













The Void
The Mystery
The Vast Array
The Infinity of Unities
The Otherworld
The Absolute
The Hidden Order
The Randomness
The Infraworld
The Nothing
The Zone of Immaterial Sensibility
The Silence
The Hollow of Space
The Ineffable
The Emptiness
The Wild

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

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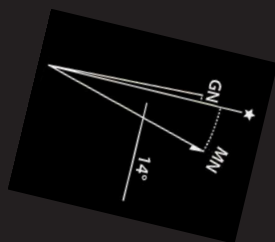
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“... a work of art opens a void, a moment of silence, a question without answer, provokes a breach without reconciliation where the world is forced to question itself.”

Michael Foucault





Abstract

This thesis presents the culmination of two years of excursions into and longing for the void: the sense of absolute presence and connectivity that I have always found in the desert of the Colorado Plateau. Away from the desert, I use my artistic practice as a means of approaching this kinship with the wild, the void.

My work may be understood as a series of experiments, striving to locate and access the void through different language, logic and media. My process speaks to a deep respect for the external wild of landscape (the desert), and a growing recognition of the coextensive wild within us all. Through my personal biocentric ethos I forge a communion with the universal wild of the void that operates on all scales at all times. This reflective connection between the internal wild and the external wild of landscape roots my practice in a radial contemplative action: a continual, affirmation and dissolution of my sense of self.

My echoic renewal of self is cultivated in tandem with an exploration of the work of Rene Daumal, Richard Long, Jack Turner, John Divola, Francis Alys, Yves Klein, Katie Paterson and other artists, philosophers and naturalists whose work similarly illuminates the void. As a regionalist, artist, and aspiring absurdist, my work aims to reflect a confluence of place and action that generates an empathic embrace of the wild of landscape through a shared recognition of the wild within us all.



How I Got Here

There is something about the desert. It's a landscape that, for me, evokes a primitive and immensely personal sense of connection to something wider and wilder. The desert is the root of my moral center, a sublime space that resonates with my love of wilderness and my search for the deeper wild that exists within myself.

Throughout my life, I have felt a pull toward and a longing for the desert of the Colorado Plateau. It is a landscape where I escape to camp, to climb and to run. In each visit, my relationship with the space bores deeper: shaping my environmental ethic and my creative processes. The towers, canyons, dunes and sky, the space between these natural monuments, between the shocking color and sharp scents of the desert are

where I feel most alive and aware of myself within the world. In this place, I recognize the intrinsic value of untamed place, and find an internal resonance with the wild. It is a place that I have never left for longer than 3 months in my entire life, even now.

When I moved to the East Coast to pursue my MFA, I was given the freedom to experiment in my practice and in that experimentation to identify the content and purpose of my work. In the luxury of choice, my default act was consistently to return both physically and metaphysically to the desert of the Colorado Plateau to engage with the landscape that is so central to my understanding of self. As my artistic practice developed, I found myself striving to capture the convergence between tangible interactions with wilderness and the thriving desert of imagination. At first, I thought my preoccupation with the Colorado Plateau was rooted in my longing to return to this particular place. Yet being so far away from the desert helped me understand the nature of my connection with the Colorado Plateau. I yearned for the absolute presence I experienced in the desert, a contact with something greater that the desert allowed me to access.

This desire for absolute presence is a gravity that pulls me westward. The desert is a sublime space, a place where mediations between myself and the unknown, the wild, the greater expanse are at their thinnest. It is a place that purifies and centers me. When I am in the desert, I am truly present, fully awake and in contact with a sense of vastness. It is in this state of being and through the enormous expanse revealed that I came to consider the void.

The Void

The void by definition is a completely empty space. It is not a mystical abstract place determined or identified by spiritual boundaries, nor is it a rational three-dimensional space between Euclidean coordinates. The void is a confluence of place and being: the recursive affirmation and dissolution of self through the materially particular terms of the body and its specific location. It is the action of presence, the spark of imagination within the great hollowness of place. I see the void as both the infiniteness of possibility that comes from the dissolution of mediations and the conscious act of striving to pass through those barriers. The void is this immediacy of life, a feeling of absolute presence and connectivity to everything and nothing: “to know X = to know (everything - X)” (Bok, p 42). This is the unseen, unknowable everything that impresses the material positive of life.

The desert is my origin/access point for approaching the void. It is the landscape that allows me to tap into the great nothingness that operates on all scales, in all spaces, all sizes and all times. In the desert, the structures of context and definition that separate me from the ubiquitous nothingness dissolve, and I am able to find a root contact with the land and with myself. The desert is not the source or home of the void, it is an access point for my own connection to the unknown.

As a graduate student in Rhode Island, a landscape that is in all ways fundamentally unlike the Colorado Plateau desert, I had to learn to access the void, the wild without the desert as a threshold. Untethered, I experienced a crisis of identity. My shift in location prompted a shift in the way I approach and recognize the void: instead of contacting the void through physical presence in the desert wilderness, I had to learn how to approach the void through a centered presence within myself. My creative practice is rooted in this constant and considered act of trying to locate that contented space, and the ability to access it within myself through a contemplative practice. The void is an extension of my own creativity, a space of imaginative spontaneity, where out of considered presence springs forth a true and untamed wildness.

I orient myself to the world through this wilderness and continuously aspire to embody it and be subsumed in it. Though I feel closest to achieving connection with the void when I am in the desert, I strive to be able to access the void in any landscape, at any time by removing the obstacles of everyday material life that mediated my experience to the great unifying emptiness of the void. When I was younger my interaction with the desert was mediated by physical

activity; as an artist I mediate my interaction with photography. In my current practice, I am trying to remove this mediation all together, to collapse the distance between the act of creativity and the point of access to the void. A seemingly impossible task as long as there is a “thing” in everything.

I hope to establish my creative action as the core art presented to my audience, rather than the inert object (a photograph) that denotes the linear end of process. Instead, the art I produce is a continuous process, an active creativity that extends both before and beyond the photos presented. Currently, my distance from the desert informs my work: I create a sense of placelessness, highlighting a dualism of absence and presence by shifting objects out of their expected context. In the process, I draw attention to and then bypass the boundaries of space and time that we assign to objects. A desert rock in a gallery or a pile of sand in a bank challenges the paradigms of location, and points to the act of displacement. The absurdity of sand in a bank vault turns assumed context on its side and hints at a creeping wildness permeating the borders of mundane and ordered space.

Like my current artistic practice and my personal practice of self-exploration, this thesis is a process of inquiry. In it I present the beginnings of my attempts to approach the void away from the desert. This is a conscious step in what I know will become a lifelong process. It is a list without a beginning or an end, a collection of words that have become representative of my struggles to know the void. To this date, the title consists of sixteen words and the fifteen spaces between. The title of this thesis is reflective of this process.

As the list grows, the title changes. It is a collection of words discovered within my research and through experimentation. Each time I encountered a term or concept that described my preoccupation with nothingness, I would write it down. In the same way, my work represents different avenues for approaching the void; the methods and modes of production shift, each attempting a new means of reaching the unreachable. In this sense, my work presents no concrete answers. They are experiments that result in further questions.

Just as Gary Snyder, a naturalist who was the inspiration for Jack Kerouac's *Dharma Bums*, titled his collection of essays *The Practice of the Wild*, the title of this thesis is a condensed narrative of my practice, highlighting what is important in my art. The title is a blank space, an invitation for more ways of trying to capture the phenomenon of presence.

Personal Evolution: Previous Work

Prior to my time at RISD, my work began with a landscape and a crisis. I visited New Orleans following the BP disaster, and Japan following the 2011 tsunami. The work that I produced was secondary to my being in these spaces. I recognized the importance of place and of being fully present in my interactions and experiences in Louisiana and Japan. I undertook these trips with no preplanned itinerary, instead moving in reaction to and spurred from each new encounter. I visited Japan and New Orleans with a genuine, albeit naïve, desire to help.

In 2010, on the event of the Gulf of Mexico oil spill, I flew to New Orleans with no plan, just a desire to provide aid to the Gulf communities. I ended up

walking from New Orleans to the Coast, a reaction to the place fueled by expeditionary logic honed from my fifteen years as a mountain guide. Along the way, I collected and photographed work gloves from the people I encountered. I saw the gloves I collected as symbols of the tragedy: representative objects that could evoke empathy through the power of presence rather than facts or numbers. In this sense, for me, the gloves became talismans, physical objects that exercised a remarkable influence on my emotions surrounding the crisis and that acted as emblematic connectors to the location and time of my experiences in New Orleans. Yet when I began to see the gloves as talismans, the gloves themselves seemed a far more potent and intimate representation of my interactions with the people and spaces of Louisiana than the accompanying photographic portraits. In the end, I only showed the glove series once, as I felt a fissure between the resulting art and the intention behind it. The photos were an abstraction of these connections, filled with the trappings of representation. Unable (due to the BP restitution system) to volunteer in the cleanup, my time in Louisiana became more about connecting with the people I met than about effecting preconceived notions of change.

My time in Japan was similarly driven by a displaced desire to help. Conceptually, the work I created in Japan was intended as a means of establishing empathic connections between those who had suffered in the 2011 tsunami and an audience in the West. I staged a series of photographs that pointed to the height of the wave's impact by having participants



Fig. 1





Fig. 2



attempt to reenact or construct a site-specific visual illustration of the tsunami's height. My hope was for transference of agency from photographer to subject, as I had become increasingly uncomfortable in the traditional photographer/subject power dynamic. I wanted to dilute the inherent aggression I felt at the core of the photographic event, but at the time I lacked the language or experience to understand my emotional turmoil. I tried to collapse the actions of my subjects, the centrality of landscape, and my own presence together, but I now see this practice as an unknowing perpetuation of the photographic tropes of inclusion, be it "...collaborative practice, or working with ephemera... just because something is done collaboratively, for example, doesn't mean it necessarily addresses fundamental issues of representation." (Jelink, 5)

When I arrived in Japan, the scope of the tragedy was overwhelming – the act of photography felt aggressive and the assumed larger audience an illusion. In photographing the victims of the tsunami, I was attempting to resolve my own presence within the context of the images. I am in every image, behind the camera, by choice, and my creative action seemed to impose my own privileged value structure on the people and landscape that I photographed. I came to realize that the conflict between the spectacle of photography and notions of inclusion is heightened at the site of tragedy. The experience caused me to question my relationship with photography and again the function and form of helping. In the resulting images, I recognized the potentially corrosive power of

my presence: I was the foreign object that re-contextualized the images, attempting to insert myself into the narrative of a landscape and people with which I had no genuine, indelible connection. Though my photographs from Japan did narrow the divide between intention and the images produced, they failed to communicate something greater. I realized that my creative practice needed to transform into a process of communicating a deeper, more personal sense of place and presence. I wanted to shift my work from a disconnected process of documentation to an intellectually and morally consistent alignment between creative impetus and the search for connectivity through a repeatable sense of absolute presence.

Current Work

Without a confluence of place and being, my previous work became part of the spectacle of disaster by contributing to the commodification of crisis. I became a mediator myself, a salesman of sorrow, covering up others' tragedy with a diffusing blanket of exported empathy. In my current work, I attempt to embody a moral consistency between creative action and the resulting work.

I recognize now that the value of my practice is in the action of striving for root contact with the void, with myself and with the landscape of the Colorado Plateau that fuels a primitive, personal sense of presence. My work in Louisiana and Japan contributed to the spectacle: they became an entertainment and a

commodity, leading eventually to a numbing of emotions through empathic fatigue. My current practice focuses inward, maintaining an intellectual consistency with my personal morals and ideals as an artist and regionalist. I now feel that to constantly search outside of myself and my region is a distraction, a distancing agent from what is most important to my work and most central to my existence: the internal and physical wildernesses as origin/access point to the void.

Informed by the practices of, among others, Rene Daumal, Richard Long, Alan Ginsberg, Jack Turner, John Divola, Francis Alys, Yves Klein and Katie Paterson, the work I have developed over the past two years speaks to an inward journey, a striving for true connection through consistent contemplative and ethical investment. Having my creative action at the center of my practice establishes a vulnerability and accountability in all of my resulting work, as they are the manifestations of my personal internal struggle. By making my artistic practice a continuous reach for the void, the confluence of place and being, I am forced to recognize my own insignificance. Addressing the void shifts my understanding beyond the corporeal, material scale of the body to include the infinitely large and the infinitesimally small. Yet if my practice is a consistent striving toward the void around me and within me, then the desired goal is a total sublimation. The action of this personal and artistic process is my art, the work that results from this action are just the physical manifestations, breadcrumbs left for my eventual return. As an artist,

the act of creating work is more important than what is created, as it is within the action that I move closer to and learn to internalize the void.

Here lies the core paradox of my work: The necessary means defeat the desired ends. In describing the poetry of Rene Daumal, Thomas Vosteen notes that “He starts the poem by denying that it is a ‘true poem’, even though its subject is a real war, because if a ‘real poet’ were to speak, there would be a great silence...the silence of a thousand thunderclaps.” (Daumal, *You’ve Always Been Wrong*, xxii)

To truly enter or connect with the void, there can be no desired result from action, no objects of production. The work in this thesis, then, represent routes toward that connection, created from a space (the East Coast) that is removed from the origin point (Colorado Plateau). If I were a “real artist,” present in the void, the act of creation would have no outcome; it would only be process.

Dematerialization and Yves Klein

Through my thesis research, I learned that other artists have similarly recognized and struggled with this paradox of production. Dematerialization within the Conceptual art movement wrestled with the contradiction of practice and product. Dieter Roelstraete, in his book *A Line Made By Walking*, explained dematerialization as: “[a] critical movement in art towards the final dismantling of one of the last remaining myths of post-Duchamp-ean avant garde: that the work should indeed be ‘made’ or produced at all. That an object should emerge at the tail end of the linear process of artistic production.” (Roelstraete, 55)

Despite the fact that there are no inherent answers to the paradox (only attempts to confront and recon-

Fig. 3



cile the inevitable trap of material necessity in artistic practice), the idea that past artists have experienced this existential crisis is comfortingly cathartic. I appreciate the struggle of dematerialization: what could be more difficult, elegant and defeatist than the pursuit of dematerialization when your only tools are materials and material production? When the artist is also made of and sustained by materiality, the attempt to dematerialize, to separate the self from the body by sublimating the void, somehow gives form to the formless. Like a sculpture and its mold, there will always be a gap between the two autonomous objects: there will always be a mediation of space between the self and the wholeness of the void. The only means of narrowing the division is through action.

Yves Klein, who worked predominantly in the 1960's, bemoaned the conflict: "[t]o be considered an artist, one had to paint, but to dematerialize art, to make it part of a grand adventure that redefined the very reason for art's existence, one had not to paint." (Klein, p. 96) The grand adventure that Klein sought is that same continuous endeavor for absolute presence and immediacy of life that I seek in my own practice. By rooting the artistic practice in action, the creative process becomes a philosophical and physical challenge. This challenge is reflected in Klein's practice and in my current work as well; when creative action is the heart of a practice, art becomes a physical task. Yves Klein's *Leap Into the Void* (fig. 3) illustrates the physicality of approaching the void. In this work, Klein dives off of a wall with arms wide, leaping into the unknown.

The centrality of action as practice is likewise evident in Klein's *Zone de Sensibilité Picturale Immatérielle* (Zone of immaterial pictorial sensibility), in which the artist and patron together destroyed the material proof of their transaction. Klein presented his patron with a receipt documenting the sale of the Immaterial Zone, a nothingness, for which the patron paid Klein in gold. The pair then tossed both the receipt and half of the gold into the river Seine.

Having imperfectly annihilated the objects of the exchange, the remaining art was intended to be the action itself. The physical objects (the receipt and gold) mostly passed out of existence (or at least out of sight), while the subject of the sale – the Immaterial Zone – became more solid in the act. The Zone, which by its nature is immaterial, was given dimension in the act of the exchange.

Though Klein's focus on action attempts to dematerialize his practice, his undertakings are still documented in photographs. The event of these photos seems to be exempt from Klein's aspirational ideal of immateriality. The photographs existence cements the captured action as evidence, which the photographs then substantiate simply through their existence. The result of this is art as an idea. For Klein, the photographs of his work exist imperfectly outside the realm of materiality, as suggestions or hints of the true art, the aspiring action.

There is a public theatricality to Klein's work that I do not include in my own practice. For every effort

Fig. 4



to dematerialize his work Klein was actually enhancing his celebrity. While my work is performative, the focus in each piece is on the act rather than the actor. In my *Personal Item* and *Placing Value* (both discussed later in this text) the centrality of action is implied by re-contextualization and the continued displacement of objects.

Klein was convinced art could change the world by allowing him to achieve transcendence on a personal level and reveal the path to anyone watching. My own practice attempts to plot a path toward the void though I do not aim for transcendence. To me, transcendence suggests a separation from place, a removal from the land. Instead, I seek and value contentment with the struggle to understand the earthly/material plane. Contentment arises in the alignment of my ideals and actions.

Richard Long

Where Klein presented a theatrical approach, Richard Long embodied a more introspective means of seeking the void: as noted by Rolstraete “Long was a walker, appearing to have the contemplative life of an artist as a non-producer.” (Rolstraete, 66) Richard Long was concerned with the dissolution of aesthetics into ethics in his practice, by putting art in service of the mind and heart, rather than in service of the eye. Long distanced his work from the “frame and pedestal syndrome” of artistic exhibition by focusing his practice on “... art as an idea and art as an action.” (Lippard, ix)

Long's A Line Made by Walking, is essentially the enactment of a mantra, where he walked back and forth through a field repeatedly, leaving an ephemeral line

Fig. 5



of trodden grass (Fig. 5.). This seminal work forced the question: where lies the art? In the action, in the line, or in the photograph? Further, merely mentioning the work could be considered a remaking of it – the piece exists as a rumor or phenomenon, where discussion or description of the piece recalls the action, line and photograph through its own repetition of retelling. In *A Line Made by Walking*, the identity of the art is in flux, evident in each aspect of the piece as well as in the collective whole of its creation. As well, Long approached the intangible through the absence or the void produced by depersonalized repetitive behavior (a traditionally Taoist principle). Like a mantra, this repetition is the sublimation of the self and a movement toward the potentially sacred void.

Where Long used repetition as a physical practice, writers like Henry David Thoreau and Allen Ginsberg employ repetitive language to focus the reader. Allen Ginsberg touches on this in the footnote to *Howl*: “Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy!” (Ginsberg, 27) Singing the glory of the world, the person, the everywhere in eternity, Ginsberg’s 15 Hobbies lull the reader into the void through trance-like action. The word holy loses meaning in the rhythm and is decontextualized. Now without meaning, the word becomes a point of access to the infinite, no longer an adjective but an action. Like Long, the individual’s repeated action quiets the mind, focuses the act, and reveals the void.

The Wild

In establishing my artistic practice as intellectually consistent with my personal morals and ideals as a regionalist, I strive to maintain a connection to the literal wilderness as well as the wilderness of the mind. I'm a regionalist by political belief. I see a crisis in the way we treat land, scarred by a capitalist narrative where wilderness is relegated solely to a usable entity. We have reached a point some might call late capitalism, where we need to protect wilderness from us, and not necessarily for us.

Popular consideration of nature and the wild are fueled by utility, where the natural world is utilized as a source for our material needs through extractive purposes or is utilized as a source of beauty and entertainment. Both forms are destructive. The earth

does not provide infinitely, and our continued gorging of natural resources is an act of consumptive annihilation. Use of the earth as a source of beauty and entertainment simply fosters the desire for more places that are entertaining, which in turn urges the creation of more amenities, easier access and further development. In using the earth, we lose the primitive, the savage, the truth of the wild and the earthly touchstone of the void. This wild is what bore us, what made us human, and what we define ourselves against. The scientific management of conservation biology creates more efficiency and utility in our administration of the wild, distancing us from the possibility of true, generative connection. It is this primitive connection that we crave, where we come from, and it is this yearning that propels us to seek out national parks. Yet our arrivals are met with a diminished, shackled wilderness, consumable and stripped through a process of Disney-ification. Only a culture that is already disconnected from the land could believe that such a commoditized use of nature would allow for a whole, engaged and resilient connection to land.

There has always been an over-arching good that society has galvanized around, a deeper ethical mythology that balanced reason and science. The moral framework of our nation was rooted in a delicate relationship between reason and Christian revelation, but in our post-modern understanding of the world, the collective good is lost, and we are left with a society of consumerist spectacle that turns the potentially shared good of wildness into a natural amusement park. Without a collective recognition of and respect

for the sacred chaos of wild space as a shared good, all we're left with is the maximization of utility, "[i]n which modern conditions of production prevail [and society] presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles." (Debord, 1)

Yet even in our secular culture, national parks are still recognized, to varying degrees, as somehow sacred lands. Perhaps we understand these spaces as locations where we can live directly, where there is still a shadow of the void. This recognition of sacredness does not necessarily grow out of any particular religious or philosophical practice but instead may be a symptom of an indelible and lasting empathic connection with the earth, with nature. When we encounter the glories on display in national parks, we feel deeply. It is an involuntary, residual human emotion that stems from an internal recognition of a connectivity we have long held but are close to losing. It is an empathic connection, and as part of an ethical, empathic extension, there is "...an intrinsic value to nature...it is the best place to learn that humans are ecologically and ethically involved in the larger community of life. Wilderness preservation is a gesture of planetary modesty and a badly needed exercise of restraint on a species notorious for its excesses." (Nash, ix)

Our consciousness and ability to emotionally connect to the ever expanding other has evolved over the course of human civilization. We have grown to empathically embrace those members of our tribe, our village, our nation and through our technologically established global village, members of the collective

human condition. We are capable of feeling connected to and empathy for people from across the globe, as “[w]e are fast extending our empathic extension to the whole of humanity and the vast project of life that envelops the planet.” (Rifkin, 610) It is time for the next evolution of our connectivity: we need to extend that empathic embrace from ourselves to the entire biosphere, to the earth itself as the ecology and space of human endurance. This empathic extension is what Aldo Leopold called for in his “land ethic”, which “simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants and animals, or collectively the land.” (Nash, 197)

Yet here again lies the paradox at the root of my practice: that the necessary means defeat the desired ends. Or, that human civilization, the very enemy of the wild, is now potentially its only savior.

Moving beyond an anthropocentric understanding of the earth, where everything revolves around human needs and comforts, requires that we reimagine and evolve the very concept of empathy. Traditionally, empathic connection infers an empathic receptor emotionally or physically capable of reciprocity - when we seek to connect emotionally to other humans, regardless of distance or time, we do so through the identification of shared attributes. The act of empathy ascribes to its subject a mirror of our own sense of self. This type of empathic connection cannot be applied to the wild: the wild as a quality is neither emotional nor physical. Nor does the wild embody an inherent morality, despite the Transcendentalists’ attempts to make it an ethical resource by

relating it to God, or American pioneer logic's devaluation of the wild to pure commodity. Both of these perspectives are myths, distancing agents that remove us from understanding the void. They are a grid or framework of human consciousness that we place over the landscape. We try to imbue the wild, the void, with morality because we recognize in it its greatness, which we rightly identify as sacred. The wilderness is indeed sacred, but it is not a sacredness born of our religious or spiritual myths. Instead the wild, the void, is sacred within its own framework, on its own terms and its own ethic.

Instead of enshrining the wild within an existing spiritualism, we need to recognize and respect the wild as uniquely other, ungoverned by our societal moral and religious systems. As William Cronon explains, "... if we acknowledge the autonomy and otherness of the things and creatures around us—an autonomy our culture has taught us to label with the word 'wild'—then we will at least think carefully about the uses to which we put them, and even ask if we should use them at all." (Cronon, p. 20)

If we are to genuinely value and honor the wild then we need to undertake an empathic evolution to include the fundamentally other in our embrace. To do this, we must extend our understanding of our selves beyond our physical bodies and intellectual individualism to include the wild within all of us: that primitive, essential connection to and immersion in the void. We need to perform a leap from an anthropocentric perspective to a biocentric perspective. Whereas an empathic connection rooted in our

current anthropocentric perspective forces the wild to conform to a human paradigm, a connection from a biocentric perspective calls for us to embrace the wild within ourselves. This is a new form of empathy, one born of the wild within us rather than of our social moral structures and myths. Through absolute presence and metaphysical self-recognition we can shift the scope of our understanding of the self to include the wild within as a primeval remembrance of the greater wild. The process of learning to “...acknowledge the autonomy of the other—means striving for critical self-consciousness in all of our actions. It means the deep reflection and respect must accompany each act of use, and means too that we must always consider the possibility of non-use.” (Cronon, p. 20)

In short, in order to save the wild landscape from ourselves, a connection to the void is required. The immediacy of life, the feeling of absolute presence and consistent self-reflection through which we engage the void is vital to the development of a biocentric empathic embrace. Connection with the void is what allows us to accept the wild within ourselves and in turn recognize the essential otherness of the wildness of landscape. This comprehension of the wild as other endows us with the necessary perspective to include it in our understanding of self and world.

Edward Abbey’s “The Great American Desert” in *The Journey Home* illustrates this process of recognizing the inherent otherness of the wild, identifying the presence of that wild otherness within the self, and then empathically embracing both the internal

wild and the wild of the landscape. In his story, Abbey finds himself on a desert mesa he assumes to be truly untouched by humanity, only to happen upon a stone-formed 3-foot long arrow pointing north. Abbey scoured the vista with care for some focal point, some visible manifestation of the sacred that could be the arrow's reference. "But there was nothing out there. Nothing at all. Nothing but the desert. Nothing but the silent world. That's why." (Abbey, *Best of Edward Abbey*, 17)

Abbey sought a known sacredness within the landscape, a human made or human embellished construction of recognizable holiness. What he found instead was the wholly alien sacredness of the unknowable, the void. "In pointing at nothing, the arrow on the mesa in fact pointed at something of great value, it had to do with emptiness and otherness." (Nash, 270)

The nothing, the wild, the void is beyond human definition. We try to control it by sanctifying it or by utilizing it, but control in this case is social pathology. In artistic practice, glorifying the wild only serves to categorize and limit the wild as a knowable and identifiable aesthetic. Extending our empathic embrace to only the visually novel (and fencing it in as a national park) is the same flaw in humanity as only extending an empathic embrace to our immediate bloodlines. To truly evolve we must extend our embrace to the other, the fully unknowable. Only then will we be able to achieve a biocentric understanding of the world and our role within it, not as masters of the landscape but as inherently different but equally

primary elements of the eternal void.

In my practice I work to avoid creating traditional landscape photography as I feel it serves only as an advertisement for nature, where the value is placed on aesthetic beauty instead of the power and fragility of nature as a conduit to the void. Jack Turner explains the tragedy of our current experience of the wild: “What we have is extensive experience of a severely diminished wilderness, animal or place – a caricature of its former self. Or we have extensive indirect experience of wild nature mediated via photographic images and the written word. But this is not experience of the wild, not gross contact.” (Turner, 27) My actions as an individual and an artist seek to challenge the view of the earth as a consumable resource rather than a connective aspect of shared life, and as a point of contact with the void.

My work, then, has followed two veins of naturalist action: the active, aggressive approach through political disobedience and the contemplative approach through creation as a process of self-affirmation and dissolution. The work presented in this thesis represents the second process, where I use mantras and talismans to approach and reflect the void.

In this way my ethos and creative practice as a naturalist is a form of protest against rationally utilitarian and spectacle-driven interactions with the earth. Through my practice, I hope to actualize a deeper connection with the wild in myself, provide access to that connection for my audience, and propose as a balance against reason and science, the void as a

sense of extended empathy that captures the imagination and develops a recognition of land as sacred.

The action of my practice, as a protest and a realization of ethic, seeks to combat consumption. Yet how do I not contribute to that consumption? By creating photographs and working with materials, I am mediating my experience of the void. As an artist I must accept this inherent distancing and recognize the mediation of photography as the walls between myself and the void, so that in identifying them I may deconstruct them. In the space between aspiring to deconstruct those mediations and the act of destruction lies the void.

By removing and returning talismans from the desert – the rocks and sand that are relics of those root points of contact – I force myself to expand my own means of approaching the void. The rocks and sand become symbolic of the desert when removed from their context, and in this decontextualization point to the ubiquity of the void. Part of my desire to place these talismans in places of civilized construct that are seemingly antithetical to my search for the void is a desire to challenge my connection to the desert as an origin point. By intentionally distancing myself from this space, and by consciously displacing elements of the desert, the value of those elements expands. The rocks and sand are imbued with deeper connective meaning – as talismans or relics, the items become umbilical links to the point of contact and symbols of my struggle. I aspire to find my center, my contentment not only within the confines of America's designated and truncated national parks,

but everywhere and at every moment. “We are embedded in it, permeated by it, saturated with it, constructed by it, and maintained by it; we owe our existence to it. The idea that we have to go to Yellowstone to find or experience the wild is absurd. We simply must learn to switch scales with ease, moving deftly from the vastly big to the infinitesimally small, integrated hierarchies.” (Turner, 43)

In this way, I can expose the ubiquity of the void. It can be experienced anywhere. A core tension in my practice has been my need to attach it to a specific space, a point on my body or a Euclidian coordinate, but this is antithetical to the nature of the void. My work therefore exists in the in-between, drawing attention to space while at the same time subverting it. In my practice, I attempt to accept Edward Abbey’s desert nothingness (“Nothing at all. Nothing but the desert. Nothing but the silent world”) and to embody and rest with that same conclusion he achieved: “That’s why.” (Abbey, *Best of Edward Abbey*, 17)

Placing Value

My work *Placing Value* is a reaction to Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind*, the widely recognized bible of contemporary American environmentalism. In this text, Nash discusses the process by which our nation came to orient itself to landscape through a pioneer logic: "[p]ioneers welcomed wild country as a challenge, they conceived of themselves as agents in the regenerating process that turned the ungodly and useless into a beneficent civilization." (Nash, 43) Wilderness has traditionally been rooted in our collective national psyche as an other against which we self-identify and self-locate. Meditating on Nash's scarcity of value principle – the idea that we value that which is scarce and exploit that which is ample – I began to see America's abstracted economic system as the root cause of

the very non-abstracted grid of scars now inscribed across the American landscape from decades of utilitarian abuse and misuse. The protection of wilderness through the compartmentalization and rarification of preservation entombs our most sacred myth of origin while simultaneously exacerbating the disconnection of its ideological roots. Only two percent of our national lands are protected as wilderness, the same percentage as paved roads.

I wanted to subvert the narrative of how we ascribe value within our culture and simultaneously advance my own connection to and reverence for the desert through the absurd act of coopting and redefining the utility of a safety deposit box, a culturally identifiable space to place that which we value.

By “withdrawing” sand from the Colorado Plateau and depositing it in a Rhode Island bank’s safety deposit box, I examine the spectrum of human-made fictions (be they sacred or economic) we layer upon land. I use the sand as an object that has been imbued with essential value as a result of its proximity to my point of access, the desert. This object, then, when removed from its natural space and relocated to a geographically and metaphysically foreign place, contaminates the sterile, inherently rational economic utility of the bank. The bank is adulterated both literally with scattered sand (with each deposit, grains escape to permeate the bank) and intrinsically by the essence of the wild.

As a capitalist nation, we value that which we own. We establish importance by measures of worth: mon-

etary cost, utility, demand and consumability. These commensurate measures of estimation are imposed upon the landscape, where serviceability informs importance. We have privatized the wilderness, placed fences across great expanses and confined the public's access and scope of wilderness experience to the paved roads of our national parks. *Placing Value* reflects and inverts these restrictions and valuations by playing with the disparity between economic value and sacred value. As my most direct access point to the void, the desert is of utmost importance to my sense of the sublime and my recursive affirmation and dissolution of self. To illustrate this intrinsic value within the framework of capitalist consumer culture, I claimed ownership over a manageable portion of the desert and placed it in a safety deposit box in Rhode Island. The whole of this action both speaks genuinely to my reverence for the desert, and highlights the absurdity of trying to delineate and assess the bounds of that reverence. Whereas that which we find most materially precious is often set aside in designated spaces like safety deposit boxes to be kept secure, that which we find most precious to our center of being cannot be demarcated or owned.

The presence of the sand in the safety deposit box subverts purely economic notions of value and transforms the bank into a site of creative expression, a locus where the void may be accessed. Simultaneously, the bank transforms the sand from a small value-less portion of desert into a precious symbol. Sense of place and value is shifted in both the bank and the sand, creating in their encounter a new space that defies the paradigms of bank and desert. This

Fig. 6



new space is a “geography of hope”, a locus of potential, born from subversive, creative action. (Stegner, “Wilderness Letter”. Wilderness.org) The idea of the bank (rather than the bank itself) becomes an access point to the void. The photographs of the process exist as receipts and evidence of the act. The action of the piece and the resulting photographs confront societal consensus of value. The sand and bank together become a symbol of this confrontation. Neither the bank nor the sand are central to the work, rather the idea of the sand and bank and the confluence of what they each represent establish the wider function of *Placing Value* as a phenomenon of continued action that straddles and distorts disparate worlds.

Rewilding Exercise

On most of my runs I wear clothes. In *Rewilding Exercise*, though, I left the house at 2am and tried to literally escape Providence by running naked to the border between Providence and Pawtucket, Rhode Island, while a friend documented my flight. This revealing act was an experiment in wishful thinking, an attempt to capture the sense of wildness I experience in the desert of the Colorado Plateau, to return to the mental space of the west that seems to be amplified when viewed from the east. Rather than trying to rewild Providence (implying that the city is inherently tame or broken) the action of this work was an attempt to rewild myself.

There is a sense of desperation in the late night naked run of *Rewilding Exercise*. My attempt to recapture

Fig. 7



Fig. 8



the primal, visceral sensation of touching the void through wild landscape required a stripping-away of the accoutrement of civilized society. Without the tangible elements of the Colorado Plateau desert (the smell of sage and juniper, the dry heat of the sun) facilitating physical immersion in the wild, I had to manufacture an impression of wildness in suburban Providence. To do this, I needed to establish myself as the other, a living opposite to the surrounding East Coast town. By eliminating the protection of clothing and running feral through the streets at night, I became the antipode, embodying the native physicality of the desert in the conflux of place and being. The action captured in *Rewilding Exercise* is a recursive affirmation and dissolution of my sense of self.

My frenetic, exposed run demanded a full presence of mind in each moment, where the immediacy of action dissolved rational thought and left only the present, the now. By divorcing my sense of self from the common consensus and stepping out of the confines of cultural identity, I was able to reawaken the wild within myself, and reaffirm my connection to the void. I became an outpost of the wild in the midst of the refined, a beacon of the other, an embodiment of the west in the terrain of the east.

Rewilding Exercise is equal parts fear and hope. The urgency of my run illuminates a fear of being tamed, of losing that intrinsic connection to the wild that nourishes and sustains me. Two thousand miles from the desert of the Colorado Plateau, uprooted from the region of my home and the source of my

core understanding of myself, I am forced to continuously recreate and reassess my sense of self within the framework of a foreign place. I fight to ensure that this recursive reformation strengthens my convictions with each cycle and does not diminish my visceral connection to the desert and my regionalist roots. The fear I confront in *Rewilding Exercise* is a fear of death: “[n]ot of what we imagine about death, for this fear is itself imaginary. Not of my death, whose date will be recorded in the civic registers of the state. But of that death I suffer every moment, of the death of that voice which out of the depths of my childhood keeps asking, as yours does, ‘What am I?’ and which everything in us and around us seems bent on stifling. When this voice does not speak, and it does not speak often, I am an empty carcass, a restless cadaver. I am afraid that one day it will be silent forever, or that it will wake up too late.” (Daumal, *Mount Analog*, p.35)

Yet *Rewilding Exercise* is also a display of hope. The very concept of rewilding suggests that a state of wildness was once reached, and will be again. Rewilding is a continuous communion: as I dissolve and reform my sense of self, I embody and draw the wild within me again and again. I will ebb and flow as I move physically and mentally toward and away from the void, spiraling closer to a grounded, autonomous sense of self and my interior wild.

John Divola

John Divola's series of images titled *As Far As I Could Get* similarly embodies a continued dissolution and restoration of self through physical action and an existentialist sensibility. In the work, Divola erected a tripod and camera, set a timer for ten seconds and then ran as far as he could away from the camera before the timer went off. The resulting photos are literally from his point of origin, the camera, and act as talismans of his creative impulse to run as fast and as far as he could in the allotted time. He is recursively getting as close as possible to the void, to death. This series of images points to something at the center of human consciousness: the drive to accomplish self-asserted goals before time runs out, be it the time of a camera clock or the span of our lives. In the context of Divola's work, then, the pho-

tographic images documenting his flight are obituaries to his root action. They recount the core meaning of any lifespan: that creativity and action are the only viable antidotes to the meaninglessness of our phenomenological existence between the birth (affirmation) and death (dissolution) of self.

Divola's work, like that of Klein, shifts the locus of the art from the image as object to the action of becoming. For Divola (and in my own practice), meaning can only be found in the continuous process of becoming, and a process by definition cannot be static or constant: action exists as a singular phenomenon in space and time that cannot be revisited without memory, a photograph or rumor of its event. Photographs produced from artistic practice are therefore representative objects of an event. The images as memory engage the audience in the artist's repeated efforts to become. Artistic practice, then, becomes an allegory of what it means to be alive in the world.

The seemingly desperate engagement with landscape in Divola's series is reflected in my own struggle to achieve connection with the void. In Divola's work and my own, the phenomenological nature of life is evident: everything is experiential and impermanent and as such there is no enduring essence, only the continuous action of dissolving and reaffirming the self. Life then is what you make of it at every moment of every day. This is a potentially terrifying realization or an infinitely liberating one, depending upon your craving for permanence, and should never be taken for granted (as long as suicide is a logistically viable option).

Fig. 9



The recognition of this immediacy of life illuminates the vast, creative freedom of possibility in action and challenges us to consider how we will fill this potential. Our efforts will naturally go towards fulfilling desires and insulating ourselves from suffering, but by what means and to what ends? Our current attempts are having disastrous effects upon the ecologies that sustain us and our ability to keep asking these key questions. Without a biocentric conception of the earth and our symbiotic relationship with it, we may forget that we are nature, born from it and rooted in it.

We are the thin layer of atmosphere between the infinite nothing of space and the rock to which we are currently attached. As Dave Foreman said ‘the being of a condor does not end at the tips of the black feathers on its wings.’ (Foreman, p. 5)

Francis Alys

Francis Alys' work embodies an ethic and aesthetic of placelessness that aligns with my own and similarly incorporates the continuous act of determining one's self through the quiet focus achieved in repeated action. A provocateur, Alys challenges his audience to reassess the chosen consensus through seemingly simple and absurd acts. His *Paradox of Practice (Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing and Sometimes Making Nothing Leads to Something)* results in images of a man pushing a human-sized block of ice through the streets of Mexico City until the ice melted. The photos confirm the plausible nature of the act but fail to rectify its irrationality. The fissure between culturally chosen consensus and the undeniable reality of the event create a sensation of senselessness that exposes the limits of our imagination.

Fig. 10



Like the geography of hope established in *Placing Value*, the disparity between the expected and the observed in Alys' work highlights the irrelevance of the chosen consensus of societal culture. The act encourages the audience to see a new perspective, shaking people out of their torpor of assumed systems and suggesting new ways of seeing the world and our place in it, thus creating the possibility for change. Alys work resembles that of a mountain guide, illuminating potentials and providing a map to their access points.

The walk Alys undertakes can be understood as a meditative practice in the same vein as Long's *A Line Made By Walking* and Divola's *As Far As I Could Get*. The root artistic impulse (Long's line, Divola's distance and Alys' ice block) in each piece is impermanent, despite the accompanying photos and texts. In the end, only the action remains as a contemplative practice that reaffirms the artists' sense of self. Remembering Klein, the photographs are simply ashes of the art, attempting to compensate for the formless void of being and action. Long's walking, Divola's runs and Alys' pushing could take place anywhere. The actions themselves are the locus of the art, regardless of place, and so their performances are the active communion with the void.

This placelessness is made intentional in my work presented in this thesis. By subverting context through object displacement in, *Placing Value* and *Personal Item* (discussed later) and by removing myself (both literally and metaphysically) from the place of Providence in *Rewilding Exercise*, I challenge myself to find new ways of accessing the void. While the physical desert of the Colorado Plateau remains my most direct access point, the void is also approachable through my internal wildness of imagination.

Reconciling Faith and Science?

Along highway 191 in the Colorado Plateau, the landscape of the desert is interrupted by a roadside billboard proclaiming, “SCIENTISTS HAVE SUCCESSFULLY DISCOVERED THE HEART OF THE DESERT”. Black lettering and the stark white background of the billboard’s message contrast sharply with the vibrant red desert rocks and blue sky of the sign’s location.

While traveling through the desert on break from my studies at RISD, I saw a blank billboard and in it I recognized an opportunity. As much as I wanted to leave it blank or chainsaw its supportive posts, I knew that it would not stay passively blank for long, so I chose instead to plaster it with a message that forced the rational and irrational to coexist. This false reconciliation married the faith our society

Fig. 11



places in scientific authority with a faith-based metaphysical search for a heart or essence. In proclaiming a heart of the desert, the message implies both a centrality of wilderness and a living presence or soul of that wildness.

The absurdist message shifts the landscape of information, intervening in the rational system of advertisement by expounding irrational pseudo science. Through the act of erecting this message, I attempted to subvert our consumerism by using its own conduit, the billboard, against itself. Installed near my own metaphysical access point to the void, the spectacle of this message is wholly separate from its surroundings.

Is there a heart – a center point or a pulsing fundamental essence – of the wild? By anthropomorphizing the desert, does its presence, its vitality become more readily evident? Or does an anthropomorphized desert mask a substantive wild behind the abstraction of metaphor? *Reconciling Faith and Science?* allows the viewer to momentarily connect empathically with the wild, as the idea of a heart of the desert mirrors our own human center. In the billboard message, scientists as expert authorities proclaim the presence of a heart of the desert, giving the viewer permission to humanize the desert as an empathically moral entity. Yet the wild is amoral, inherently unknowable, and therefore an anthropocentric empathic connection only serves to dilute and confuse the very nature of the wild. The statement proclaimed on the billboard embodies antipodal sentiments, utilizing rational scientific pursuit to proclaim the irrational discovery of a metaphysical center. This polarity of logics speaks to the central paradox of the current

anthropocentric approach to land ethic, where the rationality that serves to protect and value wilderness behind an illusion of permanence also distances us from the connectivity required for a resilient, indelible resolution.

Reconciling Faith and Science? balances the faith we place in facts and expert scientists with the intrinsic faith we source from our internal moral authority. The statement “SCIENTISTS HAVE SUCCESSFULLY DISCOVERED THE HEART OF THE DESERT” suggests a confluence of and resolution to the dichotomy between these two traditionally oppositional versions of faith.

Further, the message implies an immediacy and essentiality of the wild. The idea of scientists meticulously searching for the heart of the desert presupposes that identifying this heart is a pressing and deeply important task. The double-meaning of ‘heart’ in the statement advertises a dualism of actions: scientists may have been searching outwardly for an actual core or center of the desert, or scientists may have been turning inward to seek out the essence of the wild. These opposite modes of investigation balance each other, converging internal and external authority and challenging the viewer to recognize the dualistic nature of the search for knowledge.

Katie Paterson

The displacement of objects enacted in my piece *Placing Value* is comparably manifested in the work of Katie Paterson. While her work operates on a different relational scale from my own, her practice also involves the removal (and eventual return) of objects from their point of origin and is similarly concerned with their ability to act as sacred, talismanic representations.

Paterson's practice functions vertically in the celestial while mine is determined by the horizontal of the terrestrial. There is a distinction between our two modes of operating: my terrestrial practice, rooted in the earth, is a practice of the corporeal. Extant in the horizontal, any vertical movement, either physically or philosophically suggests a transcendence, a

seeking of the sacred by moving beyond the secularly mundane. Paterson's celestial work suggests an opposite origin point that is vertical, and her objects descend down to our earthly plane before returning imbued with moral resonance.

Her *Field of Sky* highlights this verticality. Paterson describes her work as: "A large Campo del Cielo meteorite, which has been travelling through space and time for over four and a half billion years, has been cast, melted, and then re-cast back into a new version of itself, retaining its original form. A newly formed yet still ancient meteorite, still imbued with its cosmic history. The iron, small rocks, metal and dust inside becomes reformed, and the layers of its cosmic lifespan - the warping of space and time, the billions of years of pressure and change, formation and erosion - become collapsed, transformed and renewed." (Paterson, *Campo Del Cielo, Field of Sky*, Katiepaterson.org)

The meteorite in Paterson's piece functions as a talisman and connection to its origin in much the same way that the sand and rock in my work are connective talismans. Paterson also collapses action, artist and subject to formulate the resulting art. Operating with the tools available to an artist, she interacts with her sacred object.

Paterson's work capitalizes on the notion of the void as external. She points to the void in extremes - the vastness of the cosmos in *Field of Sky*, and the infinitesimal in *Inside this Desert Lies the Tiniest Grain of Sand*. In this second piece, the vertical regres-

Fig. 12



sion travels to the infinitesimally small: “A grain of sand collected from the Sahara Desert was chiseled to 0.00005mm, using special techniques in nanotechnology. This new minute grain of sand was then taken back to the Sahara and buried deep within its vast desert sands.” (Paterson, *Inside this Desert Lies the Tiniest Grain of Sand*, Katiepaterson.org.).

Paterson illustrates the scope of the void using an absurdist scale that is beyond our rational, observable means. She emphasizes the ridiculousness of our attempts, to assign location and size to the unknowable. We habitually categorize our experiences and interactions, yet the infinite eludes our efforts in its ubiquity. We identify the void as other, and in doing so relegate it to the external, removing it from our bodies despite our primal recognition of the void within the gut of our being. Recognition of the void as everything and nothing, all consuming and wholly separate, illuminates the impotence of our failed classifications.

Similar to *Placing Value*, Paterson’s meteorite and sand reflect the value and scope of the void in the dichotomy of their earthly pervasiveness. Her meteorite, a rarity, is the antithesis of her grain of sand, which is ubiquitous. She confutes the scarcity of value principle; the mundane and the extraordinary are both imbued with equal value.

However, where Paterson changes the physical makeup of her removed objects, my practice changes the symbolic potency of removed objects. Paterson removes her objects from their origin points, and

fundamentally alters them on a molecular level. The changes made to her objects are not immediately evident in their appearance, yet while the change is not independently knowable outside of the context of her work, the objects she works with are entirely remade into new objects, infused with her artistic labor. In my own practice, I similarly remove an object from its origin, but in doing so imbue it with a resonance of the closeness to the void I experienced at its point of removal. The change I inflict upon the object's autonomy as a potential empathic receptor is not on the molecular scale as Katie Paterson's work imposes, but on the terrestrial spectrum by the corporeal terms of body and object. The sand and rock that I remove from the desert become talismans of my access point to the void and through spatial re-contextualization become removed access points themselves. This shift is a product of the observer effect, a term that refers to changes the act of observation will make on a phenomenon being observed. My view of the sand and rock as talismanic representatives to the void invests these objects with the essence of the root connection originally sourced in the Colorado Plateau. The shift in my perception of the objects from independent elements of the desert to symbols of the absolute presence I found in the wild invests the sand and rock in the process of connection and makes them touchstones or breadcrumbs to follow when returning to the sense of absolute presence and connectivity I continually seek.

Fig. 13



Personal Item

My work *Personal Item* embodies an arc of connection through recontextualization. I scoured the desert for a geometric rock that fit the dimensions for a carry-on personal item as prescribed by United Airlines guidelines. I wanted the geometry of the rock's natural shape to appear to be chiseled into the required dimensions, yet I did not want to alter the rock in any way. Instead, I sought to find a rock that naturally, advantageously fit the dimensions specified; I wanted patience and randomness to provide. Once I found a rock that met these requirements, I carried it with me out of the desert and on to a plane back to the East Coast, photographing the process, the displaced rock and its new locations throughout the journey.

There is an absurdity in this piece that mirrors the sentiment of *Reconciling Faith and Science*. Like the

statement “SCIENTISTS HAVE SUCCESSFULLY DISCOVERED THE HEART OF THE DESERT,” the core action of *Personal Item* is inherently senseless. Both communicate an irrational, measurable dimensionality of the wild. In *Personal Item*, commensurate value (the dimensions of a carry-on item) is applied to wildness, a prospect that points to the greater (detrimental) issue of maximized utility of landscape and the consumptive annihilation of wilderness. The process of *Personal Item*, the mechanistic search for a perfectly shaped rock, highlights the materialistic extractive way we treat the earth. Rather than recognizing the autonomy of the wild as wholly other, we try to control it by assigning it boundaries, utilize it by pulling out elements we desire, and glorify or sanctify it by cordoning off specimens of its otherness as archetypes of the whole. We scavenge nature to find fragments of wildness that fit the dimensions of our needs and section off national parks as exhibitions of nature’s sublimity. By turning wilderness into pageantry, we dilute its essence and redefine it in our own terms. *Personal Item* illustrates the senselessness of our attempts to civilize the inherent otherness of the wild by extending our cultural pathology to the search for a single “perfect” rock. Like our national parks, my actions in *Personal Item* try to fit the maximum amount of sacredness into the allotted efficient and limited dimensions.

Yet sanctity has no dimensionality: a greater volume or mass of talismanic objects does not correlate to more hallowedness. By trying to physically fit a precious object, a touchstone of the void, into specific proportions, a spatial valuation of sacredness is implied. Personal connection to the wild then becomes possible only within defined personal space: a

Fig. 14



perspective that obscures access to the immeasurable wild within us. This misguided relation to the wild is the flawed perspective illustrated in Edward Abbey's search for the sacred subject of his pointing arrow. To seek a known materially identifiable sacredness within the landscape of the other denies the presence of wild otherness within us.

At the same time, the practice of searching for a particular rock in the expanse of the desert echoed the meditative repetition of a mantra. The continuous search decontextualized the act, removing the process from the purpose. The search alone, disconnected from the outcome, revealed a connection to the void. Yet in finding a rock that fit the desired dimensions and removing this rock from the desert, the action became secondary to the outcome.

The act of taking the rock from the desert implied an ownership of the rock and imbued it with an anthropocentric sanctity. The idea of ownership is antithetical to the wholly alien wild, as it suggests that the wild can be identified and controlled. That there is a specific physicality to the void and that it can fit neatly below the seat in front of you on a United Airlines airplane is a flawed logic and my efforts are therefore an intentional fallacy.

Why go through the ridiculous process of searching, finding and carrying a large rock across the country? Why participate in the absurdity of surrendering a rock to a TSA security check and then watching the bizarre scene of it being x-rayed for unsafe materials? Like Francis Alys, my intention is to be a provocateur and highlight the senselessness of the chosen consensus. There is a fault in the human need

to compartmentalize, identify and contain: we try to give tangibility to the immaterial, conjuring means of understanding that which is unknowable. We place objects and limitations in the foreground of the wild to shield ourselves from the frightening expansiveness of the void. We try to turn the wild into something, anything, that fits within the framework of our anthropocentric worldview. As inhabitants of the earth we cannot help but use land, but we need to reevaluate how we do so and further, consider the possibility of non-use. The practice of extending our empathic embrace to a biocentric recognition of the world and the self is essentially a practice of removing those mediations we place between ourselves and the absolute otherness of the wild.

The ludicrous actions I embarked upon in *Personal Item* serve to blur the lines that civilization has drawn between itself and the other of the wild. By taking up space in an unexpected, senseless way, the rock under the seat in front of me on the plane oozes wildness into a civilized, man made space. Removed from the context of the desert, the talismanic reference of the rock became an imagined space. A rock outside of the desert only suggests that the desert exists; the actual desert of its origin, the terrain and scope of the landscape, are knowable only through imagination. It is in this imagined desert that we may find a glimmer of the wild within ourselves, a refracted vision of the unknown within us accessed through the prismatic effect of the rock.

Like the sand in *Placing Value*, the rock in *Personal Item* embodies a paradox of sublimity. As talismans, these desert objects highlight the inherent flaw in attempting to identify true wildness through an imposed

sacredness. Yet when they are placed in the context of civilized society, their extreme otherness becomes evident. Relocated to a bank vault or an airport, there is a radiant strangeness to the sand and rock that accentuates their distinct otherness and hints at the greater, unknowable void. Both pieces force a shift in perspective, challenging our ordered, dialectical conception of the world: “[a]rt has a double face, of expression and illusion, just like science has a double face: the reality of error and the phantom of truth.” (Daumal, *The Lie of the Truth*. 23) My work attempts to illuminate absurdity as a means to an end, humor as antidote to the strict utility of rationalism.

Who Is My Audience?

Heath Bunting, on his blank, black billboard, noted that ‘most art means nothing to most people’ (Bunting, Bristol 1991). I would add to this, ‘most of the time’. If Bunting’s assessment of the general populous is correct, then the intended audience for my work exists within the small fraction of people who find meaning in artistic expression. Yet I hope to engage as wide an audience as possible, with the intent of prompting an internal connection with the void that may lead to a shift in self-awareness and a new empathic ethic of land use and non-use. In this sense, the intended audience for my work is as wide a spectrum as possible: any living, breathing entity grappling with the ethics and inherent aggression of our material existence.

As discussed earlier in this thesis, I believe that a fundamental shift in the way we understand and interact with the natural wild is immediately necessary. We are in a time of crisis, suffering from a disassociation between our present actions and our future needs. Our current utility-based conception of landscape is wholly destructive, both to the earth itself and to our sense of self. We treat the landscape as commodity, confining and domesticating the wild by relegating it to organized and managed spaces. In this dilutive process, we diminish the imaginative wild within ourselves and widen the gap between the self and the void. Without that absolute presence that comes from contact with the wild, the void, our metaphysical essence and physical health dwindles; we become sleepwalkers in a gridded, logical world designed to insulate us from the fear that comes from the unknowable. There is hope in that fear.

By pointing to the void in my work, I hope to waken my audience to the generative process of recognizing the inherent otherness of the wild, identifying the presence of that wild otherness within the self, and then empathically embracing both the internal wild and the wild of landscape. The process of developing a biocentric empathic embrace of the earth calls for genuine humility, a quality that will both enhance our relationship with the land that sustains us and deepen self recognition and the process of self reflection. As more people engage in this process, an indelible embrace of the wild will be generated. I share my personal connection to the void with my audience in order to spark similar connections that may eventually lead to a collective shift towards valuing the internal and external ecologies that sustain our existence.

The work presented in this thesis is a collection of personal experiments. They are all attempts to approach the void through the action of artistic practice. My processes in each are simple, deliberate, absurd and meditative struggles to confirm my boundaries of self by pushing against and testing the intellectual consistencies of my personal morals and ideals as an artist and regionalist. In doing so, I would like to think I am moving a step closer to the void or at the very least a contented space. My practice is my own deeply personal metaphysical aspiration; it is an internal practice that constantly reaffirms my expanded empathic embrace of the wild, and fuels my connection with the wild within myself and the wilderness of the Colorado Plateau. In this sense, my audience is myself and my place.

Both for my wider audience and for my own internal struggle, my work aims to be an ignition point for continued and deeper contemplation. As my own audience, the work presented in this thesis is a reminder to myself of the struggle and process I have discovered while away from my access point. I hope that these pieces serve as cairns on a self-made path toward the void, evidence of the ways in which I found temporary access to momentary experiences with a sense of absolute presence and connectivity. For my wider audience, the work is further indication of a deeper presence similarly evident in the work of those artists who influenced my practice. I may not be able to bring someone to the void, but I can illuminate its precipice.

Possible Critiques

As noted earlier, the body of work presented in this thesis represents a series of metaphysical experiments, undertaken in the hopes of reaffirming my sense of self. In this undertaking, I have primarily focused my practice on the content and process of my work, rather than the form it has taken and the resulting images. Because the action of creating is for me the centrality of art, I have potentially not given enough focus to presentation techniques. Here again is the paradox that I share with dematerialist artists like Yves Klein: the necessary means defeat the desired ends. If action is the true art of my practice, then the work that is created in that action is secondary; it exists as documentation of the actual art, the action.

Yet if I hope to introduce my audience to the presence of the void and possibly effect a shift in perspective that reveals the internal wild and spurs a value for an empathic embrace of wild landscape, the work that result from my creative action need to be paramount to my practice. In order to spark a recognition of and possible connection to the void in my audience, my presentation techniques need to truly engage my viewers. The photographic images I present, though peripheral to the action that they document, are still my best means of communicating to my audience the continued and considered action of striving toward the void that can germinate an evolution of empathic connectivity with the wild while still maintaining a safe distance from the spectacle of visual consumerist culture. As such, I need to expand my future practice to include a deliberate process of both action and communication, so that my own metaphysical struggle and expanded empathic embrace are more powerfully and accurately transmitted to my audience. I recognize that in order to convey this struggle to larger audience, it may be necessary to embrace the spectacle, if only to subvert it. To do this, I must find a means of presenting my actions (and the resulting images) to my audience in a way that will incite a wider empathic embrace of the wild.

I have come to value the blank of landscape where I enjoy the relative safety of managed wilderness and I am free to focus on the existential nothing. Yet this pure wilderness is a myth, a product of institutional

conservationist practices that attempt to reform the wild to fit our desires. The wild is not pure: “[t]he myth of the wilderness as ‘virgin’ uninhabited land had always been especially cruel when seen from the perspective of the Indians who had once called that land home.” (Cronon, p. 9)

The connection I seek in my practice may then be seen as a selfish act. In moving forward, through the constant affirmation and dissolution of my sense of self, I need to find a way to rise above my own desires and accept the limitations and faults of my own idealism of the wild. I am working toward this stage of self-recognition.

Conclusion

The work presented in this thesis joins the chorus of Rene Daumal, Richard Long, Alan Ginsberg, Jack Turner, John Divola, Francis Alys, Yves Klein, Katie Paterson and so many other artists, philosophers and naturalists as another voice calling attention to the void, the mystery, the vast array, the infinity of unities, the other world, the absolute, the hidden order, the randomness, the infraworld, the nothing, the zone of immaterial sensibility, the silence, the hollow of space, the ineffable, the emptiness, the wild.

In pointing to the void, I seek only to illuminate its presence. I strive toward the void but am careful not to delineate or define the void. It is the attempt to materialize, explain, box off and enclose the wild,

the unknowable, that is the pitfall of our current conservationist ethos, both in the administration of our national parks and in our internal, struggle to understand the wild within. As noted earlier, “we too easily imagine that what we behold is Nature when in fact we see the reflection of our own unexamined longings and desires.” (Cronon, p. 1) We are not the wild, but are of the wild: we project our need for communion, for something greater, onto wildness rather than accepting its otherness. Once we strip away the mediating desires that skew our perspective, what we may see instead is the parallel wild within ourselves – not a mirrored image, but a uniquely autonomous yet fundamentally similar landscape of the unknown.

In moving away from the desert of the Colorado Plateau I came to recognize the nature of my affinity for it. When there, I feel an otherness that parallels the wild within myself, and in this recognition, I find contentment. The need for connection with this other wild has always been within me, but it was only in a separation from my access point that I was able to approach my previously unexamined desire for a sense of absolute presence. The deep respect I have for the desert of the Colorado Plateau emanates from the recognition of a wild within myself, which in turn is a reflection of the universal wild that operates on all scales at all times. The internal and external wild echo each other in constant reverberation, a recursive cycle continuously reflecting back on itself with every affirmation and dissolution of self. This process of connection and disconnection

springs from the void and generates an expanded biocentric understanding of the world, empathically connecting land to our sense of self. This empathic embrace challenges us to believe that the identifiable wild within ourselves is the very same wild process occurring outside of ourselves. Our continued existence is dependent upon a humble (empathic) integration into and not a separation from this wild. I strive to embody this connection: as a regionalist and artist, I aim to pick a spot and dig in deep, to seek and connect with the void and in doing so expound an empathic connection to and through the thing in everything.

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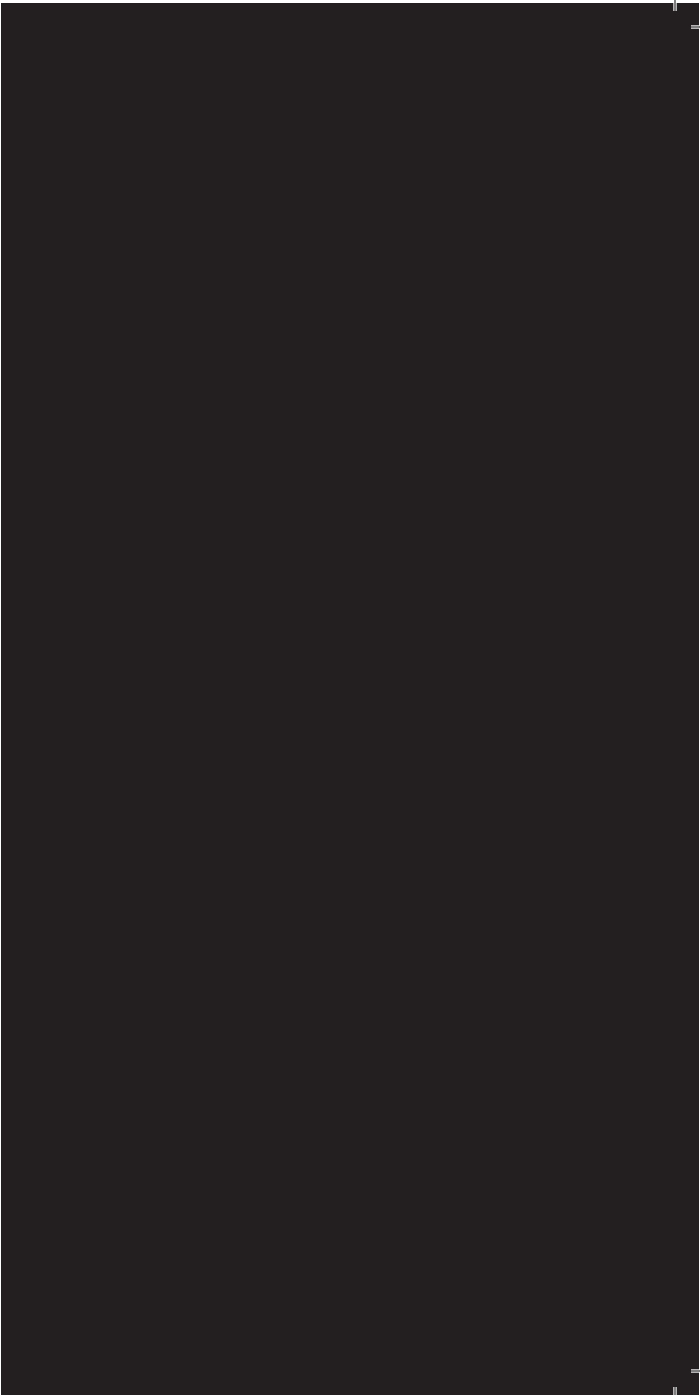
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Drew Ludwig, *Personal Item*. February, 2015. Inkjet photograph, 4X6 inches (111.76 x 139.7cm).

Drew Ludwig, *For Just \$19.99*. March, 2015. Inkjet photograph, 44x55 inches (111.76 x 139.7cm).







Plates



Fig. 15



293 Times Removed

The bible can be read aloud in 70 hours, or at least that is what the website told me while I was researching how many times the word “wilderness” appears in King James’ version of the book. ANSWER : 293.

I was looking forward to making short work of the reclamation, as I had already attempted and failed to white out the entire book. I was 9 pages in before I thought to calculate the amount of time it would take to finish. ANSWER : 33 days. It seemed easier to remove the bits I liked.

I learned a few things in the process: white out is \$254.17 a gallon, all of King James’ “wilderness” when stacked make a pile 3” wide by 1.5” tall and I still don’t have what it takes to spend time with the bible.

October 2013





Fig. 16



Cultivation Experiment

A long time local told me it was an abandoned industrial site and most likely toxic, but I still liked to be there. It was my blank spot, and I was missing home.

I had cut the wheat, piled it and stared at it for awhile. I had felt the urge to cultivate. I was there to take a photo and the pile needed angles and straight lines. It had to look just so.

I would go back and visit and wonder if I should take more photos as it fell into the ground. I never did. The photo I really wanted was that first pile, the real stuff, the pile before I made it pretty.

October 2013

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]



Fig. 17



Charlotte

The camera was a beast. It was 8" X 10" and sat on a tripod in the middle of our living room. It was colonizing our space. Whether we wanted to or not a defacto collaboration was happening between the three of us. We, the roommates, performed for it: I the photographer and she the photographed. The next day I moved the camera out. Its just the two of us now.

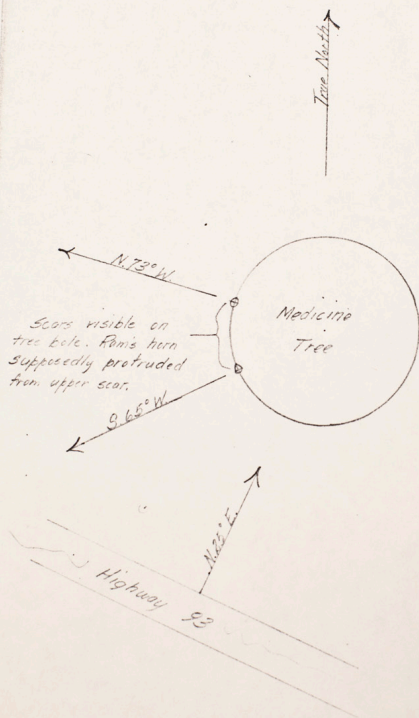
November 2013





Fig. 18







25.

Courtesy U.S. Forest Service

Another view of the historic medicine tree in the Bitterroot Valley

1/16 Dreamer

My great great grandfather's name was Bigfoot, and I wondered why I had such small feet and if I too could be great great. His god given name was Lucullus Virgil McWhorter. LV for short.

There was a man named Yellow Wolf who traveled through LV's cattle ranch between hunting seasons and would pitch his tipi near the river. They became family and Yellow Wolf gave him the name of Bigfoot. They had shared history.

A university has gathered the photos of their 40 years together and categorized them into acid free archival folders. I spent three days with them and dreamt in my car for two evenings. It seems like yesterday.

January 2014



Fig. 19



Four Mirrors on Plank

In the desert you can look down at an angular red moment or up into an endless blue gradient. Both perspectives can give me vertigo.

I wanted them to exist in one sightline, at one time, balanced, so I found an old plank of wood, laid out mirrors from a hardware store and pointed my camera down.

March 2014





Fig. 20



Self Evidence

I can't help but look at desert towers. I like to climb them. I go into survival mode up there. Its terrifying but somehow rejuvenating. I try not to think about it too much because its not about thinking. Its about something external and unmistakable. Something you just can't help but see.

March 2014



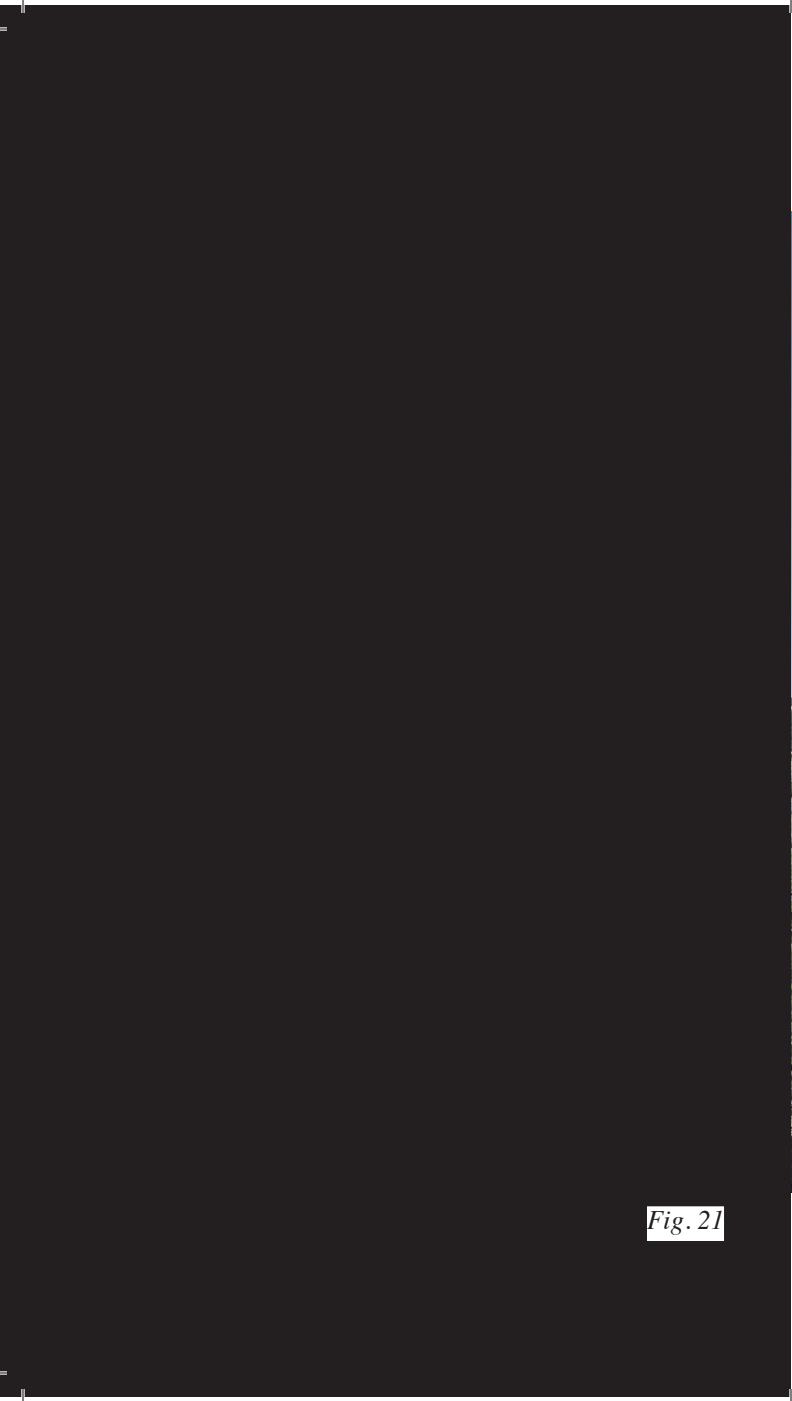
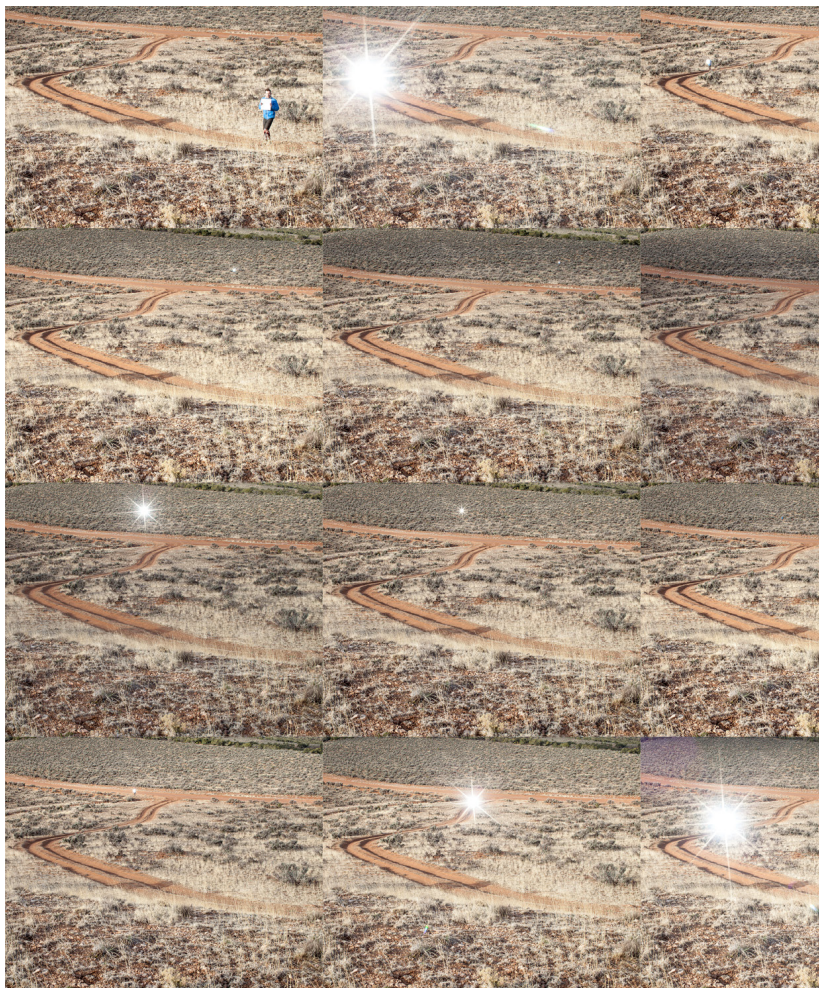


Fig. 21







Angle of Incidence 2 & 1

I was sick of thinking about art. I needed to move. I grabbed the mirror from my car and set my camera on a 10 second timer and pointed it away from the sun. Mirror in hand, I ran as fast as I could away from the camera, turning back every 10 seconds to hit the sensor with a beam of light. It was hard to calibrate the sun's angle in those moments when my heart was beating and the clock was ticking. Sometimes I was successful. That was the first Angle of Incidence.

I became fixated on orienting multiple mirrors to my camera at the same time. I tried calculating the proper math. I began to see geometry everywhere. There were too many moving parts. I needed advanced technology or extra hands. I couldn't do it alone.

My friends seemed to enjoy running around the desert with mirrors and walkie talkies.

March / August 2014





Fig. 22



Something to Push Against
Someone to Share it With

I think I have always looked at the world vertically. It's my default perspective after years of mountain guiding. So when I arrived to the Ocean State, I craved a high point. The abandoned bridge became my focus and so we put two swings up there. They still get some use upon occasion.

May 2014





Fig. 23



Metaphysical Experiment 2

I heard once that its silly to think more crosses equal more Jesus. I thought I would put this to the test but with a material a bit closer to home.

When you first start coming out of the high-country, descending into the red rocks, there is a distinct transition in the landscape. Right at this break, there is a wall of petroglyphs (and a few more recent notations) called Newspaper Rock. I think about time differently there. It seemed like a perfect place for a metaphysical experiment.

Sage is my favorite smell. Especially after a rain. I can't help but pick it and rub it against my hands, wrap it in bundles, leave it about, give it to loved ones, put it in my sock drawer. It's spiritual stuff and its everywhere in the desert.

I gathered the sage after dark, fashioned my tent poles into a rectangular cube and wove the potentially transcendental material into the structure through the night, but nothing happened beyond a handful of shooting stars and a few passing cars.

August 2014





Fig. 24



Tumbleweed

One night, camping at the end of a dirt road,
my headlamp caught a murky puddle with a
tumbleweed at its center.

August 2014

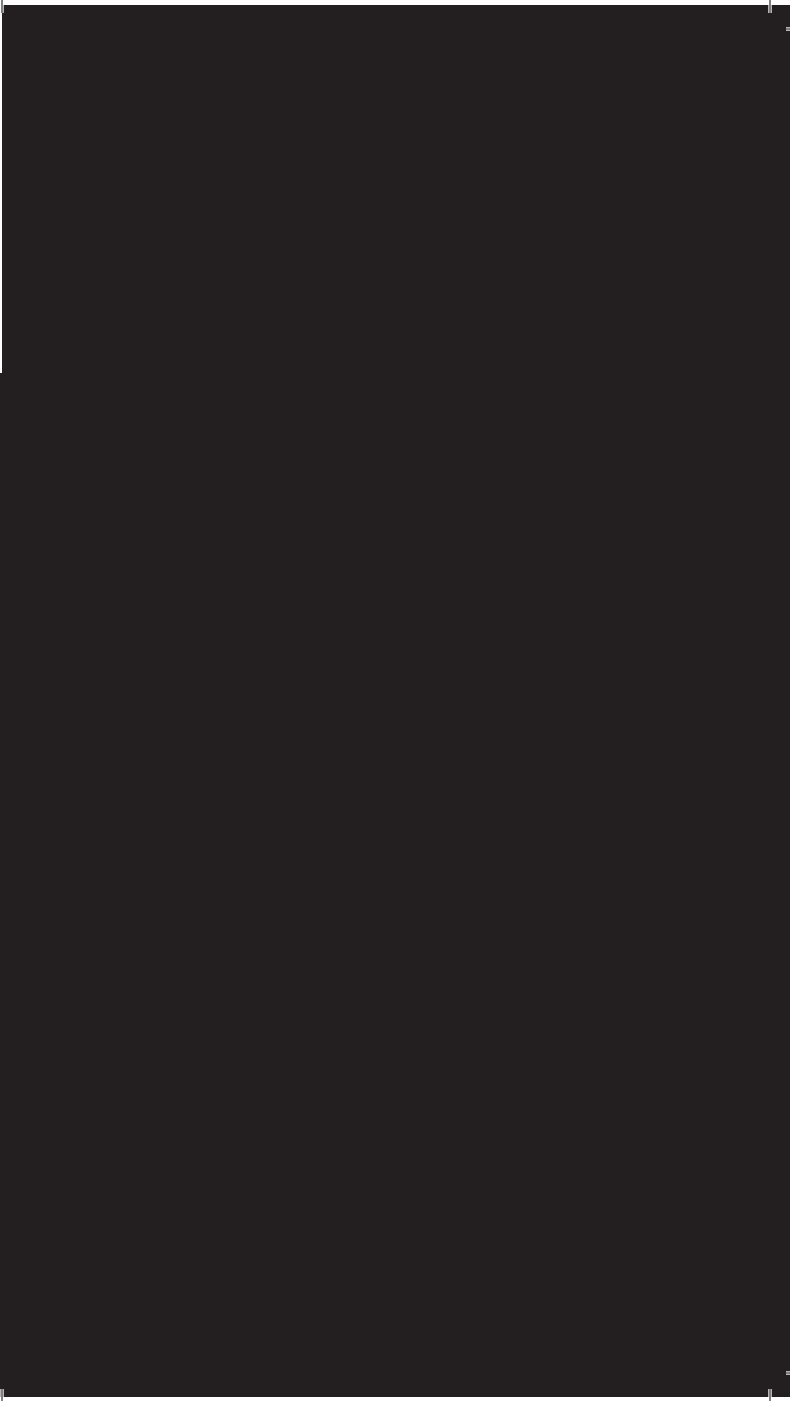




Fig. 25



Dodge and Burn

I have a friend who fancies himself a desert rat. He has a knack for finding arrowheads. They just appear where he steps. Like catch and release fishing he holds them for a moment before putting them back below the surface.

Ten years ago, on a particularly hot day, he told me the secret: shade. "If you were an Anasazi where would you make an arrowhead on a day like this?". We spent the rest of the day in the shadows. Count: Friend 6 Drew 0. I still have never found one.

A few months ago I spent a day running between those same patches of shade and still turned up empty handed. The sun went down and I met up with a friend around a fire and told her of my search. She greeted me in the morning with a pointed rock and asked if it was close enough? It was.

August 2014





Fig. 26

A photograph of a white rectangular sign mounted on four metal posts on a rocky, sparsely vegetated hillside. The sign has black text that reads "SCIENTISTS HAVE SUCCESSFULLY DISCOVERED THE HEART OF THE DESERT". The background shows a clear blue sky and a utility pole with wires. The entire image is framed by a thick black vertical bar on the left and thin black lines at the top and bottom corners.

**SCIENTISTS HAVE SUCCESSFULLY
DISCOVERED THE HEART OF THE DESERT**

Reconciling Faith and Science ?

I had to get it out of my head. I found myself writing it in unexpected places and wondered why I took such comfort in the thought of scientists, the whole lot of them, searching for something outside of their expertise.

The outline of the vacant billboard stared at me every time I passed. Just up the road, red desert rocks were framing empty space inside the boundaries of Arches National Park. I didn't see anything or anyone out the window.

One day I measured the frame, the next day I had a billboard printed. The ladder was from a friend's back yard. When I reached the top, I realized the rungs had become a pulpit of sorts, and I wanted to come down for fear of someone stopping to ask if it were true. I removed the message after a photo or two, but now, maybe, I might leave it up so the proper authorities could take it down.

August 2014





Fig. 27



Placing Value

My mom sends me care packages of sand and sage instead of cookies. She gets how much I miss the desert.

A few boxes in I started amassing the sand. I needed to put it somewhere special, where it wouldn't get lost or ground into my apartment floor. It had to be a safe place.

I went to the bank, signed the paperwork for a safety deposit box and made an installment.

November 2014





Fig. 28



Rewilding Exercise

Most runs I wear clothes. Actually I had always worn clothes up until last Monday. What you see here, is an experiment or maybe art, or maybe just wishful thinking? I thought I might learn something repeatable or even visit a place in my head that resembles my life out west. While I don't think of myself as sentimental, it is very romantic to think of the west as a wilder place. This phenomena seems to be amplified when viewed from the east.

I figured I should change as few variables as possible so I could use my normal runs as a control group of sorts. I eliminated the protection of clothing and asked a friend to document the evening. The photos would provide further clues should the initial exercise be a dead end. I think this piece has alot to do with hope? I will keep working on this.

November 2014





Fig. 29



Nothing to See Here

I had black paint and I went looking for a billboard. But then I found one that was already black, so I returned the paint.

November 2014





Fig. 30







Personal Item

It was as close as I could get. I had been wandering in the desert for two days and by then had measured hundreds of rocks that roughly fit the allowable dimensions of the smaller of my two carry on items. United Airlines calls it a “personal” item, so I thought I would take the opportunity to fill the space with as much “personal” as possible. 9” X 10” X 17” of the stuff.

They were alarmed that they could not see through it with their machines and in a panic when the flashing lights and monotone beeps at the hand check station warned of explosive materials. I told them I thought there might have been some surface uranium where I had found it, but that didn’t seem to help. Only the words “art student” appeared to calm their shaky nerves.

February 2015



Fig. 31



For Just \$19.99

It was a particularly drab east coast winter, and I needed an escape. Everyone did and those trying to sell things knew it.

Every add showcased a product that was the answer to our winter woes. I tried to imagine an add that would have worked on me.

February 2015









