

Master of Fine Arts Thesis

Deft Perception  
Action and Recording with the Body

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**“Whether we are concerned with my body, the natural world, the past, birth or death, the question is always how I can be open to phenomena which transcend me, and which nevertheless exist only to the extent that I take them up and live them...”<sup>1</sup>**

Merleau-Ponty

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<sup>1</sup> Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 423.

## Premise

Awareness comes through the body. A hand moves through clay, rubs skin with charcoal, tongue tastes dust, ears hear the scrape of mass dragged across the floor. Body feels the pull of muscle. Material experiences are perceived directly through action. Physical awareness is essential, bringing specific knowledge of the body and environment, of one's state and manor of being. The premise *action* is given. It is situation, internal compulsion. A body must act.

*Because action: record.* Physical awareness is essential, but it is a quale, a qualitative subjective experience, difficult to translate. Records of action externalize the subjective experience. *If* a body acts with material, *then* record. The record reveals the momentary action; the fleeting and invisible become visible, physical. Specific properties of material produce specific records. If a body acts, with *clay* and *sandpaper*, then *dust* and *shape* record. If a body acts, in a *white room*, with *charcoal*, then *drawing*, and *trace* record.

These records are pared-down to basic materials, direct movements. The results are elemental and raw, not digested or translated. They exist to reveal the actions that created them, to reveal the body in action. They offer a means to get outside oneself: to live through phenomena (such as gravity, friction, and material) and be able to reflect on the experience. The work relates the experience of a body outside the body itself.

I use my body as an instrument to measure our individual selves against the world. In the work, material, friction and gravity are all addressed through the physical

body. Bas Jan Ader addressed the relationship between body and transcendent forces by saying, “I do not make body sculpture, body art or body works. When I fell off the roof of my house or into a canal, it was because gravity made itself master over me.”<sup>2</sup>

It is not enough for me to know that gravity is powerful theoretically; I must subject my body to the force to demonstrate its power, to live out my relationship with the transcendent forces of nature. The actions I undertake to explore this relationship are recorded. Through empathy, they reach for the collective experience of body. It is a plight that is intuitively understood; the pain and embarrassment of falling, the romanticism of engaging one’s body to feel alive in the world. The work connects with the power and fragility of living physically.

The most profound personal experiences for me have occurred in the dramatic landscape of south central Alaska. The work retains aesthetic remnants of these formative events and their environment. There is a vastness about large flat paper that references open space, alpine plains and snow. Colors are desaturated like winter light, high contrast forms and shadows. I do not design my work to resemble landscape, but my decisions about what looks *right*; about composition, color, texture and scale cannot escape the time spent moving through Alaskan landscape. Climbing mountains, or crossing open water, one can see how far they have come, and see the distant horizon at the same time. Elation from strength and achievement combined with exertion, struggle, and acute vulnerability. The landscape provides a grand scale against which I measure my own insignificance.

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<sup>2</sup> Spence, *The Case of Bas Jan Ader*, 2.

## Drawing

Anthrokinograph is a word invented to describe the mark made by a human body in action. *Anthrokinograph III* is a drawing of the body, how the physical circumstances of a drawing define the result. For this piece, a nine-foot by twenty-foot sheet of paper is hung on the wall of the gallery. A two-inch flat metal ledge is mounted along the upper edge of the full length of paper. To make the drawing, I coat myself with charcoal, smudging the joints and folds of skin and clothing. Then I climb up to one end of the ledge and begin to traverse the length of the paper hanging by my fingers. As I inch and swing along the wall, my motion is recorded on the paper in dark smudges as a drawing. When I reach the far end of the ledge I fall, leaving two streaks from my hands as I drop toward the ground. The action is not performed for an audience, but the record is displayed to represent the act.

The physical challenge of making *Anthrokinograph III* demands acute physical awareness in the moment and causes the mark making to be experiential and kinesthetic, escaping analysis until the action is complete. The action is not a defiance of gravity; it is an illustration of its incredible force, the futility and necessity of our struggle to live with it. Through the body, we collectively understand this struggle.

The wispy dark marks of the drawing itself disguise the physical exertion. They hang, light and airy on the wall, resembling something cloudlike, a drawing of mist or smoke. The incongruity between action and record veils the struggle. Through the record, the direct action is transformed to something less clear, and softer. The observer's ability to recognize the action determines the read of this piece. Aware of the physicality, the work is an action of struggle, but unaware, the drawing represents a floating feeling, as if gravity did not exist at all.

## Records and Limitation

*Drawing to Dust 3* is a drawing in clay dust on the floor, a few inches deep and roughly ten feet in length and width. On a nearby wall, a video projection of *Drawing to Dust 2* shows a figure dragging a head-sized piece of raw clay across a large sheet of sandpaper on the floor. In the gallery, *Drawing to Dust* exists in two forms: as a video projection and as a physical artifact.

In the video, the figure explores many movements and body positions, using both hands and sometimes feet in various efforts to move the clay. The sound is coarse and gritty. When the clay moves, light dusty lines are left on the dark background, composing an abstract drawing. As the action progresses, the lines begin to merge into fields of dust, covering the surface of the sandpaper and building up into piles around the edges. Toward the end of the video, the depth and pattern that the figure is creating begins to resemble that which is in the gallery space. When the raw clay in the video is transformed into simplified geometric shapes, the figure stops and the projection fades to black.

In this recording, the physical action of labor is primary. The angle of the camera is low, centered on the movements of the figure rather than the marks being drawn. The

shapes and movements of the body describe effort, force and repetition. The sound is grating and harsh, accentuating each movement across the sheet. The observer is shown the work in relation to the body enacting it, and what is revealed is the vitality of the labor itself, how the body bends and flexes to create force and respond to it.

As an artifact, the dust patterned on the sandpaper gives the observer first hand perception of the material. We can walk around it, bend down close to it; envision the forces that formed it. The formation of the artifact required the destruction of the original. This is the destructive nature of physical recording. The original piece of clay is irreversibly altered by the friction of mark making, reducing the material to flat-sided forms and layered piles of dust.

The video recording is not destructive, but it is incomplete. The projection reveals the figure and the sound of the action but removes the material qualities, the smell and texture of dust, the ability to walk around the piece and observe the composition from multiple angles. Recording in light and sound does not physically alter the work, but it also does not capture the full experience. Together, the twin records (artifact and video) expose each other's limitations, revealing the loss between action and record. Upon close inspection, it is possible to see the projection *Drawing to Dust 2* is a previous iteration of the piece, not a recording of the artifact *Drawing to Dust 3*. The piece evolved between the end of the video recording and the subsequent creation of a new artifact.

Recording in dust is a precarious act. The fragility of this record is evident and embraced, creating a more privileged moment of observation. Already between the two iterations of this piece, the drawing has been altered and the forms and colors irreparably



changed. The more ephemeral an event, the more precious it is to capture and to observe.

In *For the Time Being*, Annie Dillard writes,

*“Digging through layers of books yields dated clouds and near clouds. Why seek dated clouds? Why save a letter, take a snapshot, write a memoir, carve a tombstone?”*<sup>3</sup>

Thinking about records in a larger timescale allows me to place more weight on “transient” phenomena, by showing that all phenomena are in some way transient. It is common to think of a record as preserving something, but how long must the preservation last? It is crucial to embrace ephemerality, because ultimately, there is no other choice. This concession reduces the importance of archival methods and expands the limits of what is important to record and what constitutes a record.

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<sup>3</sup> Dillard, *For the Time Being*, 47.

## Action/Reaction

*Because action: reaction.* When a body pushes, what pushes back? Clay is a malleable, tactile material when mixed with water. Its responsiveness records the dance of action and provides a sensual reaction. *Opening* is a mound of dark wet clay piled on a low cement plinth. The pile is covered with finger marks dragging up the side toward two large voids in the center. The voids have marks from knee joints and folds of skin, made from two legs, which were buried in the pile. The wet clay records the momentary struggle of a body working its way out.

The psychological pull of such a void is strong. A dark dampness, soft and yielding, yet a crushing weight, act alternately as a lure and a trap. As with *Anthrokinograph III*, an observer may empathize with the body that made the mark, and imagine their own touch, their own submergence and re-emergence. The sensual appeal of wet clay is the classic enticement for many ceramists: the push and pull of the body and material. Direct contact, clay moving and responding to touch; it is an ideal material to record footprints: records of action pressed into the earth. We can see ourselves in these marks. The symbolic power of burial and excavation of a body in earth addresses the central questions of life. How do we exist in this world, above the ground for a short time?

*Pendulum* is a bronze cast attached to the end of a long metal rod hanging from the ceiling. The bronze is dark and amorphous, a root-like form that upon closer inspection is recognizable as a hand. The form is narrow and distorted in the upper

section, expanding in mass and complexity toward the lower end. In the lower section, skin wrinkles and cuticles are visible on three polished fingers, which extend downward toward a raw clay basin on the floor. The basin is round and white with a gritty texture. It is filled with sandy clay dust of the same type that fills the basin so it is just slightly arced toward the center. The bronze fingertip hangs just barely above the surface of the dust. It is the human hand, reaching.

The motion of the piece contradicts the normal function of pendulums. To record time accurately, the periodic swing of a suspended mass is maintained by mechanical or electronic means to be periodic and regular. The scientist Foucault proved the rotation of the earth by observing that the pendulum's mass swings on a stable axis as the earth rotates beneath it. Such scientific instruments require idealized forms and specialized mechanisms, which are not present here.

*Pendulum* will swing only a short time before air and mechanical resistance reduce the motion to stillness. It is a human gesture, reaching, touching, drawing, but incapable of eternal timekeeping or measuring the rotation of the earth. Although pendulums often record endurance, this pendulum records limitation and impermanence. When the swinging has subsided, the hand continues to quiver slightly, pointing toward the earth, reaching for the dust. Kinetic energy is converted into anticipation: the potential for action.

## Interpreting Records

IF: the records are elemental and raw, not digested or translated AND: the work relates the experience of a body outside the body itself, THEN: The work requires interpretation and must relate to other bodies to be complete. These works are successful when they allow an imaginative sensorial experience. How it would feel to... Through empathy and active perception observers may expand their own body awareness.

My works are records of engaging actions, and what I find engaging is the kinesthetic experience of landscape. The experience of vast landscape defines the structure of the work: feeling strength while being dwarfed by the forces and matter of the world. Records of action are made through the body, but attest to the power of larger things.

This document began with a quote from Merleau-Ponty.

*“Whether we are concerned with my body, the natural world, the past, birth or death, the question is always how I can be open to phenomena which transcend me, and which nevertheless exist only to the extent that I take them up and live them...”<sup>4</sup>*

His question is also a prayer. He starts with what is available to us (body, nature, time) and he asks to be open- to be aware. It is not clear the target of this request, but he seems to answer it himself. The phenomena he seeks are only available to him through his own experience, for there are no other options. He must “take them up and live them,” to make them real. Ultimately, it is a call to action.

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<sup>4</sup> Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 423.

## Works Cited

Dillard, Annie. *For the Time Being*. New York: Knopf, 1999. Print.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Phenomenology of Perception*. New York: Routledge Classics, 2009. Print

Spence, Brad. "The Case of Bas Jan Ader," in *Bas Jan Ader*, ed. Jan Spence Irvine: University of California Irvine, 2000. Accessed March 2, 2016.  
<http://www.basjanader.com/dp/Spence.pdf>

## Technical Statement

### Material

I choose archetypal materials, things that read clearly as what they are: clay as earth, dust, and ceramic, paper and charcoal as drawing, sandpaper as a grinding surface, plaster as a direct casting medium. I gravitate toward the elemental in the classic sense: clay/earth, water, charcoal (fire). Using these natural materials signifies the material as a whole: just that one piece of clay, but also *all* clay. This one, specific drawing, but also the *Drawing* that describes drawing. Raw materials trigger these strong connotations. While the pieces in the show are singular and specific, the archetypal form is also apparent. In this way my material selection supports universal connection in the work. One may not know the specifics of this clay, but we know earth and we know dust. I also use manufactured materials: stock steel, large rolls of paper, industrial sanding belts. These too, are archetypal. I do not draw a strong distinction between “natural” and manufactured materials; rather I focus on the clarity of their form as a symbol.

The clay I use comes from the Stancills Incorporated mine in Perryville, Maryland. At Stancills, there are many different layers and colors of clay with various properties. The company is very supportive of artists and is the clay source for Peter Callas, Margaret Boozer and others. I took two thousand pounds of dark gray, sticky clay from a vein near the surface of the mine. I found it to be uneven and difficult to manipulate when used directly out of the ground, but after reclaiming and mixing the clay it was quite workable with few stones and little grit.

The Stancills mine is located within sight of the Chesapeake Bay, at the outlet of the Susquehanna watershed. Canacadea Creek in Alfred flows into the Canisteo River, which feeds the Susquehanna watershed. I used this inherent location information of the material in several pieces to engage systems and ecological cycles in the work. In the thesis exhibition, the location information is less important than the dark color and creamy texture of this raw clay.

The touch and feel of this clay, and clay in general, is what inspired the bronze cast for *Clay Hand*. The piece was made by reaching into a mass of wet clay, removing the hand and narrowing the opening at the wrist to give a vaguely teardrop-shaped void.

Into the void, hot microcrystalline wax was poured to create a positive. The wax was then cast in bronze using the ceramic shell method.

The basin beneath the bronze cast was made with white clay, high in molochite and containing nylon fiber. The piece was thrown on the wheel, then trimmed dry to match the arc of the pendulum suspended above it. The trimmings were collected and used to fill the basin.

## Physical Training

For *Anthrokinograph III*, the finger ledge is a 20' section of 2" x 2" x 1/4" angle iron. To prepare, I installed an 18' practice section in my studio and began recording my physical training to increase my strength for this specific project and measure progress. As of March 1, I could move my hands along the ledge a total of 16 times before falling, approximately 12' of distance. As of March 15, I could make 30 movements at a time, approximately 20' of distance. As of April 4, I could traverse the practice ledge a total of 10 times over the course of 2 hours.

Date	Activity	Repetitions	Miles	Hours
3/1/16	Traversing 2" Angle Iron	3x 16 hand movements		0.17
3/2/16	Traversing 2" Angle Iron	1x8 hand movements		
3/2/16	Doorframe pull-up	3x pyramid workout 3		
3/3/16	Climbing			1.50
3/4/16				
3/5/16	Doorframe pull-up	3x pyramid workout 3		0.08
3/6/16				
3/7/16	Doorframe pull-up	3x pyramid workout 3		0.08
3/8/16	Climbing			2.00
3/9/16	Climbing			2.00
3/10/16	Climbing			2.00
3/11/16				
3/12/16	Climbing (outdoors)			4.00
3/13/16	Climbing (outdoors)			3.00
3/14/16				
3/15/16	Traversing 2" Angle Iron	1x30 hand movements		0.17
3/16/16				
3/17/16				
3/18/16	Moved 1000 lb wet clay			2.00
3/19/16	Yoga			1.00
3/20/16	Traversing 2" Angle Iron	3x 30 hand movements		
3/21/16	Climbing			3.00
3/22/16				
3/23/16	Climbing			2.00
3/24/16				
3/25/16				
3/26/16	Run		8	1.50
3/27/16				
3/28/16	Climbing			2
3/29/16				
3/30/16	Climbing			1.5
3/31/16	Climbing			0.5
4/1/16				
4/2/16				
4/3/16	Yoga			1
4/4/16	Traversing 2" Angle Iron	10x30 hand movements		2
4/5/16				
4/6/16				
4/7/16	Climbing			1.5
4/8/16				
4/9/16				
4/10/16	Yoga			1
4/11/16	Moved 1000 lb wet clay			3