2010

Different Ways To Record Light

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DIFFERENT WAYS TO RECORD LIGHT

A Thesis Presented

By

RYAN PATRICK FEENEY

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of

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Department of Art Architecture and Art History
DIFFERENT WAYS TO RECORD LIGHT

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By
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Thank you.
Different Ways to Record Light is a series of photographs, videos and objects that explore the affect that popular culture has on how I perceive, and make sense of the world around me. By using light as a thematic and metaphoric subject this work opens up a discourse about the role that images and technology play in our perceptual lives. This thesis paper will give a theoretical, contextual and historical framework for the concepts explored in my studio practice.
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I have this very vivid memory of being around the age of eleven or twelve. It was at the age when being fashionable became an important part of the social aspect of going to school. The cool thing to have at the time was a wristwatch. I cannot remember why a wristwatch was a popular thing to have; perhaps to a fifth grader it signified an air of maturity that was desirable. Whatever the reason, after Christmas break that year, about half of my class came to school with a watch around their wrist.

It wasn’t long after everyone started wearing their new watches that someone figured out it was possible to catch the light from the fluorescent tubes in the ceiling and reflect a circle of light on the wall. As often happens in a classroom filled with young people, once one person started doing it, another would start, and then another, and after a while the action snowballed and everyone with a watch was shining a light onto the wall. As soon as the teacher would turn his back to the class to write something on the blackboard, a number of dancing points of light would converge on the back of the instructor’s head.

Today I am twenty-seven years old and whenever I see a spot of light bouncing off a watch and onto a wall I am immediately brought back to that day in fifth grade when all of those lights were pointed at the back of my teachers head. In fact, I would say that I am unable to see a similar light without it sparking that memory. That experience, for whatever reason, had such a lasting effect on me that it dictates how I have come (and will come) to
I understand any similar experience. I am very interested in the fact that this small moment had such a profound effect on me.

This realization was the inspiration behind the video Dancing Light. Dancing Light is a two and a half minute video loop of a re-creation of that moment. I sat with a video camera, a small reflective surface (not a wristwatch, but something similar) and a light source and I performed the same act that so many of my classmates performed that day in the classroom. When projected onto a wall, this video removes the physical act of the reflection, but still projects the effect of the action. Although there is nothing in the frame that would signify a classroom setting, for me that act is one specific to a recollection of my childhood classroom.

Figure #1: Dancing Light. Video Still, 2010

This video work, Dancing Light, is one of the many works in a series of photographs, videos and objects entitled Different Ways To Record Light. In this body of work I explore the affect that my relationship with memory and popular culture has on perceptual
experiences. I am interested, epistemologically, in the phenomenon of how one comes to understand something seen or experienced. There have been many different theories written about how things such as memory and cultural identity affect our understanding of perception and it is those theories that form the backbone of my project.

The first question that my work asks is ‘how do we make sense of what we see?’ When something is experienced: perceptually, physically, or metaphysically, there is a recollection that happens in our mind. We have an automatic impulse to place what is experienced in a framework that the mind is already able to understand. This framework is made up of an identity that has been created by a confluence of different elements such as personal memory, collective memory and a relationship to popular culture. The combination of these elements creates a sort of lens through which one sees, and ultimately comes to make sense of the world.

In this work, I explore the lens of my own identity. The affect that these different elements have on my perception of the world is a very subtle, yet powerful one. Whenever I see or experience something it is informed by this lens, yet its power over my perception often goes unnoticed. I am interested in searching out moments when this lens becomes evident. In paying attention to these moments, the goal is to gain a better understanding of my own identity, and the authority that that identity has over how I come to understand my experiences.

This idea is mirrored in Guy Debord’s book Society of the Spectacle. In this book Debord introduces a term he calls the ‘spectacle’, which is relevant to the way I think about images. “The spectacle is not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people
that is mediated by images. The spectacle cannot be understood as a mere visual deception produced by mass-media technologies. It is a worldview that has actually been materialised, a new view of a world that has become objective.iii

Debord’s claim here is that the ‘spectacle’ of images that we are continuously subject to shapes our notions of reality. At times, without being aware of it, the images we see in the media have a direct influence on the way that we see the world. This idea of images that we have been exposed to changing the way in which we come to understand the world is the central idea in my current body of work, Different Ways To Record Light.

This idea is something that reoccurs through my work and is at the crux of the concepts that I am interested in exploring. This ‘lens’ is made up of all of the things that one has experienced due to their specific circumstances, for example era, geographic location, class, race, etc. It is through these specifics that one encounters the world. A very broad explanation of this would be to say that since I was raised as a white male in the American Midwest, I encounter the world from the viewpoint of a white, American male, and I am unable to encounter the world from any other viewpoint. This concept for me raises a number of questions, primarily about the possibility (or impossibility) of a ‘universal experience’.

After doing the research for this project, I have come to the conclusion that the idea of a universal experience is more complicated than I once thought. I used to have this romantic and naïve belief that I could watch a sunset and have the same experience as someone from a different era or a different culture would have as they watch a sunset. However, upon reflecting on perceptual and phenomenological experience, I have come to
the realization that my encounter with a sunset is informed by what media has projected sunsets to be (how sunsets are used in movies and greeting cards, for example). Therefore someone without the same exposure to those movies and greeting cards would not possibly be able to share my experience. If our experiences are subject to the media that we are exposed to as a result of our culture, then ‘the universal’ is a tough thing to achieve.

As implied in the title of this body of work, ‘light’ is the thematic subject matter that I am exploring. In this work, I use light as a starting point in the conversation about interconnectivity between how one understands experience and one’s cultural upbringing. Light was a logical starting point because of its pluralistic nature. There are different kinds of light (artificial, natural), light holds many different metaphoric meanings (spirituality, knowledge) light is at once both universal and cultural, meaning that all societies place and importance on the power of light, but different cultures have different ways of interpreting that importance. I have a multifaceted relationship with light. My understanding of light’s effect is made up of a combination of memories, assumptions, scientific understanding and cultural references. For example, I identify as a photographer; photography is a medium that is dependent upon light, so in that sense, I am dependent upon light as a form of communication, on the other hand, I was raised in a Catholic family, a tradition that attributes great religious and metaphorical meaning to ‘light’. Although these meanings attached to light have different signification, they join together to form the knowledge and associations that I have about light, and what it does. Despite the fact the light can be explained in a very concrete and scientific way, someone from a different background, with different memories would not have the same understanding as I do of ‘light’. Through the investigation of this
idea, *Different Ways To Record Light* gives some insight into the inner workings of my own understanding of what I perceive.
CHAPTER 2

ST. JAMES THE LESS, AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND DIAGRAMS

The way I approach my studio practice is by working in series rather than single pieces. This aspect of the way I work is a very important part of understanding the trajectory of my work and the interests that I choose to investigate. Each series or project acts as a steppingstone towards different ways of articulating the concerns that I explore. Because of the approach to making work, it is important to discuss other projects that I have done in order to provide an introduction to the theories and content that I work with in the series Different Ways To Record Light.

Figure #2: Image from St. James The Less. Digital C-Print, 2007

The first project that I showed during graduate school was a series of photographs entitled St. James the Less that were taken at the catholic grade school I attended in Columbus, Ohio. I spent nine years in that school. My parents both work there, my mother
as a teacher, and my father as a financial director. I took these images as I prepared to move from Ohio to Massachusetts.

What interested me about these images was how the affect of being *in* the space was so different from the affect of looking at an image *of* the space. Walking down the hallways of the school with my camera was a very nostalgic and sentimental experience. I was confronted with specific memories; I remembered the clothes that I would wear to school, or the conversations that happened in the hallways between classes. Upon looking at the images, I found that the space was pushed away from that sentimentality. Looking at the images was still a nostalgic experience for me, but the images put the space, and the objects within the space, at a far enough distance that I was able to look at the content of the images from a more objective viewpoint. In the images, I could see a ‘history’ of where I had come from, as opposed to reliving that history, as I did when I was walking the halls of my old grade school. This difference between physical memory experienced through being in that space and memory experienced through seeing images of the space is a very important concept to my work and has become a continuous theme that I explore. This exemplifies the role that images play in the formation of the identity through which we see the world. This realization would eventually lead me to the use the metaphor of light in order to further investigate the difference and relationship between memory and experience.

The series *Autobiography* is a collection of images that I found in my family home in a shoebox, tucked inside a closet. These images were the ‘bad pictures’. These were the photographs whose imperfections kept them out of the photo albums and away from the living room walls. These pictures that I collected were unfocused, poorly composed and unspecific. These ‘bad pictures’ are a common part of most family snapshot collections.
While looking through these shoeboxes full of pictures, I became very interested in the images that fell short of the traditionally successful snapshot. I found myself noticing things that went unnoticed in the other images; the pattern of the carpet in my grandparents’ old house, or the decorations for a party that I had forgotten about, for example. These details took a back seat to the intended subject of those ‘successful’ images, and therefore the specificity of the images didn’t seem as jarring as they did in the ‘unsuccessful’ pictures. The images in this collection form an index of memory, time and place. The collection of images in *Autobiography* comments on the fact that the images that we fill our photo albums with create a subjective archive of the past while the rejected pictures have the ability to move towards a more objective archive.

![Figure # 3: Images from *Autobiography*. C-Prints, 2009](image)

In the introduction to his book *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes writes about the phenomenon of how an image cannot be separated from its referent, and it is that impossibility of separation that creates a sort of encounter with ‘the real’. *Autobiography* asks what happens when that referent is shifted, or moved aside; what then is ‘the real’ that is
encountered? Since there is no person or event that assumes the role of the main subject of the picture, different details are able to fill the void of the main referent. Barthes uses the term *punctum* to discuss the moment in a photograph that ‘pierces’ the viewer psyche and gives meaning to the photograph. When a specific referent is absent, that punctum shifts from something personal (like a documentation of a specific person) to something more general such as, for example, a style of décor or a time period.

The final body of work that provides a context to the central themes in *Different Ways To Record Light* is entitled *Diagrams*. This project examines how images function in today’s image culture. One thing that has happened with the advent of technologies such as digital cameras and online social networking is that the public and private spheres have collapsed into each other. In *Diagrams*, I collected images and objects from a wide range of sources: snapshots found at garage sales, portraits pulled off the Internet, images torn out of magazines and books as well as images and relics from my own past. I organized, arranged, rearranged, juxtaposed, drew upon, and ultimately re-photographed a variety of combinations of this source material. The intention of this project was to draw connections between all of the sources so that their origins would be indecipherable from one another. In *Diagrams*, I forced connections through marks and highlighted the similarities in the images in order to point out the blurring between what is private and what is public.
Today there is little difference between the public and private realms. Something intended to be private is presented in the same platform as something intended to be seen publicly. Websites such as Youtube and Facebook are prime examples of this. As well as private moments existing in photo albums in family homes, they are also put into virtual albums on the Internet, in the same space as advertisements, fashion images and celebrity gossip. Images from private sources are now displayed and consumed on the same level as images from popular culture.

What affect does this collapse of the public and private have on one’s sense of culture, history and identity? This is the main question posed by the images in the Diagrams series. If there is a separation between the public and private spheres, it is a complicated one, then the difference between my public identity and my cultural identity is also complicated. My goal as an artist is neither to search for a separation between these two spheres, nor to claim that there is not a separation, but rather just to sift through this muddy territory in order to make some order out of it. The idea of playing with these contradictions and
complications has become an invaluable part of the work in the *Different Ways To Record Light* series.

Cultural theorist Michel Foucault has written that we are all visual learners. Our view of our father forms our notions of masculinity, and of our mothers, femininity. It is through this visual mode of learning that we first learn about the world, and this visual way of learning continues to be a great part of how we come to understand things on a day-to-day basis. Taking into account the fact that we learn about our identities through visual means in this way, then as the relationship between the public and private become more complicated, so do the ideas behind our public and private identities.

Author Joanne Finkelstein reflects on this idea in the quotation from her text *The Art of Self-Invention*: “Popular culture functions as a toolkit for shaping identity. This is historically interesting as well as economically consequential as global consumer markets regulate the products we use to effect these makeovers. The daily requirement to perform an identity naturalizes this state of affairs. We accept the necessity to enact ourselves.” In this passage from her book, she explores the importance that popular culture plays on the way in which our identities are developed.

This reintroduces the ideas mentioned in the first chapter. Guy Debord in *Society of the Spectacle* further claims that our realities change with changing relationships to images. If there is little separation between public and private images, then also, there can be little separation between public and private identity. When images from the private realm such as family photographs and home movies, become confused with commodity and social institutions, then, theoretically, the ‘reality’ that we live in becomes one of commodity and social institution. Debord goes on to write: “The spectacle that falsifies reality is
nevertheless a real product of that reality. Conversely, real life is materially invaded by the contemplation of the spectacle, and ends up absorbing it and aligning itself with it. Objective reality is present on both sides. Each of these seemingly fixed concepts has no other basis than its transformation into its opposite: reality emerges within the spectacle, and the spectacle is real.”

What Debord is saying here is that once the institution of the ‘spectacle’ presents itself as a reality, then it not only becomes reality, but it, in a way, is able to control one’s notions of reality. The collapse between public and private therefore would have the unique ability to alter our notions of identity and make it impossible to distinguish between who we are on a personal level versus who we are in the public eye. Through the work in these past projects, as well as in my current work, I aim to simply call attention to these questions and perhaps lead myself, and my viewers, towards new ways of evaluating how images work within a social world.
I make a lot of collages. This habit of collage has proven to be a very useful exercise and an invaluable part of my studio practice. I have found that by removing an image from its original context and creating a new context for it, or just allowing an image to exist outside of any context, often results in the meaning of that image shifting. This is no new practice. Artists often work within the medium of collage in order to develop different ways of approaching images. Once a found picture is used in a collage there is an unveiling of some underlying information, or at least the image allows itself to be read in a new way.

Earlier this year I made a collage that had a profound effect on me. As I began this project, I had decided that a good starting point would be to collect textbooks on the physics of light and color for source material for a series of collages. One of the first collages that I made was compiled of two simple images from different textbooks. One image was a photograph of a prism refracting white light into a rainbow spectrum, and the other a crude illustration of a spotlight. I removed the images from their sources and arranged them in a way so that it appeared that the illustration was the source of the light being refracted through the prism. This was a very quick collage. The concept was simple. My goal in making this collage was to use two unrelated images to create the illusion of one unified photographic space. The outcome of the collage, however, went well beyond that.
I had not noticed this while the image was in the original context of its textbook, but once the image of the prism was in the fixed context of the collage, I came to the exciting realization that it was impossible for me to look at an image of a prism without automatically thinking about Pink Floyd’s iconic album cover for ‘Dark Side of the Moon.’ This automatic association, though hidden under the more obvious associations one has when looking at a prism, nevertheless, was always there for me. It was through the use of this image in the collage that the connection between the prism and the Pink Floyd record cover was able to jump from the back of my mind to the front. My theory behind this idea is based on the fact that I was exposed to, and familiar with, the record cover before I started learning about prisms and light physics. That means that when I did start learning about how light refracts to make a rainbow, I was learning it through the knowledge that I already had about the record cover.
I was fascinated by this realization. I was never a huge fan of Pink Floyd, I never owned that record growing up, but I had always been able to recognize its cultural significance. It is simply because I understand the relevance of that record to the culture that I am a part of that it became an important part of how I viewed the world. In this case, my knowledge of this small part of popular culture actually had an impact on the way I learned, and came to understand, aspects of science. This revelation opened up a number of questions for me; what was it about Pink Floyd that had an affect on the way that I encountered the world? If this cultural element had such a profound affect on me, what other cultural aspects alter my understanding of perception? These are the important questions asked throughout the work in *Different Ways To Record Light*. In response to the acknowledgment of the effect that Pink Floyd’s album cover had on me, I made the work *Science / Culture*. This piece is a pair of photographic prints that essentially recreate the *Prismatic* collage. This version, however, is made up of original captured images rather than found elements. The image on the left side of the piece is a photograph of a spotlight and the image on the right is a photograph of the iconic Pink Floyd record. Through the act of literally including the image of the Pink Floyd record, the piece is intended to point out to the viewer the cultural relevance of the iconic album, and in turn, open up for the viewer the same questions that the realization had opened up for me.
The ideas behind the piece *Science / Culture* echo a short essay by Sigmund Freud on a novelty item called ‘The Mystic Writing Pad’. In this essay Freud gives analogies to how the conscious and subconscious mind work. In this analogy, he equates memory to writing. The Mystic Writing Pad is a toy that is made up of a resin or wax tablet covered by a thin sheet of cellophane. When a mark is made on the top cellophane layer with a stylist, the sheet adheres to the wax tablet and that adhesion manifests as a dark mark. The cellophane sheet can then be lifted, separating the connection between the top and bottom layers and thus erasing the mark. Freud’s interest in this device is in what happens after a mark has been ‘erased’. The mark is no longer seen on the top sheet, but the impression of the mark is still visible on the wax layer when looked at without the cellophane and at an angle. This, according to Freud, is a perfect analogy of how the conscious and subconscious memory works. The ‘memory’ of the mark is both temporary and permanent.
This analogy also works well for the concept behind the thesis of my current body of work. The subconscious impression that is left behind from, for example, growing up in a culture that values Pink Floyd’s Dark Side of the Moon, creates a sort of cultural lens.

According to what Freud says in his reflections on the ‘Mystic Writing Pad’, it is difficult, if not impossible, to view the world without looking through that lens.
CHAPTER 4
LIGHT SOURCES FROM MY CHILDHOOD

In the contemporary art world, nostalgia is usually a negative term. It is used to describe work whose content is derived out of sentimentality rather than some greater purpose. Despite this, my work is at times unapologetically nostalgic. It has to be that way. This is something that took me a long time to realize, and sometimes I have even struggled against that sense of personal nostalgia in my work. I believe that if one really evaluates and pays attention to what one is most nostalgic about, one can learn a lot about oneself. If this body of work is about how I view the world through the lens of my own personal and cultural upbringing, then there must be an intimate connection between the work and my sense of history, identity, and past. It is through the use of nostalgia that I reach that greater, more complex meaning. At this point in the paper it should be clear that the goal of this project is to draw out those moments where my view of the world is obviously influenced by my cultural understanding of the world; challenging the idea that perception and cultural knowledge are entirely unrelated.

The piece *Three Light Sources From My Childhood* is a good example of this overt nostalgia that often appears in my work. *Three Light Sources From My Childhood* is a photographic triptych made up of reproductions of snapshots found in my personal family archive. Each of these images includes a source of light: an image of the sun, a campfire and a lamp in a domestic space. These three photographs are devoid of people. They include very few signifiers at all. I have no way of knowing who the photographer was or what their intentions were for taking the pictures. These photos are part of the subcategory of snapshots
that were not ‘good enough’ to fit into any of the family photo albums that was explored in my *Autobiography* series.

When the three images are combined they create a sort of loose narrative of my childhood, and through that narrative they hint at the origins of my personal relationship with light. The image of the lamp for example, shows a domestic space that includes small details of a specific type of decor (the style of lamp, the type of wall paper, the wreath hanging on the wall, etc.) These are signs that could perhaps point to a middle-class, American, Midwestern home. The campfire photograph has no details of location; however it could perhaps signify a geographic location or a leisure activity only participated in by a certain demographic. These socioeconomic indicators offer a male, Midwestern anthropological, investigation of my way of looking at and interacting with the world.

Figure #7: *Three Light Sources From My Childhood*. Digital C-Prints mounted on Sintra Board, 2010
By finding these images and appropriating them, my goal is to search out and explore ways in which I view the world. I have an understanding of light (how it is experienced, what metaphorical meanings are attached to it, etc.), and I have come to that understanding through a number of associations and/or assumptions that have been dictated by upbringing; perhaps by taking a closer look at the beginning of my relationship with light, like I do in *Three Light Sources From My Childhood*, I will be able to decipher some affect that my upbringing has had. It is a difficult task to approach images from my own history and evaluate them with a level of objectivity, due to the nostalgic nature of the image, but it is important to do this. If I am able to look at images such as these in a more objective manner, then I might be able to delineate the authority that the lens of my identity has on the way in which I perceive.

W. J. T. Mitchell is a theorist that writes about images and how they function. In his essay ‘What Do Pictures “Really” Want’ he writes about this subjective / objective dilemma. Paraphrasing this essay, he states that due to the simulated specificity to their referents, pictures are subjective by nature. In their specificity, we identify with the objects present in an image. We have all looked at a photograph before and said something along the lines of “that looks like the neighborhood that I grew up in” or “the clothes that person is wearing reminds me of a certain time period”. People have a natural inclination to make connections between what they see and what they know; it is these connections that make looking at a picture such a subjective experience. Obviously this is especially true when looking at images of one’s own past. A common goal of many artists (myself included) is to separate an image from its subjectivity, or at least utilize that subjectivity for a greater purpose.
In the works that I have made that seem to have the strongest sense of nostalgia, my aim is to cause a sort of rupture in that subjective mode of looking. In creating this rupture, the image would theoretically lose its ‘power or subjectivity’. In dismantling an image’s power, new meaning and significance can become unveiled, new aspects of the image become present that were not present from the subjective viewpoint. This is precisely what I am doing in *Three Light Sources From My Childhood* and other works in my thesis exhibition.
I would be remiss if in my thesis I did not include a discussion of the effect that digital media has on how we view, interact with and understand the world. The piece *Untitled (Video Still)* attempts to explore the relationship between digital media and perception. In chapter one of this paper, I discussed a quote from Guy Debord where he explains that our notion of reality is ‘mediated’ by our relationships with images. A large fraction of the images that most of us come into contact with on a daily basis come from a digital screen, therefore according to Debord, that digital screen would always be present in the way that we see.

![Figure #8: Untitled (Video Still). Video Still, 2010](image)

*Untitled (Video Still)* is an image of a sunset displayed on a flat screen television. The image is one that was appropriated from a video found on the open source video sharing website Youtube.com. If you do a search for ‘sunset’ on Youtube, you will get an
extraordinary number of results. I find the necessity for people to post videos of sunsets over
and over again on this website very interesting. This reintroduces the ideas mentioned earlier
about the complications between the public and private spheres. As videos like this become
more and more ubiquitous on the Internet, they further inform our notions of what a sunset is,
and how one is supposed to approach a sunset. What Untitled (Video Still) does is point out
the complex implications that are involved with this phenomenon of real experience and
simulated experience through a digital screen becoming confused.

For this video work, I chose one of the sunset videos; the one that I found to be the
most stunning. The video I chose was clearly from a cell phone camera; the colors were
unnatural, the resolution was poor, the movement of the video was shaky and jarring, the
sound quality was horrible. I picked this video over the many others because the digital
quality of this clip was painfully obvious, and I found myself very attracted to that. For this
work, I display a still from the video on a TV monitor. This places the viewer in a position
where he / she expects the image to move or the sun fall behind the horizon. There is a
tension that is created between the expectation of something to happen and the static nature
of the image.

Now more than ever before, the world is experienced through the digital screen.
Already we can see evidence of how that change is affecting everyday interactions. For
example, I cannot count the number of times when I have heard someone use abbreviated
internet lingo in real life; stating ‘BRB’ instead of telling me that they would ‘be right back’
or saying ‘LOL’ when they thought something was funny rather than actually ‘laughing out
loud’.
Theorist Jean Baudrillard writes about this in his book *Simulacra and Simulation*. Once an original is no longer present, according to Baudrillard, then the simulation of it becomes the signifier; the real embodied experience. This is what we see happening as the digital screen becomes more and more a part of how we experience the world. The social interactions that take place in the virtual sphere are increasingly becoming not a *virtual* social interaction, but *real embodied* social interaction. For the anecdote behind the video work *Untitled (Video Still)*, the thousands of videos of sunsets on the Internet have, in many ways, become a valid substitution for the experience of being in the physical presence of a setting sun. The question I pose in my work is ’what are the possible affects and outcomes of this ever increasing digital simulation?’

This video work points out this phenomenon of the ubiquitous screen, and opens up a dialogue about changing image economies in the digital age. Just as Walter Benjamin predicted in his 1936 essay ‘Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ the simulation of experiences, such as a sunset, on the digital screen will have no other choice but to inform our ‘real life’ experiences. I, for example, after finding all of these sunset videos on *Youtube* will now always see sunsets knowing that there exists on the Internet any number of simulations of this experience.

The affect that changing image flows have on the way one encounters the world is a subtle one. If you were not paying attention, you might not ever realize that the way images move and function is always changing, and therefore you would be unable to notice the affect this constant change has on how you view the world. Through appropriating the vernacular video from *Youtube* and re-contextualizing it into a gallery setting, the work calls attention to this phenomenon; coaxing the viewer to confront the fact that these common vernacular
images have a direct effect on the way in which the world is encountered. If in *Untitled (Video Still)*, I am able to open up that conversation between the viewer and the hundreds of sunset videos on *Youtube*, then perhaps that viewer will walk away paying more attention to the affect that other images have upon them.
Chapter 6

Sunrot

The works in *Different Ways To Record Light* often refer to themselves as photographs. The medium is a very important part of the ideas that drive my work. I identify myself as a photographer, and this is a large part of how I relate to the world. When making a series of photographs and videos about light as a phenomenological experience, there is a natural connection between the content and the medium. In many pieces I try to openly address that connection. After all, a photograph, in literal terms, is nothing more than a record of light.

*Sunrot* is one of the works that begin to reference itself as a photograph, and starts to play with that concept. This piece is a photographic diptych: in both images a man is photographed from the neck down wearing a corduroy jacket, in the first image, the character is stoically standing still with his hands at his sides, in the second image he is lifting the lapel of his jacket to reveal that the corduroy fabric underneath the lapel is a different color than the rest of the jacket. The implication at work here is that the jacket has been exposed to so much sun that a majority of the jacket has been bleached, or as the title of the work insists, ‘sunrotten’.
This work investigates two important ideas. The first revolves around the wearing of the fabric by the sun. This brings to mind an event that everyone can relate to; having a worn-out garment, watching the color fade from leaving something in the backseat of a car all summer long, or seeing advertisement posters that have been taped up in store windows forever being hard to read because they have been bleached from exposure. The jacket in this diptych acts as a mnemonic device that recalls associations to these sun bleached materials, placing the viewer in a position of nostalgia. Through cropping out the subject in these photographs, that sense of nostalgia is pushed even further, allowing the viewer to connect with the sun stained material, rather than with the personality of the individual wearing the material. The second aspect of this work is that it calls into question the definition of ‘photography’. In this diptych, the sun rotten collar acts as a document just as much as any traditional photograph would, and it still falls into that parameter of the literal definition of a photograph: a record of light.

Through challenging the very definition of photography and utilizing the embedded nostalgic effect that the referent of these photographs have, the viewer is invited to reflect
upon the connection between their relationships with sun bleached materials from their past and how that has altered their comprehension of the power of natural light, or the vulnerable nature of common everyday objects.

Because photography exists through the very medium of light, it is necessary that the work be presented as photographs. If the project were carried out as painting, sculpture or drawing, the irony and investigation into image function would be lost. For me, the photographic medium opens itself up to not only theoretical investigation, but also plays with sentimentality, identity, memory and epistemology. It is because of this balance between theory and play that I have used photography as a subject matter in and of itself.
In ‘A Little History of Photography’ Walter Benjamin coined the term ‘optical unconscious’ when talking about the camera’s ability to see things that the human eye cannot. It is through the image that we gain a better understanding of how the physical world works. The effect of this optical unconscious is that we know what happens during motion because we have seen it in still images. In other words, we understand things because images have taught us how to understand them.

Images have an enormous amount of authority and power over us. Whether they are on the digital screen, used in advertisements, hung on a gallery wall or in a shoebox tucked away in the closet of your family home, images have the ability to dictate how we read and make sense of our surroundings. In paying attention to the authority that images have over our understanding of the world, we are better able to evaluate that ‘unconscious’ that Benjamin talks about. In the body of work that I have just discussed, the goal is precisely that; to explore the authority that images have over us. Through using light as a metaphor for common optical, perceptual, physiological and phenomenological experiences, a discourse begins to develop that explores how our experiences are mediated by the images that we come into contact with on a daily basis.

The photographs, videos and objects in Different Ways To Record Light are my way of exploring that optical unconscious. I feel like my job as an artist is to pay attention. By paying attention to the constant influence that images have over us, I might be able to learn something new about my relationship with the rest of the world. The work in this thesis
exhibition does not aim to reveal any great metaphysical answers or give a rigid critique of some institutional system, but rather it aims to simply call attention to the fact the Pink Floyd’s ‘Dark Side of the Moon’ might have had a greater impact on you than you had originally assumed.

Figure #10: *Different Ways To Record Light* Installations Shots. Herter Art Gallery, University of Massachusetts, Amherst. 2010
**TECHNICAL INFORMATION**

*Sunrot*, 2009

Digital chromogenic prints mounted on Sintra board

Hung on wall with wooden frame

Dimensions: 40.75” x 13.5”

*How Rainbows Work* 2009

Digital chromogenic prints mounted on Sintra board

Hung on wall with wooden frame

Dimensions: 47.5” x 37.5”

*The Dancing Light* 2010

Digital video

Running time: 2:33 (looped)

Projected on wall

*Staring At The Sun* 2010

Digital chromogenic prints mounted on Sintra board

Hung on wall with wooden frame

Dimensions: 40.5” x 36”
Untitled 2009

Digital chromogenic prints mounted on Sintra board
Hung on wall with wooden frame
Displayed with spotlight and stand
Dimensions: 36” x 24”

Three Light Sources From My Childhood, 2009

Digital chromogenic prints mounted on Sintra board
Hung on wall with wooden frame
Dimensions: 56” x 19”

Melted Army Men 2009

Digital chromogenic print mounted on Sintra board
Hung on wall with wooden frame
Dimensions: 29.6” x 14.4”

Science / Culture 2009

Digital chromogenic prints mounted on Sintra board
Hung on wall with wooden frame
Dimensions: 49.75” x 21”
Sunrise 2009

Digital video using footage found on Youtube.com

Running time: 2:30 (looped)

Displayed on television on floor, in corner of gallery

Lightfastness (Construction Paper Value Scale) 2009

Black craft paper stained by the sun mounted on Sintra board

Hung on wall with wooden frame

Dimensions: 61.5” x 9”

Light And Color As Tools 2009

Digital chromogenic print mounted on Sintra board

Hung on wall with wooden frame

Dimensions: 19” x 19.25”
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Figure # 11: Photo of the artist in his studio
IMAGE IDENTIFICATION


2. How Rainbows Work, 47.5” x 37.5”, Digital C-Prints, 2009.


4. Staring At The Sun, 40.5” x 36”, Digital C-Prints, 2009.

5. Untitled, 36” x 24”, Digital C-Print with Spotlight, 2009.

6. Three Light Sources From My Childhood, 56” x 19”, Digital C-Prints, 2009.


There have been a number of different theorists that have written about the connections between culture and the how it affects a viewer’s reception of the natural world, mostly in the fields of psychoanalysis and phenomenology. These theories are important to this work, however might not be listed as direct sources. i.e. Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Hal Foster’s *Return of the Real*, Walter Benjamin’s *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, and John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing*, to name a few.

This idea was paraphrased from the work of Fredric Jameson’s in his book *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1998* (New York: Verso)


Barthes, 25.


Debord, 8,9.

Sigmund Freud, *A Note Upon The Mystic Writing-Pad. from Archive; Documents in Contemporary Art.* Charles Merewether, Editor. (Cambridge Massachusetts: The MIT Press), 20-22


