Two Murders, A Reincarnation, In Bloom

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Introduction

As I write this, it has been over a month since I last saw my wife. It’s been seven years since I’ve lived in a place I considered to be my home; at a spry twenty four that’s over a third of my life. I’m supported financially by my mother and grandparents who own and operate a small winery in Denver, Colorado. My grandparents raised me after my parents split when I was roughly five years old. They are now in their late seventies and continue to work seven days a week at the family winery in order to make ends meet, as money is very tight. They are motivated by family which they value over all else. Whenever I’m home for brief visits I’m quickly put to work. As a result of growing up at the winery, and before that a cut-flower greenhouse that my family owned before business went south, I acquired an extensive range of skills. Customer service, masonry, plumbing, tractor & car maintenance, chef, farming, electrical work, winemaking, landscaping, pie and dessert baker, backhoe operator, social media and marketing consultant, pest trapping and removal, wood worker, vineyard caretaker, pizza making extraordinaire, and weekend wine pourer are a few of the common positions I hold. When I’m away at school my mother or grandparents carry the additional load as a consequence of my absence. Every year I spend away from home as my family ages is harder than the last. My emotional state is perhaps best metaphorized as the tasting notes on a wine; on the nose it is sour anxiety, on the front of the pallet it is an overwhelming sense of guilt, and as it moves to the back of the pallet it is a mouth puckering and crippling pressure to perform and justify why I have been absent from the people I care most about- and this wine is not getting better with age.

It's easy to look back and track the "how," as in "how did I get to be an MFA candidate in Pennsylvania?" I was born in November of 1995. I grew up as one of four children. I worked continuously throughout my childhood and young adult years at the family business. I attended barely enough high school to make it through. Then I went on to pursue college at Arizona State University. Two degrees later, I decided to go up to bat for another degree, which brings me to my time at Pennsylvania State. The problem with the “how,” is that it can be incredibly boring and it glances over the most important question: "Why?" Why did I not end up like many of the other kids I grew up with or the youth of my generation — lost in an addiction? Why is it that art clicked for me and so few other students in the same classes? Or most importantly of all, why am I pursuing art if it is contrary to being with the people and many of the things I value most?

The "why" questions are dangerous and form the springboard for existential crisis, but I'm part of the generation of existential crisis. It's nothing new. The truth is, I've been in a perpetual state of existential crisis since my parents divorced twenty years ago. It's not that I'm comfortable with existential dread, it's just impossible to avoid this dread when you set your
phone down and look up from the distraction. I was just recently talking to my wife during our nightly phone call, and we were discussing what the world might look like in 50 years- By then if we don’t make some major changes to humanity we will be well underway in an irreversible climate crisis, there will be more people on this planet than we can reasonably feed as the global population peaks, and much of the biodiversity and natural wonder that has evolved for the last million years will be permanently erased from our planet. Effectively, we will be at the climax of the human narrative on earth.

Now, I am not naive enough to think that this modern moment is the first time people have been faced with existential crisis or the potential end of humanity. This certainly has been present in humanity since the beginning and justifies the origins of religion. More recently with the birth of the nuclear age there has been the added potential that we experience massive destruction and extinction in a radioactive doomsday. Undoubtedly, the cold war era was rampant with fear of the end. The distinction between the cold war and 2020 is that destruction through nuclear war requires an active role from a few select individuals at the top of opposing governments. As long as world leaders can behave, we can all keep our heads down and hope for the best. The threat climate change poses to humanity is far more insidious. It is happening passively. No longer do we need action to end the world, rather we need action to keep the world from ending.

Combine the threat of the climate with intensified social, racial and political divisions, and the only response I can muster is an exasperated "fuck". It's no surprise typing "nihilism today" into google shows an increase in this line of thinking. Keeping your eyes on the screen, inventing a false ego, and completely withdrawing is sometimes the only manageable response to cope when the gravity of the present moment slams down. But, distraction and withdrawal aren’t good coping mechanisms. Nietzsche himself, who is most closely associated with Nihilism, believed that its “corrosive effects would eventually destroy all moral, religious, and metaphysical convictions and precipitate the greatest crisis in human history.”

Traditionally, religion operated as a powerful coping mechanism. I myself was raised Catholic- sort of. I belonged to the group of Catholics that rarely attend church, but still make the sign of the cross when they drive by. Despite loving many aspects of Catholicism and for that matter many other religious followings, I belong to the ever growing population that is disaffected by organized religion, as shown by research from the Pew Research Center. This


decline of coping mechanisms and increase in existential dread is creating a dangerous cocktail. The most heartbreaking statistic that haunts me and perhaps best captures this moment is that of suicide. Over the last two decades in the United States the national suicide rate increased by 38%, according to the CDC in a study recently published in January of 2020. The suicide rate for teens and young adults is up 47%. That means the steepest incline is among people my age. At first this shocked me, but then I considered the people I know who have attempted or succeeded in ending their lives.

We are in a desperate situation. This would be a great time to propose a solution, but sadly, there is no one solution. The issues we face as a society all originate from individuals. My uncle who is a widely published tenured professor of economics once commented to me while speaking on the difference between macroeconomics and microeconomics that "there is no such thing as macroeconomics, it's all microeconomics." Although I am not working through issues of carbon tariffs or currency the sentiment stands, societal and cultural issues are all about the individual: you and me. Therefore to try to imagine a "fix-all" when individuals are infinitely complex and nuanced is unreasonable. Rather, the goal of this writing is explorative. I’m attempting to scrutinize the best tool I believe there is at coping with our individual predispositions, how that has defined my creative practice, and what that means in the context of the rest of the world. I think that in this pursuit there are ramifications that challenge preconceived ideas of arts and sciences, and I believe there are tools and implications that could be of great importance to individuals working through their own "why's"- especially individuals of my generation. This is the exploration of the "why" to what I am doing and the tool that I am using is art.

Two Murders

Clay is an awfully strange material. It's of course easy for someone to explain verbally that it is everywhere. With a few exceptions, you can dig almost anywhere and find material with mineralogy that would fit into the family of what we consider clay. When I was in high school, and was gifted with this and other exciting information about clay that could potentially alter the course of my education, I responded like any high school student would: "Great, so what?" I didn’t initially appreciate that its accessibility, ease of use, functionality and expansive creative possibilities explained why for tens of thousands of years it was one of the most important technologies of human civilizations across the globe. Today, it is also one of the best tools we have to learn about these ancient cultures. It is amazing that this abundant, inexpensive material that has been used for thousands of years could capture my fingerprints and creative whims with

an immediacy that few materials offer. Not to mention the art I created could be fired into a stone that would outlive not only me, but potentially outlive all humans, and then fall into its place in the human narrative to be discovered by some future inhabitant. I was caught up in that romanticism during the first semester of my university studies, and by the second semester that was all crushed. In a graduate level course that I ambitiously convinced the faculty to let me take during my freshman year, I was introduced for the first time to the concept of craft as a subservient form of art in an academic hierarchy that discriminates based on medium.

Perplexed as to how this hierarchy was possible given the rich historical context of ceramic works I began to hunt this elusive character, craft. Now, seven years and a thousand pages of Glenn Adamson later, I feel that I found craft. Today, despite it being a word that discriminates forms of creative expression based on materiality, it has been embraced by a community of makers with a wide range of creative practices that wear their craft badge with pride. It seems to be popular with museums right now to host shows that highlight the history, or try to show new moments in craft. Show titles such as Crafting a Continuum, don’t even get me started with how often I’ve seen the title Contemporary Craft. However, despite this community and attention like any good hunt I didn’t just come to admire craft, I came to kill it.

This may come off as inflammatory or insensitive to a large community that I hold in very high regards, but I promise it does not come without justification. There is more at stake in the continuation of craft than the obvious impacts for those in the community. Furthermore the hierarchy of art and craft has shed light on faults in a larger societal way of thinking.

Starting with the most common argument to end the art vs craft debate, is to say there is not a distinction between art and craft. After all there are "craft" artists who transcend their status to become "art" artists, so it's clear that this is not an impenetrable demarcation. In ceramics this transcendence is led or championed by artists who have halted their production of utilitarian objects and operate in the auspice of sculpture. Peter Volkous was a pioneer in this way. In a Rose Slivka article published in the 1961 issue of Craft Horizons, titled The New Ceramic Presence, she stirred controversy by glorifying artists like Volkous for pushing ceramics as a medium forward. She characterized these new artists with a similar intellectual structure used to describe their abstract expressionist painting counterparts. They were using clay in an "art-like" fashion, Slivka even referred to the artists as "painter-potters". The reality is, that Volkous and other artists of that generation expanded on the ideas of and potential of clay, but they did very little to break down any art vs craft divide. If anything, they found a path out of a negative categorization, took that path, and then burnt the bridge behind them. Take the massive rejection

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of artists to the 1972 ceramic national that effectively ended the exhibition.\(^5\) Jurors Robert Turner, Jeff Schlanger, and Peter Volkous rejected all 4,500 slides and determined it should be an invitational not open call.

As a side note, I don’t blame those artists for wanting to build that divide. Even today, in order to demand prices for work that is even in a similar ballpark (pricewise) to a painting one cannot be considered a craft artist. Despite major art galleries having a greater openness to ceramic artists today, they certainly keep a limited number of them on their roster. Matt Wedel perhaps expressed it best in an interview with Garth Clark\(^6\) that each gallery is in a state having their "one" ceramic artist and that’s it. Not to mention this token position is almost always held by artists that keep a distance and distinction between themselves and the greater ceramics community.

One of the biggest shortcomings of Skivka's article and a majority of writing that has been done on craft is that craft is commonly discussed through its relativity to art. Slivka is an easy example, but it is common language in museum writing to describe how an artist works with their "craft" material the same way an artist works with their “art” material. In The New Ceramic Presence the ceramic artists are constantly being compared and described as moving clay akin to the way a painter would move paint. This removes a sense of integrity to the work as if its value is quantified by its similarity to higher ranking mediums. Just recently I had a curator from the Detroit Museum of Art in my studio to look at my work. He made the comment that it was strange and interesting that I worked with clay the same way an “artist” would work with any other material. Implying that clay was somehow not an art material, and that I was using it in some novel way. I was surprised by this in the most unsurprising way.

All that aside, the craft community is doing fine. Yes, it can be insular and there is a lot of potential missed depending on your perspective, but it’s growing and it’s very supportive of the people within it. Why kill it then? Craft has been in the shadow of art for so long and has survived and even thrived, to threaten it seems unjust. This threat to craft is my attempt to save art. Art is already in a very fragile state. To those in the art community this likely comes off as a farce, but the signs are abundant. The current art world structure will not and cannot meet the needs of the upcoming generations and technological shifts. Culturally speaking, the Pew Research Center has found that less than half the American population is interested in art\(^7\). To

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understand how the death of craft could save art we have to go back to when the art-craft demarcation first began. Note that I am referring specifically to Western culture.

Industrialization in the late 19th Century threatened craft and marked a major turning point for the medium with the birth of a true craft counterculture. The divide of art and craft goes farther back, however. In Peter Dormer's 1999 book, *The Culture of Craft*, he looks all the way back to the middle ages. Dormer claims that during the Middle Ages there was not a distinction between art and craft. All the creative fields were considered to be less important than the liberal arts. It was during the Renaissance that a true artist class came to be and this was largely due to the patronage of the church.

The church was influential on both the type of art being made and the intellectualization behind the arts. One of the key techniques employed by Christianity to create a hierarchy of value is to establish a system of binaries- heaven vs. hell being the most notable. This sentiment also became the tool to establish and define art’s value. Art holds a profound place in human life and is an intrinsic part of humanity, but it has always been an elusive term to define clearly and even more difficult to establish the value of. This places art in an insecure place. Creating a secondary category of lesser art was thus useful in creating a relative that art could be compared to and elevated above. This is the birth of craft. Craft was created to make up for the lack of definition of art. It was a means to bolster art when there was no pre-established value system. It can be useful to insult another thing to build an arbitrary relativity and therefore hierarchy. A tactic that has been used throughout human history in many aspects of human life beyond just the arts- often with detrimental effects.

This hierarchy was very beneficial for a faction of the arts for a long time. Those arts that were able to maintain their place at the top of the art hierarchy and closely align themselves with the church through religious propaganda became the academic arts. This includes painting, stone/marble sculpture and architecture (with exceptions). Whereas the other art practices were placed on the less prestigious end of the spectrum that would become craft, and therefore were refused the same kind of academic setting. The academic arts for a time were elevated to a similar level of value as the sciences during the Renaissance. Masters such as Leonardo DaVinci operated in a more rounded sort of intellect where art and sciences went hand in hand as part of critical thought. As the sciences grew, they began to threaten and blur some of the binary's the Church had established. The structure of relative value through a binary system only works if one subscribes completely to one end or the other -- to believe or not believe. When too much grey area comes into the picture, meaning people are no longer subscribing to either end, the whole relativity becomes challenged and threatened. I believe this moment in history also may

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explain the divergence of science and art. As science began threatening the Church, the church
distanced itself from science. I think that due to the arts relationship to the Church through
economic patronage, as the Church distanced itself from the sciences so did art. Ramifications of
this distance may explain why the arts are so closely tied to spirituality as opposed to the
sciences that are commonly thought to be distant from spirituality.

Art maintained its binary with craft through the enlightenment period. Thinkers such as
Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgement* began thinking of art in a wider scope and began
searching for a more solid definition of beauty and the sublime.9 However, the search for an
ultimate truth created a definition of beauty that was deeply flawed and instead built another
binary of “taste or no taste.”

As a tangent, Eastern culture is an especially interesting counter case in that their
dominant religious structures, such as Buddhism, were not based on binaries. The goal was quite
the opposite, Buddhism attempts to dissolve dualities. Interestingly, the art-craft divide did not
historically occur in Eastern countries. While studying eastern ceramic history, I learned Eastern
cultures such as Japan did not historically demean ceramics. I was immediately drawn to that
culture. I became infatuated with Eastern philosophy, and the work I created often reflected a
Japanese aesthetic. In more recent history though, the whole modern world is subject to a
Western washing, and upon the introduction of dominant Western cultures to the East we’ve
seen the art-craft divide follow.

Fast forward to the late 19th Century and early 20th Century, artists began threatening
dominant paradigms in art, reigniting the question of what is art. Craft was no longer an adequate
scapegoat and it was not enough to discern some of what is art by establishing what is not art.
Paul Cezanne and Edouard Manet (among others) were avant garde when they began painting
the bourgeois and pure landscapes. This marked the first assault onto academic arts. Then
artists such as Brach and Picasso began looking to the then booming world of science as they
worked through cubism and abstraction. Too much of this grey area was being introduced into
the concept of what art was. The binary of craft vs the academic arts became more blurred as the
idea of what art was came into more extreme scrutiny. Finally, Marcel Duchamp lit fire to the
whole hierarchy and it is still burning to this day. Starting with *Nude Descending Staircase*10 and
moving to the 1917 work *Fountain*11 Duchamp challenged the concept of what art is. The
cumulation of these artists’ works took the subject matter, the material, the handmade, the
classical training, and threw it to the wayside putting the idea of art into an identity crisis.


10 Marcel Duchamp, Nude Descending a Staircase, 1912 · Philadelphia Museum of Art

11 Marcel Duchamp, Fountain, 1917/1964 · SFMOMA
And so finally, craft must be laid to rest. It was constructed as a means of establishing the value and definition of art. Art is dynamic, and as it has grown and expanded beyond the academic values that were seeded by the Church, it no longer fits the art craft binary. To continue holding onto craft is detrimental to art as it is an attempt to maintain a dated and limited definition of art. It is also damaging to the fields still operating under craft by intentionally defining the mediums as lesser than art. The distinction is almost impossible to make today between art and craft. The line is so thin between art and craft that if one was to replace the word craft with art in many contemporary craft writings, they read just the same.

Recently, in one of my graduate courses while discussing craft theory the faculty posed the question, "Do you think it would be beneficial to discuss ideas of materiality, craftsmanship and other "craft" concepts in a painting course?" The same semester I am attending a course titled Advanced Painting Critique with Brian Alfred, so I responded, "They already are." The only difference between the painting critique and the ceramics critique is that the painters already assume they are operating in art so they don’t feel the need to categorize or validate their work.

That said, I do think acknowledging the history of craft theory is essential in an academic setting. If we eliminate the art craft divide, then craft could be canonized as a form of art that was used as the crutch to bolster art, and that was satisfactory for a period of time. This would allow us to academically examine some of the most important achievements craft made, such as posing as a counter culture to industrialization, behaving as usefull tool in critiquing the domestic, and exploring queer theory.

There is a portion of the art world that, through their postmodern enlightenment or ignorance toward the world of craft, have already dissolved the binary of art and craft. But, without a substantial definition of art, art remains in an insecure place. There is a lack of structure to justify the human value and especially the economic value of art. In line with Western tradition, the old binary was replaced with a new one - those who understand art and those who do not. Similarly to the Church when it distanced itself from the sciences as they began to threaten the binaries the Church established, art has been in a state of distancing itself from the general public. This is because when people question what is art and why it is valuable, it further threatens an already insecure concept of art. The digital age and speed of communication has accelerated this confusion on what is art and who is engaging in it. The result is an art world that distances itself from people who pose the question of why is this art? Those people become disaffected from being told that they don’t understand, and so they stop caring. An intellectual barrier to something that is so fundamental to humanity is detrimental to society. As the heading suggests this is the second murder that I foreshadowed to, our current understanding of art must also be killed.
A Reincarnation

Humans can’t exist without art. Art itself is a manifestation of humanity. It is a special shadow that people cast on the earth that continues on after we are gone. It is the mythos of our species. However, we can exist without the word “art.” The word “art” and the concept of “art” are very different things. Ludwig Wittgenstein, a 20th Century philosopher, explained the weakness of language and its dependence on social agreement not logical derivation.\(^\text{12}\) Each person has their own concept of what art is and for an academic world to deny any of those definitions by claiming these individual concepts are not art is to splinter and damage the word “art.” Or vice versa, for someone to look at a banana duct taped to a wall and claim that it is not art is again to undermine the word “art.” The issue with undermining the word is that without language that can aid in finding social agreements to a concept, then divisions are built between people and communities. Two people may be experiencing the same phenomena with two different forms of human expression- one conventionally seen as art and one conventionally seen as not art. The person who is engaged in the conventionally deemed not art will feel a sense of isolation and inaccessibility in relation to the person engaged with the conventionally deemed art.

I think back to growing up in the outskirts of Denver. When I was in my middle school years I fell into a drug habit that brought me into the homes and living spaces of people living in an economic desperation I didn’t know was possible. I grew up in a working class family, but the people I was interacting with were so desperate they were selling drugs to twelve year old's to make ends meet. Even in these spaces of despair there were still items that existed and functioned as art. These people did not feel any connection to the concept of art and did not categorize the things they had as art. The word “art” had been stripped away from them so there was no route to engage with art. Without the word “art,” the emotional phenomena they experienced with these objects was difficult to articulate and therefore explore. If they felt ownership of the word art then perhaps they would see that the phenomena they experience with these things they cared so much about was not so dissimilar from the experience someone in a drastically different social class may have with a priceless work in the Museum of Modern Art. This is why the language around art is so dangerous. When the language is taken away from people, the means of understanding the experience is too, and therefore it takes something that is fundamental to humanity away from them. To take such a powerful thing away from the

everyday person is a means of exerting power by retaining certain economic and social structures.

To this point, the question still remains: "What is art?" We know postmodernism blew the ceiling off of any historic precedent, and there is no going back. It would be impossible to revert to any pre-established concept of art. The toothpaste is out of the tube.

A favorite artist of mine, John Baldissari, said "The artist calls it art, it’s art." So, Who is an artist? If we stay with the postmodern line of thinking, then everything is art, but that answer doesn’t sit well with most people. How does a painter in New York distinguish what they do from a group of grandmothers in their basements? Is it that the painter is trained in the academic cannon of art? If that were the case, it would be hard to explain why an exhibition of Geez Bend quilts has been touring art museums around the country. Or if everything is art how can the wealthy collector validate spending exuberant amounts of money on the "art" they buy? This definition of art is the very reason why the term is in such an insecure place to begin with, and it opens the opportunity for those in power to exploit the insecurity to exert power. As of right now, social media such as Instagram is already threatening that power structure. Art is becoming democratized in a way where no longer does a dominant paradigm have as much control over what art is and what it is not. This democratization furthers the idea that everything is art. Individuals have a never before found freedom to curate and define the concept for themselves.

I take issue with the idea that everything is art. If something becomes everything then it is equivalent to being nothing, and we know that this thing we are trying to define is somehow inherent to humanity. It is certainly not nothing. Is it better then to create the statement that anything can be art? Anything is not everything and therefore distinctions can be made. This puts us back to the situation we are in now. It is a situation in which some kind of dominant paradigm will sooner or later arise and that paradigm will find a way to strip accessibility to one demographic or another as an exertion of power. Even aside from that hypothetical, the biggest problem with both of these definitions is that it places art as a "thing." Both words, anything and everything, imply a physicality and externality as if art is inherent to an object or to an experience. This is the thought process of the Enlightenment Era. Kant argued that qualities such as beauty or the sublime were inherent in certain things. This is the hunt for some sort of universality. In Kant's arguments were the tools of their own dismantling because it was nearly impossible to establish universality in external things. Postmodernism makes quick work of the Kantian perspective. There is one little thing however that postmodernism was too quick to

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dispose of from the Enlightenment Era; when all universality was thrown out the window, we lost something special. We lost the one thing universal about us, our humanity.

Art is not an external thing, it does not exist in a painting or sculpture, it is not found in a gallery or museum, it isn't a beautiful day on a mountaintop, it isn't in the bottle of Crozes-Hermitage (wine reference), and it's not found in the sonic vibrations of Mozart or Beethoven. Art is a state of awareness. It does not only exist in the mind though, art is not purely conceptual. A mentor of mine, Chris Staley, often talks about a favorite word/concept of his: liminal. Liminal means to occupy a space at or on both sides of a threshold. I too think it is a great word/concept, and it aids in my definition of art:

Art | ärt | noun

Art is the liminal space between a person and a moment of reality in which the person is at once not only aware of their own humanity but also humanity as a whole.

This definition is unique in that it provides a basis to discuss art and a concept to compare it against, but, simultaneously, does not threaten individuality in the perception of art. To break it down further, I am stating that art is neither a completely internal experience nor does it exist as an external quality of something. It requires an interaction, a liminal space, between a person and the external world. It also stipulates that not everything in the world we interact with is art. In order to experience art, one must be in a mindset of awareness provoked by this liminal space. This awareness draws attention to our own personal experiences, biases, and dispositions and through that it provokes a kind of community and awareness. A community that is bound together by the one thing that is universal in people, and that is our humanity.

To prevent this definition from becoming too lofty, abstract or hypothetical, it's important to ground it in personal experience. The nucleation point for my pursuit of redefining art was engineering school. However, prior to engineering school there are two experiences that primed me so that I'd be impressionable enough to appreciate science.

The first experience came after I had decided that I wanted to pursue art as a career. My family was trying to talk me out of it. They felt that I should go talk to my uncle, who is an artist, since I didn’t really know him or understand his experience. His name is John Balistreri- same as my grandfather- and at the time he was on an extended sabbatical at Jun Kaneko's studio in Omaha, Nebraska. My grandfather joined me for the visit and while we were there we had dinner with Jun and his wife, Ree. Sitting around the table with Jun, Ree, my uncle and grandfather drinking amazing wine, with delicious food, using dinnerware made by artists from around the world, in an enormous space adorned with creative works from innumerable widely recognized
artists I was overwhelmed and yet completely comfortable. At that moment I felt a connection not only to the people I was sharing this meal with, but to the very concept of being a person. It took so much human energy in order for that moment to exist that the space was vibrating with it. This all culminated at the end of the meal when Ree brought out a bottle of mezcal that had a label featuring art from Ken Price. The mezcal was from Oaxaca, Mexico made from tobala- a type of agave it takes 30 years to grow to maturity. I was drinking it from an Oribe cup that referenced Japanese history, but was made by Goro Suzuki, an internationally recognized contemporary artist. To this day, every detail of that cup is burned into my mind and fingertips. I was lucky to have had the opportunity to experience that moment, and it occurred to me that most people, including my future self, may never have access to that feeling due to economic barriers.

The art I am defining isn't economically prohibitive though. I didn’t realize this until after I visited Omaha and began looking for art everywhere. I found it in the most mundane of places. Every morning since I was five years old, with the exception of school days, and until I moved away to college I would go and get coffee with my grandfather. He wouldn’t go to a nearby coffee shop. No, we went to an obscure, hip coffee shop that required a 45 minute round trip through downtown Denver. My grandfather never failed to bring his own ceramic cup to the coffee shop. When I was old enough to acquire a taste for coffee- instead of just dipping biscotti in my grandfather's cup as we drove home- I also took on my own handmade cup. The cups we used were visually nice -- they were gifts from my uncle. The aesthetics of the cups were just an entry point, they could have been mass produced objects, but the art was in how you approach the cup. In that daily cup of coffee there was everything. The cow was in that cup because without the cow there would be no steamed milk to cover the coffee. There was the farmer because they had to grow the beans that were harvested and roasted to make the espresso, and in the beans there is the sun that provided the energy for the plant to grow. There is also a culture. Espresso and cappuccinos came out of Italy in the early 1900's. Beyond all of that, I am in that cup. It was the physical representation of this daily ritual with my grandfather, and the cup was made by my uncle so it contains my family lineage. Without my moment of existence the experience of that cup would also not exist, it is a reflection of myself. This line of thinking is borrowed from the Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh in *The Heart of Understanding: Commentaries on the Prajñāparamita Sutra*¹⁴ and also Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* ¹⁵.

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Both stories are examples of experiencing art in an intense way, but they do revolve around objects that could be easily argued as traditionally accepted art objects. I felt that I was beginning to understand the depth of what art was. So, it was surprising to find this experience in the matrices of linear algebra or the concepts of modern physics. I should add that I have a degree in Materials Science & Engineering, which I completed in addition to a double major with Ceramic Fine Arts. I got two degrees in large part due to a suggestion that my uncle (the economics professor) made when I told him I was going to go to school for art. He said “you're good at science,” and then challenged me to pursue both majors in college. I figured if I was going to go to school I might as well get as much as possible out of it, plus I couldn’t turn down the challenge. I had the preconceived idea that science wasn’t art, but the similarities between the fields seemed to get more intense the more I learned about each.

Recently, while discussing the similarities between the two with a mentor I highly respect, he made the distinction that "Art was more about questions whereas science was more about answers." When I first started engineering school I too had this perspective, but the deeper I went the more I realized how undefined and explorative cutting edge science is. Science is only about questions, and if an answer is found it's used to generate more questions. I imagine someone who was just beginning an intellectual pursuit of art would feel it had the same rigidity and exclusiveness that I perceived in science when I was first starting.

By the third year of my five year undergraduate program I was thoroughly lost trying to build the distinctions between art and science and was struggling to do so. The person I found that perfectly exemplified ideas of postmodernism was Albert Einstein. After all, he rejected enlightenment’s universal truth when he stated that physics was relative to the observer in his Theory of Relativity. His science was composed of the modifications and mashups of other modes of science (Maxwell's equations and wave physics) in the same way a postmodern artist combined different canons of work to create a new narrative. There was no aesthetic output that was directly comparable to what was traditionally considered art in the sciences, but through interaction with it there was an identical intellectual provocation.

Like in an old Scooby-Doo cartoon I was hot on the heels of pulling the mask off of the mysterious ghost of art and revealing its nature. But there were still some loose ends I could not reconcile. Then I came upon the work of John Cage. (between Cage and Baldisseri you would think I have a bias for artists named John, maybe I do?) One of Cage's most famous works is 4’33⁶. It is a three movement composition written to be played by any instrument or combination of instruments. The piece then instructs the musicians not to play their instruments for the entirety of the four minutes and thirty three seconds that the work consists of. It was a piece of

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⁶ JohnCage, 4’33, 1952
silence. Well it wasn’t exactly silent, there were the murmurs or uncomfortable laughs of those in the audience, the occasional cough or clearing of the throat, there were just common sounds of people existing in a space at the same time. This wasn’t necessarily different than what a person may experience in a library or any other quiet public space. But the context was shifted. So why then do many people who have experienced this piece in person describe such a profound experience?

Artist Jenny Odell in her book *How to do Nothing* described the experience as "changing the way she listened" even after she left the performance. Cage built a moment of reality that was capable of catalyzing a deeper level of awareness in the audience. When I learned about this piece, I realized the definition of art. Art wasn’t completely physical, but without the physical experience of being in that space with the sounds of people it wouldn't exist. It was an exchange between the viewer and performance that inspired an awareness of not only that audience's position and their humanity, but the humanity of all the people around them.

After I came to this conclusion I started seeing all art differently. It suddenly made sense why pictures of a soup can could have a profound effect and commentary on the state of humanity. The mundane qualities of daily life or celebrity in pop art had new vibrance. Marcel Duchamp's genius was made clear. Bill T Jones performance *Floating the Tongue* was one of the most intense combinations of physicality and awareness I had ever seen. I had the language to explore art, I had the tools to understand and embrace the incredible potential it holds.

I was having a conversation with some undergraduate students who were responding to the art at the most recent Art basel in Miami. They were making fun of what was being considered art and one student told a tangential story about an artist who was installing a show in a gallery. The artist had set their glasses down in the corner of the gallery while working and left them there. Apparently, a group of visitors had gathered around the glasses thinking they were a part of the exhibition and spent a good bit of time discussing them in relation to the rest of the show. Now, I don’t know how truthful this story is, but the student was using it as an example to undermine art by pointing out the ridiculousness that people could mistake the glasses as art. Real or not, I thought this story perfectly captured what art was. Like a Thomas Friedman piece but with less intentionality, the glasses placed in the right context spurred a group of people to start asking questions and making judgements about what was in front of them. That’s profound.

The next question is, how does this ability to see art change the world or our personal perspectives of life? There are two important ramifications art can have. The first is that it reminds us that human life has value, and the second is that it poses the question of quality.

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18 Bill T. Jones, *Floating the Tongue*, 1978
The idea that human life has value is one that logically is hard to deny and therefore is perhaps the closest we get to a universal truth about value. If you're alive, then you must in some way value human life. But, so often we take this for granted. When we insult or cause harm to another person based on sexuality, race, appearance, or any other number of arbitrary features, we are not giving them the same space and freedom we have to exist. This is to ignore their humanity and place it as lower value to our own. Moreover acts of aggression towards one another are most commonly a byproduct of someone devaluing their own life. One of the biggest crimes we all commit today is the degree of self deprecation we each put ourselves through. It can be so hard to feel that your life is valid or has value in the contemporary world. From this insecurity we build egos that project a false persona to shield ourselves from our vulnerabilities. The internet has provided the perfect platform for these ego's to thrive and interact. We post things to validate our own experiences and we hide behind these false personas when we attack and harm others. At some point, it is almost impossible to tell where ego ends and one's genuine self begins. This is scary because the ego has no interest in the value of human life. It is only interested in promoting itself through external validation.

Art can be instrumental in reestablishing the concept that human life has value. To see value in art, when art is the reflection of humanity and oneself, is to acknowledge the value in humanity and in oneself. When experiencing art, and fully engaging with it, the awareness that comes along with it is the path to be fully conscious in that moment. It is what we as humans evolved to have that's different from all other creatures on earth. Eckert Tolle, a New York Times bestselling author claims that consciousness is the enemy of ego. Art being an instigator of consciousness makes it an amazing tool at battling our own egos. It reminds us that we are human and that we have value, regardless of external factors.

Once human value is established, art sneaks in a simple question. It is a question of personal judgment; it is a question of quality. Art forces us to ask "Is this thing good?" "Is it effective?" "Do I like the way it was made?" and "Why?" The question of quality is underrated in society today. We've traded it out for a believe or do-not-believe system. This believe/do-not-believe system is detritus from the bygone eras of religious rule I mentioned earlier. It is a system of dualities that asks what side are you on. Do you believe the earth is flat or that the earth is round? Do vaccines destroy lives or save them? Are humans drastically changing the earth's climate or are we just innocent bystanders? Are you Republican or Democrat? Quality, on the other hand, exists in the in-between and in the nuance. It poses the question of what's better and why. It returns to people their individuality and power to explore a concept rather than simply subscribe to it.

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A good friend of mine, who is currently working as a journalist, is constantly struggling with the believe/do-not-believe society. The news media is a divided realm of society. Depending on where your subscription lies, your values are almost predetermined. Facts are easy to manipulate or obscure based on an organization's self interests and even then, people can just choose not to believe the facts presented. Organizations attempt to present themselves as fair and unbiased to win audience over to their side and believe in their narrative. But, there is no such thing as a person that does not have a bias. In the very selection of what to report on there is a bias. Trying to hide that is counterintuitive to the goals of the news organization. Even in my friend’s office, a publicly funded news source, there is consistent pressure for journalists to hide any appearance of a bias. It is common for news organizations to limit or attempt to control the behavior of their journalists online in an attempt to prevent anything they do to be perceived as biased. This is reasonable to a degree, no organization can have their employees committing libel or slander, but commonly the case is that these organizations are attempting to limit even the slightest of political leanings or personal opinion. It is shocking that the very institution that promotes free speech is hesitant about the expression of free speech of those working there.

I can't blame them though, they are just abiding by the believe vs do not believe system trying to convince the audience that they should be the institution that people trust in. If quality were to come into the picture though, the audience wouldn’t make selections based on whether or not they believe or do not believe. They would have to consider how journalism is done. Yes, the reporters and organization have a bias, but did they do their due diligence in seeking diverse sources? Are these facts easy to follow and not presumptuous? Is the journalism good? Good is a quality judgment, something could be believable and not be good. The discussion of quality forces us to ask deeper questions. Art trains us, and puts us into the mindset to have discussions of quality. Art is the best tool we have at dismantling the believe or do not believe society.

I'd like to add that quality can easily be misunderstood. For example, if a news source does not present information that’s inline with your personal belief system then one can easily label that news source as "bad." Or, thinking back to the previous conversation about material hierarchy in art, someone could look at a work done in fiber and label it as “bad” because it is not a painting. While “good” and “bad” are terms that can describe quality judgements, in this context they are employed as surface level affirmations of a binary. Quality is explorative and requires more rigor to the thought that goes into it. There is a degree of introspection required in which the viewer must pose the question "Why is this good?" This is where distinctions can be made between different creative outputs.

The distinctions that are made are not meant to perform as universalities, but instead should be considered probabilities based on accessibility. Over dinner my good friend Kaleigh
asked if I would consider a painting by numbers activity, referring to a common activity her six year old daughter partakes in, a work of art. By my definition, if it instigates a degree of awareness and questions of quality in me, then yes. But it does not, and therefore, for the sake linguistic clarity- unless I was trying to compliment the six year old who completed the work- I would not refer to it as art. For Kaleigh though it likely is art. As an object created by her daughter how could she not see an intense sense of self in that piece? It captured a moment of her daughter’s adolescence, and as she thinks about her daughter aging and existing in the world in the future how could she not begin to consider a relationship to humanity? So how then do we use the word art in language when describing how an object or experience performs in relation to humans? This is when probabilistic accessibility comes into the picture.

I know this sounds awfully mathy, but it is pretty simple. When we look at a piece of art, if it engages us, and we begin considering questions of quality, then we will likely start making judgements or observations. Composition, color, content -- how do they compliment or oppose one and other? How does the piece or experience make you feel? If a high number of people feel similarly and find the work accessible, then probabilistically speaking a higher number of people will experience art in that same situation. So, in common conversation that work or experience may be talked about as art. This goes back to Wittgenstein's Ideas on language, that it requires a degree of social consensus. The problem with Kaleigh's daughter's paint by numbers for me is that the quality of it was not very accessible. There was nothing very impressive about the aesthetics nor did my six year old friend give me a route to engage with her personal content behind the work. I did not have the same degree of accessibility Kaleigh did because of our different relationships to the work. Odds are, a majority of other people when looking at that piece would be on a similar boat to me which is why in daily conversation I would not use the word art to describe it. However, I would never say that the piece is not art. It is important in the language around art that it does not become exclusionary in the sense that it defines what is not art. That is contradictory to the individuality that is so essential in the very definition of art, and it reverts us back to binary that isolates people.

For a great discussion on quality I do recommend the book: *Zen and the art of Motorcycle Maintenance*\textsuperscript{20}. There is a lot of father son relationship dynamics and masculine motorcycle talk that may turn people off, but the underlying conversation on quality is quite good.

In the closing of this section I'd like to clarify some vocabulary and reiterate some key points. As I move on to my own work I may use the following terms: technology, art and craft. I

know I killed craft in the first part of this writing, but there was precision in that assassination. I only killed the idea of craft as a noun. As a noun it describes the hierarchical, materially limited concept of a lesser art based on a duality. As a verb however it can be a useful word. Craft as a verb describes how something is made. It is therefore inherent in any form of human productivity: i.e how is the song or painting crafted? As for technology, when that word is used today it carries connotations of circuits and artificial intelligence. However, the definition of the word is simply the application of knowledge for a practical purpose. That means clay and paint are technologies. As an etymology junky I enjoy exploring the origins and the relationships of these words. For example, this is an excerpt from the origin of the word technology: "from téchnē "art, craft, proficiency in an art or craft, systematic method of performing or engaging in an art."

To reiterate:

Art | ärt | noun

*Art is the liminal space between a person and a moment of reality in which the person is at once not only aware of their own humanity but also humanity as a whole.*

When we engage with art we acknowledge that human life has value and we pose questions of quality. That engagement builds the mindset that impacts our daily lives as we carry the values of human life and quality into our personal experiences.

**In Bloom**

I am currently looking at an Amaryllis that just bloomed right next to my chair on the makeshift balcony of my dusty ceramic studio at Penn State. That moment of blooming or coming into bloom is so important in literature, music, nature, humanity. One of my favorite songs from the 90's is *In Bloom*.21 Blooming represents the coming of spring. It is a time of growth and reproduction in nature. After seven consecutive years of rigorous academic pursuit, I have a lot in common with this amaryllis. I’m just now coming into bloom with the creative output I produce. It was a long path of growth and preparation. Countless nights of no sleep, many hospital visits -- often stress related -- so much loneliness and feeling of homesickness. I couldn’t be happier to have experienced it all.

Without the journey, the destination loses its color. Growing up in the acres of greenhouse my family operated, I became obsessed with the lifecycle of plants. When I

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21 Nirvana. *In Bloom*. 1990
discovered seeds had the potential to become plants, I planted them all over the greenhouse, much to my family and the employee’s dismay. My favorite flowers were the poppies. They started as a sprout and grew into a foliage that looked like a boring low pile of leaves. Suddenly though, a stem would shoot up. This was the moment of growth before the bloom. It was a beautiful moment especially when it came to the poppies. They formed a small fuzzy bud that the flower would bloom from. The anticipation of this blooming was so exciting, I’d go check on them everyday. I can remember my mom would tickle my nose with the bud that contained the flower. I loved this anticipation, but when the flower finally did bloom it was spectacular. The most exciting part about all of it is that the poppy didn't bloom just once. More and more bulbs would shoot up from the leafy base and continuously produce more flowers - that first bloom was just the beginning. I feel that same excitement with my own work. This is just the beginning, now let's dive in.

Objecthood is something that is very important to my work. It was one of the major entry points into clay for me. Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of mechanical Reproduction*\(^{22}\) was one of the first articles I read in my undergraduate research that dealt with objecthood in a direct way. Benjamin described an object as being capable of having an aura. This aura is a sentiment that I understood to be similar to Thich Nhat Hanh's passage explaining how everything can be found in a piece of paper. The aura is all of the context and energy that an object carried as part of its existence. I was curious how an object could carry an aura. It wasn’t until reading the work of theoretical physicist Carlo Rovelli that I came to an understanding.

In Rovelli's book *On the order of Time* he takes issue with the time variable in physics.\(^{23}\) We commonly perceive time as a very predictable, consistent entity progressing linearly into the future. In physics it is anything but that. Again with Einstein's relativity, we know that time is mushy and completely dependent on reference frame and velocity. Moreover, there is no quality in physics that stipulates we are progressing "forward" in time. Direction is never firmly established. Rovelli found this unsettling so he tried to directionally ground time using entropy - the degree of disorder in a system. The second law of thermodynamics states that Entropy is always increasing and therefore has a direction. When we take the universe to be our system, then since the Big Bang we have been in a state of positive or increasing entropy. Rovelli calls this thermodynamic time. The gist is, change in entropy is analogous to time progressing and it establishes a direction.

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This understanding of time gave it a tangibility that I began projecting on to my physical reality, and I quickly thought of the aura. Objects are unique because they are a state of relatively low entropy. Ceramic objects are especially unique in that they must go through a process of extremely high entropy (the firing of a kiln) and then from there on exist in states of extremely low entropy. Aside from someone breaking a piece, ceramics change little to none over the passage of time. Because ceramics, and other objects, exist in these states of low entropy they not only capture a time and energy of when they were made, but also act as a location that we can project our own experiences onto free from the temporality of time. This is the importance I see in making my own physical objects, and it is some of the fascination I have with ceramic as a material.

Scientific concepts such as this are major influences on my creative process. Sadly, when I say that, for a lot of people the concept of science paints a rather sterile image. As I mentioned above I found science was flexible, creative, and deeply profound -- easily capable of being art. But, for many it is perceived as unapproachable, rigid, hard to understand and most of all lacking humanity. Given that so much of art is about capturing or presenting us with humanity it is easy to see why this sterile perception of science clashes with art. Einstein (I promise this is the last time I'll bring him up) saw through this. In 1938 he wrote:

"Physical concepts are free creations of the human mind, and are not, however it may seem, uniquely determined by the external world. In our endeavor to understand reality we are somewhat like a man trying to understand the mechanism of a closed watch. He sees the face and the moving hands, even hears its ticking, but he has no way of opening the case. If he is ingenious he may form some picture of a mechanism which could be responsible for all the things he observes, but he may never be quite sure his picture is the only one which could explain his observations. He will never be able to compare his picture with the real mechanism and he cannot even imagine the possibility of the meaning of such a comparison."

In this statement the most famous scientist of the last two hundred years is admitting that science itself is entirely a human construct. When the law of gravity came to be during the time of Isaac Newton it was not a discovery. Rather a moment of creative invention in building an equation consisting of an invented logical language that explained a phenomena. I think of this type of creative invention as identical to the process I am experiencing when I am working artistically.

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The science I speak of when I say that science inspires my work is simply a specific category of explorative human expression. It is not drastically different from finding inspiration in any other art form. In my creative practice I am very interested in drawing attention to the art science divide. Obviously, I see this dividing line as being infinitely thin and permeable. There are many artists that make work about science and those that do typically fall into one of two categories. The first is the artist that sees the scientists do something cool and so they find a way to aestheticize. This work seems to fall short often. In most cases it does not engage in any critical way with science and contributes nothing back to the science. It is a one way conversation in which the artist is saying, "look how pretty this thing I don’t fully understand is." That work can be good in some ways. It may inspire some people to look deeper into the underlying concept. But often, it keeps the science part at an arm's distance, and it's novelty resides in the mysteriousness science holds in today's society. People who work in the sciences see this work, that may not even be true to the science that it was based on, and quickly disregard it because the concept of art is so badly defined in society that that's how they see art -- lacking the intellectual rigor to partake in such dialogs. This all just further mystifies science at a time when science literacy is so important for the health of our planet.

The other type of artist, the category my work fits into, takes scientific concepts but doesn’t try to simply aestheticize them. Instead the goal is to humanize them. At the advent of modernism and abstraction at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. Artists were influenced by much of the modern scientific achievement at the time. However they didn’t try to depict a scientific concept. They took a concept and placed themselves into the narrative in such a way that the work became about their human experience in relation to the sciences. There was no risk of the science being wrong because there was no attempt to explain what the science was. Of course, they had to understand enough of the science at the time that the concepts provoked questions, but the focus was still on how a human experienced the science not what the science was. They expressed emotion, posed questions of hypotheticals, and considered the quality of science. In Duchamp's The Large Glass he was exploring questions about four-dimensionality. There was no attempt to explain the fourth dimension though it was more a creative disposition that inspired a narrative. This work though gave a humanized entry point into the concept. Paul Cezanne was attempting to address the sciences in his own way as well. In Cezanne's Doubt Marleau Ponty writes:

25 Marcel Duchamp, The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass), 1915-1923. Philadelphia Museum of Art
"...Cezanne never wished to "paint like a savage." He wanted to put intelligence, ideas, sciences, perspective, and tradition back in touch with the world of nature. He wished, as he said, to confront the sciences with the nature "from which they came."

To confront the sciences with the nature from which they came is interesting when considering Einstein's closed watch quote; the sciences came from humanity.

I see the humanizing of the sciences as incredibly important in my work. To humanize the sciences not only provides a greater level of accessibility impacting science literacy, but the kind of awareness and question of quality that are inherent to art are at a low in the sciences. In engineering school critical questions of quality and humanity were not the norm -- but rather far from it.

My experience of engineering school, and what I have observed from other students, is that school was more about the salary promised at the end of graduation. Critical engagement in the science was secondary. The university system as a whole is moving toward a business model focused more on economic gain than education. For students it is an obstacle course in regurgitation of information rather than understanding, and grades are a test of one's political limberness not an assessment of performance. In the sciences this system fits well into a hyper capitalistic structure in that students leave school willing to conform to a job that treats them as a cog in a machine not as an individual. If the arts and sciences were not considered so distant, then perhaps students would at least pose the question, "Is the paycheck enough?" There is an extremely low percentage of US engineering students that go on to continue their education into graduate school. Programs struggle to convince their American students to keep pursuing an education because the salary increase vs years of school is not substantial enough. For a majority it would seem that the quality of pursuing a higher education for the sake of a deeper intellectual pursuit is not worthwhile enough. Has science lost creative flexibility and explorative wonder in the eyes of my generation? Has that been replaced with a means to an end economic pursuit? It is no surprise people are so turned off by the thought of science.

Now of all times, given our planet's state, is when we need the most engagement in science.

By bringing the sciences into my work I am creating a conversation about our relationship to it. The process of combustion is a central theme in the work. I explore combustion as a technology that has defined human history and since the industrial revolution has become our primary source of energy. Combustion has certainly had devastating effects on our world's climate through the byproduct of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gasses and pollutants. But in my work I attempt to not paint it with a broad brush as being the enemy. I look at the nuance in the technology. I give credit where credit is due and then subtly pose the quality question of,
“is this the best we've got?” This comes from my childhood of living in a very industrial area. When I was young, I could look out into the night horizon and see the oil refineries that were only a few miles away, and I remember thinking that I had never seen anything so beautiful. There was a giant flaming torch and endless many lights. It looked like a futuristic city with enormous complexity. Of course, this refinery was and still is slowly killing the planet, but it is also spectacular that I can use the energy refined there to drive seventy miles an hour down the highway in an incredibly thought out precision machine (car). The 1994 Toyota Corolla or 1987 Ford Mustang that made up the early vehicles I drove are amazing feats of mankind.

To create this nuance I looked to surrealist and postmodern artists. The forms I build such as 844-5.0 - a title that references one of the last operating steam engines and a Mustang 5.0 - has recognizable references to these vehicles, but they are mashed together in one piece and obscured in abstraction. The work draws the viewer in as it is just recognizable enough to give the impression that you've seen that thing before but don't know where. Then moments of hyper realistic texture, such as that of a tire, give the viewer a tangible clue to look deeper, stay longer, and build a narrative as they try to piece the elements together. My interest in a surrealist imagery first came from working with my undergraduate mentor Kurt Weiser. From there I began to look at surrealists such as Salvador Dali or Rene Magritte as experts of this push and pull narrative building. All their work toes the line of giving viewers some very realistic information to grab on to, but also abundant distortion, abstraction, or juxtaposition to provide the freedom of the individuals thought process.

When it comes to issues of science literacy that I am interested in addressing, I don’t think I can accomplish it through telling or explanation. If an audience member does not believe humankind is responsible for climate manipulation for example then there is no amount of verbal oration or didactic art that will change their mind. This is not because they are stupid or there is anything wrong with them. They are just victims of the believe/do-not-believe society and they are subscribed to a rather dangerous viewpoint. This is why allowing the viewer to build their own narrative is so important to me. Any change in perspective must be internally self arrived not externally prescribed. This is why the nuance is so important and why I do not want the works to make blanket statements about any one perspective. My piece *Limits of Communication* is an interpretation of this breakdown of ideas between people when we lack the flexibility and openness to understand another perspective. Instead we attempt to force one viewpoint onto another and an impasse is formed.

If the viewer goes through my entire exhibition and never even considers combustion that would still be perfectly acceptable. As long as the work invokes that liminal space I consider art, I’m happy
I would like to now circle back to these ideas of the liminal and entropy. In works such as *Pulling Apart* the abrupt paring of the porcelain teapot with my abstraction of combustion draws attention to the pairing of the industrial with the domestic. This may seem like an odd pairing: a daily cup of tea associated with the industrial process of combustion, but what I find to be so fascinating is that what we perceive as a domestic space is just as much industrial, yet we deny it. In most of our homes or apartments right now there is a hot water heater in the basement that is burning natural gas. It is intentionally kept out of sight and out of mind because we do not want to associate these industrial processes with our living spaces (where does your electricity come from?). An artist whose work I think of in terms of containing this cognitive dissonance and expression of the liminal is Robert Gober. His surrealist sculptures combine figurative, industrial, and domestic elements that force the viewer to look deeper to build a relationship and narrative between the different elements.

Entropy works in multiple ways in my work beyond being a motivating factor to work physically--objecthood. One operation is obvious: combustion is an act of entropy. Another way it operates is related to objecthood and best explained through my graduate cohort, Andrew Castaneda. In his oral defense, a prerequisite of graduating with his MFA degree, he presented his piece *Cabin*. It is a meticulously curated photo of a cabin that was very influential in his personal development. He made the statement that now that he had that photograph he would be okay if the real cabin no longer existed. This statement lit up his whole committee. Each person in the five member group, that would determine whether he would receive his degree, had a follow up question to this statement. One of the follow up questions since Andrew talked a lot about community was if he would feel the same way about a photograph of a person. I personally do not feel that the answers he gave quite hit the question on the head. After his defense I asked him about it and questioned if he just had an iPhone snapshot of the cabin would that be sufficient? Would he be okay if the cabin did not exist then? And his answer was immediate and definitive - no that would not be sufficient. Knowing Andrew as well as I do, I understood what he meant but he did not directly articulate in his defense. Like almost all people, Andrew struggles with this concept of time or entropy. It is progressing outside of our control. He is aware that one day that cabin will not be there and already it is no longer there in the same way that he remembers it. So in the photo he created, he carefully curated a scene that captured the essence or aura of that location and froze it in a low entropy state - this is the objecthood I explained earlier. To respond to the question of whether a photo of a person would be a sufficient replacement to the real person, the answer he could have given would be that unlike cabin he did not feel he could capture all of the nuance and complexity of a human's essence in an object. For Andrew, photography is part of the process of dealing with time and loss.

In my own work I have been told that it looks "monument-like" or from a different era due to its scale and stature. This is reasonable since I do find inspiration in the brutalist
monuments of Yugoslavia and Russia, but beyond just the physicality of those things, I am very interested in the concept of a monument. Similar to Andrews photograph, monuments are intended to capture the essence of a time, mentality, person, or moment. By trying to capture the essence of combustion and the way it operates in society currently I see this work as behaving in this monumental way. Can they be a step to accepting the end of the way this technology is currently being used? I would love for these works to operate as a component in the loss process. Perhaps one day when society is in a bloom of its own regarding energy production we will look back at this work and feel satisfied that the aura of that time was captured. The same way I fondly remember the fuzzy poppy bud even after the beautiful flower has bloomed.

There is an aspect of this objecthood that clashes with today's society. More and more people of my generation are less interested in objects. This may be due to a lack of space as we move into smaller apartments and homes, but I argue that it is due to the lack of accessibility of art. My generation is so much more interested in experiences than in a permanent object. As I state above, conventional art objects have lost a great deal of accessibility due to language and exclusionary practice. This leaves us in a deficit of searching for instances that make us aware of our humanity. Some experiences have a great deal of potential in leading us to that awareness. This has to do with the stimuli that invite us to see the art in something--the quality factors. In traditional objects these stimuli or quality factors have a lot to do with the visual aesthetics of the object. As an aside, these aesthetics can be very powerful and potentially explain why something like science is less accessible and more difficult to see as art. It does not always appeal directly to one of our senses and therefore is lacking in stimuli. Nonetheless, in an experience there is a wider range of stimuli. Take 4’33"27, by John Cage, again. In that experience there is the visual experience of the musicians not playing. But then there is also an auditory experience that is essential in the impact of the work. This compounding of stimuli can increase our potential of experiencing art. Despite having the language to explore art I think people feel it when they are seeking out an experience. Many artists are aware of this and it may have a connection to installation art or the field of relational aesthetics that Nicolas Bourriaud28 coined.

My thesis exhibition is an attempt to stitch all of this together. I see the sculptures as bending the space around them dictating the movement of the audience. Their scale makes them bodies in the space that intend to make the viewer consider their own body in relation. The paintings set the environment and continue the narrative inherent in the three dimensional work. The long table down the middle introduces an auditory element. Visually it carries the openness of abstraction, but there are poignant high notes of realism that entice the viewer into a narrative building activity. Throughout the whole exhibition there is a small object each viewer carries. A

27 John Cage, 4’33, 1952
handmade cup containing tea. The caffeine stimulates the senses as the tea hits the taste buds while the tactility of the warm cup keeps the audience's sense of touch exploring. And in this small cup is the containment of the entire show, an object that is recording and capturing the engrossing experience of art.

To quote Andre Breton the famous surrealist author: "To see or hear is nothing. To recognize (or not recognize) is everything" 29

I see the instigation of this art experience as my own counter attack on the distracting shallowness that is invasive in today's culture. In the state of awareness that my art intends to create, I offer the viewer to consider some of the content underlying the work. To consider complex issues such as this while in a state of consciousness is the best shot we have at finding collective solutions. This is my own subtle form of activism.

Conclusion

Something that has always been a detriment to myself when talking about my work is my ability to explain in excruciating detail any aspect of it. The last section of my writing was eight pages of this and I could have continued on for another thirty. I could talk about Isamu Noguchi’s influence on my texture, similarities in my depictions of the industrial with Philip Guston, what E=mc² has to do with any of this or the relationship of my work to the digital culture we are in and what that has to do with Urs Fischer. So this is the beginning of that: Texture is something that expresses the action ………….Kidding I'm done.

I have tried to capture major influences and am happy to answer deeper questions in person or throughout the course of my career. The downside of my knack at making connections is that it can make the audience or faculty I work with feel that I am being too prescriptive or didactic. The truth is though I don’t feel prescriptive or didactic at all. I feel that, yes, I can make all these connections and explain them, but I am aware that I am just one human and everyone is going to make their own connections- likely better ones than me. In comparison, I fully accept that I may have made all the wrong connections and it's nonsense.

This is the type of mental space I love to exist in. Andrew and I were discussing this residency/gallery/design shop that I want to build in Denver. It will be a physical space that would epitomize the values I have laid out in this writing. Andrew and I were talking about, "Why do something like that and what if it fails?" I explained to him my perspective on life. On one hand ,I feel completely Nihilistic. I am one insignificant human in an already overpopulated

planet and if this whole place blew up tomorrow it would make no difference to the rest of the universe. At the very same time though, I feel that through an awareness of humanity, this place earth, human existence, and life is the most important thing in all of the universe. These may seem like an incompatible binary. But, in researching Zen Buddhism and the dissolution of binaries I found something beautiful: acceptance that both of these things exist, and I can feel them at the same time. This presents me with a very exciting option. I get to engage in any way I want with the world, and it is both meaningless and the most meaningful thing I can do. So, what is the highest quality thing I can do? I found that answer through art and so whatever happens I will make it work and hopefully one day there will be a place in Denver that represents this art.

I close with another conversation between Andrew and I. When talking about how art came to be he compared art to a jetpack in a video game. In a videogame there comes a time when in order to advance further in the game you need some sort of equipment - such as a jetpack. The thing is you don’t know you need that equipment until you get to that point in the game. On the grand timeline of human evolution he says we needed something to grow as a species, something that set us apart from other animals and brought us together. Art was just that jetpack that went hand in hand with consciousness and brought us to the next stage. It is essential to humanity. If we take that jetpack for granted and fail to use it for all its potential or limit access to it, it will halt our progression as people. We need art.