The Experimental Encounter:

Repetition and Creative Experimentation for a Richer Experience of the World

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Abstract

All creative activities are inherently experimental in their conception, their realization, and their reception. The process of engagement with abstract information can be creative and exploratory – a work's affective qualities serve to inform an interpretation or an experience of the piece, and yet this experience remains largely dependent on the viewer's intuitive approach. Experimental media is exceptionally rich with potential for discovery and can often generate unique opportunities for learning and an awareness for new possibilities. What is learned through experimentation can be utilized through new applications - furthering the development of exploratory work. Through an analysis of Deleuzian rhizomatics with an emphasis on creative activities such as art making and art viewing, this paper seeks to identify the cyclical process of creatively forming a basis for understanding experience through perception, affect, and a synthetic knowledge of the world.

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CHAPTER 1: Rupture

"In a chaos of shifting impressions, each of us constructs a stable world in which objects have recognisable shapes, are located in depth, and have permanence. In perceiving we are building, taking some cues and rejecting others. The most acceptable cues are those which fit most easily into the pattern that is being built up. Ambiguous ones tend to be treated as if they harmonised with the rest of the pattern. Discordant ones tend to be rejected" (45).

- Mary Douglas,
Purity and Danger

All creative activities are inherently experimental in their conception, their realization, and their reception. The process of engagement with abstract information can be creative and exploratory – the affective qualities of an artwork serve to inform an interpretation of the works content in the mind of the viewer. The work of art itself, a complex mechanism often composed of abstracted ideas, an artist's intentions, material and form, presents us with a platform upon which we can journey into unexplored terrain and uncover an awareness for possibilities extending beyond our current understanding of the world. For both artists and viewers of art alike, experimentation is a tool that helps to form novel relationships between what is perceived and what is known, or what a medium can *say* versus what the medium can *do*. Through this experimental engagement with the arts, we embark on a mental journey where discovery is not merely the goal, but the path itself.

Heraclitus once famously stated that you could never step in the same river twice. The river, a flow of water along a singular path, is continuously changing in its form and composition at each interval throughout its course. This is true for reading as well. Each time I read a book – even if I were to read the same book a thousand times – the experiences in my life, my physical surroundings, the things that are currently in the forefront of my mind and my memory, and quite possibly things in my subconscious that I am less than aware of, are all part of my present reading of the text. The physical book itself, having changed very little over time (similar to the banks of the river's path) might

eventually be understood in a new light and in a new context because of the changes that have occurred in the reader. My experience of the world, or rather, the flow of my experience through the world, is what actually changes in relation to the text. My past and present experience shapes my perception in each subsequent reading. Even when I recall a memory of the book, that memory is experienced through my current perspective. Through me, the text channels an image in dialogue with countless other sets of information presented in other works that I have read, from films I've seen, places I have been and other experiences that have helped to shape my mind. The interconnected fabric of texts form a network of ideas whose links disappear and reappear as our interests and foci bring us back to other works, other sets of ideas, other modes of thinking. My own history, rich with experiences but seemingly absent from my present perspective, becomes the narrator who whispers a distant memory into my ear as I read, or watch, or live each passing moment.

Any text – a book or a collection of articles, a film, a single work of art or a body of work – might be considered in this context both in their formation and their reception. The viewer or reader, equipped with a history and knowledge of the world, works to establish meaning through an encounter with the text. Similarly, the author who produces a work does so by forming a record of their thoughts on a subject or subjects through writing. The author may choose to be more or less specific in the language of the work. The author of a scientific text, for example, strives to be as clear and precise as possible in order to reduce the possibility of interpretational error. Poetry is written quite differently. The poet presents their work through abstracted concepts, style, and rhythm to communicate emotional content. The power of poetry doesn't lie in its linguistic precision, but in its capacity to be relatable. The physical composition of the book is simply a stack of pages combined in a specific order with characters in ink. A typical book is written in a single language, it follows conventional rules for spelling. The text has grammar and syntax. These are the tools the author employs to ensure effective communication, and these are the same tools that the adept reader will employ as they engage the work. For the visual arts, the materials themselves can become just as much of the language of the work as its other compositional elements. The artist employs rules for their own craft techniques: the proper method for a firing clay, the necessary depth of field for a photograph, the right size gouge for *this* cut into the woodblock. The thickness of paint and the stroke of the paintbrush are technical devices for the artist/author that are likely to be just as important as correct spelling and punctuation.

We can easily imagine the reception a particular sculpture will have if it were cast in bronze peanut butter. Not only would we immediately find a difference in the appearance of the work, we would also consider the difference in craft techniques, as well as the works potential lifespan and durability. Indeed, if these two nearly identical works were paired side-by-side our first assumption about the work might be the discrepancy between the materials themselves long before we consider the content of the form. We could certainly consider the history of bronze casting in art and compare what we know of past works with the current work. Peanut butter, being relatively underrepresented in the arts, wouldn't necessarily carry the same level of historical baggage that bronze does, but might direct the thoughts of the viewer to other contemporary issues perhaps those involving processed foods. When we look to a work and consider its composition and its content, we often find a fixed set of information that is physically present in the work (such as in the content of the written text), or merely implied (as in the case where we ask about the meaning *behind the bronze*). Whether we look at the isolated single work, a body of work, an artist's lifetime of work or involvement in a particular movement or period of time, we have only what is presented to us with which to form a basis for understanding. As we work through a text, the text itself works on us. Our minds are affected by texts as we perceive them. This is not very different from when we witness some natural event. Watching the sunset or looking out across a vast expansive mountain range can generate an emotive reaction in the viewer that is somehow inspired by the event but is perhaps logically disconnected from it. The reader or viewer investigates the work; they dig into it and uncover useful bits of information that they can identify with and understand. We connect what we perceive to things that we know. For Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, a book is an assemblage, a multiplicity in connection with other assemblages ("A Thousand Plateaus" 4). The book itself functions like a machine. It has moving parts; inputs and outputs. Its internal mechanisms work on a reader by conventions the reader has adopted and learned to utilize. An interpretation of the work develops as we begin to identify its key elements and relate them to our own base of knowledge. This machine is necessarily connected to other machines. We plug ourselves into a work so that the machine can work upon us, in order investigate and explore it, to map and to survey, to form connections to other works, other ideas, other ways of thinking about the world.

Consider the moment where one experiences something new. A young man, perhaps, is entering the gallery space for the first time and is confronted by something that is typical of abstract expressionist art. The man, having never seen paint purposefully used this way to fill a canvas, is at first shocked and perhaps a little embarrassed for the artist. "This is art?" asks the young man, who likely has little experience in the history of the movement. "I could do that!" Clearly this work does not conform to the young man's limited experience of other popular works. It seems to make a mockery of the standards held by other great artists the young man is more familiar with (at least one could tell what Picasso was *trying* to paint). But something catches his interest. There must be something about this work, perhaps buried under those layers of paint that awards it the respect of other gallery visitors. "What am I missing?" he asks himself. Using what information he does know about art, the young man assumes that there must be some meaning buried in the work somehow. And so he begins to search for that hidden meaning. He works with what he perceives. He probes and explores the work, searching for some bit of comprehensible content - but would he know to recognize this content even if he found it? He evaluates the immediate visual information; line, value, texture, color, shape, movement. He looks closer at the textured surface of the canvas in hopes that something concrete will jump out at him and provide an explanation that will bring some order to the apparent chaos of the painting. Creative linkages connect this work to other works that the young man has seen before. Though this work appears to fundamentally oppose the degree of clarity achieved in representational painting that he remembers from his renaissance art class, the medium is similar and the format (a painted canvas) is also similar. But the connection doesn't seem to help make any sense of this work now. His mind continues to wander, to form connections to other schemas with little success – this work is just too far outside of previous experience of art for the young man to easily comprehend it in a meaningful way. The colors used in the painting are reminding him of a vibrant sunset he recently witnessed. The gesture of the painted surface is reminiscent of rain-water sliding down the bark of a tree. These notions are easily dismissed by the viewer because they don't appear to have a logical connection to the work. Indeed, if this was the method that the viewer was intended to use to decode the work, the work could simply be about anything. Nothing about this work seems logical, actually, and the young man wonders if somehow the artist has managed to fool everyone into accepting the farce as a product of serious artistic intention. A cigarette butt is discovered among the thick ridges of

paint and the young man considers the apparent carelessness of the artist's construction of the work. Actually, the way the work was assembled is probably the only interesting thing to the young man. It might be fun to have the resources to belligerently sling paint all around a studio and then sell the "artwork" afterwards for millions. The artist himself probably had no clear idea in mind about what type of image he wanted to produce because the results of this type of process seem entirely unpredictable. The illusion of a masterpiece is destroyed and the young man discovers the work for what it is – not a work of beauty, not a masterful presentation of artistic finesse or skill, nor a conceptually challenging or even remotely interesting work – but simply layers of paint and other rubbish haphazardly smeared onto the surface of the canvas. Vaguely aware of his own internal interpretation of the affective quality that the work is having upon him, the young man shrugs his shoulders and moves into another space in the gallery as he soberly confides to his friend, "Yep, I don't get it". An interpretation of the work as it is derived from the sum of its structural and aesthetic components is challenging. Perhaps in this case it is the insistent notion that there is a correct answer to the painting's riddle. We're looking for the solution that explains all the works individual working mechanisms. We want to know what the work *means*. In doing so, we have "… reactivated the conceptual opposition between object/form and meaning/content, an opposition which itself sets up the promise that art will 'mean' anything at all. Art becomes predetermined by the question you have asked" (O'Sullivan 14). A better question, then, would be to ask not what the work means, but what it *does*.

When I am confronted with something completely new it is at first unrecognizable and perhaps totally incoherent. I've encountered a rupture in my normal routine and as a consequence I am forced to mentally respond in some way. I strive to unpack the content of the work. Deleuze and Guattari use the term 'rhizome' to describe a process of mapping or forming connective relationships between similar and disparate entities in order to produce an understanding of a concept or a thing ("A Thousand Plateaus" 7). Everything is a multiplicity; an assemblage of ideas, materials, histories, and conceptual meaning. Textual works are increasingly complex because of the potential for connectivity to other entities. But the work itself is not simply an assemblage that exists in a vacuum. Its composition is not merely a static ordering of specific, unchanging entities that are predefined and organized into a convenient taxonomic list for review. The work is also perceived by an equally

complex multiplicity – the reader. As the viewer of a work of art begins to build a relationship with the work they are encountering, a series of connections begin to form between what is apparent in the work and what is accessible to the mind of the viewer. The rhizome is the system of connected elements we use to order a coherent image of the whole.

> "A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles. A semiotic chain is like a tuber agglomerating very diverse acts, not only linguistic, but also perceptive, mimetic, gestural, and cognitive; there is no language in itself, nor are there any linguistic universals, only a throng of dialects, patios, slangs and specialized languages. [… T]he book is not an image of the world. It forms a rhizome with the world, there is an aparallel evolution of the book and the world […]." (A Thousand Plateaus" 7)

"Something in the world forces us to think. This something is not an object of recognition but a fundamental *encounter*" (Deleuze 139). Thinking, in this context, is the mode of creatively forming rhizomatic connections that facilitate an understanding of the encounter. This happens quite often in the gallery setting where artists present us with original works that challenge our expectations and confront us with something new, unfamiliar, and unexplored. I strive to unpack the content of the work. I evaluate the works layout and its composition. In order to develop an understanding I'm forced to reposition myself to the work in order to associate with it on neutral ground. I convert the work into something manageable. Eventually I begin to discover clues that connect this work to other works and past experiences that do make sense to me. The alliances formed between this work and others as well as the discordant elements between this work and other works form a kind of profile in my mind that begins to solidify into a recognizable consistency that I can finally respond to. Because rhizomatic thinking is less concerned with accuracy as it is with forming compatibilities and congruency, repetition becomes a key component for a greater understanding of the subject.

Art is particularly good at creating an arena for this type of thinking because artists are consistently working to find new ways to produce creative and innovative methods for communication. The abstract mode of presenting information in the visual arts allows a work to

gesture towards an idea without stating it explicitly. In this format, a visual language is decoded according to what is visually present and the relationships the viewer is able to make with the work. Similar to poetry, art uses specialized forms of language – a language that is by no means consistent from author to author or from artist to artist – that can "speak" to people in ways that more conventional modes for communication often cannot. The material itself becomes a linguistic device; the color scheme is a tuning fork for emotive calibration; composition forms a visual hierarchy that distinguishes relative importance among the visual elements within the work. Rather than working to concisely and accurately convey specific content, the work of art is capable of offering a jumping-off point for a proliferation of new ideas. Just as in a written text, content is ultimately generated in the mind of the reader; the works author attempts to direct the viewer towards a specific line of reasoning with which the reader might engage, but it is the reader of the work who forms rhizomatic connections between the presented information in order to come to an understanding of the works content. The affective quality of an artwork has a capacity to *work on* the viewer, cause a rupture in the flow of habitual living, and trigger creative thinking. Just as in the case where we reread a book in a different setting or during a later period of life, our experience of the text is accordingly shaped by our new awareness of the work in a new context.

CHAPTER 2: Observation, Experience, and Shifting of Awareness

"The artist creates blocs of percepts and affects, but the only law of creation is that the compound must stand up on its own" (164).

- Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari,
What is Philosophy?

The artist is a producer of sensations. Their labors are always affective, though in a wide array of intensities and formats. The affective quality of works of art hold a capacity to be important to people for very different reasons, and, because of this, there is a great diversity among appreciation for art. As viewers of art, we mostly look for the type of art we like the most. Artists and viewers alike enjoy the familiar and the new, the styles or materials that visually stimulate, cause intrigue and elicit emotive response. The affective potential of a work determines the relationship a viewer will have with it and thusly the capacity for communication between the viewer and the works content. An artist's methods for producing these effects are likely to be as diverse as the number of unique works in the world. Creative practices are learned independently through hobbies and general interest as well as taught by the experienced and the knowledgeable. In any case, artists benefit from repetition of their projects and exploration of mediums through experimentation. Working to produce consistency in one's craft develops skill and knowledge of how a medium can be used. The same is true for the methods the artist employs to ensure communicative potential in their work. The element of creative exploration is an important part of the creative process because it is what allows artists to make new discoveries about what they are capable of doing through their work.

The art machine is not in need of a tune-up; nor is it satisfied with basic maintenance. Art does have a capacity, however, to be disassembled and reassembled, to be evaluated and reconfigured as necessary and in the most minor or extreme ways. In fact, this process of evaluation is necessary for the viewer who works to construct meaning from what they perceive. There is a fluid relationship that is formed between the maker and the audience. The artist structures the work in a way that can be received by an audience according to his or her intentions. But, ultimately, it is the viewer that

perceives the working elements of the work and generates a unique understanding. If we look to any movement in the arts we can identify a variety of conventions that are unique to that movement and that are employed by artists to achieve new means of creative expression. The conventions adopted by artists who represent a particular art movement are like the secret decoder ring that helps us to unpack meaning in their contemporary landscape. We say that "art for artists" is incomprehensible to the uninformed outsider, and this is true to a degree because the outsider simply doesn't have the appropriate tools with which to generate an informed reading of the work. Similar to the stylistic and rhetorical devices of the writer, the conventions of a particular movement calibrate our reading of the work and contextualize it in order to direct us toward intended trajectories with some degree of accuracy. Conventions in art are only useful for so long, though, as the conventions themselves devolve into tropes and clichés; the resulting work becomes redundant. When art finds ways to shift its own conventions and push the boundaries of what people expect from the arts or from artists, new strategies for communication emerge. Artists that present us with the unfamiliar grant us new avenues toward unexplored territories and an unprecedented awareness for novel rhizomatic relationships.

The work of art encourages us to approach it from different perspectives in order to see it in varying contexts. Evaluating the work through alternate readings develops a stronger holistic understanding of the works potential affects. We can examine a historical work of art and consider what the work was to its contemporary audience. We can examine the same work in relation to its current audience and identify a discrepancy between the two that is just as interesting as either of the former interpretations. It is no longer a question of what the work is about or what it means. It's not enough to ask what the work is saying but what it is *doing*. The gallery visitor works to untangle an assemblage of connected sensory information in order to produce some kind of meaning implied through the work. They do so through a repeated process of comparing and contrasting what they are perceiving to other things that they know. The artist in the studio goes through a very similar process as they experimentally draw connections between conceptual interests and a configuration of medium. The way that we establish an understanding or a conception of a work of art is the same as the way that we make sense of any encounter in the world. Because art has a capacity to confront us with things that are well outside of our typical experience of the world, it provides us with a great wealth of opportunities for exploratory thinking. A work of art can have the power to shock us into wakefulness.

It is a jolt that suggests that there are things we don't know yet. It proves to us that there are other ways of thinking about the world and lends to us a makeshift roadmap we can use for navigation.

Creative activities benefit from invention and innovation. Exploration and discovery often create exciting unexpected results and this can energize the creative process. Innovative work also has a strong potential to create intrigue for an audience for the same reason – even a minor rupture in flow of our normal experience is enough to catch our interest and allow us to consider the potential for something different. New ways of thinking. New ways of communication and new forms of creative expression. These concepts all benefit from experimental processes that are identical to the way that we form meaning through the rhizome. When one is engaged in the process of constructing the work they are assembling a machine that can be activated and will in turn activate its audience. The artist is charged with considerations for presentation, conceptual depth, a works relation to contemporary and historic works, and – most importantly for this paper – activating creative communicative potential or affect. During the creation of this machine, the work will also affectively work upon the artist. She will be aware of her own intentions for the work, the content that she is trying to embody; but also aware of what is actually developing as a result of craft. In some of the early testing phases of my work with a video feedback-loop, I uncovered a series of problems with the work that I could not have foreseen before I began the work. In my studio I had aimed a live camera and a projector at the same space on a white wall. In this scenario, if I were to wave my arm in front of the wall, the camera would "see" my arm, and send that information to the projector. The projector would then show the image of my arm on the surface of the wall. This was working well until I invited a fellow student into my space to share the work I was doing. I quickly recognized that the camera was less responsive to my colleague's relatively darker skin tone and the resulting work was not nearly as visually diverse. I began to realize that the scenario

2.1 Sean Robertson, Me, Myself, and I, and Me, Wood frame, Styrofoam mannequin head, vanity mirror, digital projector, software. 2014

I was developing was rapidly entering a discussion of inclusion – a subject that I had not anticipated at all. Another work involved a stool that a participant would sit on; the participant would look towards their own reflection in a mirror and would instead see their projected image on the surface of a Styrofoam mannequin head as it appears on the surface of the mirror. The viewer would need to adjust their height to a degree, and the tilt of their face relative to the camera in order to line up their features with those of the mannequin. This quickly became problematic when people of atypical height, or those in wheelchairs, for example, attempted to participate in the work and could not because of my poor planning in format. We are often surprised at what develops from the machines that we build, and as a result become inspired to change our previous course in order to create stronger work. In the Introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari suggest that "… when one writes, the only question is which other machine the literary machine can be plugged into, must be plugged into in order to work" (4)." The experimental process of creation can be exciting and rewarding, but also challenging because of the difficulty in forming novel relationships in the work that will be adequately received by the audience. We experiment with various arrangements of materials in combination with location and scale. The mediums at our disposal transcend clay and wood, steel, machinery and digital technology, light, space, and duration. We employ technique in the construction of the art object and evaluate the physical limitations and properties of the medium itself. Works of art often explore the social, cultural, and political issues in order to develop a dialog that surrounds work. An experimental approach to forming connective links between these elements enable artists to produce works that are entirely radical (radicle) and at the same time maintain a promise of accessibility for those willing to participate in the works exploratory nature.

CHAPTER 3: On Artists and the Creative Practice

"The art-work is an individuation of the world, an interpretation constructing a singularity in which the will to power is expressed as an evaluation that constructs itself" *(24).*

- Stephen Zepke,
Art as Abstract Machine

"Inevitably, there will be monstrous crossbreeds" (157).

- Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari,
A Thousand Plateaus

There are a limitless number of strategies that artists can employ to explore and experiment within their creative practices. A focus toward a particular medium can be the basis for a large body of work that maintains a high degree of variety and room for innovation. Even a very general concept can be considered through any number of material configurations, various locations and social contexts to develop into a singularly unique work of art. With such a great amount of variety at their disposal, the savvy artist learns to focus their energy into specific trajectories. Through repetition and experimentation, an artist learns to calibrate their creative practice in a way that allows them to produce the type of work that is in line with their creative ambitions.

Martin Klimas incorporates the use of high-speed photography and unique methods for triggering his camera's shutter to produce dynamic, visually striking images in his work. In a series that features porcelain figurines that are shown at the moment they explode into hundreds of tiny pieces, Klimas employs a technologically enhanced, orderly process to create a fantastic array of crisp, high-resolution images that are well refined and yet wildly unpredictable. The figurines are dropped from a height of three meters to a point on the ground where a camera with an audio sensor will record an image precisely at the moment of impact. The mass-produced kitsch figurines, formerly inept in emotive or affective potential, become activated in that fraction of a second that the figure

appears to come alive with movement and expressive gesture. In similar body of work, Klimas fires a steel ball at a variety of different vases that contain simple, elegant, flower arrangements. The images, taken in one seven-thousandth of a second, portray an image that is otherwise completely unavailable to unaided human sight. The complexity of the image is strange and fascinating: in the clarity of the still image we are able to see a static form of the liquid water in a fraction of a second. The technologies employed grant us a superhuman perspective of the properties of the material and affords us new insight in to the potential for further creative exploration as well as a reminder of the limitations of our own senses. The process for producing these images, rigidly structured as it is, also relies on a high degree of chance and unpredictable outcomes. If the artist were to drop a hundred nearly identical figurines – and it seems likely that Klimas does just that – he would never be able to produce a pair of identical images. The height of the objects drop, the speed of the shutter, the lighting in the room, the angle, frame, and depth of field of the camera – all these things and more are all considered and controlled by the artist in a way that ensures a certain type of result. What becomes most interesting about the work, however, is precisely the element of the work that artist cannot control – the exact manner in which the shattered fragments will be arranged in the instant of the photograph. The process used to collect images, a well-oiled and timed machine, allows to remove himself partially from

3.1 Martin Klimas, Untitled, 2008, Ed 5, 170 cm x 200 cm


3.2 Martin Klimas, Untitled (Chrysanthemum 3), 2009, Ed of 5 (60 cm x 80cm) + Ed of 2 (220 cm x 170 cm)

the creation of the work. Klimas regains manual control of the work in post-production where he is able to analyze output and filter results according to his own artistic sensibilities.

Eric Standley also employs a creative approach in his use of technology in order reach a high level of precision in his work. With the help of drafting software and a laser cutter, Standley produces 3-dimensional works with an astonishing accuracy and complexity. After removing symmetrical geometric shapes from each piece of colored paper, Standley layers the paper in stacks that are typically more than 100 sheets thick. Standley explains that the inspiration for this work originally came from a fascination with Gothic architecture and stained glass windows of 12th century Europe, and this element certainly shows in his own original projects. In a short interview, the artist describes how he happened across the unique effect of layering discarded multiple sheets of cut paper and realizing a potential for exploring a new frontier for creative processes. Standley recalls having to learn to "… be conscious of drawing on those multiple layers at one time and think about a whole composition with depth. I was using a different part of my brain to draw." ("Virginia Tech: Eric Standley").

> "Most people think, oh yeah technology… You gain an efficiency and the price is you're humanly removed from the object. I think I'm coming around a different way. I feel very connected with this maybe because I'm right in there breathing on it. Every efficiency that I gain in technology… the void is immediately filled with a question: can I make it more complex?" ("Virginia Tech: Eric Standley")
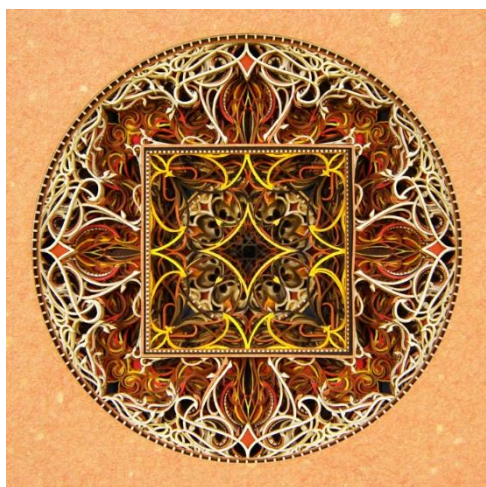
3.3 Eric Standley, Either/Or Circle 4.20.1, cut paper, 8" x 10", 2014
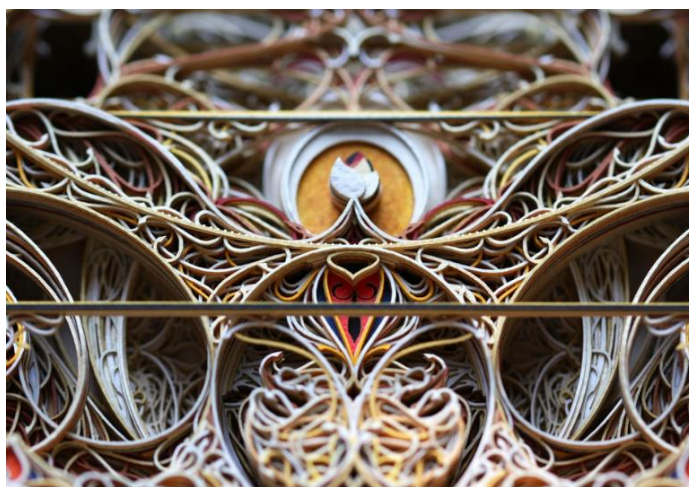
3.4 Eric Standley, Dew Sri (center detail), cut paper, 2014

Both of these artists are working with complex systems that they're able to manage through a strict set of rules within their creative process. Klimas' camera takes exactly one photograph for each statue as it breaks on the ground. The height of drop, the lighting and camera settings are all determined before the drop. The structured process for collecting images aims for precision and accuracy, and yet the work remains unpredictable. Standley, who constructs his work in phases of sketching, plotting images in drafting software and then cutting the designs with a laser cutter, and finally assembling the cut paper layer-by-layer, clearly abides by a set of rules that maintain mathematic precision. Rather than limiting creative potential, these project settings focus the artist's process towards specific set of preferred outcomes. Standley's final composition is a single stack of cut paper, but it seems likely that once he has a substantial selection of cut paper he can work through any number of stacking orders and review the results. How is it that he is able to choose the right order? Is the best solution to this problem the one that comes closest to his original concept sketches? Or the one that that maintains the highest degree of color harmony and compositional interest? Klimas is also tasked with making decisions over which photographs will be selected for exhibit. The artist's sensibilities for craftsmanship in photography serve to inform his decisions to exclude the out-of-focus photographs and the images whose color balance seems unnatural – but there must be another part of the artist's selection process that comes from his creative intuition. This is, for me, the most interesting part of these particular creative processes. Complicated systems of unique variables are all controlled to ensure a particular set of outcomes, but the outcomes themselves remain unpredictable. Because the work is experimental and capable of producing a large quantity of unique results, the artist generates a wealth of useful material to fuel the creative practice. I think that it is these found surprises that drive the artist to dig deeper to uncover more of the unknown, perhaps in order to find content that they'd never even considered.

Certainly one of the primary drives for all my past creative efforts is exploration through experimentation. Experimentation is a process of testing something to either prove or disprove a hypothesis, but also a strategy for producing unexpected results. In a creative environment, using experimentation to prove a hypothesis could be as simple as asking, "can I create a 2-dimensional stop-motion animation? What is the process? What are the materials used?" and finding solutions to those questions. This type of experimentation is strictly controlled and the initial plan for carrying out the

experiment is sound enough to ensure a predictable outcome. Another process for experimentation would be to arrange a series of variables and activate them through some process just in order to just see what happens. "What are the visual properties of paint when it's applied with a brush versus a knife or a comb?" This latter form of experimentation is similarly controlled in that the operator is defining his or her own tools and methods for application. The major difference between the two is that in one scenario we are working to resolve a specific outcome, the other is where the specifics of the outcome are unimportant so long as there *is* an outcome that we can survey and analyze.

Incorporating technology into my creative practice has granted me not only a wide range of variables to explore, but also a strong degree of control over those variables with relative ease. The more familiar I become with the tools, the more I learn about how to push the technological boundaries of what I can do with them. When I first started this program I knew I wanted to continue working with technology. I had been using video editing software during my undergraduate and wanted to continue using the same tools but in a new direction. I had recently become aware of large-scale video projection mapping projects happening all over the world. I was immediately interested in the visual effect of a 2D image transforming the 3D façade of large buildings. I quickly realized that despite the lack of proper resources for this particular type of work, there was still a lot of exploration that could be done with the tools I had access to. My studio practice began with projecting my computer's desktop onto simple arrangements of basic geometric shapes. Using a variety of software applications (MS Paint, Photoshop, Illustrator, etc.) and different materials such as paper and Styrofoam, I began to outline a studio practice that established the conditions for a new type of work. Initially the projects were very simple. Though I had an interest in using video, initially I couldn't find a way to incorporate it in a useful way. Instead, the first series of projects involved still images that created an illusion of depth, or shifted though a series of combinations of color, generating a gradual feeling of movement without the use of recorded video.

From the beginning of the program I was making work that involved the use of bright colors in darkened rooms. I felt that even the earliest explorations were visually striking and I realized that I'd uncovered a rich vein with which I could explore my creative talents. My studio practice at this time involved repeating similar scenarios in my studio but with alternate methods. I developed a sense of

best practices that helped me to learn how to repeat the results I was looking for. Throughout this process, I've learned a great deal from my peers and faculty in regards to the types of work that resonates with people in unique ways. The way that I look at or interact with my own work is can be different than the responses I might get from viewers. Because of feedback from others I'm able to calibrate the work I produce so that I might predict a common thread of outcomes: work that is appealing and visually intriguing, promotes interaction and/or inspires conceptual thinking in a way that connects the viewer to the work, or produces feelings of wonder, melancholy, and even anxiety. When I watch viewers interact with the work, I often see people doing things that I could not have expected. This is a very rewarding feeling because it means that people are engaging with the work intuitively rather than by my instruction. In older works I found that I had to show people how they could interact or give the viewer tools to use, now I find that my work is approachable in a way that allows the viewer to enter on their own terms and find their own way to navigate the work. I've found this to be especially evident in the work I have done with video feedback-loops.

During the second year of this program I began incorporating the use of live video in my studio practice with an emphasis on an optical feedback loop. For me, the feedback loop is not only a model of a self-referential system, but also a metaphor for how we engage with creative and experimental projects. An optical feedback loop, like an audio feedback loop, is a self-referential system in which a signal is allowed to repeat itself in a continuous cycle and is capable of picking up new information along the way. The structure of the video feedback loop is as follows: if one were to
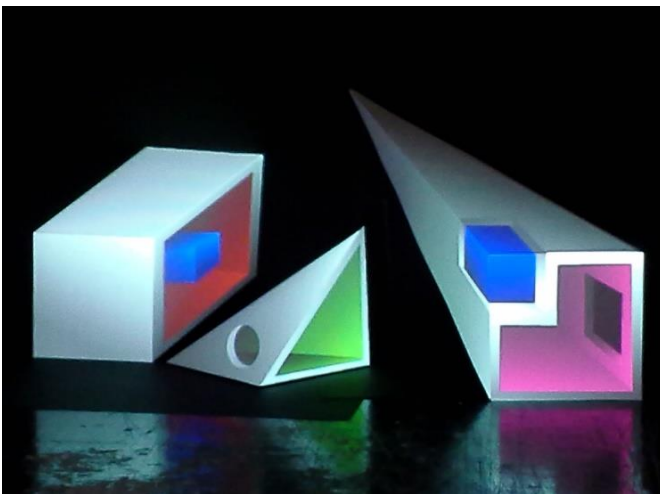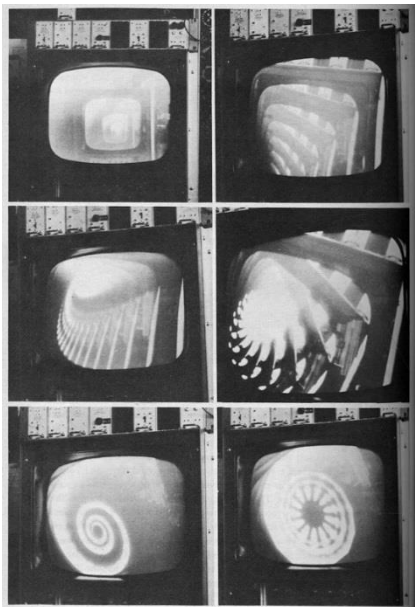

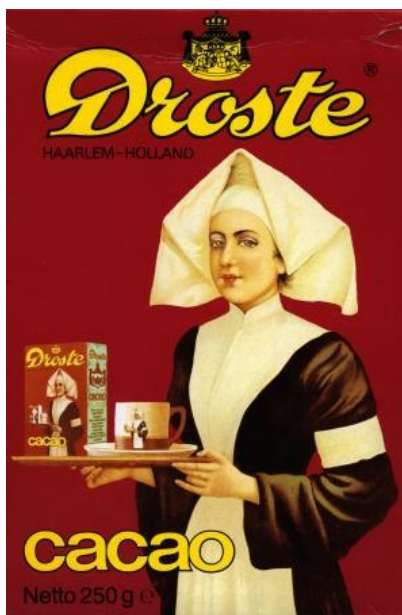3.5 Sean Robertson, Geometric Shape Illusions. Paper, digital projector, software. 2013
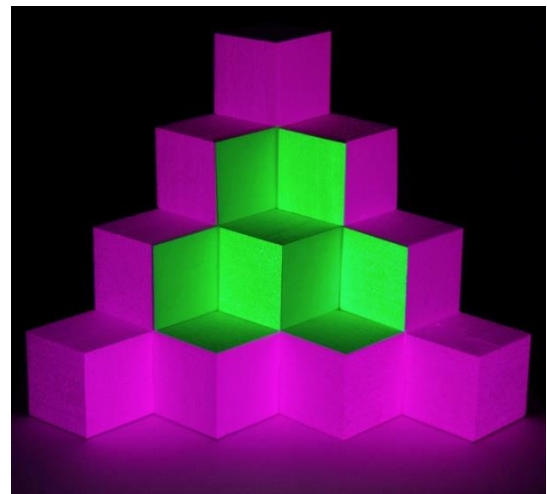
3.6 Sean Robertson, Cubes. Styrofoam, digital projector, software. 2013

connect a live video camera to a television in a way that displays what the camera is recording on the TV screen, and then aim the camera at the TV screen itself, one would see the image of the TV appear within a frame showing a smaller TV, receding endlessly into infinity. The resulting image is also referred to as the Droste effect, this name originates from the image on the cover of Droste cocoa powder. The repeating image in both scenarios is recursive, each iteration of the image becomes smaller and smaller. So, if we were to draw an image of a TV within a TV within a TV, and so on, we would be limited by the sharpness of the pencil and the accuracy of our own vision. The digital version of this scenario, as it is captured by the video camera, is easily controlled simply by adjusting the camera itself: the level of zoom in relation to the proximity of the camera to the TV adjusts the size and depth of the repeated image; pitch and roll of the camera can radically alter the appearance of the resultant image and create a spiral effect or a stable horizontal image. In order to maintain the appearance of a near-infinite repeated image, a balance must be maintained between the height vs. pitch of the camera, as well as the camera's pan and yaw. In other words, the camera must be pointing at a spot on the TV in a way that keeps a true center of the loop near or on the screen.

3.7 Photo by Douglas R. Hofstadter. 1981

3.8 Box cover art for Droste cocoa powder

My own work replaces the TV set with a digital light projector and also includes the use of a computer using a live performance software application called Isadora. The software allows me to take a greater amount of control over the captured signal from the video camera through a set of "actors" that each have a limited function. The most basic functions within the program generate an incredible amount of variety within the projected image. The optical feedback loop, already exceptionally rich with a diversity of visual effects, becomes dramatically altered through the use of the most basic controls: contrast/brightness, hue/saturation/luminance, horizontal and

vertical flip, etc. One commonly used effect, motion blur, allows me to take control of the amount of light that builds on the screen as well as its rate of decay. Other factors are considered and have an immediate impact on the visual field as well: the level of ambient light in the room; the brightness of the projector; the reflective qualities and color of the surface the projected image will appear on as well as its adjacent walls all determine the information that becomes the input source for the loop. Despite the large number of stock effects at my disposal within the software, I almost always limit the adjustments that I make to a minimum. The reason for this, as I have
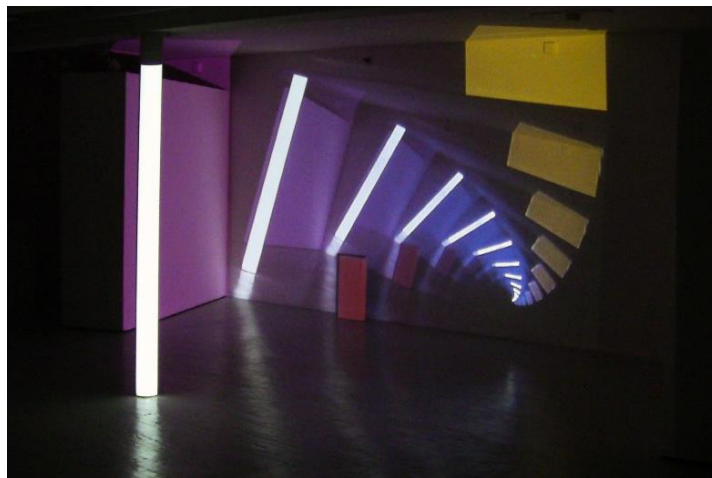
3.9 Sean Robertson, Within a Room. Video camera, digital projector, software. 2014

discovered over time, is that the more complicated the system becomes the greater difficulty I have in maintaining control over the visual image. Each new list of variables (brightness, saturation, etc.) adds an element of instability to the projected image. The goal, then, is not the radical alteration of the source image, but a process of refining visual results to a desirable configuration.

A work that is on display in the MFA Thesis Exhibition, *Untitled Light Painting (The Bane of T. Kinkade)*, appears as a light projector showing an irregular colored shape that is floating on the surface of the wall. The image is slowly changing in form and gradually shifting between shades of violet and red. Since installation I've had the opportunity to watch as gallery visitors interacted with the work. Despite the fact that the work is intended to be interactive, people tend to avoid walking in front of a live projector – most people recognize a digital projector as a tool for playing recorded video and don't think to block the projected image. In order to encourage people to move in front of the camera and projector, I placed a small title card on the wall opposite the entrance to the room. The hope is that because of the small text and the low lighting in the room, an interested viewer would need to move closer to the title card in order to read the card. As the viewer passes in front of the projector, a camera will "see" their form and alter the image on the wall. The image on the screen, now disrupted by the movement and image of the viewer, changes in shape and size, its interior forms begin shifting

through shades of blue and yellow. At this point, the viewer will likely realize that their movement in front of the projector is actually altering the work. In order to confirm this, the viewer would then begin waving their arms about or walking back and forth in front between the projector and the wall – experimentation ensues. This is the critical moment in the work that I have attempted to orchestrate for the viewer: through an effort to create an image that is both interactive and alluring, I invite the viewer to involve themselves bodily in the creation of a new image. As the viewer is using their arms to block light from the projector and manipulate the image appearing on the screen, they are becoming aware of how to effectively make changes that they can see develop in the work. The complexity of the system dictates that no two participants will likely ever produce a pair of similar images. Nor is it likely that a participant's intuitive approach to working with the piece will be similar to others. Through their engagement, the work itself is created. The image generated by their participation is the manifestation of their participation with the work.

I have calibrated the *Untitled Light Painting* so that it will continue to function continuously regardless of how people choose to interact. If someone completely blocks the projector, for example, all light will temporarily fail in the feedback loop. If this does happen, however, the brightness of the projector is set high enough so that light can gradually, but quickly return the loop to a stable image. The shape and form of the image has been set in a way that the blobs of color and light will seldom grow larger than the rectangular display of the projector – this is intended to keep the viewer's focus on the shapes they are creating rather than the format i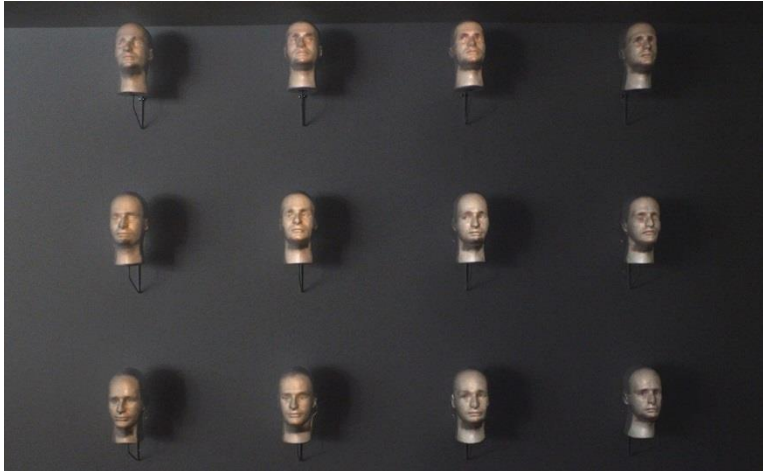n which they are presented. Blur, mirror image, and high saturation settings in the software help maintain a consistency of shapes that appear organic rather than block and pixilated. The viewer's experience with the work is intended to feel like a natural interaction with a living thing (themselves) rather than a technological oddity (the machine). During a conversation

3.10 Sean Robertson, Untitled Light Painting (The Bane of T. Kinkade).
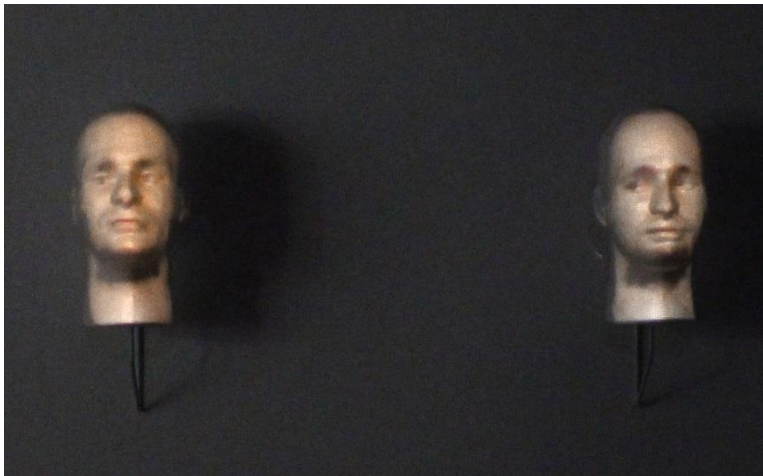Video camera, digital projector, software. 2015

with a small group that were viewing the piece, one man pulled out his reading glasses to see what would happen if light passed through them. I was completely surprised by the result. Light that was refracting off of the lenses of the glass was creating large swooping oval shapes arrayed in patterns on the screen. If the participant held the shapes for a long enough period, light would accumulate on the wall and the projected image would reinforce the shapes he was making with his glasses. Exploration and discovery is precisely what the work asks from the viewer. To see someone take a creative experimental approach to my work, and make discoveries that I was previously unaware of, was evidenced that my work was doing exactly what I had intended it to do.

On a nearby wall in the show, a series of 12 Styrofoam mannequin heads were mounted to a wall in a grid pattern. The number 12 was chosen simply because I knew that I could evenly space out the heads in rows of 4 by 3 (a common resolution for a digital projector is 4:3). On each mannequin face, I have projected recorded footage of my own face. The final work, titled *IntrospecSean*, shows 12 unique videos of my own likeness on each mannequin head in a two-minute loop. Before recording the footage I considered how I might present myself. I wanted to show a series of "me" in different contexts, all lined up in a way that I could look at objectively. Each head, a separate, isolated, presentation of my own likeness would be presented in a group of similar but distinctly different heads. In this arrangement one can perceive a single head and compare it with others or as part of a group. Before I captured the footage I considered how I might present myself visually. I knew that, for technical reasons, I needed to keep my head as still as possible. Opening my mouth, for example, would create a visible error on the surface of the closed mouth mannequin head. Because of the resolution of the projector, and the physical form of the mannequin faces, the best means for presenting my likeness accurately would require that I keep my face as still as possible. The only movement, then, would be my eyes. I did a series of specific eye gestures (looking left to right at regular intervals, or darting my eyes in random directions, for example) during the recording. In the final work, these differences in gestures would be localized on only one head. This would be the only differing element between each head on the grid. The mannequin heads themselves were purchased from a distributor online. When I made the order, I found that I had an option to buy 12 "near perfect" heads, or 12 "slightly damaged" ones. This became an interesting decision for me because I knew that either choice would affect the final work significantly. I confirmed with the distributor that

the slightly damaged heads only had minor damage, so they'd still be acceptable for my project. The cost of the slightly damaged heads was only slightly less, and this was not an element that persuaded me towards either option. If I purchased the undamaged heads, they would be nearly identical and any imperfections in my video-mapping craftsmanship might show as feature of distinction between the heads. If I used the slightly damaged heads (smooshed noses/ears, minor abrasions) I would be working with each head one-to-one, so to speak, as I worked to map my own face to its unique form. The process of lining up video to individual heads involves resizing and relocating 2 minute clips of footage to specific spots on the screen. Additionally, in After Effects, I apply a mesh-warp tool that allows me to stretch portions of my face into the proper position on the mannequin head. This is necessary not only because of the effects of "slight damage" in shipping, but also because of the relative angle of the projector to each individual face on the grid. In order to achieve some kind of accuracy in representing a variety of images of myself, I would need

3.11 Sean Robertson, IntrospecSean. Styrofoam mannequin heads, recorded footage, digital projector. 2015


3.12 IntrospecSean, detail. 2015

3.13 IntrospecSean, still taken from recorded footage.

to distort the recorded image of my face to fit the physical surface of each mannequin in order to achieve likeness. The final work is a self-reflective recreation of my distorted image.

The final work on display at the thesis exhibition, *Rhizome*, consists of four digital projectors, a live camera aimed at the center of the room with the center wall as a background, and Isadora performance software. Viewers who approach the work at first see large bodies of color filling three adjacent walls in a room. Isadora allows me to take control of a number of the visual properties of *Rhizome* through the use of adjustment actors. I use a wave-form generator to produce values that range from 0-100, and connect those values to an actor that controls a set range of hues. Over a period of time, the general appearance of *Rhizome* will gradually shift through hues of cobalt to a much deeper indigo, then violet, and finally to a very rich and warm red-orange. Because of the inherent
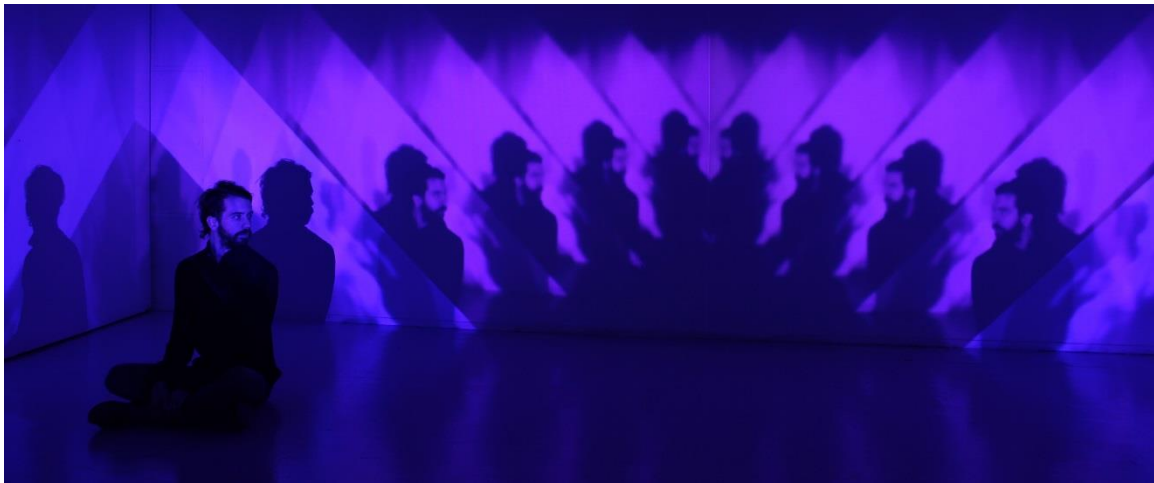
3.14 Sean Robertson, Rhizome. Video camera, digital projector, software. 2015

3.15 Sean Robertson, Rhizome. Video camera, digital projector, software. 2015

properties of these colors on the spectrum, and the technical properties of the projector itself, each space on the spectrum that the image passes through has a unique quality that has a capacity to alter the apparent depth of the repeated image in *Rhizome*. For example, when the wave-form generator is giving a value that produces cobalt, the quality of the image is very sharp with a high contrast. The image of a figure standing in the space will repeat through the feedback-loop with a crispness of image that is easily discerned by the viewer; in the case where the room is empty the walls of *Rhizome* will appear dark with a thin band of cobalt light meandering across the walls in a horizontal S-curve. On the other side of the spectrum, when the room is primarily filled with deep violets or reds, the walls are covered with a glowing fullness of color that is lacking in the cobalt example. The participant in this scenario will not see their image repeated with the clarity that cobalt provides. Instead, the visual field is dominated by fullness of color and a limited number of silhouettes are created by the subject's shadow. The wave-form generator is set to a pace that creates smooth transitions through color hues. Other actors gradually change variables in contrast and the rate that light decays in the system. Because each wave-form is separate, and produce values at different rates, there is a variety that is achieved that extends beyond what I can reasonably predict. Ideally, a viewer spends enough time in the space to see a variety of unique combinations of these variables – this can happen with or without their participation though the latter is certainly preferred. I want a perspective viewer of my work to at first peer into the space and see an opportunity to be enveloped in the glow of the room. There's an important element of exploration that I feel requires intuition and a yearning to investigate. My hope was that the rich glow of the room would feel inviting, and perhaps viewers would seek a better view of the fullness of color that fills the room. The variety that is achieved through the use of multiple wave-form generators on various adjustment actors creates a sense of change and complexity that is intriguing to me, and hopefully for the viewer as well. Though there are similarities to be noted at each stage of *Rhizome*'s appearance, there are likely never two moments where the room looks exactly the same. Participation from the audience adds another rich layer of complexity to the work, making each individual interaction entirely unique. What makes the work most fascinating to me is that I have provided an audience an opportunity to engage with my work on their own terms. How it is that they initially begin to engage with the work, how they respond physically and mentally to what is happening in the space that I have created is done fully through their own intuitive devices. In the

moment of experimental engagement with the work, the viewer is affected by the visual and immersive experience they are involved in. Before they have the opportunity to cognitively address and analyze the experience, they are involved in a process of physical and mental experimentation with an unfamiliar, unexpected, and immersive art machine. In this machine I have orchestrated a particular series of combinations of affects and percepts that lead the viewer towards a predetermined (though largely unpredictable) range of effects, but how the viewer intuits their relationship with the work – and the experience they produce through my work – remains entirely up to them.

The most important thing my work can do for a viewer is provide a platform with which they can explore and make discoveries on their own. This is an important element in my creative practice and I feel that my work is an attempt to share that creative and experimental experience. The optical feedback loop is a model for how we perceive, engage, and learn to interact with our surroundings again and again. The more we investigate the further we immerse ourselves into experience. As the viewer enters *Rhizome* they are confronted with amorphous representations themselves multiplied in innumerable directions. Intuition determines where the viewer will direct their focus, and how they'll move their body and affect what they are seeing. As we explore we learn how to explore. As we experience we learn how to experience.

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