2018

transit

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transit

A Thesis Presented

by

Christopher Janke

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

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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The Master of Fine Arts Program in Studio Arts
This written thesis, \textit{transit}, accompanies an exhibition by the same name and serves to contextualize the exhibit. The written portion begins with an inquiry into the nature of the contextualization itself, questioning the nature of the relationship between the written thesis, the exhibit, and the University which explicitly requires and connects the two, especially the ways that the written word as granted authority through an institution of higher education might undermine the exhibit’s intent to provoke thought into other forms of knowledge and other avenues of legitimacy than those presented by this institution.

The thesis discusses the philosophic question sometimes called “the problem of reference” (how a word comes to refer to something in the world) as well as to the mystery of knowledge (how a human comes to know something). I discuss my own development of the artistic and poetic methods and concepts used in \textit{transit}. I also inquire into the relationship between the conflicts in the cultures of the region, particularly during the time of the arrival of written language and capitalistic practices from Europe, and my struggle to understand and represent the ways that colonial concepts continue to dominate and frame our culture, even exhibits of art, such as \textit{transit}, that work to cause thought, emotion, and reflection on other understandings of words, concepts, and knowledge through a physical de-stabilization of text and words.
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CHAPTER 1

PREFACE/INTRO/DISCLAIMER

It was at the Mel Bochner interview at Mt. Holyoke College in 2015 that the colonialist model of contemporary art became crystallized for me. I had spent a previous semester reading and writing about cultural capital in relation to literary aesthetics, and I was newly encountering the realm of visual art, where the cultural and financial capital worlds engage in more direct exchange through transactions in the art market. Bochner said that, leading up to his creation of “The Wittgenstein Illustrations,” where he used a pattern of numbering to associate his action with the philosopher’s concepts, he had been looking for a mode of art-making that hadn’t yet been done, he realized numbers might present a new opportunity. He began at that point to create drawings using numbers, establishing with great speed and based mostly on intuition, a different pattern of numbering for each drawing named after quotes from Wittgenstein’s writings.\(^1\) It was the way he answered a question Thomas E. Wartenberg had posed regarding Bochner’s initial impetus for these pieces that led me, a few days later, to a realization that the field of contemporary art was arranged conceptually like “unimproved” real estate, the way homesteaders or gold-rush claimants are arranged. Whatever portion of the landscape isn’t already “owned” is a potential claim for an individual to make into private capital what was public or unclaimed before that point. The artist finds a site (conceives of a mode of making), makes a “claim” to the site/mode through studio practice and exhibition, and eventually is granted a kind of deed\(^2\) through curatorial and review procedures. The claim is thereby registered, and the artwork is seen as a part of the artworld and, perhaps most importantly, is viewed as a part of art history: a contribution to the way in which art colonizes the conceptual landscape of the culture, powered through the money made possible through the acquisition of the artifacts that demonstrate the narrative.\(^3\)

\(^1\) [https://artmuseum.mtholyoke.edu/blog/thinking-through-images](https://artmuseum.mtholyoke.edu/blog/thinking-through-images)

\(^2\) In many ways, this document might be seen as the written deed that goes along with the exhibition claim. And while there’s something satisfying for me as a poet to watch the way in which even the artworld discredits its own physical facts in favor of the authoritative justification on paper, as an artist I see this attempt to prioritize the summary over the text, as a way to coopt the art into a paradigm and program, and I give it the unwritable Bronx cheer.

\(^3\) Some better scholar than I will, or has, traced this alongside Martha Woodmansee’s study of the development of authorship and copyright. I see these movements as essentially privatizing the public in a way that individuals are compelled to do for their own financial survival in a system that forces individual competition for survival based on an understanding
I didn’t know Bochner’s work. My education in arts was in literature and in music and not in the realm of conceptual work. I have since become a fan of much of Bochner’s work. However, Bochner’s interview, to me, is a perfect example of what an artist can do to damage the work they make. Bochner’s Wittgenstein pieces, for me, were diminished by the interview. His replies to a number of questions about the genesis and procedure of the work revealed an approach that was relatively uninterested in the ideas of Wittgenstein; the drawings had existed prior to the 1969 publication of the text that the work supposedly relates to. In the publication that accompanied the exhibit of Bochner’s work that was shown in conjunction with the interview, Wartenberg lays out his understanding of how Bochner’s illustrations relate to Wittgenstein’s text. I found the ideas and essay compelling. The interview, however, revealed an entirely different relationship and engagement, and I walked away disappointed.

The talk at Mt. Holyoke College stands for me in a few important ways as an example of what I don’t want to do with my own work and with this very text, meant to somehow accompany an exhibition. I am not here trying to stake a claim or justify my work to the academy or the artworld (although at this, to graduate, I must fail); I am trying to avoid doing damage to my own work by talking about it and thereby flattening it (in saying this I accept that in my work there is much going on that I don’t yet grasp. In writing about my own work in an attempt to be authoritative, there is a great risk to the work and diminish it through my own lack of insight or because of my own closeness to the work and its technical formation.); I don’t want to reveal, as I will inevitably, my own lack of a grasp on the concepts I’m engaging in within the work of the exhibition. (I say inevitably because I see the concepts as fundamentally antinomic and unresolvable, as complex enough to require graduate degrees to adequately discuss, and as engaged fully within the exhibition itself as best I am able.)

It is also important to open for discussion some of the peculiarities this paper and its context. It is rare in art practices outside of academia to write a lengthy paper about one’s own work. Not only is the exhibitionary output of contemporary artists manifest in a stunning breadth of media, the subject matter itself is broad, vague, and sometimes indeterminable, often by design and often celebrated for being so. Such is the nature of studio art in the contemporary context. Within the academy, and within its requirements for a thesis, this breadth is acceptable only when accompanied by a paper such as this one. The thesis functions both to justify of economic value of the individual as being distinct from an invisible and intentionally unrealized equal value. That is, contemporary capitalism.
to the institution the academic bona fides of the field and to serve a gatekeeping function for those who, however robust their studio practice might be, fail to meet the expectations inherent in academic writing. The written thesis is an academic requirement that also links the exhibition with the powers of the academy, lending to the exhibition the cultural capital of the institution and giving the institution claims over the exhibition. By submitting to the institution in this way, an exhibition implicitly recognizes and verifies the institution’s cultural power; it also serves to help underwrite the authority of the institution and its practices through submission to them. After all, without student exhibitions and papers about them, there is no Department of Studio Art.

Because this paper is the most concrete link between my exhibition and the institution, and because my exhibition touches on the changes in practices in the verification of knowledge and the ownership of property during the colonial time, changes that have some similarity to the relationship between the exhibition and the institution, it is essential that I address how the practices are at work in this paper, including some of the complex ways that the academy functions within the lives of artists as they make work. Indeed, because of some of the ways that the academy reinforces methods of providing and excluding legitimacy and reinforces an individualized capitalistic approach to artistic discovery, both of which mirror the colonialist approach to land that serves as essential background for the exhibition and the ways my understanding of the site of the exhibition, it would be irresponsible of me to avoid addressing these issues. That is, I would see it as undermining some of the basic concepts inherent in the exhibition to leave unaddressed the practices within this paper because of their similarity to the practices of knowledge and property that were brought to this region by the colonists and which my exhibitions touches upon. Above, I lay out a conception of the field of contemporary art to be one in which the contemporary expectation is one of discovery, registration, and individual capitalization, and I see this paper as a part of that system. It is with this paper that I am expected and required to justify my artistic discovery and to register the claim within the cultural institution of the academy. Further, this paper serves not just to register the art but to justify it in words as a kind of knowledge, implicitly undermining the authority of modes of knowing separate from that which can be articulated through writing, which is not only part of the method of most art-making but is explicitly part of the subject matter of transit.

And though I protest, I am not in a position to omit the paper and forgo the degree. In spite of the fact that the possibility of capitalization is neither likely nor desired in the expected manner, and in spite of the fact that...
it’s an open secret in the discipline that assuming one can capitalizing on an art degree is a foolish one, and in spite of the fact that every exhibition has the potential to be an alternative to word-based knowledge, I write. Such is the power and authority of the degree-granting institution and its enforcers. And yet to leave these issues entirely unaddressed within this paper would be to implicitly agree with the practices to which I am subject, to which I object, and around which transit was meant to orbit, complicate, and present some kind of alternative to.

I also aim for this paper, even with my hesitations regarding its functions as well as the possibility of my words flattening rather than illuminating my exhibitionary work, to contribute positively to the experience of the exhibition. I’m not sure these are those words in relation to my own work, nor am I sure that I can meet the multiple demands on this text. There is a powerful way in which this paper illustrates the difficulty of my own engagement with art: I am trying to “professionalize” myself; I am trying to understand more ways that democracy and aesthetics might be more closely aligned (particularly within public higher education); I am using the academy, which in many ways is itself trying to perform these very tasks, trying to “demonstrate value” in many different value-axes, and simultaneously tearing down important aspects its arts and humanities programs and, sometimes, its students doing so. In the exhibition, I use words to resist some of the ways words are typically interpreted. Here, that luxury, that discovery, is denied.

Here goes nothin’.
CHAPTER 2

HISTORY OF A SHADOW

a. Land

At the same time that the American colonists were beginning to come into serious conflict with the King George the Third of England, Edmund Wallis named an island after him in the Southern Pacific Ocean. Wallis is the first European to keep detailed-enough records that historians can be certain he visited this Island. There may have been a few before him, but his visit in 1767 led the way for subsequent expeditions and the eventual colonization, Christianization, and post-colonial life of what is now called Tahiti.

Captain James Cook was part of these visits. In 1769, Cook led an expedition to Tahiti to witness and record celestial measurements regarding the transit of Venus, in part because about 12 years earlier, Edmund Halley had proposed a method to use this celestial phenomenon to calculate the distance of the sun from the earth and thereby to gain a sense of the scale of the entire solar system. Halley had died before the theory was tested, but Cook’s voyage led to a better understanding of the size of the earth in other ways as well: a more precise system of longitude. Within 100 years, missionaries and others will have so thoroughly colonized the land as to impose laws against dancing, music, and tattoos.

b. Language

Gottlob Frege used a set of language games to illustrate some of the difficulties and solutions he was proposing in relation to how language refers to the world. He used the terms Hesperus and Phosphorus, or morning star and evening star, to illustrate that although Venus is the object in both sentences: “Hesperus is Hesperus” and “Hesperus is Phosphorus” but that the meanings of the sentences were not quite the same. He proposed a theory that posited there was a thing he called a “sense” that functioned as a kind of linguistic structure that was, in a way, in between language and the world, between word and referent. Frege’s theory was discredited by some in the mid-20th Century, but there are still current off-shoots of Frege’s sense theory, in part because each theory of reference that has been developed seems relatively sensible until a refutation and a subsequent theory comes along at which point, it gains traction. Frege’s distinction between the “sense” and the “referent” are still
relevant, some aligning Frege with Russell’s descriptivist understanding of names, some interpreting Frege’s sense as to be better understood as “intention.”

The question of how a word refers to an object in the world currently has no solid resolution in the philosophy of language. Problems persist, such as “empty referents,” (such as a unicorn or the current King of France), or the way in which Marco Polo (apparently inadvertently) changed the referent of the word “Madagascar” from a region on the Southeast coast of Africa, including the large island off the coast, to mean only that Island.

c. Celestial Movement

Described as looking like a blueberry in front of an orange, the Transit of Venus occurs when Venus passes between the earth and the sun; the next one is in 2117 and will be visible in China, India, Australia and regions nearby. These transits occur in a predictable pattern, in pairs. The first of a pair separated by eight years before the sibling arrives. The pair that follows on their heels comes more than 100 years later.

Simon Starling’s The Black Drop, a film that interrogates photography and the history of the moving image and the transition from cellulose to the digital image took perhaps the last film footage of a transit of Venus in 2012. It was after watching this beautifully-shot motion of Venus as it moves across the sun, I was struck that this was the metaphor for the theme of a project I had conceived of words made of sun-shadows at a library.

The word “transit” seemed a great metaphor for a work that aimed to center around the mystery of the way that the external world becomes an internal world, the way that knowledge happens. The transition of matter into interpreted experience is a kind of transit. Somehow a shadow version of the world moves into our minds; the external world of objects becomes an internal world made, in part, of words. A “transit” also felt like an apt metaphor for the physical manifestation of the work, which is made of words moving as the result of the relative motion of the sun and earth. It fit also because of the history of the use of the alternate names of Venus in the study of the philosophy of language, as well as for the history of the phenomenon, first recorded on clay tablets in cuneiform and then, through voyages around the world to codify scientific knowledge, had a complex intersection with colonialism. Halley, it seems fitting to mention, was not only the first to use Newton’s laws to predict the motion of comets accurately, but, by comparing ancient recorded observations of

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4 Within the world of art, however, we can often point to ways in which an intention does not ultimately determine the interpretation of a work. Is the same ambiguity true for a word?

5 Perhaps the philosophy of language would benefit more from a study of colonial power.
distant stars to his own observations, discovered that the distant celestial bodies, what seem like permanent referents, are not fixed.
CHAPTER 3

HISTORY OF A MODE

The work at the Hadley library presented for the 2018 spring equinox has its origins in a question I encountered as I worked trying to write a poem in 2009.

It was a difficult poem, difficult in that it would be difficult for the reader to read: a block of text with no capitalization or punctuation, a stream-of-consciousness text centered around its title, “of the of of the of.” I didn’t know what the title meant at the time, but I knew that the poem’s title was right. Through the next few months, and even still, I became obsessed with the word of – how it seemed both utterly undefinable and completely indispensable. The limited knowledge I had of other languages showed me that “of” was a convention; where we say “of,” some other languages, including languages as disparate as French, Bosnian, Japanese, and Indonesian use forms of “from” or “of” or “at” or “to,” revealing the tenuous nature of prepositions and the indispensable but undefinable relationships they document. “Of,” this simple, nearly-mute word seemed to indicate a vague and undefinable connection. The grey of the tree, the tree of the yard, the yard of the plain, the plain of the earth, the earth of my eye, my eye of my everything. An utterly flexible utterance with no attempt to explain or define its many categories of connecting.

The poem I’d written, in its lack of punctuation and pause, was, in a minor way, interconnecting language, demonstrating through syntax the difficulty in separating one thing from another. At the same time each word is a kind of definition of a territory, each thing is of another, of every other. Was this a fact of the world or a flaw of language? Or was language, through a preposition, in moments where prepositions weren’t being interrogated, plainly hiding the mysteries by which things are unexplainably connected through the very blasé nature of the word itself and its treatment of this unspeakable phenomenon? I wasn’t, amn’t sure.

But the theme of the poem didn’t make it any easier to read, and although I love a difficult poem, I also realized that the difficulty of the surface of the work isn’t always necessary for the success of difficult concepts within the work. What if I found within the poem itself easier, or at least shorter, poems? I decided I would layer vellum over the poem and trace words to create a new text, an erasure of sorts but one that didn’t destroy or obviate or hide the original but that in turn created new interpretations that lacked linearity. After doing it
once, I found I could do it multiple times: find a new work in the original work that nicely both simplified and complexified the text.

There was another transformation happening that I didn’t recognize at first. Suddenly, the poem was materially bound and full of a potential of materiality. With its layering of vellum creating different texts, the stuff of the poem became essential to its meaning in a way that we don’t generally grant to the paper and ink of a book.

And the potential of the material was now grounds for aesthetic/material investigation. I found I could backlight the poem and its layers, draw on some of them, create multiple, simultaneous maps of the poem, such as topographical map where each “of” was a mountain peak and there were no other words layered over a map that was drawn from a map of the expansion of the universe from point 0. I found I could hand-cut clear acrylic precisely-enough after much practice to create a transparent front and back to the poem, use some book tape to bind the covers, and make the poem into a loose-leaf book.

I found I could create more of these poems in a series and mount them all in a hand-made case that took many hours to make and remake in my basement.

I also found it could hang in a window.

In the window, though, it looked like it might be a map of what was through the window. It wasn’t. Suddenly, this frustrated me, and it seemed like a major error in the work or in words themselves. Why did this book, which contained maps, and which was a visual experience, why did this book NOT refer to the visual experience just beyond and through it when it hung in a window. An odd question, perhaps, but one that I couldn’t shake. The book’s physical form took on a metaphorical meaning, as if it represented the ways in which my own mind, with its interpretative features, including language, formed a layer between me and the world, both obscuring it and revealing it. And yet, because this book did not directly refer to the objects I could see through the book that were in the yard beyond, the book somehow was insufficiently “of” the world. It related to the world, supposedly that’s what words do after all. However, these words suddenly seemed incredibly distant from the world. As if there were no connection, no “of.” There was a mind/body word/world breakdown. Suddenly it felt that they had nothing to do with one another whatsoever.

I set out to fix that. I began to make work that was designed for a particular view of a particular space. Poems that were mounted as translucent loose-leaf books of 6 inches square and meant to view the world through, a
commentary on how we surround ourselves with the words around us in our own minds and that these words seem to both come from and be put upon the world – that these words are both shaped by the world and shape the world. These books hung in windows or doors and would, in part, label the world one could see through that view, and a poem would be written with the constraint being the words that labeled the world, so that the poem, when printed on transparency, was an actual map of that view of the world at the same time it was about that world and commenting and changing it.

The next challenge was finding a way to put the words onto the world and not just putting the world into the words. I experimented with projecting words onto surfaces, with taking a photo, labeling the items in the photo with words, removing the photo and writing a poem with the labels in their locations and then projecting the poems back onto the places where the photos were taken. I kinda liked it. I was illuminating a space only with text that also labeled certain aspects of the space. It felt full of potential. But it was while working in this mode that I ran into a technological problem. In trying to get words sufficiently large and sufficiently bright on the side of a house, I was floundering. It was after trying many projectors and methods that I found myself at an impasse working on site at a friend’s house on the West-facing wall.

I remember walking around his house puzzling through how to angle the projections, how to manifest words on his siding, when I realized that the projector I needed was right then setting in the West. Of course, I thought. I had missed the obvious.

An obscuration of the sun, such as with sand-blasted text on acrylic, would cast a legible shadow of a word. And the word would move in a way that corresponded to the relationship of the earth, the sun, and the word itself. It would render visible what is usually invisible: the physicality of a word, and it would do so in a way that was vulnerable while being tied to motion, a grand motion of bodies at a scale hardly comprehensible by humans.
CHAPTER 4

CONCEPT IN THE WORK

Although Plato’s Allegory of the Cave is the most frequent reference to Plato that others have made regarding this kind of work, it’s maybe Plato’s *Phaedrus* – a dialogue that discusses many things, including art and rhetoric, and from where the concept that the aim of building knowledge and understanding is that we do so, as is the term used in *Phaedrus* to our attempt to divide the world into conceptual and linguistic parts, by cutting “the world at its joints,” to find where the world is divided and to understand its component parts – that might be a better point of relation.

Simple experiments with perspective reveal how challenging it is, visually, to separate one thing from another, how vulnerable is our perception to how we aim our gaze. The clichés about the one and the many, about the whole and its parts, about when one thing becomes another simply through the passage of time began to be part of my feelings around this work. What started with my awe at “of” was now expanding into an awe at the ways in which this “of” was just as important and just as mysterious in the way words related to the world. These essential relationships were unresolvable philosophical conditions to which I was having emotional reactions and which this mode of working seemed to speak to, or have potential to. It felt like a continuation of my concerns in traditionally-written poetry, where I often found myself writing around the phenomenon of consciousness, another unresolvable condition, and the word/world concern I realized was one manifestation of the physical/mental divide, but now the object/word divide could be explored using objects and words. And borrowing power from the sun seemed like a fitting way to try to communicate the vastness I felt within “of” and within every word, within what seemed like the simplest conundrum.

I could not shake the feeling that a word was simultaneously distinct from the world and from the world; each word not only labeled the world but also, through its division of the world conceptually, changed the way the world was experienced, changed the way I moved and acted in the world, which in turn changed the world. Words are not accurate representations of the world but are complex cultural interpretations, webs of relationships that change what we see as real and how we behave.
Further, the word always has a physical presence; a “word” is only an instance of a word, a manifestation of what we normally call a word. It is air in vibration as it exits a larynx, or a bump of ink, or the snap of chemical spark across a synapse. This itself became a mind/body puzzle.6

I realized that every word is a cooperative imagined experience. A word isn’t a word unless it is disembodied; if the word is ink on a page unrecognized as a sign, it isn’t a word. And a word can’t communicate unless this is done by at least two; it must be twice-disembodied in order for it to operate. In this way, both within each individual, every word must cross a barrier on its way to becoming something within and between every set of individuals, a word must also cross a series of divides. It must transit.7

And as such, every instance of a word must necessarily change the word. A word is always in flux.

And in the process of writing this paper, I came to realize that I needed to clarify what is in flux – that the sign is in flux, because the matter on which it depends is in flux. But knowing that the paper on which this word is decaying (or the screen on which its displayed is) isn’t the whole story. The relation to the referent is changing.

But there is not even any solid, single referent. The referents, too, are physical manifestations, small sparks of consciousness. Is there a shifting map of wordless referents inside each mind that intersects with and disturbs the signs? The whole thing is not only material but unstable in a million ways. And shifting right at this moment.

Like culture, like celestial bodies, the motion is one of collision and conflict, of history and happenstance.

Knowledge, too, is made of bodies, always crossing, always in motion.

So as I continued making work that brought words onto physical spaces in the world, this concern and manifesting the emotion of instability in it, became my aim in the work. To ground the instability of the concepts of mind in the instability of the material word – to put words on place that move in time, words that make the sun’s invisible motion to mimic this material/conceptual connection as tenuous and to make mysterious again the world, to make the words themselves confounding, grounded in a physicality of change

6 This idea was first presented in a lecture which has since been published as “Using a Net to Catch the Air: Poetry, Ineffability, and Small Stones in the Shoe: A Lecturish” in Ineffability: An Exercise in Comparative Philosophy of Religion published by Springer in 2017.

7 This idea was first presented in a lecture which has since been published as “Using a Net to Catch the Air: Poetry, Ineffability, and Small Stones in the Shoe: A Lecturish” in Ineffability: An Exercise in Comparative Philosophy of Religion published by Springer in 2017.
and ungraspable as concepts, as “of” has become for me. That is, with the work, for brief moments within the world, to use words to shake it of its words.
CHAPTER 5

transit AT THE GOODWIN MEMORIAL LIBRARY

a. Why there? Why then?

The work, transit, was initially conceived for a library at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa. In 2004, on the invitation of my friend, Tim Knepper, I contributed a lecture and performance to a symposium he was conducting on “Ineffability” as part of his on-going cross-cultural organization called “The Comparison Project,” which is working to re-frame the study of the Philosophy of Religion as a humanistic inquiry. The Project picks a theme for each two-year phase and invites scholars, artists, and religious practitioners to participate in a multi-disciplinary way to speak and perform about the theme. I gave a lecture on poetry and ineffability⁸, which was greatly influenced by the work I was doing my interrogations of the problem of reference with solar-based text; I gave a reading, and I displayed some of the work I had previously made in an exhibition. Tim had been working with Lenore Metrick-Chen and Philip Chen from the Department of Art to see if I might be able to make a piece at Drake.

While at Drake for a few days, considering a project that was to continue the word/world investigation, I went looking for interesting light, for spaces that might have potential for physical exploration, as well as for places where a word-installation might have conceptual or symbolic significance. The Cowles Library, incorporating both old and new sections, staircases used mostly by staff, a grand reading room that contained the minutes of the Iowa legislature, was where I centered my proposal with a theme of the acquisition of knowledge.

I designed a slide show proposal, with images and text, but the work, for a variety of reasons, including the cost of producing a complex work in Iowa for an artist living in Massachusetts, never seemed like a good fit for Drake.

I put the idea aside, thinking it one full of potential that I might dig up and complete another time.

It was just around this time that I learned that a friend, Patrick Borezo, who had recently finished his MLS degree and moved from the Jones Library in Amherst to the Goodwin Memorial Library in Hadley, became the

⁸ The lecture has since been published as “Using a Net to Catch the Air: Poetry, Ineffability, and Small Stones in the Shoe: A Lecturish” in Ineffability: An Exercise in Comparative Philosophy of Religion published by Springer in 2017. A few concepts within this paper were first presented at that lecture and are noted here in footnotes.
director at the Goodwin. Amy Borezo, a book artist who runs Shelter Book Works and Patrick’s wife, and I had worked together on some publishing and exhibition projects in the past. I learned that Patrick was actively trying to grow the library’s services and connections with local communities, through readings, workshops, meeting groups and through art. After learning about some displays of work, including a few by friends and one by my sister, an artist in her own right, had at the Goodwin, I asked Patrick if he thought the library might ever be interested in an installation of words. I described the project, and he asked me to send along a written proposal. I did; he discussed it with the Board of Directors, and they expressed support. Now the conception had a location. It took another three-plus years for the project to manifest – as well as hundreds of pictures, and dozens of hours spent watching light move in a space.

It is through a slow, years-long encounter with the light in a space that the work developed. And it was through this slow study of the place that I determined that the equinox would be the day in the calendar. It was selected, in part, because I could easily predict that there would be two per year in which the angles of the sun would be the same, with enough time in between (6 months) in which to conceptualize, build prototypes, and/or plan for the next one. (I had also considered the solstice, but a solstice is particularly hard to plan for because there is only one per year.)

I would have to do it in the spring, Patrick pointed out, because the leaves from the large oaks on the grounds would not obstruct too much sun.

I realized through studying the equinox within the Goodwin that the building was built squarely to the cardinal directions. The South wall faces due South. This meant that on the equinox, the light coming through the second floor West windows would move across the floor, up the East wall, and then go directly out the windows on the East wall – or come close to it, depending on how obstructed the sun would be by the trees on the distant horizon, beyond Donut Man (now Dunkin’ Donuts).

I learned that the South wall had very few windows but one large one on the second floor, which I thought would present some opportunities to project words deep into the room if I could gain some physical mastery with lenses or curved mirrors. I bought materials, began on prototypes.

I experimented with reflectivity in certain windows, visited at all times of day on the days around the equinox.
It wasn’t until much later in the project that I realized that our equinox is, in some definitions of the word, another kind of celestial transit.
b. The Goodwin and Hadley: From Knowledge to Knowledges

Between the fall of 2015 and the spring of 2017, there were many visits and studies and sketches in my work for the Goodwin. My plan for the late summer of 2017 into the fall equinox was to build and test prototypes, to finalize the text, and then to build the project through the winter, with increasing time and attention as March 20, 2018 would approach.

It was in August and September 2017, as I was preparing for the fall equinox, through building and testing and devising prototypes and more fully beginning to explore the second floor of the Goodwin as well as books and historical items shelved there that I then saw how dominant is the colonialist perspective of Hadley in the library. Not only is the colonialized version of history the one that is most commonly represented in the many texts about Hadley's history, including the books about Hadley that themselves read like artifacts, but the repeated tropes and pieces of language that persist to the present day became, through my time spent in the library, prominent and unavoidable.

At this same time, I realized, too, that I had underestimated the way in which the history of the use of the written word and of epistemological conflict would be essential factors of my reckoning with the space of a small-town library. It became clear that the “history” of Hadley displayed, with an origin story of 1659, was going to need some attention; it also became clear that this place was telling one version of a story of the entrance of the written word into its land. Text arrived with the colonists.

I wondered about the connection between the epistemology of the Puritans and the spread of genocidal actions taken during the founding of Hadley by the colonists and their descendants. Was the violence the result of a theory of knowledge or was it the product of some other aspect of the cultures and of the resources and relationships with the land? Whatever the answer, it was true that the reverence with which Hadley’s “history” was regarded, and that history it was clear that the history of the written word – of text – within Hadley and within the library, mirrored a history of one culture’s written knowledge taking over, with violence, an older unwritten knowledge.

The “Angel of Hadley” is part of the imagery and iconography that was new to my experience with Hadley, a myth that was prevalent within the history books written about Hadley. The story was retold through centuries, and iconic enough to be part of the tchotchkes sold at Hadley’s 350th anniversary celebration, and for a time, it
became a kind of perverse guide for how I might begin to engage in the complicated history of the small portion of land that was once called Nonotuck, which means “in the midst of the river” for the shape of the promontory that Hadley now occupies.

The apocryphal story of the Angel\(^9\) was first told about 100 years after it is supposed to have happened. The legend says that in September 1675, a mysterious figure dressed in old-fashioned garb appeared out of nowhere to warn of an impending attack by the local Indians\(^10\) and to lead the colonists of Hadley to a victory. After the battle, the mysterious figure is said to disappear, never to be heard from again. Interesting, though, is that even in the first telling of the myth, the “angel” is acknowledged not to actually be a ghost or apparition but is, instead, a man in hiding: William Goffe, an Englishman who was in hiding in Hadley at the time, taking refuge in the house of John Russell, the local pastor’s house. Goffe and General Edward Whalley were being hunted by England for having been part of the signing of the documents that led to the execution of King Charles I in 1649. But not only was this story invented, probably, 100 years after the event supposedly took place, but some authoritative versions of the timeline of King Philip’s War indicate there never was an attack on Hadley in September 1675.

A dissertation could be written on the narrative strategies employed as this myth gets told and retold over the more than two-hundred years since its first telling. The origin stories we tell ourselves reveal so much about how we want to be seen. There is more than one significant fine art painting depicting the event. And the shot glasses. How are we to interpret those?

As I spent time with the myth, what struck me was its persistence; it signaled a need for a cultural connection to a “Rightness” in the fight against the Nonotuck. Even in its acknowledged fictions (the “angel” being a man and the story never having happened), The Angel of Hadley represents a version of a God supporting the colonists as they strive, supposedly, against great adversity, against wildness, a signal from the Great Beyond in

\(^9\) I’m relying here on my understanding of The Angel of Hadley written by former UMass Professor James A. Freeman and published in 2009.

\(^10\) An entire paper could be written on the “proper” terminology for the Indigenous, First Nations Peoples, Native Americans, Indians of the region. The word “tribe” itself is sometimes a contested word, and the “tribes” that existed in this region were in some ways, as best I understand it, small and allied in confederacies and often under attack from neighboring “tribes.” Here, I use the word “Indian” because it is the word used in some of the source material I am relying upon, which comes through funding from Indigenous sources, albeit through some “tribes” who had allied with the colonists during the conflict often called King Philip’s War, a conflict whose name itself is under some debate (or so is my understanding of Lisa Brooks’ scholarship).
favor of the forces of “settlement” and “civilization.” And this perspective persists: “Bottoms up! Here’s to our preservation and continuation of colonialist genocidal power,” is what the shot glasses seem to elicit.

I didn’t feel that I could make a piece that had as one of its centers a representation of knowledge in a place that also, culturally, represents knowledge and do so without knowing more about the knowledge that seemed to have been violently erased. In writing about this time period, though, I am not only forced to reckon with my lack of training as an historian, but I also am forced to face the fact that, as Thomas M. Norton-Smith puts it,

... sense experiences are identified, categorized, and ordered—worlds are constructed—through the use of language and other symbol systems. In other words, there are no facts without a conceptualizing intellect using some system of description, exemplification, or expression. ...speakers of radically different languages—using radically different systems of identification, categorization, and ordering—will conceive of the world in radically different ways. Different words make different worlds. So, any translation of an American Indian language into a Western language, no matter how carefully or neutrally crafted, will recast Native thought into the conceptual categories—hence, the ontology—of the Western language.11

Taken broadly, which seems the only sensible way to take such a sentiment, my own understanding of knowledge so colors my ability to understand another kind of knowledge that one might say I have to render a “foreign” knowledge in my own language in order to reckon with it, making it no longer foreign, destroying the difference in the knowledge that I was interested in in the first place.12

Nevertheless, I will attempt, through language, to engage and illustrate the differences, and perhaps the difficulties of acknowledging within one system of knowledge another. Doug Harris, the Deputy Tribal Historic Preservation Officer for the Narragansett Indian Tribal Historic Preservations Office, illustrates one of the complicated ways in which the people who first inhabited the land of the Connecticut River Valley, and, of course, the rest of the continent, interacted with their environment. Harris studies sites to determine any


12 If words and knowledge cannot function as neutral interpreters of experience, then every act of engaging with words and knowledge is done from a perspective that makes speaking about a different perspective nearly impossible. If central to the project of *transit* is the question of how to evoke the indescribable nature of the connection between words and the world, and if that connection is made more complex by the history of a written culture's genocidal acts towards a culture with a tradition where words are oral and sometimes place-based, how, in the face of this, would continuing to write about it better serve the ends of the ideas, the goals of respectful engagement, and the goals of the exhibition themselves? It doesn't. Nevertheless, a paper is required, and I suppose I have more to say/ more damage to inflict.
ancient ceremonial structures that might be preserved when these sites are being considered for new construction. His analysis not only will reveal carvings and forms made from stacks of stones that were used ceremonially 2,000, 7,000, and 12,000 years ago, but he will also find ceremonial sites that are imbued with sacred words having been spoken as part of a ritual. Harris represents the Narragansett position that such forms cannot be moved and recreated and keep their ceremonial meanings intact. He says he has no access to the words that must be spoken as the site is built, so for these sites to be preserved with their ceremonial meanings, they must remain undisturbed. It is an ancient connection between land and word, the meaning of which we have tiny glimpses of, but to the depths of which we have no access.

Harris has discovered many ceremonial sites that correspond with the movement of the sun and stars. The Perseid Meteor shower is a significant annual event, one which in the cultures of the Native Americans who live in the land of this part of the Northeast, represent the movement of the souls who have died over the last year. Harris’ work revealing ancient stone patterns that align, during the few days a year at which the Perseids are visible, with the motion in the night sky. Is this tradition that is thousands of years older than the English language one we will grant the term “epistemological” to? Here are connections of celestial objects, human understanding, and an act of language (at least in some cases). A hint at a lost practice, at the skeletons of transits.

David Abram, philosopher and ecologist, in his 1996 book, The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World addresses some of the differences between Indigenous and contemporary understandings of language and knowledge when he writes about the transformation of cultures as they gain written language. He writes, about the Aboriginal People of Australia, “we find the most intimate possible relation between land and human language. Language here is inseparable from song and story, and the songs and stories, in turn, are inseparable from the shapes and features of the land.” Abrams makes the case that in Aboriginal cultures the concepts of song, place, person, and word are all inextricably linked through an understanding of life as being a continually-constructed dreamscape. When moving from one place to another,

13 The information regarding Doug Harris is my best understanding of Harris’ presentation on December 3, 2017 at The Hitchcock Center for the Environment and of the video he narrates at https://www.ncptt.nps.gov/blog/ceremonial-stone-landscapes/.

a story is told about the past in that place. When a song is sung, it evokes a specific path from one place to another, and each person adds to and occupies a portion of the melody.\textsuperscript{15}

The more prevalent view of language, at least since the scientific revolution, and still assumed in some manner by most linguists today, considers any language to be a set of arbitrary but conventionally agreed upon words, or “signs,” linked by a purely formal system of syntactic and grammatical rules. Language, in this view, is rather like a code; it is a way of representing actual things and events in the perceived world, but it has no internal, nonarbitrary connections to that world, and hence is readily separable from it. If we agree with Merleau-Ponty’s assertion that active speech is the generative core of all language, how can we possibly account for the overwhelming prevalence of a view that considers language to be an ideal or formal system readily detachable from the material act of speaking?\textsuperscript{16}

He also writes:

We thus learn our native language not mentally but bodily. We appropriate new words and phrases first through their expressive tonality and texture, through the way they feel in the mouth or roll off the tongue, and it is this direct, felt significance—the taste of a word or phrase, the way it influences or modulates the body—that provides the fertile, polyvalent source for all the more refined and rarefied meanings which that term may come to have for us. …the meaning of words must be finally induced by the words themselves, or more exactly, their conceptual meaning must be formed by a kind of subtraction from a gestural meaning, which is immanent in speech. Language, then, cannot be genuinely studied or understood in isolation from the sensuous reverberation and resonance of active speech.\textsuperscript{17}

Through the study of the Goodwin and of Hadley; through reading and listening and e-mailing; through watching the sun rise in a building that feels old but that is 1000 times less old than the culture that was nearly destroyed in the last 400 years, I began to see the oral nature of the knowledge of the Nonotuck as an absence. It was personal: here was a thing I wanted to experience but knew I could not, but it was also a deep loss for knowledge more broadly. And it was a stain on the culture and epistemology of what now dominates.

The resonance between a language that moves through the air but that is not preserved and my project that converts written text to a text that moves with the sun, which appears and disappears and which resists translation to the page, did not escape me, nor did it make me long any less to hear the words that grew in this place spoken in this place by the people of a culture who had also grown in this place.

\textsuperscript{15} This section is my best understanding of Chapter 5 from Abram, David. \textit{The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World} (Kindle Location 2545). Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.


When comparing the ways in which different epistemologies acknowledge authorities within their systems, it is
telling to look at how many ways are there for information to become knowledge within each system. For
western knowledge, a knowledge based on propositions, there are relatively few ways, and they are all within
language. Truth, in Western thought, is based on statements. Language is the repository for fact; indeed,
Thomas M. Norton-Smith makes the cast that in our Western epistemology, facts are made of propositions, of
words. Truth is propositional.

In American Indian epistemologies, the range of authoritative sources for knowledge is far vaster. An object, a
movement, a dream, a dance: these are all sites of potential authority. Not only is this the case, but it is also the
case the test for truth is fundamentally different than the test of “Justified True Belief” as the requirements for
knowledge are known in Analytic Philosophy. Further, the function of truth is different in different
epistemologies. Norton-Smith speaks of “propositional truth” versus “procedural truth.”

Returning to our comparison of the Western and Native conceptions of
knowledge, note that the former views knowledge as propositional—a
knowing that proposition \( p \)—while American Indian knowledge is
principal a procedural knowledge—a knowing how to \( p \)—where \( p \) in this
instance is an activity, performance, or procedure, perhaps as elaborate as
a storytelling, a healing, or a ritual ceremony, or as simple as observing the
world to learn something from it.\(^{18}\)

Further, the sense of what the possibilities for truth are different. A bivalent truth system, where truth and false
are the only options and where they are in opposition, is not the only way by which truth can be judged.

First, because the respectful success in achieving a goal or purpose is a
matter of degree, it follows that the truth of an action or performance is a
matter of degree—a surprising result only if one is captivated by the
Western tradition’s bivalent notion of truth. But we’ve already seen that in
the nondiscrete, complementary dualist logics embodied by indigenous
thought the dualisms that may emerge—even the true and the false—are
not regarded as opposites.\(^{19}\)

And it is here, again, that the ways in which my own Western thinking should be called into question in
attempting to translate one epistemological system into another. How can I engage with a knowledge that
allows for non-binary truth values based on a place-and-sound-and-person-based language with my own

\(^{18}\) Norton-Smith, Thomas M. The Dance of Person and Place: One Interpretation of American Indian Philosophy (SUNY series in

\(^{19}\) Norton-Smith, Thomas M. The Dance of Person and Place: One Interpretation of American Indian Philosophy (SUNY
Edition.
written, bivalent epistemology from within and to please an institution dedicated to such methods and justifications?

The language spoken by the Nonotuck, now called Western Abenaki, has almost entirely died out. Eastern Abenaki is being preserved but only through the remnants of colonialism. The last native speaker of Eastern Abenaki died more than a decade ago and all revival efforts, of which there are a few, stem from a version of the Bible translated into Eastern Abenaki. From what I understand, however, Western Abenaki is growing and can tap into a lineage of fluent speakers that goes back before colonialism. So the absence is not absolute, but this does not mean that there is not a danger in the act of translating — in bringing one culture into relation to another through officially sanctioned epistemologies can, perhaps, be like the translation of the Bible — an act of preservation of an oral language through the written words of another culture.

In fact, some warn of the death of many epistemologies worldwide as the Western version of knowledge continues its global conquest. Boaventura de Sousa Santos speaks of the global tide of epistemicide rising as the cultures of the global south face the forces of Western modernity. He even suggests that “One of the tricks that Western modernity plays on intellectuals is to allow them only to produce revolutionary ideas in reactionary institutions.” Even the acts intended to preserve may be part of a destruction.

Of course, when cultures clash, there is also a potential for hybridity, although I hesitate to claim hybridity in the current context, although I am eager to learn more of the way that whose ancestors predate Europeans in this area speak of it. In the wake of King Philip’s War, almost all of the Native Americans who had lived in the valley who were still alive moved to an area near what is now Albany and then to an area near what is now Montreal. Greylock’s incursions 100 years after the war show that the animosity remained, as did the violence.

I have to leave investigations regarding current post-coloniality to others. Although I find evidence of it in current projects of de-colonization in the works of the Nolembeka Project and in the work of scholars such as Lisa Brooks, who, although writing within the Western historical context, is doing so to bring to light the stories of the communities that the colonists were warring with. And perhaps the very interest in hybridity is a break from the epistemologies of Puritanism and its descendants, including versions of Western epistemology, as “Justified True Belief.” Another dissertation area for someone to explore.

This reading and research about the Nonotuck, oral cultures, and American Indian epistemology led me to a place where I felt I had to use my project to explore, within the Goodwin’s walls, not only the concept of “knowledge” but to try to engage with the Goodwin’s own announcement of its history, to resist and comment on it and to also find ways to represent the complexity of a conflict of knowledge that is still ongoing, still hybridizing, is always in motion.

And it is concepts such as this with which I found a great degree of alignment in my project’s approach to language and place. To represent knowledge as a thing in motion seemed fitting, and my attempts to do so with a materiality of language within material and using material to work with the contradictions and antinomies of Western thought, I was stumbling into a mode of epistemology that had resonance, for me, among ancient pre-text language practices.

And I found, too, my own biases towards bivalent truths, towards evidence and text even in my understanding of the contemporary context. In speaking with Rich Holschuh, a Sokoki photographer and blogger living near Brattleboro VT, when I expressed my dismay at the loss of knowledge that I felt colonialism had brought about, he suggested that the knowledge that was lost during King Philip’s War was still available – in the land of Nonotuck itself. The knowledge, he implied, was not necessarily in the people or in their language; the knowledge came from, comes from, is in the land, in the environment, and in the way we move within it if we are attentive. And I was, after all, moving through it with attention and building a project that would ask others, if they were so inclined, to do the same.
c. Mechanics of Text and Sun

*Transit* is a text-based composition that depends on moderate-to-strong sunlight for the work to come into view. Through the use of laser-etched mirrors and cnc-routed clear acrylic, sunlight is reflected or obscured to create text in a particular location at a particular hour made of sunlight or made of shadow.

Most of the pieces manifest over the course of about 15 minutes, move a few feet over the course of about three hours, and then become obscured as the sun moves into a position where the building itself obscures the mirror or acrylic from direct light.
i. each light / is a motion

Figure 1: each light: This phrase evokes both the material of the project and one theme: that, if we take light to be a metaphor for knowledge, perhaps there is no knowing without simultaneously creating some unknowing.

Figure 2: is a motion: The text “each light / is a motion” is illuminated on the ceiling of the second floor when the sun rises over the repurposed church-now-vodka headquarters immediately to the East of the Goodwin.
ii. of its own shadow

Figure 3: each light (in context): The text, laser-etched onto 12” square pieces of mirror and framed in simple pine is attached to the windowsills with removable clamps. One of the requirements of the exhibit was that it would not damage any of the building. There are no physical penetrations into the walls or trim.

Figure 4: own: The text on the first floor manifests around the shadows and obscurations of the church/vodka headquarters next door. For many of the windows, by the time the sun reaches the text, the angle is such that the shadow of the text is cast onto book spines, also full of text and visual distractions, making the words hard to read.
iii. world moves outside // word moves inside

Since *transit* is, in part, about the movement of an external world into an internal world, this pair of installations attempts to engage that metaphor with the motion of sunlight.

Figure 5: sha

Figure 6: world / moves/ outside: This installation reflects sunlight back into a sunlit area by reflecting the words “world moves outside” onto the grass but only when the grass is already brightly lit.
Figure 7: word / moves / inside: At solar noon, 1pm EDT, the words “word” and “inside” align to create a text on the wall inside the stairwell. The text is constructed in such a way as to emphasize the ephemeral nature of comprehension, as the words on the wall arise and fall from peak legibility.

iv. “the dream”

Figure 8: “the dream” : A reflecting pool designed to look as if it is part of the architecture of the Goodwin with floating text-rafts is illuminated for 6 hours on a sunny day. The text, which does not have a fixed syntax includes: “mind” “world” “dreams” and “of.”
v. Temporary Memorial Graffiti

Because the Goodwin Memorial Library displays a Soldier’s Memorial made of text which lists the residents of Hadley who were killed in “The Three Wars” and lists the “settlers” of Hadley, I felt a need to create text that would interact with the existing memorial. I think of these pieces as a kind of graffiti, a temporary intervention, a way that written text might mimic the fleeting qualities of spoken word, to speak at the wall about the ways in which its perspective, its presentation of knowledge is not only far from complete but is from a colonizing viewpoint and to ask, implicitly and explicitly, if the dominant epistemology and understandings of truth represented aren’t causes of the suffering and violence memorialized.

Figure 9: And All Who The: approximately 11:30 AM EDT, the text “And All Who The” begins to appear on the East side of the Memorial Wall. Over the course of about an hour, the text appears and disappears, the phase completes but there is no point at which all of it is projected.

Figure 10: Words Don’t Hold: The phrase is completed as the words “Words Don’t Hold” are created in reflected text on the West side between approximately 1:30 and 2:30pm. The phrase is a commentary on who is not listed on the wall as well as on what might exist outside of the realm of language’s ability to describe.
Figure 11: “some apparent omissions”: This installation of dates is a performance of text in which a series of dates of some of the many violent conflicts in which the United States has been engaged are put on the wall to begin to “correct” some errors of omission. The wars and conflicts omitted far exceed the wall space; the selections were made in order to reflect wars that are commonly known and wars that were significant to the immediate region (1675 for King Philip’s War), as well as for conflicts between the government of the United States and Indian Nations. The last series of dates are a short list of some of the current conflicts with which the US is engaged in (Iraq, Somalia, Syria), including the longest war in US history (Afghanistan). The phrase on the wall “THE BRAVE LIVE ON” is briefly altered to read “THE WARS LIVE ON.”

Figure 12: “settled”: Between approximately 2:30 and 4pm, dates are projected onto the wall where the list of significant years in Hadley’s history are listed. Because the land around where the Goodwin stands, and because the Memorial wall lists 1659 as the “settled” date, I chose to project a slow-motion graffiti that lists dates indicating the millennia of human habitation of the region indicating not only the false narrative of the “settling” of Hadley but also indicating the longevity of a culture that had been built in this place over the span of almost 12,000 years, which has experienced near-erasure in less than 400. The term “settled” for what the colonists did in 1659 seems a particularly inaccurate description of their activities and effects.
The last piece of graffiti to appear on the Memorial Wall is the name of a Nonotuck warrior who fought for his land against the colonists and who was killed in the famed “Falls Fight” on May 19, 1676 in what is now Turners Falls, when a band of Hadley residents led a raid on a fishing encampment and killed hundreds of non-combatants and spoiled the food stock for the inter-tribal warriors in King Philip’s War and helping to turn the tide against the Indians who were fighting the colonists from Rhode Island to Maine and helping to establish a method of genocidal action that would continue for the next 200+ years.

vi. wor(l)d // passes / through

As the sun sets, each of the letters of “word” moves across the main room of the library and heads towards a window on the opposite side, in some cases exiting the building altogether. Meanwhile the l of the world remains outside.
Figure 15: passes: On the second floor, while “word” is crossing the floor of the first floor, “passes through” makes its way across the floor and eventually, through the course of three hours (during which reflections of sunlight from the roofs and windshields of passing vehicles create movements of shadow text on the walls), at a clear sunset through the windows on the east side of the building, evoking both the material nature and the contingent quality of text and thought.

Figure 16: through
vii. Artifacts

For the artifacts that were displayed, I wanted to create a sense of excavation from library materials or from materials that linked to the Goodwin’s collections or to libraries and information systems more broadly as a way to inquire into present hybrid knowledge systems and a potential for post-coloniality.

Figure 17: The Angel of Hadley Yoga Mat: The original painting hangs in the Jones Library in Amherst. Now you, too, can celebrate mythic colonial conquest while practicing a Westernized version of an ancient practice that may or may not represent appropriation or hybridization or health or cultural capital.

Figure 18: Minecraft in Western Abenaki: Jesse Bruchac has spent much of his life helping to preserve Western Abenaki, and one of his public outputs, among many, is a youtube channel where he posts animations, interviews, and family videos in which Western Abenaki is spoken. Rather than bring an oral language into the exhibit, I chose to show that the language, indeed, lives on, but that for the purpose of the exhibit, and in the confines of the Goodwin, I thought it a gesture of both absence and liberation to point to a possible post-colonial knowledge in the language that was developed in the region where the Goodwin now stands since humans arrived to this land thousands of years before the written word had been developed anywhere between the earth and the sun.
Figure 19: Quanquan’s Mortgage of 1663: The crediting of the heritage of the image was important to preserve. Although I discovered the deed in a (paper) book in the Goodwin, I accessed the digital image through JSTOR via the UMass library, and I retained the credits for the deed, the photo, and the author of the chapter which displayed the photo in the book edited by a local scholar to indicate some of the problems of the concept of ownership. Importantly, the mortgage is where text and land meet, and this mortgage is where cultures also intersect. By some interpretations, King Philip’s War was begun in part because of the conflicting interpretations of mortgages. Indians had been signing mortgages understanding that they were granting access to the colonists for farming and other purposes; the colonists, some say through a system of fraud, interpreted the mortgages as quit-claims, documents indicating that those who signed them had given up all right to be on that land.
CHAPTER 6

EPHEMERAL TEXT

While lying on the floor of a particularly bright day, a few days before the opening of *transit*, as I was aligning a frame so that the reflection of the sun from the text laser-etched onto the mirror of within the frame I was adjusting would appear in the precise place on the wall at the hour of the day I wanted, a fellow artist who had stopped by to look at the work asked why I was worried about precision. He said that my focus on precise placement and legibility was misplaced. He suggested that perhaps the words didn’t need to become manifest at all – or if they did, they would not need to be legible – for the work to, in his mind, be meaningful.

And, to be sure, there is a way in which the legibility and visibility of the work is a problem core to the work. Clouds impact the existence of the work. When there is dense, sporadic cloud-cover, the work appears and disappears rapidly. The sun’s position changes so much each day that large portions of the work can only bear their reflective qualities for a few days before the reflection does not appear at all.

The intrusion of the world into the work is part of the work, of course.

But that this intrusion is implicit and essential does not negate the need for the text to exist not just as object creating text but as true two-dimensional text (shadows and reflections). Core, also, to the work is that it be possible for the work to manifest at a certain hour and a certain day. If some of the concept in the work is to play with a destabilization of the apparent fixedness of concepts, to disturb a myth of language by revealing language’s reliance on the malleable physical world, then it’s necessary to make the work aim towards legibility and a kind of stability that can be undercut and not for the manifestation to be “merely” conceptual. The delicacy and vulnerability of the work is not for a lack of a capacity of engineering but for a lack of possibility inherent in the world and in the nature of the material (words) themselves.

And these contingencies are part of the physical nature of the work even before we consider the other obstacle to the work’s ability to manifest itself: the weather. And the impact of the weather is not only a part of the way the work undulates in the space, but it also impacts the way in which we conceive of time and scheduling at a lived-world level. The work forces me to rearrange my life according to the motion of clouds, to the accuracy of a forecast, to the gestures of the wind. It feels quite at odds to contemporary life. In the throes of designing
and building, my appointment-making includes weather-contingent yesses and nos. “Sure,” I say, “I can meet you on Wednesday in Amherst, that is, if it’s cloudy. If the sun is bright, we’ll have to reschedule.”

Of course, this also impacts the viewing of the piece by the audience – and the appearance of the piece whatsoever. I suppose I see the work as posing a challenge not unlike other site-specific works that may be in remote areas. But, to be honest, the ability to see a particular work is always difficult.

The challenge to the viewer is different in its details, but the resemblance to the difficulties in other works, particularly hard-to-reach site-specific works feels, to me, familiar. And although I intend it to be less obnoxious or ostentatious than lightning fields (and therefore conceptually different in the site’s different levels of accessibility), but I acknowledge that there is something true when some complain that the work is “hard to see.” But, really, isn’t all of it hard to see, and, really, isn’t that the point?

For the sun-dependent work, the contingencies connect with the body, and it might be important to say that the body is one of the unspoken cores of the project. The work forces a viewer to move, to regard time and space and weather as elements of their experience. Or I should say, offers these opportunities. The work isn’t the kind you can “drop in on and see.” But, again, no art is. This one just makes visible that illusion, perhaps it problematizes some of the consumerist assumptions around art consumption.

I think that is one of the reasons for the precision. If the work doesn’t manifest because of weather, then the work is one that becomes primarily conceptual. But if the work doesn’t manifest because it doesn’t get built or because it’s impossible to build, it emphasizes a different set of conceptions entirely. And it eliminates the body. So the degree of precision is also my offering to the viewer: if I’m asking you to consider your time and space relationships to view the work, know that I have also done so in a somewhat obsessive manner. I’m doing my best to give you something for your time. I have spent a lot of time on the precision, to try to get it right. (This also is a kind of unspoken commitment between artist and audience that may be in keeping with various other kinds of art, of course.)

There is more to the precision than that, though. If part of the work comes from an obsession with the word/world relationship, then placing a text precisely within a particular environment also pushes some theory-of-reference buttons. Even the most precise placement of text is inevitably idiosyncratic, there is a way in which this very idiosyncrasies point to the contingencies of naming. The relationship between how I, as
“author,” label has a slant relationship to the way in which a viewer would “label” accentuates the way in which language and concept is impermanent, contingent, tied to a body.

In the world of poetry the “inevitable surprise” is a phrase that is sometimes used for what some poets are trying to achieve. It’s another way of describing one version of catharsis, and it’s clearly oxymoronic. I suppose that I haven’t yet escaped that aesthetic. I’m looking for something similar in my combination of texts as a way to have experienced the project overall, which, I must confess is, roughly, impossible.

But in the midst of the experience, I am happy for an audience member to experience some disconnect with the work – an argument, a quibble, a rejection – this reaction is, in a way, part of the work and my desire for the work to use words to challenge words.
CHAPTER 7

THEN WHO IS IT FOR?

a. A question of audience

The question of who art is for is, in a way, one of the central considerations of what constitutes art in our current context. What “art” is is largely a function of who is considered to be a legitimate audience to recognize it as such. It is true, too, that the very definition of art is part of the dialogue within each exhibition inside the “art world,” with each exhibition in an established gallery attempting to put their stamp on what constitutes “art.”

The pursuit of an audience is a complex task and, in the world of contemporary art, seeking an audience is also the seeking of validity of a mode of making. The world of high art depends on systematic extreme inequality of capital in order to exist; there is no “high art” without the inequality. It is difficult to imagine a world of art separate from the financial structures of museums, galleries, and collectors that serve to both fund and legitimize the enterprise culturally through accumulations of capital, financial and cultural. The systems of higher education and criticism are wholly a part of the artworld; institutional critique is readily subsumed by the system that supports and depends on the inequality as the works that critique the system are bought and sold by it. So if the question of “who is this work for?” arises in a way differently for my work transit than it does for a “typical” artwork, I say two things: 1. Good 2. Why isn't this a part of every conversation about art? (aka Puhleez: There is no “neutral” audience.)

The questions of audience and of what constitutes a suitable aesthetic experience are core also to transit.

Because the work exists within uncontrolled contingencies of weather, and because it spans the entirety of a day, the work explicitly questions the ability for any viewer to see it with a significant degree of completeness. What does it mean to “see” a work of this nature? Who would be able to do so? Who is it for? It stands not just as a critique of the traditional methods and venues within the artworld but also as an example of a different concept, method, and practice.

Another way of asking the question is: who validates the work as “art”? Would this work, outside of an MFA program, and not promoted within the “art world” still constitute “art”?
That the work was completed and presented within the confines of an MFA program, is part of the institutional requirements of the degree, and is accompanied by this paper are therefore significant. Indeed, there is a way in which the work, in its implicit questioning of what constitutes a legitimate audience or a legitimate space for aesthetic experience through its reliance on weather and its installation and commitment to a space not usually considered one for art, is compromised by the way in which the work interacts with the institution. The bone fides gained by me – my cultural capital accumulation – that is, the very thing that legitimizes the work in the eyes of the institution (and to large segments of the art world), undermine some of the philosophical and aesthetic meanings of the work. I am forced to the unfortunate conclusion that aspects of this work declare their insufficiency through implicit need for cultural affiliations, for an audience of those within an established corner of the art world.

Moving between a need for legitimacy and a need to challenge some of the assumptions within the discipline becomes part of the cultural practice of many artists, because asking a question about the audience for a work also asks its purpose, which is, of course, an intentionally vague subject within the realm of art and art-making. The discipline of “art” has no “subject” for study, and this indeterminacy is part of our understanding of its output. Indeed, when an artwork is too clear in its messaging it is often critiqued harshly. It is a question, again, for another paper whether this critique is a kind of willful blindness on the part of those within the discipline, a disavowing of the financial connections and of the cultural and political dangers of using art to further political aims. Under the guise and arguments in favor of a lack of didacticism, there are also elements of protective self-censorship. Perhaps modernity taught us too well to separate our awe from our action.

In the contemporary art world, and within the academy, there are many artworks that are discussed without being seen in person. One of the explicit requirements of this paper is that it justify my work within the artworld by establishing its relationship to predecessors who are already accepted as members of the artworld. For transit, its lack of clear audience and sprawling array of potential meanings are part of the trajectory of contemporary artists in which I place my work in relation. Artists before me have both confronted the viewer with work where it was not expected and/or required an audience to travel to a site remote from the gallery space. For most of the artists below, their acceptance into the broader artworld (and their own apparent acceptance of their membership into this world) has helped to answer the question of who the work is for: those who pay attention to art within the artworld. I am not sure this answer remains the same for my work.
There are affinities between my work and James Turrell’s: his reliance on natural light and the difficulty in viewing some of his work being two key aspects. Important differences, too; Turrell’s work builds on technologies that can supply a “wow” factor that is in a way about the marveling of how something could actually be done, as in the case of his museum and gallery installations. In the case of The Roden Crater, the wow factor has more to do with the scale and precision of the work and the relative difficulty in seeing it, and some of the criticisms of this work could be levelled also at *transit*. While I aim for precision in my work, it is important that most of the work in *transit* be technologically plain, because one important distinction between Turrell’s site-specific works and my own is that I intend my works to make a kind of sacred space out of an ordinary one rather than building a monument around a special location. Turrell’s works seek to isolate the aesthetic experience from most aspects of our human world; mine seeks to reveal the complex beauty that is within and around our everyday experience.

Turrell’s ability to conjure a connection to the stars and to play with perception in a way that, for me, also makes me question my senses and my interpretative (read: culturally interpreted/ created) abilities is also amazing. I have had his make my body seem to shiver in response to light, and I have had his work make apparent how physical and reliant the phenomenon of sight is on the mechanics of the body and the interpretation of the mind.

If Turrell’s work is about building monasteries to light, removed from the world, for contemplation (such as the Roden Crater and The Quaker Meeting House in Houston), then I see my work as regarding a sacredness in each site. There is no place that has less history than any other; there is no place that is not dependent or related to any other, including to celestial bodies, including to our own bodies. It is in this way that my work also differentiates itself, not just conceptually, but financially, from the grand work of The Roden Crater. If it is implicit in Turrell that a special place is required for the experience of a transcendent work of art, and if that special place can only be manifest through the moving of soil, through the spending tens of millions of dollars, then implicit to my work is that whatever transcendence is possible is possible in the ordinary, the overlooked, and the mundane. If Turrell is about our bodies’ relations to light and is about exposing the physicality of the relationship, my work aims to be about our minds’ relationships to cultural ideas and objects themselves, and to the way that ideas, as words we carry with us, have physicality and place. I aim to give a space for a perception of thought as manifest in the movement of works, perhaps to perceive in ways that reveal conceptual
inconsistencies and that our bodies’ intersections with culture and concepts might be fundamentally different than how it feels.

It is in this way that my work intersects with some of Jenny Holzer’s. Her original truisms, especially if seen as interventions into a word-saturated streetscape of New York (as I think they’re meant to be understood), are ways to interrupt automatic processes within everyday life – for example, to jolt awake the inadvertent viewer by confronting them with some of the unspoken content of the consumerist experience while engaging in activities related to it. In that my work in the mode of transit appropriates a public space to a certain degree, that it comments on the use of that space, and that it does so for those who may not be looking for “art” are commonalities that are important to acknowledge. It’s important to note, too, that Holzer’s work is using a different kind of language to cause a different kind of result. Holzer’s work on the street was, among many other things, a call for awakening to the ways that societal concepts move us through financial relationships. I see Holzer’s truisms as attempting to use phrases that seem straightforward but are not to cause a viewer to suddenly question the statement itself as well as others that might be associated with it or contrary to it. Holzer’s ability to raise the question of who it’s for and what constitutes art as radical and inherent; I intend my work to borrow from these gestures but to move them into a contemplative realm.

Another artist that is important to name in the formation of the work is Walid Raad. I mention him not because his influence is obvious in the work but because it was through his work at the UMass Museum that I came to see an acceptance of nuanced and complex concept within the visual arts context. My understanding of how Raad relates his physical objects to concepts and impressions that allowed me to be able to envision my work having a place in the world of visual art. When he showed a portion of Scratching on things I could disavow at the UMass Museum in 2014, I saw his artist’s talk, attended his Q&A, and I realized the layering of meaning that he had imbued into the objects which no casual museum-goer could hope to access, and I think I felt an affinity with my writing processes and with some of the associative and conceptual methods I use when writing poems. Raad seemed, and seems, to me to layer meaning without necessarily feeling the need to explain or tip his hand. His use of parafictional techniques is one clear way: he allows not just the casual viewer but even the engaged viewer to reckon with layers of fiction and fact that make it hard to distinguish one from the other. There is dark comedy in these methods. But his layering of concepts doesn’t stop with those that engage in the crafting of fictions and near-fictions, Raad also engages his personal and political histories as well as associative
mythologies and an understanding of the cultural power of narrative strategies. My experience of his exhibit, talk, and Q&A was a liberating one, one where I felt my practices of concept, word, and object might have a place in the art world. I neither had to distance my work from its conceptual origins nor had to expose or explain those origins in ways that seemed to flatten their effect. My work, instead, could point to problems or concepts obliquely or seemingly in passing while deeply engaged in exploring them, whether or not the audience “got it.”

Essential, too, to Raad’s work in *Scratching on things I could disavow*, is his commentary on the history of an object within the gallery space and questioning the gallery space. Raad denies the viewer within the gallery access to the objects on which this work is based; he displays 3-D printed objects in their plastic colors rather than the objects about which the work is based. In this work, as in other work by Raad, such as his work as The Atlas Group, he seems to question whether the gallery space itself can be a safe place for the viewing and consideration of the aesthetics and of the work. There appears to be an inherent distrust of the exhibition space itself, as well as a distrust of the audience when Raad introduces fiction presented as fact in such a way that a viewer may not be able to see any difference between them. My work is less aggressive in its challenge to the gallery space; rather than confronting the gallery and effectively challenging its authority or removing from the gallery the very objects the work is centered upon, I have made work that intends to show a beauty impossible within the traditional gallery, to base a work entirely on a place and its history as something entirely other than a gallery. Rather than to interrogate the gallery for an audience within it, I intend to reveal beauty entirely outside it for an audience that need not enter it.

It’s important to acknowledge the tradition of concrete poetry, especially because of our mutual dependence on the materiality of words. Ian Hamilton Finlay’s “Little Sparta,” is particularly noteworthy, in part because of the scope of time and space of his work – making from a farm something that changes our experience of the land and the landscape – as well as in the site specificity and the difficulty in viewing “Little Sparta” in person. Likewise, Finlay’s work, as well as mine risks becoming “mere” illustrations of concepts, and risks making the place a “mere” page of a text. It is easy to deflate a work, to take its expansive possibilities and destroy them through adding more words. Finlay and I share the common challenge: to bring words to an existing place that is hard to get to and to have the words deepen the mystery rather than flatten or explain it, as well as to find ways for the work to exist outside of its place to find another audience, which entirely changes the experience
by removing the words and the viewer from the place where they are installed. Finlay and I share an attachment to place: the installation and the dependence on the location make the works difficult to conceive of outside of their context: to display them in a museum would not make sense. Finlay also occupies a corner of the artworld that is sometimes more associated with poetry than with visual art. His work is interpreted as both literary and tied to a location that is difficult to access, a cross-section of methods that contradict our expectations of the portability of literature, and a challenge to the audience which is shared with transit.

Georges Perec’s *An Attempt At Exhauusting A Place in Paris* is an example of a different kind of difficulty of access or of “seeing.” Perec is an influence in that he demonstrates an indexical impossibility by recording the goings-on on a street corner in Paris for a 24-hour period as it happens; bare facts are rendered without emotion but this non-emotional rendering elicits emotion from the reader and cause the mundane to suddenly be revealed as inordinately complex, full of history and movement, each moment and atom rendering a kind of infinity. Perhaps this is related to Husserl’s “horizon of the object,” in which we recognize through a shift of perspective that our perspective on any given object is limited, and if we so desire, we can shift our perspective and discover a new world of the object and we intuit that this motion could continue forever for any given object. There is a way that Perec’s attachment to place renders his literary work incomplete; there is an implied impossibility in his task, and there is a way that his literature is both attached to place and entirely removed from it, revealing the possibilities of any street corner – and the impossibilities. The reader/audience has access to the street as portrayed by Perec, but there is also an implied pointing away from the street to the situation in which the book is being read. Another rendering of the mind/body problem, perhaps, and of the problems and inevitabilities of summarizing as a part of speaking, describing, or naming.

It may be that an essential predecessor is simply the contemporary view of a poetics of plain space, a poetry of the vulgar, as well as the philosophic poem: Williams, Frost, Neruda, Stevens, Armantrout, and Kearney. In poetry all that is needed is a turn of phrase to create an aesthetic and where the connection of the aesthetic to the physical world is inherently distanced but implied. And where there is a sense that syntax, the construction of language, alters the semantics of the words. These strains are powerful in my crafting of I might call a plastic poetics, where I am attempting to use plain language and physical presence to alter the experience of the basics of language, and, by giving it a body to be experienced, to change what words themselves, even language itself, might mean. And these intents may be have more in common with poetic practices: aesthetic experiences that
are intended to point outwards, to cause the audience, whoever and wherever they are, to experience their own place anew, to turn away from the immediate cause, the aesthetic object, and to observe a different beauty altogether, that of their own experience in their own alive context.

I see my work as taking risks that might not be considered risky. I’m attempting to reduce language to tiny, seemingly easy, components. I try to take recognizable, understandable words and use them to refer to the location in which they are installed and to the ways in which they are installed. The risk is that they appear to be illustrations of the words or concepts. My sense of the work, however, is that the elements of time and fragility fundamentally change what might otherwise be “mere” illustration into a self-reflective performance of a biological/philosophical/cultural condition. So I hope a few others experience, anyway. I know that at times I do. To render an accessibility with words and to imply the possibility of profundity outside the exhibit, to imply that the limited viewing possibility is both an inevitability and an unnecessary condition of experiencing a profound connection to the mysteries of (any) place.

In transit, as in other works of mine in this mode of making, I see the phrases that I am using as slow-moving. I envision the conceptual aspects of the pieces, if they are to work well for an audience, might take hours to have an effect. Of course, this audience is largely an illusion; few are interested, available, and patient enough to experience the entire span of the work. However, in a very real way, what we want or hope from an audience seems to me to never be at all what we get. Audiences are rushed, and even the ones that are not usually do not have sufficient time to spend to really deal with and engage a work. It’s tiring to do so; I know as a fan of art myself. I rarely am able to deeply engage with a work on an emotional level, even if I am writing about it. The engagement is cursory or is to enable a piece of writing such as this one, so creating a work where the largely illusory element of audience is implicitly acknowledged is also more than fine by me. Does this mean that the work must operate successfully at the level of suggestion in order to “succeed?” I don’t think so. I think that a work can resist summary and still succeed, even if the ideal audience never shows up.

The constructing of the work does not mean that there is anyone who experiences the work in this way, so I remain hopeful that there are those who are able, within the scope of their own experience of the work, to

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There are a gazillion other antecedents to mention. There’s the requisite tracing of a hand in the cave by sunlight, cosmological architecture, the artist Robin Bell who projects phrases onto Trump properties as a form of protest, Susan Hiller’s The Last Silent Movie, which I have read a good deal about but have yet to have experienced.
leave it having had a transformative effect, but I do not know if the work in the end has any of its intended effect. This paper attempts to justify my work as worthy of the attention of those within the artworld; established artists have the benefit of critics and theorists and students who do this linguistic-interpretive work for them.

I have been gratified to learn that some of my work is deeply appreciated by those who work in the spaces where my work is installed. It may be this audience, then, is who the work is for: those who experience the place day-in and day-out, regardless of their relationship to the artworld. I hope, for their sake, there is something pleasurable about the way my work alters, temporarily, the spaces they inhabit. In the end, whether or not what I make is received as art and within a lineage is an academic exercise. Must human-made beauty and its experience be catalogued, delineated within a tradition, or justified to the proper authorities for it to have value? Do we de-value our own experiences of beauty and of the possibilities of “art” by requiring these justifications?

b. A question of benefit

“Who is it for?” has another essential reading. The question does not only apply to the aspect of audience: who gets to see an art work and who might appreciate the work when it is seen (a reading of the question that is central to many conceptions of work and certainly is to contemporary museology), but also another reading of “Who is it for?” as in: “Who benefits from the work?” This reading raises concerns central to the capital enterprises of art as well as the concepts of expression of individual and expressions within a diverse society.

Many times during my work on transit I forced this question from my mind. If I questioned the sacrifices of time, money, of relationships, and family when pursuing a work of serious art that has no chance of remuneration are a heavy burden, there was a risk that I would not complete the difficult tasks at hand. There are those who regard the sacrifices as de rigueur for an art degree – indeed, there is an argument to be made that the value of the work is heavily dependent on the apparent degree of difficulty, and implicit within this valuation are the sacrifices made for the sake of the completion of the difficult task. However, this “value” is so rarely realized remuneratively, and, in the case of transit, offers little possibility as such, that it’s important to examine some of the power relationships at play.
There is a growing trend within the arts that encourages artists to negotiate with galleries and other venues that present opportunities for a return that is more than mere “exposure.” Artists and their allies have begun to recognize that working for nothing but opportunity contributes to a downward spiral in wages and in payments for the difficult sacrifice-laden work that artists produce. It is no great stretch to see the issues of enrollment in BFA and MFA degrees as a part of a similar concern with regards to higher education and its return to the artist. Simply put, many artists are finding the costs of these degrees – those financial, opportunity, and cultural costs – too great. In a system that asks young artists to take on great debt, to sacrifice other opportunities, and to bring their visions into a community with little chance for future remuneration, the benefit is often outweighed by the cost. Indeed, a recent study of MFA programs finds that there are only a few that are worth the sacrifices when one considers the likelihood of the degree contributing to the artists’ abilities to make a living from their work.

The role of the academy and its power within the artworld and as a reinforcing structure of this dynamic should not be underestimated. The annual financial cost (and debt) of students enrolled in school – and by the incomes made by the artists teaching within such institutions is in the hundreds of millions of dollars. And a spiral mirroring that of the one decried in terms of exhibitions and “opportunity” is as powerful within the academy but not as often challenged. Not only is there an arms race of degrees, but through the decades during which race has developed, the economy for artists outside the academy has diminished for the vast majority of artists. The “art market” is growing only for a fraction of artists. Further, an emphasis on non-commercial art within the academy, an important way the academy can contribute to diversity within the artworld, serves

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22 I have limited the discussion in this section to the most important points. I am happy to forward a brief paper I’ve recently written looking at some of the issues of art and education within the current context of the MFA.

23 A recent study determined that MFA degrees in Studio Art were more likely to hurt than help artists in their pursuit of their careers, with the exception of a few top schools. (See: Ben Davis, “Is Getting an MFA Worth the Price?” artnet News, August 30, 2016, accessed May 3, 2018, https://news.artnet.com/art-world/mfa-degree-successful-artists-620891.)


25 Between 2005 and 2015, the value of transactions in the Global Art Market increased from $36m to $64m However, the total volume of sales of all works priced under $50k was only 12% of the overall volume. The European Fine Art Foundation report for 2016 says that “growth in sales over $1 million ‘have far outpaced growth in value in all other segments.’” (See: Eileen Kinsella, “What Does TEFAF 2016 Art Market Report Tell Us About The Global Art Trade?” artnet news, March 9, 2016, accessed May 3, 2018, https://news.artnet.com/market/tefaf-2016-art-market-report-443615.) Further, employment by artists making art, and even in ancillary industries, has fallen dramatically in the last 30 years and has done so particularly since the Great Recession. Scott Timberg’s Culture Crash is an excellent resource for more discussion and details.
however to exacerbate the conditions that graduates face. Because of the simple necessity that schools are economically structured to have a much greater number of students is needed than teachers, when there is a lack of commercial opportunities for artists, the system depends on students’ non-remunerative educational investments to survive. Developing as a result is a hierarchy of academic artists, where the few graduates who are able to capitalize on their degrees do so while the vast majority find employment in unrelated industries. Yet the assumptions of the financial structures behind degrees such as the MFA remain the same. They are structured as professional degrees – to help artists create practices and methods that are viable and capitalizable in the marketplace. Yet the marketplace and the artists’ place within it does not exist.

Ironically, perhaps, the case that is made for art within the academy is accompanied by conceptions of art as being a component of human activity that helps to create a healthy society, a healthy culture, a healthy campus, a healthy citizen. While this argument includes within it an understanding of the value of the output of each artist as contributing to society, it does not necessarily (and often does not) include a vision for how participating in the making of art makes for material struggles for many citizen-artists.

When a discipline that ostensibly prepares its graduates for a profession is unable to claim many graduates as making a living from that profession, the assumed relationship of costs and benefits should be re-examined. There is no doubt that BFA and MFA graduates have gained something during their studies, but as departments begin to scramble to convince students to pursue these degrees for the sake of the departments’ own longevity, it becomes clearer that our traditional understanding of costs and benefits may be entirely upside-down. Asking students to support, through time, work, opportunity, and resources a field of study that is structured as a professional degree and asks for adherence to professional standards but that provides few graduates with opportunities for a profession is a field of study which depends on false hope, structural inequality (art-making only those who can afford the extraordinary cost), and/or willful ignorance to survive.

7. c. Is it for me? A question of academy.

In the end, I have to admit that I recognize the difficulty of viewing the work means that even the most interested members of the audience are forced to experience the work conceptually more than bodily. But, as has been the case with other work I have made that moves slowly over the course of a day, often the people who most experience bodily are those who labor in the place – people who experience the location day-in and
day-out and who, in my own imagination, get to experience their place in a slightly altered way, in a heightened state perhaps, as the location lives out its own relationship with the sun. But I also must acknowledge that although I do know that some of those who work at the library appreciated the exhibit, there are few who found the time or opportunity to deeply engage with it. It is therefore necessary to turn back to the question of audience and purpose for at least one more reason and that is the material factors surrounding the manufacture of the exhibit. In acknowledging that there may be no real “audience” I have to acknowledge that the work may be inherently not just self-serving but self-indulgent. I do not say this to facetiously undercut any importance in the work; I aim to make work that is meaningful to others in aesthetic, ethical, and philosophic ways. However, I also understand that my own concerns are often idiosyncratic. Indeed, that is one of the things that is often prized about artists: their peculiar obsessions. The risk that each artist takes in seeking their own genuine way of making is that it is obscure, even alienating, to others, including those within the artworld who might be able to pay for the work in one way or another. If I anticipate no one caring sufficiently about the work that it will gain me some any significant degree of cultural capital, then all the more reason to recognize the strange sacrifices that I ask of others to engage in to make the work.

The question that crossed my mind many times this semester was “How many hours might be enough?” And it is clear that after 150 hours alone on a laser cutter and hundreds of hours more planning and writing that the answer is “none.” And while I accept the decisions to create transit as my own, and while this may be a problem within “art” more broadly (W. H. Auden is said to have been paraphrasing Paul Valery when Auden said “A poem is never finished, only abandoned.”), the structure of a degree set up to be one for professionalization that leads to no profession but that often requires a great sacrifice of time, to an extreme, one might say. The professionalization programme is vague about the nature of outsourcing labor, about the dedication of financial and other resources, about what sacrifices might be considered expected or reasonable within the context. Likewise, what personal issues are likely to attend to the decision to go “all-in” and produce a professional thesis exhibition and scholarly paper. The conversations I’d had with my cohort and with graduates about how to maintain any kind of family life and how to justify the debts, personal, financial, professional, incurred during the path of study and while producing what is supposed to be a significant work certainly are reminders of the ways in which artists are expected to sacrifice in order to prove themselves worthy. The question of who it’s for is a hard one for all of us, I think.
The question “Who is it for?” therefore also asks “Who should pay for it?” and there is no simple answer. Ignoring this question, however, which, in my experience, has been the approach of the academy, helps to place the burden of making on the artist while emphasizing the cultural benefit to the larger whole: the society and to the academy, while the possibility and expectation of capitalization on the artwork and on the practice is what is bestowed on the artist, even when the art and the market make such capitalization profoundly unlikely and even when such abilities are not made significantly more manifest through the course of the rigors of the degree.

The problem is one that is common to many disciplines within the Humanities and to aspects of learning within those disciplines. Simply put: not all valuable knowledge and practice makes one more employable; some of the value of the education and of the practices should be understood more broadly: creating practices that an entire culture benefits from. And yet, within the discipline of Studio Art and many other Humanities, we see the cost fall on the student with an expectation that there is a material benefit or with the expectation that those who are worthy are those who will see a benefit. In this way, the academy’s participation in art (including my own participation within it) mirrors the larger art world, where artists are expected to sacrifice in order to later privately capitalize upon their knowledge and experience. But as our current economy reveals, what the market values does not match what Humanity values. Likewise in art and aesthetics.

One of the key changes in land distribution between the Native Americans and the colonists was that the colonists considered the land to be saleable in a way that would allow for absolute privatization of the land. In the conflicts that led to King Philip’s War, the Native Americans claimed that they had been tricked into signing deeds that included a “quit-claim” which would preclude their future use of an area. This privatization was a radical shift in the distribution of resources on the land that is now Hadley.

The resemblance of current practices within the artworld and within the academy have resonances of this privatization, with an important distinction. It is the private parties that get an “opportunity” and “experience” rather than land through the work towards a degree and then are expected to prove their use to the market while using their expertise to provide exhibitions that benefit the public, the implicit argument being that those who prove themselves worthy in the marketplace will be adequately rewarded. It’s an open secret that this is not the case for artists. While this sharing of benefit undoubtedly provides a public benefit, we should regard
that placing the burden of the cost on the individual artist as an unjust and unnecessary outcome of the artworld and its educational methods.

When questions of audience are seen as beside the point, especially in a culture where opportunities for artists are diminishing, the burden is placed on individual artists to spend money and time on their practice and, in the case of the academy, on students to pay for the right to do so without expectation of remuneration while producing work for a vague, unknown, and sometimes imaginary, audience. And to produce a paper alongside their exhibition to justify and register their capital claim.
CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

Although one of the current uses of the word “literal” means “actual,” the word itself reveals its literary origins. In just a glance at the word, we see “literal” has “lit” as a root structure. It is a word about words; its origin, from Latin through Middle French and Middle English, is a reference to letters. “Literally” refers not to what actuality is, but instead to the wordliness of a thing. In its first use, “literal” was in reference to the Bible; “literal” was a reference to scripture. The trace of reference to the Bible as containing what is “actual” remains in our use of the word, when something is taken to be “literal” it is distinct from “figurative.” And while this is a significant shift away from “literal” being a reference to the Bible, it reveals the trace of the epistemology of an earlier time, when there was one source of Truth, and that Truth was revealed through words.26

It was this epistemological stance that was held by the Puritans when they landed in New England in 1620. When King Philip’s War broke out between members of the next generation, part of the justification for the war on the side of the colonists was based in an understanding of what was pure and true versus what was evil and wild. Associations between ancient Biblical stories and the current situation were made explicit through the work of Increase Mather, both as preacher and as the likely editor of Mary Rowlandson’s captivity narrative.27

There was one single source of knowledge, one authority, and it came through The Word.

The question I am left with after transit is in what ways this rigidity of authority remains a structural and conceptual component of thoughts and action in contemporary aesthetic practices, especially those within the academy. If all aesthetic experience is internal, why do we resist modes that expand this internal realm? If beauty can be expansive, why do we build systems to contain and contract it? I think instinctively a call to “quality” or “excellence” might be my first response, but it is also clear to me that the gatekeeping systems serve to justify a control of resources, especially within a shrinking economic field for the arts.

While it may stretch the metaphor, it is worth considering the University’s relationship to the exhibition as one that uses the written thesis to register, as if a deed, the thesis artworks produced within it inside its archive. If the analogy I began with holds, in which the artist strikes out to find new territory in order to stake their claim

26 This idea was first presented in a lecture which has since been published as “Using a Net to Catch the Air: Poetry, Ineffability, and Small Stones in the Shoe: A Lecturish” in Ineffability: An Exercise in Comparative Philosophy of Religion published by Springer in 2017.

27 I’m relying on my understanding of Lisa Brooks’ work here. See Our Beloved Kin.
and in order to build their fortunes through capitalizing on that claim, then this paper becomes the way in which the University then holds the deed and establishes their own power through the relationship. The University is part of a system of verification, of implicitly de-legitimating methods outside the academy and of capitalizing on the artists within it – and by encouraging artists to capitalize (rather than make their resources and discoveries communal) their own practices. There are two ways in which the academy and its involvement in the arts and in this project mirror some of the Puritans’ methods. 1. King Philips’ War was preceded by discrepancies in land title and can be viewed largely as a battle for resources, but it also should be seen as a war over methods to distribute and hold resources: privately or in commonality. The academy puts the burden of remuneration on the private capitalization of the individual while acknowledging a broad public benefit from the activities of art-making. 2. Further, as the Puritans saw the Bible as the only source for knowledge; the academy and its dependence on declarative, explanatory papers represents a narrowing of the legitimacy of possible methods of gaining, expressing, and possessing knowledge. Text arrived with the colonists and it remains a tool of capitalization, and it is a paradox, perhaps to explicitly say it here with the written word, a tool for the narrowing of knowledge.

The people who were here before Europeans were regarded as insufficient to the Puritans, to their understanding of what was proper, true, and excellent. And just as the land has, for 400 years, been passed down creating structural legacies of theft and genocide, so, too, has the language retained its conceptual literalness, its narrow version of the true. And the culture of justifying one’s methods, of making a claim to conceptual and material territory, is core to the structure of the academy, to discoveries and inventions made within it, and to the state’s enforcement as well. Therefore this paper. But just as there are trends of using the current legal system to examine mortgages and treaties made in bad faith, there are also methods to challenge the contemporary landscape of the use of cultural authority to deny aesthetic validity, possibility, and livelihood. It’s just that these methods do not currently seem to be winning the arguments of word or land.

I don’t think transit offers a viable alternative to the myriad systems that are at work that discourage discoveries that are beyond words that can serve a public for its own benefit, conceptual, bodily, and materially. I do hope, however, that transit, in spite of this paper and its relationship to the institution, resists some of the methods of private capitalization of knowledge and practices. I also hope it traffics in pathways to knowledge that are not describable in words, that use words to frustrate and confound traditional linguistic power, leaving open new avenues for knowing, both inside and outside of language.
Figure 20: Goodwin Memorial Library 1st Floor Plan

Figure 21: Goodwin Memorial Library 2nd Floor Plan
BIBLIOGRAPHY


PHOTO OF THE ARTIST AT WORK