the built elements. Another way I resolve this is through the marks themselves. I use large gestural movements in areas combined with tiny, almost mechanical marks as a way of further energizing the composition and further exploring the conflict between the natural and built environments that I have set up.

I tend to think about my work through the lens poststructuralism where difference in the language chain is of key significance as Derrida begins to expand and build upon Saussure’s ideas. Derrida first moves the discussion of meaning from spoken language to focus on written text. Meaning, he believes, is constructed, not from the relationship between the signifier and signified, as Saussure suggested, but from the relationship between the various signifiers in a given text. Since the signifiers are fixed in a given text only temporarily, he suggests that their meaning can only be gleaned fleetingly within the confines of that text. As signifiers are used differently in subsequent texts different meanings may be attributed to them. Meaning, therefore, must be reconstructed with each text, opening signifiers to constant redefinition.³ He contends that there can be

no signifieds, in the Saussurean sense, since the signifiers are constantly being challenged.

I believe Derrida is correct in his assertions and think some of this idea is present in my works where there are no elements of man-made construction but only elements that reference nature. By removing one category of imagery I have in effect removed the opportunity to create meaning through comparison or juxtaposition. I have created several pieces in which the only elements present are those which represent the natural world. These are the same, or similar, elements and marks previously discussed. However, when taken out of the initial context and allowed to stand independently their meaning is altered. They must be contemplated alone as signifying a fantastical new landscape where nature is freed from the confines typically imposed on it. However, since these are images and not texts I must differ with Derrida and suggest that while these images do call for the reconstruction of meaning with the viewing of each individual piece, they also have a continuity of meaning evidenced in, and because of, their making. Again, I have created these drawings using very tiny, mechanical-like marks which I believe forces the question of how natural and man-made elements coexist. The question is embedded in each piece through the contrast of imagery and method of mark-making.

Foucault, building on Derrida's inquiry into meaning, investigates supporting structures of knowledge. Not unlike Derrida's questioning of the relationship between words, Foucault investigates "discursive practices", or as he says, "the internal order of words and things, the way they confront each other".⁴ In his essay "What is an Author?" he articulates this notion by claiming that arrangements, placement and position matter.

In drawing together Derrida and Foucault we see that we are not simply the bearers of language as signifiers and signifieds, as in the Saussurean sense, but are instead caught in its structure since it is inextricably linked to our culture and our lives. This is true in written text and visual culture alike.

In The Order of Things Foucault explores the possibility of a new definition or understanding of the subject as he leads us through Velasquez's painting, "Las Meninas". Guided by Velasquez's placement of figure, fixture and light, Foucault arrives at its subject – the absent king. However, in viewing the painting the place of the king becomes intertwined with our own. Velasquez's achievement, according to Foucault, then becomes one of representation – where what previously held the identity of the knowing subject is now found the viewing subject.⁵ In many ways this absence is very present in my work. I leave a lot of white space in my work which allows for the implied continuation of the landscape; and a place for the viewer to insert himself or stand within the landscape itself. However, in several pieces I also use the white space in a much more defined manner. The white space often becomes the positive and the drawn elements, the negative. In this way, the white space becomes a participating element in the piece, like a river or a stream. It is only through the viewers participation that this works – they must 'see' something that is not there. It is because of this absence that the viewer is essential to determining meaning.

Recognizing this relational specificity allows me to construct meaning in my art by examining the way in which different images or elements in a piece both relate to one another and at the same time retain their difference from one another. Meaning or concepts represented by individual elements no longer adhere to the elements themselves

but are fixed within the constraints of the individual piece and are open to reinterpretation as different combinations appear in different orders and in different pieces. The subject then becomes the image or element to which all other elements relate but which also exists as clearly distinctive and separate from those elements. However, it is not enough to understand all of the work I have undertaken during my tenure here. To further explore these ideas I'd like this discussion to include my earlier digital pieces as well. While they are not present in our gallery today, they have been important in my development as an artist and directly relate to this discussion.

In digital art it is not possible for the subject to exist as an independent and distinctive element but only as a functioning part of a larger dependent system. It is not possible to identify unique whole images, as each image is constructed of numerous units, or pixels, each acting as its own frame with its own 'subject'. The humanist subject that is the definable, Suassurean, unified subject found in classical art can no longer be invoked. The very notion of a knowing subject implies knowledge based on a fixed understanding. However, Derrida and Foucault have proven that the subject can not be understood through the accumulation of language or discourse but lies within its visual structure, just as the subject of digital art lies in its technological structure, and requires us to define a new understanding or frame of reference from which to view the subject in digital art.

With the digitalization of the image a fundamental shift came about in our conception of image making. The traditional image, refers either to a representation of reality or a representation of itself. The paint or media used to create the image is made by mixing a physical pigment with a physical medium, like oil. The amount of pigment

used determines the angle at which light is reflected from its surface resulting in the color or hue we perceive. Further, the paint used to create the image is fixed permanently within the picture plane spatially, and tonally. In a digital image the picture plane is divided into a grid where each unit, called a pixel, is addressed individually. The hue, intensity and brightness of each pixel is controlled separately. By assigning a number to each component associated with each pixel, one can control how that pixel appears visually. Color is not created by mixing pigment, as in traditional art making, but by mixing light. The amount and proportion of light used is determined by a binary equation correlated to each pixel. Therefore, the color and tone of the image is not continuous but composed of individual pixels viewed simultaneously. It is not created by the refraction of light, but the projection of it. Further, our eye does not perceive and process this information directly, as in traditional art, but only after it has been projected onto the computer screen and reassembled to simulate a whole continuous image. The resulting image is not a continuous image, but a collection of numbers and units that must be stored in the computer's memory in order to be viewed again.

With the digitalization of the image, a fundamental shift came about in the visual arts. For centuries the classical image consisted of a content or subject fixed spatially, temporally, and contextually. In effect, the subject was “enframed” within the picture plane. However, as the use of digital technology became more prevalent we have seen this traditional structure change. It has been reconfigured so that it is no longer a solid, fixed picture plane but, “is divided by means of a finite Cartesian grid of cells, where the color and intensity of each of the cells, or pixels, are specified by attributing to the cell a binary number from a finite series.”⁶ While the resulting collection of cells “reads” as a

solid, fixed image each cell has gained the ability to be stored, altered, copied, printed or transported independently of the rest. Each cell, in effect, can now act as its' own individual picture plane. Therefore, by decentering the traditional dividing line between subject and picture plane we are forced to question what constituted the art in the first place – the seemingly solid image, the newly recognized individual picture planes, or the simulation itself. This question is being addressed today by artists such as Chuck Close who takes the question and turns it on its head by recreating the individual 'pixels' in traditional media that can be viewed as a unified whole when viewed from a distance.

Digital imaging has deconstructed ideals of representation by breaking down traditionally held notions of what constitutes and defines the subject. The tension between "high arts'" values on objects and sensual experience and post-structuralism's emphasis on the primacy of mediated images and signs has become manifest in the realm of digital imaging by calling into question one's ability to distinguish the art from its media, or more specifically the subject from its' frame. Digital imaging calls into question the very notion of art production as an individual or unique endeavor and enters us (the artist, the viewer, the critic and the media) into an economy where the concept of the subject is now negotiable.

Derrida proposed that meaning is not construed through representation at all but is, "given as difference". In other words, X is X, which is different from Y. However, he also tells us that these differences are fluctuating, as opposed to static.⁷

"It is not a question of a constituted difference here, but rather, before all determination of the content, of the pure movement which produces difference. The (pure) trace is difference."⁸ Therefore, "Difference is...the formation of form. But it is on the other hand the being-imprinted of the imprint."⁹

However, if understood correctly, then the meaning of the subject as following meaning in language, can only exist in a specific instance. The subject, therefore can be seen not a discursively based construct but a time based one. In looking at the subject in digital art as a whole. I think this is one of the few discourses poised to adopt and implement this truth. Artist Keith Piper takes advantage of this notion of a time-based subject in his project titled *Relocating the Remains* in which his animated 'subject' sets out on an expedition. However, Piper is dealing with expedition in the sense of an individual's exploration of a landscape through which others have preceded and left fragmented remains. It therefore becomes an expedition for one to uncover and decipher the subject as the piece constantly animates and morphs itself between what is presented as the subject and the subject of hidden and recovered remains. The relocation, a time based concept, then becomes one of uncovering lost fragments, forcing the viewer to take his or her place as the subject(the one looking for the artifacts) as well as being relocated from physical to virtual space.

Just as meaning in language and the meaning of words can only be understood as being different from those around it, set in a specific occurrence, form can only be identified as through its difference from its surroundings. One can only depict form by visually distinguishing it from what is around it. If no difference could be determined, it would be understood visually, as being part of its surroundings.

The subject then, would become identifiable through its difference from its surroundings. However, the more I have worked digitally the more this has become a difficult measure since what is understood visually is created as a product of its surroundings, in the form of technology and its machinations, not through its difference from its surroundings.

Moreover, the subject does not come to be understood by reconciling the viewers' discourse about the piece but through the computer's discourse with the piece through the implementation of the technology. Therefore, the subject does not appear through its difference from its environment, as Derrida would suggest, but as a product of it. This can be taken a step further as evidenced in my own digitally created images. Not only are the pieces a product of the technology but they are often begun as a compilation of other individual images that are layered together to form a new image. Each individual layer can stand on its own but it would have no relationship to the intended piece. That piece can only exist as a compilation of technology and a compilation of manipulated images. It's making is not evidenced in its final viewing, as is the case with my drawings, and they can never invite the viewer to participate in discerning or creating its meaning. This is largely why I have chosen to change media for my current and future art making.

In looking at the subject in this light Heidegger's concept of enframing, found in his essay *The Question Concerning Technology*, becomes extremely significant. Heidegger characterized the "subject" as "that which makes itself known", stating that, "appearance, as the appearance 'of something', thus precisely does not mean that something shows itself; rather it means that something makes itself known which does not show itself. It makes itself known through something that does not show itself"¹⁰ In this way Heidegger's ideas are very present in my drawings. Much of the negative space there becomes positive. The elements it represents make themselves known through what does not show itself. While Heidegger is speaking of technology, I feel this comment is equally relevant to both my digital and more traditional works.

Although a means of revealing, enframing is not merely a method or procedure applied to the question of appearance or the subject. It is the framework through which “appearance” or the “subject” appears. In discussing digital art the frame can be seen as the machinations involved in producing an image, or the broader context of the technological system without which there could be no image. Moreover, as we have seen in our discussion of Derrida’s “différance”, we are again faced with the notion of a time-based subject. If we understand Headgear correctly, then the subject only appears when viewed in light of its’ frame or technology. Its meaning can only be understood when viewed in this manner, it is not intrinsically apparent, as would be the case in more traditional art.

In this manner one may view a frame as functioning to both unify the distinctiveness of what is inside and to separate it from what exists outside. However, in the case of computer art, what functions outside the frame (in the form of digital information) serves to feed, or make possible, what appears inside the frame. Thereby, calling into question the very notion of a frame as that which delineates the “inside” from the “outside”, since what is being “enframed” is now a product of what exists outside of the frame. Not only is the notion of the “subject” becoming apparent through the frame called into question, but the “subject” now becomes manifest, not only *through*, but as a *product* of what is non-manifest.

It follows then, that the crucial difference between traditional art and digital art is not only based on the physical differences of media but on differing concepts of the subject and meaning. Despite the theory that the underlying technology is merely instrumental, in digital art it comes very close to being, and approaches interchangeability

with, the art itself. This is made clear when we look at the work of digital artist Mark Amerika entitled *Gammatron* (www.gammatron.com), which highlights how digital art brings the viewer into a meaningful confrontation with the boundaries that underlie these same philosophical and aesthetic issues.

Amerika's piece entitled *Grammatron*, which was exhibited as part of the 2000 Whitney biennale, is an experimental multimedia environment that Amerika developed in 1997. The piece first introduces the non-linear narrative of Abe Golam, an "info-shaman" whose alternative persona is Grammatron, a genderless digital being. The piece then complicates the subtext by framing images of "itself" to correspond with a streaming text, which is supported and initiated by the computer code. As such, it violates previously held ideals of "appearance" and "enframing" in that one cannot determine where the frame through which the "subject", Grammatron, is revealing itself. Is it the frame of the image, the frame of the monitor, the framework of the software which enables the "creation" of Grammatron, the framework of the code which generates the software, or in a broader sense the frame of the internet as a whole which of course is where Grammatron "lives". Amerika sets the framework of his images in contrast with the uniformity of traditional frames, which tend to preserve the self-sufficiency and autonomy of the aesthetically contained world of the picture. In viewing *Grammatron*, one cannot separate what is being revealed from what is creating the images. In essence, one cannot separate what is "enframed" from what is not. Thus Amerika has effectively broken down the notion of frame as border. He achieves this effect through the deployment of several unusual contrivances which raise questions about how we represent "appearance" in particular and about the process of representation itself. The

image as a whole depicts a constantly morphing “being” that is constantly switching between revealing itself and concealing itself. Overlaying a textual narrative over the visual narrative initially created compounds the implication of this already evocative image. The effect is that in the arrangement of these competing narratives, various strips of meaning, and frames of reference, are enmeshed with one another which serves to highlight the artificiality depicted while clearing a space for our perceptions of other “beings”. This further draws our attention to the unique vulnerabilities to which both “out-of-frame” processes and “in-frame” experiential “realities” are subject. When one questions the work in this way we see that Amerika set up a delicate integration of art, technology, imagery and narrative, while simultaneously blurring the distinction between science, art and technology making it all but impossible to identify an independent ‘subject’ of the piece. Heidegger had forebode a similar conclusion when he said,

“Why did art bear the modest name techne? Because it was a revealing that brought forth and made present, and therefore belonged within poiesis. It was finally that revealing which holds complete sway in all the fine arts, in poetry, and in everything poetical that obtained poiesis as its proper name”¹¹.

By raising questions about frames and how forms appear, I seek to tie together the two, often disparate, practices I employ. Both my digital art and my drawings question what is understood as subject, how individual elements are created both through their presence and their absence and how any individual pieces’ meaning can only be construed when contemplating both what is within the bounds of the frame and what lies beyond – in the form of technology or additional terrain in an unmarked white space.

II. Notations

¹ Weedon, C.; Feminist Practice and Poststructural Theory; (1987), Oxford UK: B. Blackwell.

Ibid

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ Foucault, M. The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences ; (1973), New York: Vintage Books.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Derrida, J. Of Grammatology , (1976), Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

⁸ Derrida, J. Writing and Difference, (1978), Chicago Illinois, University of Chicago Press

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Heidegger, Martin, “The Question Concerning Technology” in Basic Writings from Being and Time (1927) to the Task of Thinking (1964); [edited] by David Farrell Krell, Harper Collins Publishers, Inc. 1977.

¹¹ Ibid. , pg. 339.

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