

SOMETHING SOMETHING SOMETHING: TOWARD A MINOR PRACTICE

By

Troy Grons Dahl

BFA, University of Saskatchewan, 2002

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Abstract

The social and political relevance of contemporary art is bound up in paradox. As the perceived failures of the avant-garde demonstrate, even the most radical projects of the 20th century eventually succumb to some form of institutional enfranchisement. As an artist working within an art museum, this irony is particularly acute. Given the problematic political biases of the institutions of art, how can artists elude this performative capture to exercise their agency?

In response to this, artists have probed the boundaries of art practice seeking a way out. Acts of complete withdrawal, while dramatic, are not productive. Critique plays an important political function of art, yet negation on its own is not enough. There is, I think, another way: not a way out but a way in. Situated in and between modes of affirmation and dissent, my sculptures, texts and photographs work in dialogue with art world conventions to create witty and poetic meditations on art and knowledge. Through the use of humour and ambiguity, I operate strategically within dominant narratives to keep performative capture at bay. Using a methodology adapted from Deleuze and Guattari's theory of the minor, I aim to create a space of productive estrangement to call forth new subjectivities.

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Dedication

This is dedicated to a low interest Scotiabank Line of Credit, the City of Saskatoon, the City of Vancouver, the internet, Diet Coke, UV light, Dr. Carleigh Brady, cheese (all kinds), knock off modern furniture, haircuts, non-iron shirts, televised sports, innuendo, cheap mechanical pencils, my family, my homies, people with difficult to pronounce names, people who let me hold their babies, black coffee, back medication, Tacofino, drinking out of jam jars, and the French.

Introduction: Another way: not a way out, but a way in.

I hold a variety of positions within the art world. As an artist, researcher, and curator I am intimately acquainted with the complexities and contradictions of artistic practice, its histories and institutions. I've tried to reconcile my deep admiration for the future-oriented, utopian projects of the avant-garde with a mild case of second hand embarrassment. In a contemporary social and political context where the status quo seems both fixed and determined by forces of inertia that are at once immovable and unstoppable, the idea of writing a manifesto seems almost quaint. As the artistic claims of modernism have been dismantled, various self-defeating narratives have emerged in its wake.¹ The irony that is often associated with postmodern practice has created a climate of cynicism. Yet I cannot shake an unspoken—and perhaps at one time unspeakable—yearning for the unrealized ambitions of the avant-garde art movements of the past century, if only for potential of imagining something other than 'as is.'

Despite the art world's incredible capacity for adaptation, artists continue to probe its borders searching for lines of escape. Acts of complete withdrawal are ineffectual, and while critique is an important political function of art, dissent alone is not enough. Operating outside of art's malleable boundaries seems increasingly implausible.² Even practices that seek to obfuscate the boundaries between art and everyday life are ultimately bound to some form institutional enfranchisement. Given this, how can art or artists accomplish anything outside of supporting an

1 Joseph J. Tanke, *What is the Aesthetic Regime?*

2 See Andrea Fraser, *From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique* for a provocative and nuanced exploration of institutional critique within the expanded field of art.

institutional imperative? How does art gain political consequence? There is, I think, another way: not a way out but a way in.

Situated in the nexus in and between modes of affirmation and dissent, my sculptures, texts and photographs work within art world conventions to create witty and poetic meditations on art and culture. Through the use of humour, ambiguity, contradiction, and indeterminacy, I aim to create a space of productive estrangement to produce new subjectivities. Using a methodology adapted from Deleuze and Guattari's theory of the minor, I operate strategically within dominant narratives to keep performative capture at bay.

If the advent of the readymade opened the art world to a wider scope of artistic practice, it also reinforced the central position of the art museum as arbiter. As Duchamp's early provocations demonstrated, the museum is a contextual frame capable of transforming some thing—an object, action, concept—into an artwork. The attendant possibilities and problems of this ontological transformation stimulated wide ranging artistic and discursive practices. Artists associated with the conceptual art movement like Sol LeWitt, Robert Barry, and Lawrence Weiner, probed the material limits of artistic practice: installations, dematerialized form, and text-based works tested the commodity status of artwork. Paradoxically, conceptual artworks, even those that attempted to circumvent the authority of the institution, eventually found their way into museums, galleries, and auction houses and were ultimately domesticated by the art historical narrative. Exhibitions of archives and ephemera from the conceptual art movement point to the contradiction inherent in institutional critique. As artist and writer Rasheed Araeen observes, “what in fact emerged was

an anti-art that had no choice but to capitulate to the very institution that it wanted to confront, becoming dependent on it for survival and legitimisation” (680).

Art institutions neatly absorb criticism, relegating radical or subversive artistic practice to curated historical vignettes.³ It is an irony built into the very function of the museum. The concept of performative capture speaks to the failure of the social transformational promises embedded in modernism's various utterances.⁴ This is the performative bind – the ideological compromise, institutional enclosure, and ontological capture of radical art practice.

Given the domestication of conceptual art practice and the paradox of institutional critique, it may seem that participation in the institutions and apparatus that support the art world is an act of complicity or resignation. In her book, *How to Do Things With Art*, academic Dorothea Von Hantelmann argues: “singular expressive acts that completely withdraw from discourse are not only irrelevant; they are not even thinkable” (19). Similarly, I am not seeking to extricate my practice from its supporting apparatus, but rather operate strategically from within. By directly engaging with historical materials and evoking art historical references, I aim to add variability and uncertainty to dominant narratives. This artistic strategy aligns with Deleuze and Guattari's theory of minor literature; through an analysis of three key works, I will seek to articulate my variation of a minor practice.

3 In 2012, I encountered two important survey exhibitions, *Traffic: Conceptual Art in Canada 1965-1980* at the Vancouver Art Gallery and *State of Mind: New California Art Circa 1970* presented at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery at the University of British Columbia, that fuel my speculation that Vancouver is the national custodian of the philosophical relics of Conceptual art. It is the reason I have pursued graduate study at Emily Carr University of Art and Design.

4 *Inversions, Insertions, Implications: A conversation with theorist Stephen Wright*

In their book on Kafka, Deleuze and Guattari unravel their theory of the minor to demonstrate how the disenfranchised voice may find agency through writing within a dominant language. According to their theory, minor literature operates “within a major language” to produce “language affected by a high level of deterritorialization” (16). It is through this process of deterritorialization, Deleuze and Guattari argue, that language is “torn from sense... in order to liberate a living and expressive material” (21). The minor practice could be said to occupy the major: manipulating it, bending it, pushing it to its breaking point to produce new subjectivities and expressive forms.

The deterritorialization of language—what artist and academic Simon O'Sullivan interprets as “making strange of typical signifying regimes”—has a political function that is essential to the minor practice. The minor is not explicitly engaged with the business of politics as such, but rather exercises its political dimension within the specific sphere of aesthetics.⁵ In his writing on the politics of aesthetics, Jacques Rancière defines the political as the “manifestation of dissensus.” As Rancière reminds us, dissensus is not “the confrontation between interests or opinions” but rather “the manifestation of a distance of the sensible from itself” (38). The sensible is what stabilizes normal positions of power. It determines and polices what can be seen and heard. By deterritorializing the major, the minor activates a political function that reflects and resists the seemingly preordained order. Through the rupture of the sensible—*sense torn from itself*—the minor contests prematurely closed narratives and fixed or assumed meanings to open to new possibilities.

⁵ As Rancière argues, the political is activated within a specific sphere—the sphere of aesthetics—whereby “the political distribution of the perceptible” (*Critical Dissensus*, 8) becomes possible.

My photographs, sculptures, and text-based works operate within a conceptual mode. Through this, it is not my intention to simply resuscitate an unfinished historical project, rather I see my body of work coming into alignment with Hal Foster's notion of the incongruent: the creation of “performative and provisional” art works that bring together traces of the past to create a “lyrical kind of criticality” (141). The lyrical criticality I seek to articulate through the minor practice is not situated in the exclusive realm of refusal, but plays between affirmation and dissent. As Simon O'Sullivan observes: “to refuse, or somehow negate the existing language (and thus the existing major forms) is important, but a minor art must do more than this. It must also involve invention and creation. It is also this that gives the stuttering and stammering of a minor practice such an inspirational, we might even say hopeful tenor.” The minor practice seeks to circumvent the self-defeating narratives after modernism and despite its complicated relationship with already-established formations, the minor remains future-oriented.

Performativity plays an important role in my practice and although a comprehensive exploration of the concept exceeds the scope of this thesis, a couple of important aspects of the performative are brought to bear in my work. I believe Foster is applying the term to suggest a sort of production or activation of art through the body to generate a multi-dimensional space around the artwork. I think aspects of my work would certainly qualify as performative under this definition. I also use the term 'perform' to describe how my work operates within a particular context. It is this usage that relates to the concept of performative capture and it is through yet another application of the term performative that I seek to address this problem: its usage traced back to the concept of the performative utterance.

Through a series of lectures presented between 1951-1955 and the subsequent book, *How to Do Things with Words*, philosopher J.L. Austin introduced the concept of the performative utterance. This speech act is a statement that performs a certain kind of action or has the capacity to change or produce reality. The concept of the performative utterance has since provided the foundation for a wide scope of inquiry not limited to language and philosophy, but extending to explorations of literature, sexuality, gender, race, and visual art.⁶

In her book *How to Do Things With Art*, Dorothea von Hantelmann returns to Austin's concept of the performative, and building on the work of Judith Butler and Jacques Derrida, she explores the conditions for the production of artworks that are politically and socially relevant. According to von Hantelmann, the exhibition is the key factor in the relevance of art to Western society. The exhibition's "ability to create and cultivate a specific nexus between the individual and the material object" (10) creates a space for the exchange and development of subjectivities. Acknowledging the complex and problematic political biases embedded in the exhibition format—the reinforcement of hegemony in a democratic market society—Von Hantelmann explores artistic strategies that may act upon this format. As she demonstrates, the exhibition context is essential to art's praxis and thus it is through strategic engagement *within* the conventions and conditions of the exhibition that artists may exercise political agency. Her line of thought is compatible with a minor practice as it "puts the convention of art's production, presentation and historical persistence into focus, shows how these conventions are co-produced by any artwork—independent of its respective content—and argues that it is precisely this dependency on

6 For example, the works of Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, Eve Sedwick, and Sarah Ahmed.

conventions that opens up the possibility of changing them” (20). Through the minor practice, I recognize the problems with the institutions and supporting apparatus that structure the art world, yet I seek to find agency from within. Working from a place of creativity, the minor brings forth a generative, forward-looking critique.

So far we have dealt with little more than
triangles-lines of escape

there can be no real way out,
The problem is
abstract

it is

in any case

impossible something

The impossibility
necessarily exists

The impossibility
an irreducible distance

this is all the more true for the

excluded

for strange and minor uses

Chapter 1: The crotch of discursive space

The tone and tenor of contemporary art has been undeniably shaped by theoretical discourse. Structuralist and post-structural thinking have figured prominently in both the creation of art and its discursive space. In his book, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*, Grant Kester examines the emergence of post-structural theory in arts discourse and its ascension to the “theoretical lingua franca in the arts and humanities” (54). Critical of the imprecise and poorly formed interpretations of post-structural theory, Grant Kester denounces contemporary art’s “liturgical relationship to theory” (58) in an attempt to mitigate the dominant influence of post-structural thought that is, in his view, antagonistic to emergent socially-engaged art practices. Although my practice does not use the same artistic strategies, I am similarly motivated by a desire to create politically relevant art. Thus by working within the *lingua franca*—canonical texts by artists, works of criticism, art theory, the major—I am situating my project in the veritable crotch of discursive space.

As part of my ongoing series of text-based works, I transform historically significant texts about art to create new forms. Breaking apart a text is certainly a political gesture and although I am stripping the original texts of their semantic integrity, I am not engaged strictly in the refusal of signification. I am disengaging the manner in which the text operates within its discursive space and realizing through new material possibilities, the possibilities of new meaning, what professor Tom McDonough in his lecture, *The Artist as Typographer* identifies as “bringing forward the possibility of new semantic charges and new futures.” It is an act of

negation but also affirmation. While the original documents no longer serve to support contested historical claims or advance some theory or another, they provide the material to create artwork. It is a gesture that both acknowledges and denies the preciousness of the source material, and through the application of my artistic subjectivity, enacts transformation to create new forms. It is at once a hopeful and critical gesture.

I initiated this project with Donald Judd's essay *Specific Objects*. I first encountered the essay in an academic context together with Michael Fried's famous rebuke of minimalism, *Art and Objecthood*. Since reworking both texts, I have been slowly picking my way through critical moments in the trajectory of art theory since minimalism: *Death of the Author* by Roland Barthes, *The Grid* by Rosalyn Krauss, and a primary source for my thesis research, Deleuze and Guattari's *Towards a Minor Literature* (an excerpt from which is illustrated above). I am not producing these works in chronological order or according to a prescribed syllabus, but moving in and out of texts according to my own logic—there are historical relationships between the texts or associations drawn based on subject matter, author or even keyword. I am applying an eclectic, non-linear approach to art history and as the project continues to unfold, it has the potential to pull together increasingly disparate works. What will emerge is a fractured, disorienting compendium that sits in contrast to orderly historical narratives.

Working from the original texts, I pick out phrases and words from the source material to create new forms. As I am not using a systematic approach to word selection, each source text potentially contains endless iterations and many possible alternative readings. I move through the source material applying my own artistic subjectivity to select words to build new texts. It is an

additive and subtractive process: moving forward, moving backward, charting an unknown path through the piece. My selection of words and phrases is intended to build rhythmic clusters of meaning through the use of poetic devices such as alliteration, repetition of sounds and words, and variation. I pull together words that evoke relationships to draw on new meanings through their juxtaposition. My texts are ambiguous and potentially humorous. I play with words that have multiple meanings and the same text may contain contradictory statements. This harkens back to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the minor that opposes “a purely intensive usage of language” in favour of “perfect and unformed expression” (19). My compositions are indeterminate. I seek to subvert the primacy of the text through artistic play to point to the contingency of knowledge.

The unused sections of text are removed to reveal a composition of words and phrases distributed on the page. I strictly adhere to the original word order and do not make further amendments to the organization of the words. The spaces between are as important as the words themselves. It is evidence of something removed and an invitation for the reader to “fill in” the empty spaces. What is removed thus activates the composition and creates a critical resonance integral to the work.

The network of relations between this series and the text-based projects of avant-garde art practice, concrete poetry, conceptual art and writing are not easily delineated if only for the reason that the boundaries of these practices are similarly indiscrete.⁷ My non-linear and at times

⁷ See Jamie Hilder's thorough examination of the points of contention and alignment between concrete poetry and conceptual art in the chapter *Concrete Poetry and Conceptual Art: A Difference of Opinions*. Robert Fitterman and Vanessa Place, *Notes on Conceptualisms* has helped shape my understanding of conceptual writing.

incoherent texts are not unlike the experimental works of early modern writers.⁸ The placement of the text on the page is evocative of Concrete poetry, yet they also align with the text experiments of Fluxus artists or early Conceptual works of such artists as Robert Barry and Lawrence Weiner.

My works are created within a certain structure, but not a strict system per se. The process is driven by my own subjectivity and commitment to the project. If a linear reading of the text seems laborious, the production of the texts is equally so. It requires a concentrated effort and each word selected has the potential to steer the text in an unanticipated direction. This process adds a dimension of chance as I make my way through the source material.

Provisionality plays a significant role in the formal and conceptual development of my text works. Although written in a linear fashion, the composition frustrates a linear reading. This invites a variety of readings as the words may be read in clusters as arranged on the page in a non-sequential order. Alternative paths through the text may be taken based on the proximity of words, jumping from cluster to cluster, moving on the diagonal or top to bottom. This variation demonstrates a permeability that exists in all text: reading and interpretation are not predetermined. I like to think that a text could potentially contain almost any other text—it is a container of meaning that can neither be easily fixed nor exhausted.

8 The influential works of Gertrude Stein or Stéphane Mallarmé continue to resonate through the history of modern art to the contemporary moment.

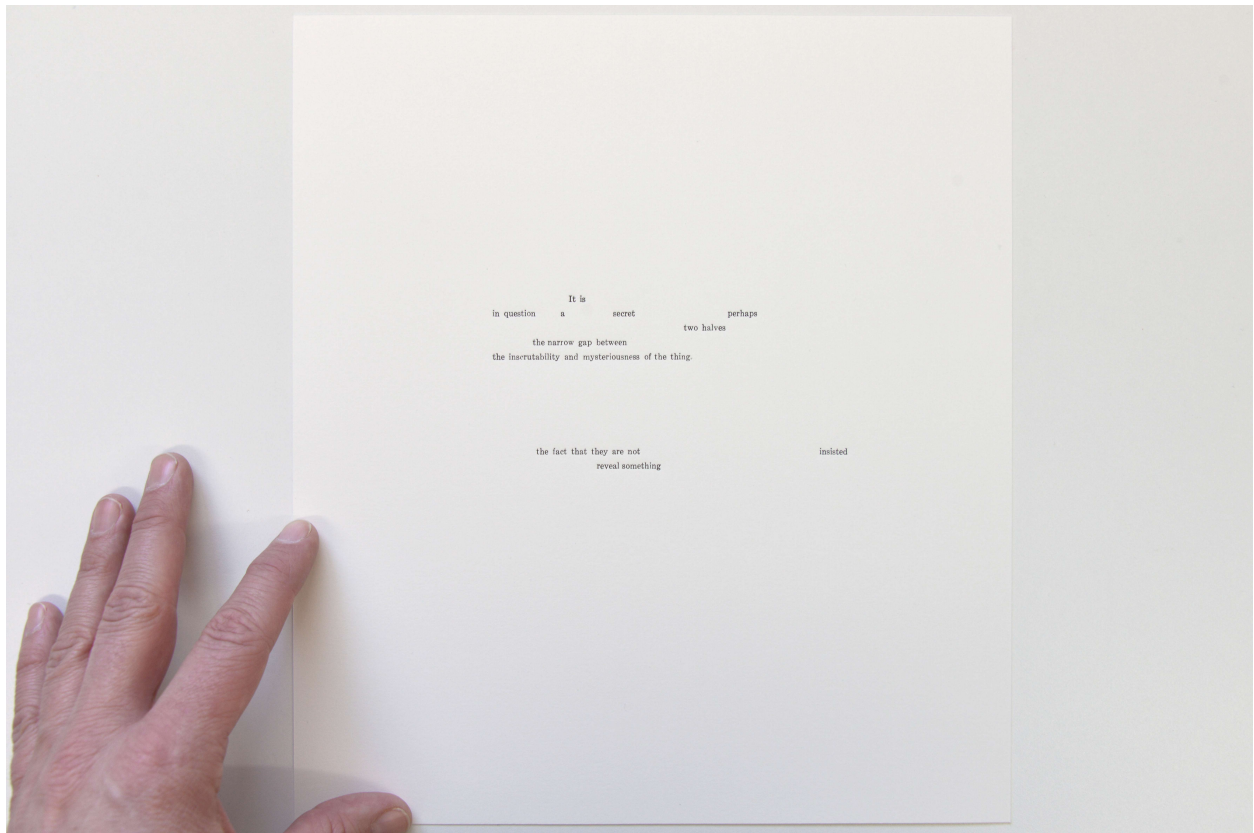


Fig. 2: Troy Grons Dahl, *the fact that they are not / insisted / reveal something [Art and Objecthood]*, 2014-15. Varied edition, 40 letterpress impressions, cloth-bound, hardcover case, 11 x 10 inches. Detail of sheet.

In the work, *the fact that they are not / insisted / reveal something [Art and Objecthood]* I have transposed my composition onto paper using letterpress type. It is a painstaking process as each small character is handled and placed to build a block of text. After a series of impressions are created, the text block is dismantled so the next may be assembled. Though the text blocks could be reassembled, the idiosyncratic placement of text is only approximated, thus making subsequent editions difficult to reproduce. I think there is something poetic in this rhythm of activity as the passages of text are composed and destroyed, existing just long enough to create

an impression. Focus and care are required to create legible text and over hours and hours of work, I felt like I somehow came to know the text differently: as if through handling each character I came to know the text inside and out.

The amount of effort seems to sit in contrast with the nonsensical revelations contained within the text itself. They contain short instructive texts on how to make art or reflect on the role of the artist in society. The compositions at times read like overwrought poetry; other times they feel aphoristic. In my work derived from *Art in Objecthood* I state: “presence / a function of aggressiveness / of special complicity / take it and act accordingly” while in my work from *Death of the Author* I observe: “in / the failure of / madness / vice / is always sought / as if it were in the end / the voice of a single person / 'confiding' in us.” The absurdity is summed up in a bit of advice from my work with *Specific Objects*: “avoid trees and people.”

For the Fried text, I produced a varied edition printed on both archival and non-archival papers. If the acid-free, heavy weight rag papers denote serious fine art printing, kraft and manila papers seem modest or practical; the multi-coloured construction paper is playful, perhaps irreverent. Paper is a fragile material; the non-archival materials in particular make no claims to lasting forever. In spite of this, I've taken measures to preserve the works in a hardcover binding, frame or vitrine. It is the contradiction inherent in the conservational mandate of the museum, and I recognize the temporal and fleeting nature of art and ideas and my desire to hang onto them.

The mode of presentation has a significant effect on the reception of the work. I intend for this work to be presented in two distinct ways. As a collection of sheets gathered in a single

volume, the works become book-like. It takes on the intimate ritual of reading: the volume is handled, opened, pages turned. There is a physical interaction with the art object which moves the experience from a purely contemplative exercise. The pages are not bound and it is not necessary to read the pages in sequence. Depending on the whim of the reader, sections could easily be reconfigured thus lending further variation to the text.



Fig. 3: Troy Gronsdaahl, *the fact that they are not / insisted / reveal something [Art and Objecthood]*, 2014-15. Varied edition, 40 letterpress impressions, cloth-bound, hardcover case, 11 x 10 inches. Detail of sheet in hardcover case.

Individual sheets or small selections may also be framed and presented as a discrete art object or part of a small constellation of art works. Placing the work behind glass frustrates the

primary function of the book, as the viewer can no longer explore the contents at their own discretion. By selecting texts to be presented based on their associated meanings, colour or other organizing principle, I seek to point to the subjective and seemingly arbitrary logic that gives shape to the art historical record. Why green and not blue? Why this and not that? Who decides what is seen and what is not? The vitrine, the frame, even the exhibition is a symbolic enclosure that remove works of art from the realm of the useful and transform their respective contents into artifacts. The minor seeks to disrupt this performative capture built into the logic of the museum through incongruence and humour.

In my work, I am addressing what O'Sullivan would refer to as “an already constituted audience.” Reception is predicated on English literacy and it takes on an added dimension for viewers with knowledge of art history and art theory. My work thus touches on the same paradox as other forms of critique: it is ultimately dependent on the very structures it seeks to disrupt. Yet this is the sphere in which the minor practice must operate. As O'Sullivan observes, the minor seeks to draw from its audience “a subjectivity still-to-come.” This is not dissimilar to the function of humour in the minor: it is ultimately contingent on reception that is activated through mutual recognition. Humour is a key element in a minor practice, not only as mode of deterritorialization, but ones that also supports collective enunciation. Like minor literature, humour “produces an active solidarity in spite of skepticism” and may “forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility” (17). As I will later elaborate, I consider my use of humour as gesture or invitation to the audience, a forging of community, even if a small one.

The difference between
between one

a whole

The use makes it possible to use
either or things not
used before Little done until lately
Almost nothing has been done and, because
possibilities otherwise unavailable could be and
the results could be

specific

of course

hard mass, soft mass,

unobjective uses.
flaccid and a little disagreeable



Fig. 5: Troy Gronsahl, *The Framework Series*, 2014. Performance documentation, Banff Centre.



Fig. 6: Troy Gronsahl, *The Framework Series*, 2014. Performance documentation, Banff Centre.

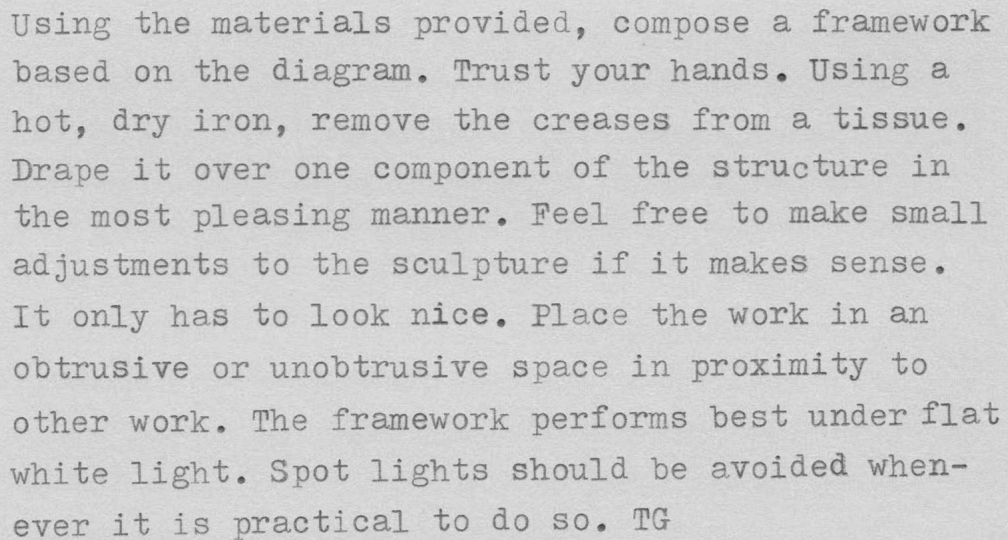
Chapter 2: The grammar of disequilibrium

The Framework Series is a conceptually-based sculpture project. Through strategies consistent with the minor, it seeks to test the performative function of art. Institutional engagement is critical in realizing the project and the use of modest materials, the provisional qualities of the structures themselves, and their activation through humour are key properties of the work.

The Framework Series shares the formal characteristics, geometric composition and material restraint of modern abstract sculpture.⁹ Consisting of improvised wooden structures, my sculptures are composed from five to ten individual lengths of wood. They include offcuts, salvaged, and store-bought home renovation materials ranging in length from one to two metres with a diameter of 5 to 10 millimetres. The work is realized through the careful placement of individual components that prop up, lean on or otherwise support the structure. I use a small number of plastic hand clamps to provide enough stability for the sculpture to stand. The compositions are intuitive, and developed through a process of trial and error. The structures are challenging to assemble and prone to collapse.

In a presentation context, the sculpture is to be assembled by curatorial staff or other designate. I provide all of the necessary components: the appropriate number of clamps and lengths of wood, and an ambiguous diagram of the structure in its realized state (see fig. 8). I also provide short written instructions. The following were produced for a presentation at Access Gallery in Vancouver.

⁹ I can imagine it could be a modernist nod to the avant-garde sculpture of the Constructivists, perhaps a kind of Anthony Caro knockoff or a passing flirtation with formalism.



Using the materials provided, compose a framework based on the diagram. Trust your hands. Using a hot, dry iron, remove the creases from a tissue. Drape it over one component of the structure in the most pleasing manner. Feel free to make small adjustments to the sculpture if it makes sense. It only has to look nice. Place the work in an obtrusive or unobtrusive space in proximity to other work. The framework performs best under flat white light. Spot lights should be avoided whenever it is practical to do so. TG

Fig. 7: Troy Grons Dahl, *The Framework Series*, 2014. Installation instructions.

The directions for assembly are an integral component of *The Framework Series*. Although stated with a matter of fact practicality, I hope to establish the wry tone within which the work was conceived. I make oblique and playful references to artists' writings and projects by 20th century avant-garde and conceptual artists.¹⁰ Donald Judd famously quipped in his essay *Specific Objects*, "a work needs only to be interesting." Here I facetiously suggest that, "it only has to look nice." By implying that a pleasing aesthetic experience is the sole function of the work, and

¹⁰ For example, the text works of Fluxus artists such as George Brecht or early conceptual artists such as Lawrence Weiner.

an understated one at that, I hope to raise questions about the role of criticality in artistic work.

Through the written instructions, process of assembly and performance as a sculpture, *The Framework Series* intentionally contravenes museological convention. For example, the placement of art objects is essential to exhibition design and is carefully considered to support the curatorial premise. In my directions, I reduce the choice of placement to a simple matter of whether or not it is in the way. Since the sculpture is prone to collapse, it further frustrates the conservation function of the museum – while refusing the performative obligation of sculpture.¹¹ The direction to avoid spotlights has a dual function. Under uniform lighting conditions, the shadows are deemphasized and the sculptures flatten out. I have also chosen this wording to refer to working in “the spotlight.”¹² As an artist sometimes operating in the unlit corners of the art world, perhaps this too, is another productive interpretation of the minor.

As Deleuze and Guattari argue, the minor pushes the deterritorialization of expression towards “a willed poverty” (19). The restrained, simplified forms serve this underlying imperative. The materials used in *The Framework Series* are inexpensive and readily available. I’ve applied a gold finish to the plastic hand clamps using spray-paint: a tongue-in-cheek gesture that winks at the idea of art as a class of luxury goods. Further to this point, my sculptures resist the spectacular feats of material and scale that have become the norm in a competitive art world characterized by international art fairs, biennials, and blockbusters. The modest scale and material poverty of *The Framework Series* are key values and a way of operating within the minor.

¹¹ A curator shared an anecdote at a studio visit about one of his former art school instructors who would test the stability of sculptural works with a kick of his foot.

¹² Which I became acquainted with through the writing of academic and theorist Stephen Wright.

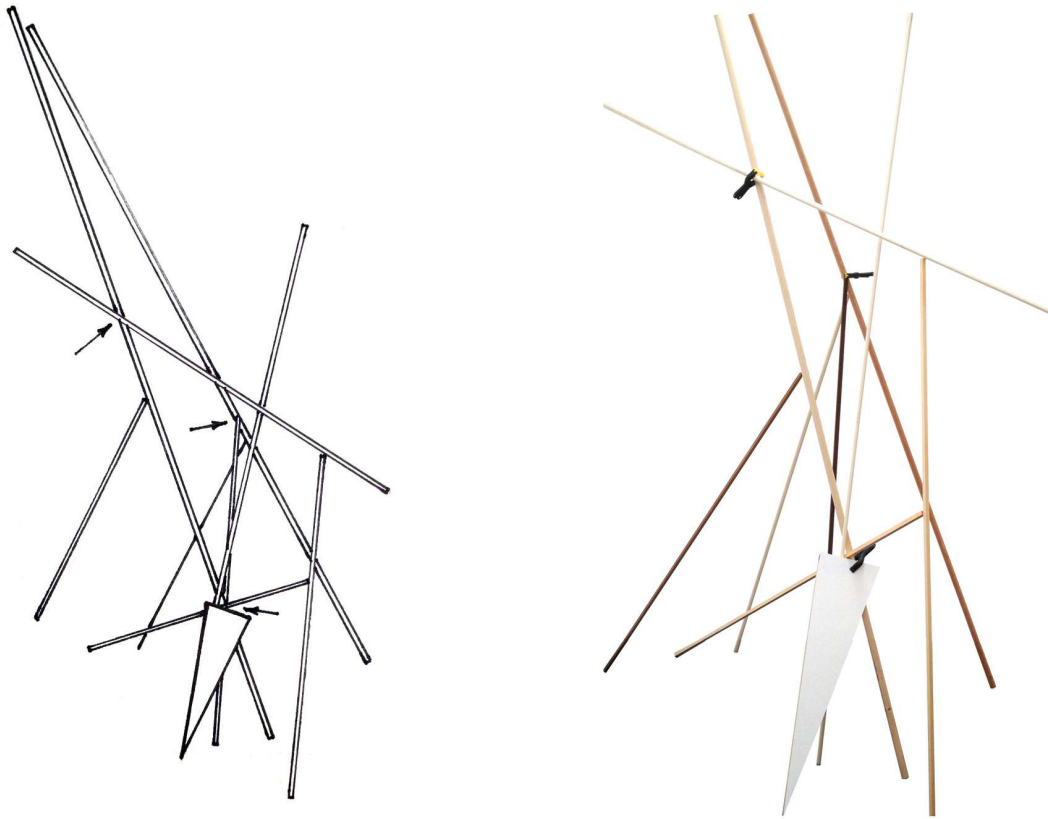


Fig. 8: Troy Grons Dahl, *The Framework Series*, 2014. Diagram and documentation of studio installation.

In the instance of collapse, the gallery is directed to leave the sculpture in its fallen state for the duration of the day. The sticks create geometric compositions on the floor. I like to think of them as some sort of divination device akin to casting stones. The gallery is directed to reassemble it each morning before opening, a chore that tests institutional patience and adds variation to the sculpture. Here, I playfully invoke what Deleuze has referred to as a “grammar of disequilibrium” (112). Deleuze suggests that if language is considered as a “homogeneous

system in equilibrium, or close to equilibrium, defined by constant terms and relations” (108) then variation is only possible through the introduction of perpetual disequilibrium. The minor is a “grammar of disequilibrium” that tests the performative limits of the major. By creating sculptures that are susceptible to collapse, I am literally and figuratively bringing disequilibrium into play to disrupt the “constant terms and relations” that give structure to the institutions of art.

Of course, all of this is a bit funny and humour is an important aspect of my practice. I am not seeking immediate gratification but rather a gradual opening of meaning through the slow realization of the humour at play in my work. Similar to Robert Garnett's concept of abstract humour, I employ a kind of “slow release art joke” (185). My work is typically conceived with deadpan wit and often employs irony. I am careful to differentiate between my use of irony as a productive device, and the negative ironic gestures of post-modern practice. As Garnett observes, “humour is inclusive, ‘superior irony’ is exclusive. The joke is empathetically addressed to a ‘you’. Detached irony is addressed to a ‘them’. You can’t tell a joke to a ‘them’” (186). I consider my use of self-effacing humour as a gesture towards the viewer, an invitation to relate through mutual recognition of a shared sensibility.

While the very real potential for the sculpture to collapse charges the work, actual structural failure creates an unexpected encounter between the viewer and the artwork. It is not necessarily immediately funny, but as Garnett elaborates, abstract humour “is not necessarily a laughing matter, it is more like being put in a ‘funny’ or ‘preposterous’ situation, like that of a critic encountering a work of art that seems to disable one’s prior criteria for the success or failure of a work of art” (177). The collapse generates a variety of viewer responses. Surprise, an

almost uniform response, is indicative of the transgressive nature of the sculptures. They're simply not expected to fall. Embarrassment is another common response. This may point to an anxiety that people feel about engaging with art which may be exacerbated by feeling implicated by the collapse. In most cases, laughter alleviates the tension.

The Framework Series employs humour as a means to manipulate the major to create new expressive forms. The instructions and diagram are deliberately ambiguous to complicate the installation of the work and invite the subjectivity of the installation personnel. Although the sculptures could be circulated, exhibited and collected, they are difficult to accurately reproduce in subsequent iterations. The title itself invites contradiction. A framework refers to an essential support structure or a system of organizing principles. Yet, these temporary sculptures refuse to perform as expected. They can be frustrating to install. They are nicely designed, yet not. They fall over. They fail. Or perhaps more importantly, they don't not fail. They are contrary, contradictory, mischievous. This is the minor at work.



Fig. 9: Troy Grons Dahl, *When the cosmos aligned, if only briefly and largely unnoticed. Equinox, total solar eclipse & perigee moon, March 20, 2015, 4:45 p.m. local time* (left) *Solstice, June 21, 2015, 10:38 a.m. local time* (right), 2015. Cyanotype, 22 x 30 inches. Photo credit: Scott Massey.

Chapter 3: It is what it is, only not entirely.

Most art historical accounts trace the lineage of monochrome painting to the art of the Russian avant-garde in the early 20th century. In 1916, Kasimir Malevich announced: “our world of art has become new, non-objective, pure” (122). His rejection of representation through a radical simplification of form helped to usher in one of painting's most enduring idioms. He viewed his early monochromes as a distillation of the medium of painting to achieve pure feeling. Just five years later, his compatriot Alexander Rodchenko exhibited his series of monochromes that was a provocation of a different stripe: the end of art. Monochrome painting has since provided a pliable form, a vessel, a projection surface for modern art's various preoccupations with abstract form (colour field painting and minimalism in particular). According to which position you adhere to, the monochrome is meditative, it is transcendent, it is a joke, it is nihilistic, it is a void. It rejects interpretation, emotion, or just the opposite.

In my recent series of cyanotype images, I draw on the historical associations of monochrome painting while playing in its ambiguous zones of interpretive possibility. Cyanotype is a photographic process that produces blue, monochromatic images through the exposure of a photo-sensitive emulsion to the sun or other source of ultraviolet light. The technique was first applied in botany using a photogram method to produce images of plant specimens.¹³ I am similarly interested in creating a photographic register—in this case of ultraviolet light itself.

¹³ English botanist Anna Atkins created a volume of photographic images of plant specimens in 1843.

The cyanotype images previously depicted were exposed to capture an astrological event—the vernal equinox which coincided with a total solar eclipse and perigee moon, and the summer solstice. During the events, I exposed coated paper to both direct and indirect sources of natural light. The variations in intensity and tone are attributed to variations in available light, duration of the exposure and slight irregularities in the application of the emulsion. The use of the cyanotype process is consistent with my use of impoverished materials. It is a practical photographic medium that does not require a darkroom or developing chemicals and the popularity of the cyanotype with amateurs is undoubtedly related to the simplicity of its technique. It is defined as an alternative process—it is photography's other, if you will—and by using this process, I am rubbing up against the traditional criteria for good fine art photography.

The title is a critical component of this work. By the circumstances of its production, this image is, in fact, a picture of “when the cosmos aligned, if only for a brief moment and largely unnoticed.” Yet the claim made by the title cannot be verified by the contents of its image. This creates a productive incongruity that is characteristic of a minor practice. As Simon O'Sullivan observes: “A minor art pushes up against the edges of representation; it bends it, forcing it to the limits and often to a certain kind of absurdity.” My title is not unlike the widely varying, highly subjective, and difficult to substantiate claims made about monochrome painting.

This riddlic form is a strategy I have explored in previous works and the playful use of language is a signal to the viewer that there is more going on than first appears. The title brings together the sort of mystical claims of modern abstract painting with the matter of fact titles of early conceptual photography. It also alludes to the English language idiom “when the stars

align.” This phrase can be interpreted as a favourable sign or a set of promising conditions for success, yet the subsequent phrase “if only for a brief moment and largely unnoticed” suggests that the opportunity has failed to be fully realized or recognized. I think there is something poignant and pathetic about this statement. It reflects on the promise and difficulty of artistic work and this shared anxiety is an empathetic gesture.

My cyanotype monochromes are indexical photographs inasmuch as they are a record of the intensities of ultraviolet light at a specific time and place. Yet they do not have the mimetic representation of a subject that one might expect from a photograph. This could be considered a deterritorialization of photography that both denies and affirms its mimetic function. The only cues to its status as a photograph are the white border that delineates a field of blue and the information provided on a wall label. Like Ed Ruscha's gas stations and other early conceptual photographic projects, my cyanotype is what it says it is. I intend to continue the project in a serial manner akin to other conceptual projects. Although it's no longer prescient or perhaps even necessary to deconstruct the concept of truth in photography, I like the playful reference to an earlier conceptual project, which has since assumed a position within the major.

no other

no other

no longer

that this hand is too slow

We know now that
meaning

is

at once sublime and comic and profound
ridiculousness indicates precisely the truth
imitate

in exemplary fashion

By positioning my work in relation to the art world's dominant modes of presentation and representation—the exhibition, the institution, the discursive space of art—I seek to develop a methodology that is critical, politically relevant, and forward looking. Reflecting on my work presented in the thesis exhibition, it has occurred to me that there is another dimension of my work that I have not fully engaged with in my research: affect. Operating in the realm of feeling or mood, affect is not read but rather experienced. Or it is on the cusp of experience. According to Lawrence Grossberg, affect is “perhaps the most difficult plane of our lives to define,” but can be described as “what gives 'color,' 'tone' or 'texture' to our experiences.” Sianne Ngai describes affect as “a 'significance' that is not reducible to signs and signification” (45).

On first blush, affect might seem to contradict the structures and logic I employ in my practice; it is not typically associated with the historical precursors of my work. As writer Eve Meltzer observes in her book, *Systems We Have Loved: Conceptual Art, Affect, and the Antihumanist Turn*, art historical accounts tend to discount, downplay or disregard the role of affect in conceptual art practice. Despite this disavowal, Meltzer claims “affect can't really be kept down, although it does get relegated to the spaces that our discourse don't attend to” (87).

Though it is an aspect of my work I have been reluctant to address, through observation and critique I have come to appreciate the important role affect has in the reception of my work. There are autobiographical and emotional elements in play and the care with which I handle material seems to call for a certain kind of quiet attentiveness. There is a sensual play between absence and presence, the perceptible and the imperceptible. In this way, affect works within my conceptual strategy to draw attention to the ways that meaning is being produced beyond logic.

Affect operates in aesthetic realm of the possible¹⁴ and I am interested in further exploring how this maybe drawn out in my work, perhaps even as subject matter or material for making art.

Conclusion: Possible Possibilities

Deleuze and Guattari claimed “there is nothing that is major or revolutionary except the minor” (26). That's the sort of talk that can get a person on a government watch list. The revolutionary potential in the minor practice is not in the making of placards, although it could be if it was framed as such. Nor is it the staging of rallies, though under certain circumstances it could be that too. The revolutionary potential in the minor practice could be expressed in confounding and strange situations. In funny situations. In grammar that's bad. The minor thrives in moments of incongruity.

What a minor art practice presents is a set of conditions for art to be socially and politically relevant. According to Rancière the aesthetic, “has a metapolitics, a manner of ‘doing politics’ otherwise than politics does” (8). It is within this aesthetic sphere that the minor must operate. The political biases of the exhibition format, the institution, the major, are not grounds for unconditional refusal but rather strategic engagement. The major becomes a growing medium for the production of new subjectivities and possible possibilities.

By working in and between zones of affirmation and dissent, I seek to move critique out of a place of negation and into one of creativity. Hinging on moments of ambiguity and

¹⁴ An idea put forth by Deleuze and Guattari in *What is Philosophy?*

estrangement, my practice is less about making sense of things and more about the expressive possibility of non-sense. It is this potential that gives a minor practice its charge. A minor practice is not uncomplicated but it is similarly not stuck. It seeks to disrupt the major's preoccupation with preserving sensible, orderly narratives and predetermined modes of being. The minor is always in a process of becoming. It is future-oriented and hopefully hopeful.

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