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*Edges of Action*

### CAA Art Journal Open Script

I'd like to talk a little about my studio research into the mechanisms of looking at and recording images and my long-standing habit of counting as a technique for interfacing with the visual world. In this video, I will illustrate my ideas using some of my artworks created over the past decade.

I'll begin with the idea of counting... and how the rhythmic partition of sensory input in the world is interpreted visually, brilliantly illustrated in this early Sesame Street animation. Looking and counting in this way relies on the eye functioning like a scanner, continuously raking over images and objects and measuring and recording their differences be they dimensional or tonal in quality

One way of thinking about this kind of looking is to describe looking as a mapping of edges; edges that are engineered by nature and denoted by the seams of their design. Mapping by counting contours.

There is a long tradition of this kind of looking to see edges. It certainly has its roots in evolution and makes up a central part of any ontology. But edges are not strictly visual, they also denote beats, and for me they create a kind of edited rhythm to live by.

Recording these edges is one of my definitions of art making, a practice that is driven by pleasure and ethics, a practice that is a means of being in intimate relationship to the world.

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Another fundamental aspect of this kind of looking is time, time as defined by the pacing of a thing in its environment. Time as defined by the edges of action. In film this action can also be described vernacularly as a beat, a correspondence I find reassuring.

One way we sense this passage, and mark these beats, is through what is known as frame rate. Frame rate is the animation of still images so they appear to be moving.

The so-called cell animation of Walt Disney made this process ubiquitous, but there are many other examples that illustrate this rhythm of seeing, ranging from Eadweard Muybridge's iconic motion studies to Tony Conrad's "Flicker" and "Yellow Movie" to these Jazzy Spies in the Sesame Street clip.

All, in their way, stop time, thereby highlighting its presence and animating it in turn. They also point directly to movement being made up of stills. Movement as a conglomeration of edges.

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For me a central concept linking looking and time is the mechanics of something called rastering.

The underlying principle of rastering is best illustrated by understanding that it comes from the latin word for rake.

If you imagine a rake slowly demarcating a series of parallel rows you get the basic premise of scanning technology.... slicing an image into more manageable bits of information.

Indeed, the raster scan is the precursor to digital processes and the now ubiquitous pixel, but of course, it can be seen equally well in the warp and weft of woven textiles such as this piece of Ani Albers. In early television, evidence of the raster scan could be seen easily such as in the animated number sequences here or even more clearly in this still of Felix the Cat who famously was the first object broadcast by RCA television.

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I am inspired by a book titled "The Miracle of Analogy" by the art historian Kaja Silverman. In it she explores an idea that I now realize has echoed in my own work for a long time. This idea is that a photograph can continue to be in development long after it has been completed.

I liken this idea to an image having mutable edges or of an object containing the potential for movement.

Silverman frames her idea by discussing the origins of photography, showing how despite its desire for permanence, by virtue of its materiality it has opened up an extended conversation about indeterminacy.

She poignantly illustrates how this quest to fix imagery remains deeply important in terms of human psychology and our relationship to the world.

The role of contingency in all matters of looking is one of the central concerns that has excited my practice over the years and I have used a variety of differing studio techniques to try and activate this status.

For Silverman, the phenomenon of an image being perpetually labile underscores the very nature of photography, continually catalyzed in its function as analogy and beset by entropy. It is analogy, Silverman claims, that best illustrates how something that appears fixed and from another time, can be revived and come to speak in the present tense.

She calls this capacity, “trans-temporal.”

This argument dovetails with my own longstanding interest in “fading.” Fading is both an analogy for time as well as a meditation on perception and as such is central to looking and learning to measure the edges of things.

My interest in Silverman is informed by an equally long-standing interest in Buddhism and its own analogy of “emptiness” used to describe the stream of consciousness we call reality.

In Buddhism the analogy of a mirror is used to evoke the changeability of perception, and impermanence, something that seems related to the discussion of photography specifically the tools used to reflect and record light waves in the form of pictures.

.....As an aside there is a vitally important intersection here that relates to the subject of noise, and the transmission of information.

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In my studio process erasure and the deliberate fading of imagery reveals this signal to noise ratio thereby highlighting the presence of time and makes fading a kind of unorthodox way of taking a picture. In other words, fading can be a way of recording and measuring beats. Another way of visualizing this is with static, such as can be seen on an analog television, a subject that has been equally generative for me.

When seen vis-a-vis frame rate, static becomes a poignant way of measuring time and mapping contours.

What is most compelling to me about this idea is that an artwork, balancing material science and studio technique, can remain open and potentially active after it has been finished by the artist. Or as Silverman would argue, that the photograph remains in development.

It is curiosity about this state of being unfixed, that underlies my research into materials... and my attempt to exploit the structure of objects and images to maintain an inherent instability.

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This research based practice has evolved into various studio techniques for developing pictures that are forever unfinished: using methods of fading, tracing, layering, cutting, and image transfer to exploit the inherent vulnerabilities found in inkjet and laser printing to mirror photography's earliest and most unstable origins.

I came to this process in an intuitive way... that is to say, through my hands ... through experimentation and a calculated disregard for making a finished product.

And while I did not seek to reinvent a chemistry of photography, indeed much of what I make would not technically be considered a photograph, I have, consistently approached this work as being photographic, based on a formula of materials and actions that together record an environment and stop time, while remaining open and in perpetual development, something akin to Silverman's miracle of analogy.

In this regard I have begun to think of the photograph as functioning like an antenna. That is, actively recording and amplifying sensory information in real time. In this definition an antenna functions like a mirror, again directly relating to the idea of rastering and suggesting that there is a continual feedback loop between the eye and time that is bio-mechanical.

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My foray into this research has its long ago origins in both my experience in the darkroom and, more prosaically, in an interest in lacquer. Lacquer is a tradition that signals something radiant that is also natural, protean, a shimmering and fragile

medium that is achievable only through an exhaustive process of building a body micro layer by micro layer..... It is an analog of photography.

Learning to lacquer, the endless rubbing, turned me on not only to the pleasure of a wet process but also the tension of working with inchoate and inherently fragile materials. An element of chance is implicit in this work and it was that instability, an intersection of material, process and conceit that became like a recursive pattern by which I could build and orient my looking at the world.

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The first work that came from this combination of interests was a series of silkscreen prints that used scratch-off ink. In these works, the desire to win—that is to reveal a winning lottery ticket—became a rich analogy of our deeper desires for revelation. And as such the image and the material action of scratching, mirror the use of a shutter to take a photograph and fix the result.

It also is manifestly a critique of that desire showing a grain of skepticism that has always been at the base of this exploration of process. A grain of skepticism that what is revealed, indeed, the desire that something be revealed, is a central catalyst in photography; and this correlation to psychology relates directly to my interest in critiquing tropes of desire and the ways in which physical matter is invested with aura.

Implied in the scratch and win pictures is a joke, a joke on us, the seekers, the rubbers, the cravers, those scratching their way to reveal something that is already apparent or conversely doesn't exist at all.

This interest in scratching as a ritual of desire led later to a more involved practice of erasing to create. Specifically I began to erase inkjet prints. I found that this digital printing paper was a strange proprietary mix of old and new, not quite paper but not photographic either. It is.... whatever it is.... still designed to be a delicate concert of particle size and light fastness, felicity and ground.

It also happens to be water-sensitive.

The images I initially chose to print and erase were all related thematically, depicting individuals in states of ecstasy, primarily of the religious variety and later, groups of tourists whose travel pictures documenting indigenous ritual performances they had posted online. In short, they were pictures of people

manifesting their desire to capture and fix an elusive transmission. By analogy, these were images depicting ghosts.

In Silverman's book one of the most compelling ideas that animates her thesis is the belief that a photograph can remain active after it has been technically finished, a subject she locates historically in the writing of early photographers such as Henry Fox Talbot as well as Jeff Wall's essay "Photography and Liquid Intelligence."

In this way she deftly confronts one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's most prevailing questions, that of aura in the age of mechanical reproduction as raised by Walter Benjamin.

What this means for me is that the printing of a digital image can be equally indeterminate, reflecting a muddy intersection of contradictory technologies that in its mess reveals Wall's idea of liquid intelligence and what Silverman somewhat more prosaically illustrates as an innate anima, a potential that exists in the photographic emulsion itself, forever prone to additional catalyst.

So I printed and I erased. I found that the digital paper consists of multiple materials.... poetic in and of themselves. Talc and binding agents evoke literal ground and link directly back to the delicate recipes of chemical photography and even further to alchemy. And, as many others have discovered, I learned that digital tools and printers can be easily manipulated to allow for a range of mechanical glitches, events that can resemble a chance darkroom encounter and by analogy, a phantasm.

As I washed and reprinted these images I developed a system. First, I almost always created pictures using multiple pages, what is referred to as tiling, thereby instilling an innate score in the composition and alluding to frame rate. Also, I found that removing some of the paper coating was not enough, that it left what felt like arbitrary moments of clarity and I was suspicious of even the most glancing narrative. What I found was, as in the original scratch and win prints, I wanted the act of removal to reveal the desire that constitutes the image, thereby revealing its own material nature.

For Silverman, the ability of photography to catalyze the miracle of analogy relies on a combination of an unstable material and a searching individual; it's the viewer who must bring their own experiences to bear on this looking. And she connects this to Walter Benjamin's idea that photography is a link between the past and future.

This idea that the viewer's body becomes a subject led me to eventually move beyond a process developing the image through erasure and begin to consider the medium more directly. It also stimulated my idea of the work functioning like an antenna. ... and by extension that the body too is an instrument of receiving and broadcasting.

This has precipitated a practice based more on collage, where I have begun to utilize cutting..... and paper's innate body to determine an image's content and highlight the seams that had been so important in the first place. This embrace of the body has meant in some way that I have returned to a more sculptural idiom and, in my view, a more rhythmic transmission. But in this case there is a bubbly fission highlighting the seams where the ground and the process are in an embodied corporeality. The material specificity of these new works allows for a physics and dimensionality that photography can only allude to, and as such they evoke a kind of metamorphosis.

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It is here in this uncanny state that I think the project has reached a turning point. Like a slow refocusing, these final works on aluminum plate and folded board function more as mechanical devices than anything I had set out to make. They demand of me and the viewer an immediate physical confrontation and mental decoding without relying so directly on the emulsion's allusion to time to coax additional meaning. They are in effect autonomous bodies, and as such they move more freely from the wall back into space.

They also more directly illustrate my interest in rastering as an action of scanning, the subject we began with, showing how cutting and by extension tiling and folding manifest and destroy form in a continuous process of re-development and animation. This leads finally to the idea of the antenna, of a work broadcasting and repeating packets of information. Where artwork can record the counting of edges and show the continual scanning process underlying the act of looking and being in relationship to the world.

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Postscript:

Ironically, it is in the process of scanning and reconstituting the dematerialized visual world that contemporary photographs have come to be linked to their earliest progenitors. As outlined by Silverman, photographic processes that reveal their

development were of central concern to many of its inventors including Fox Talbot who famously suggested that his photos could be revived by re exposing them to their processing chemicals. The broader implication, developed extensively in her book, is that the aura of the original subject could be reactivated by virtue of its reception many years hence... that the viewer is therefore a kind of catalytic agent. In this scenario, even the most faded corner of an image holds the subject of its origination,... recording the performance of its making. Where the image breaks down into noise, is where this promise becomes most discernable,... as the mottled particles evoke the original stray bodies that activated their visibility in the first place.

November, 2016