“Animating Without” **New Media Thesis**

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As I approach the end of my college career I look back on the projects I’ve produced, hoping to feel a kind of qualification from that work. But my projects are so diverse in material, that it’s hard to see myself as having been enough of a student in any one thing. I’ve never fully invested myself in one medium, or been able to focus predominately on any one artistic practice. It’s a characteristic that’s always felt a bit embarrassing to me, and aloof, and like it’ll surely become a kind of professional liability. I feel confident in my abilities and skills, but insecure that I’ve dedicated enough of myself into any single form.

I’m capable of a lot, but is it enough of any?

I’ve never understood more what it means to be an artist than I do right now. I’ve never been more certain that thats what I will spend my life doing. But still, I envy my peers who have discovered through school the specific disciplines they want to focus their ambitions on professionally. The desire to define an enduring fascination has grown even as I have. With this project and thesis I reflect on my past, present, and future relationship with art, in an effort to understand that discontent within myself and as an admittance that I don't.

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I've considered myself a painter because I began expressing art that way. It was the last time I knew something for sure about myself as an artist. Being a painter made conversations more simple, made me feel valid, and provided an opening into my work. I felt justified, and found a sliver of the comfort I sought, but it never felt entirely true. As I grew and my work did too, I evolved to use the label to encompass anything I wanted it to. I decided I would be a painter making films, a painter trying to write, in this case, a painter who is animating. Suddenly I wasn't just justifying myself anymore, I was seizing the perspective that motivated my creating. Going back and embracing those beginnings of art for myself was helpful to understanding our relationship now. I learned to look back on where I've been and reuse old ideas for new answers.

I enjoy everything about the process of learning a new medium. My whole life I've moved through as many physical and digital ones as I've ever been able. I love the feeling of recognizing the value of a piece before you understand anything about it, then learning to bring those effects more deeply into yourself. I study and fixate over a method when I want to experience life in the way those artists do. Each new material opens up a new creative dimension and a new way of thinking. To be shown beauty in these new ways feels comparable to being shown a new color. It's enough to want to change for a medium. I become interested in things I haven't been and think in ways I wasn't able to, motivated to maneuver feelings how I never could.

My experience in college, and the New Media program, have supported me in those pursuits, been nourishing and helpful as I've moved, anamorphically, through.

But, even within those freedoms to explore different art for myself, has endured this secret hope that I would be stopped in my tracks somewhere along the line. That I'd come across the inspiration that would settle my ambitions into a single, focused, direction and ease all my insecurities. A medium to focus the force of my creating unto, which would build some kind of great hill for me to look out onto art from. I've wanted to feel so inspired by a way of creating that it'd make expression itself feel more simple, and as a result, I'd hoped to understand my art better. If I knew my art then I would know more of myself and the path ahead would be clearer. Perched before this final leg of my college education, I'm perched also on the edge of all that uncertainty.

This series is an embrace of the endless search for artistic identity, and a personal acknowledgement of my journey so far. It's a de-archiving of the trails left behind, ideas un-wandered, and rushed from. It's a love letter to my being and feeling, and the ravenous desire to make real what an artist knows in their moments.

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When I'm interested in exploring a concept, I get hung up in the awareness that some aspects of the idea can only be expressed in a certain medium and that others need a different one. But combinations feel incompatible. I wonder, do we really always have to hint?

In the words of Marshall McLuhan, “The medium is the message.” In studying his principles we can understand that art is the observance of ideas through the perspective of it’s medium, which is what makes meaning inseparable from form.

Great art, in its great awareness, knows that it’s principles are defined and made valid by it’s medium, and embraces that. It wont outsmart itself, it cant ascend beyond the frame. It finds ways to hint at what it cant say, long towards deeper ideas, which we feel in the aura that we experience from great art.

On My Process

I’ve always explored inspiration with formless intention. I like to inspect the thing I’m experiencing by it’s characteristics that seem at first most opposing. From there I can feel that my interest lies in the relationships that allow oppositions to exist in truth together. It’s those things which are often the hardest to understand, and what art is so adept to reconcile.

Words written in sentence have to exist correctly next to one another to make meaning, but words expressed as drawings on a page can be self validating, mean infinite things in infinite contexts. So I look beyond traditional applications. I ask myself questions of expression. How could this concept look visually, sound audibly, be defined poetically? Can it be tactile? Described emotionally? In what ways is it rational or antithetical? Those musings are hard to share. They feel impossible to approach.

Sometimes they don't make sense. For me, the challenge of exploring them is more interesting than the anticipation of their answers. Art in it's infinite forms empower us to approach them. Embues us to be creators of meaning. And that is the goal of expression for me.

Rightness and the Flow State

What does it mean to wander around art as the viewer? Through art as the artist?

In a lecture at SUNY Purchase, focused on the significance of composition, we were assigned to sit in front of a single painting for an entire hour. With prediscouraged tension, we'd scan over colors and shapes. Think about narrative and theory and context and authorship. Consider the cadence of a critique. We'd think about opinions. Fortify judgement. Sound to ourselves deep and smart many times over, until it begins to wear thin.

The exercise was meant to teach us that there was more to discover about art than that which you do in the few minutes most people spend to experience it. A great cognitive truth we were all told young, "You cant judge a book by it's cover."

The challenge exposed us to the *practice* of focus - which unveils, and the fruit of patience. Importantly, it familiarized ourselves with our own inner discomforts. Those

discomforts which we often allowed to steer our experience. When it comes to experiencing art, maybe just perceiving it isn't enough. It taught us that there are layers of perception which develop and are not inherent.

I became fascinated with the mental spaces you inhabit when you've run out of words to label and questions to have. The threshold at which our naturally indignant minds give up their unrelenting efforts to discern, and turn instead to face the more passive truths of the moment. You'd think, after sitting for an hour if you even can, that you'd leave with an absolute certain knowledge of the painting you've studied - an expert of it. But I left with the feeling I'd never been less sure of my judgement of things.

I became fascinated with the *process* of experiencing something and the experience of knowing and not knowing.

In viewing a single work with such thoroughness, you determine, decide on, and overwrite each impression you have so many times that the whole effort of it all is turned frail. Unrelieved of your pursuit by the knowings you've achieved - so staying longer still, you exhaust your fundamental desire to have determined some kind of truth of the piece in the first place. You open up to the feeling of having been wrong, because you were wrong about what you thought you saw and did at first. And wrong each of those times you were sure you'd apprehended it entirely and well, only to discover something new. Inside yourself now, alone, resigned, bored, annoyed, comes also a slow and unnoticed unclenching. Acknowledgement. Resignation. You begin to wander.

“And when I wander here and there - I then do most go right.”

A Winter Tale, Shakespeare

In front of those paintings, we wandered through being right and being wrong and then feeling right again but more this time. we wandered through our opinions, through someone else's, through someone opposite. Found we don't have much of an opinion at all. Or cant relate to what it means to. Feel like an open box we should stuff up with as many as we can. Collect opinions. Collect feelings of rightness instead of deciding which are it and convincing ourselves genius when we find them so quick. You may not know more the longer you sit in front of that art, but you can experience more fully its personality of rightness, with which comes some undeniable knowledge.

What is rightness?

My desire while creating, in whatever way that I try, is fueled by a potential to achieve some kind of “rightness”. A reconciling. The steady justice of something transient.

Art is an opportunity for rightness to be discovered and perceived. “Rightness” as a quality which finds no opposite in “wrongness”. Which is a result of attention and consideration of the feeling of rightness and all the infinite manners it has the potential to exist in.

Composition can be understood as an arrangement, however unexpected, of rightness. By unveiling how a thing's details fit together, art elevates it, making it greater than it might initially appear and expressing deeper truths. The experience of *how* something is uncovers a more profound beauty and surpasses the surface impressions of what it may first seem to be.

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Eli Siegel, critic, poet, and educator who founded the Aesthetic Realism movement of New York City in 1941, in his essay “Art as Rightness”, attempts to articulate the vital role art plays in justifying the world and it’s inhabitants as meaningful and “right”. He asserts that art creates a sense of “rightness” by expressing the inherent relationships that unify objects, even those that may be ugly, broken, or out of place, which art can render as meaningful, interesting, and profound. He says, “Art reasons with the profound order of existence…to present something ugly as inevitable and complete is to show its rightness—at that moment”. Art can accomplish to express what is right by engaging in an honest interest of what is, and attempting to capture the full “isness” of a thing. The concept has been identified under many names, many times, most notably to me, in Aldous Huxley's, “The Doors of Perception” as the semi-spiritual “Absolute”.

By presenting the world as a series of relationships art shows us that everything, when viewed in the right context or through the right perspective has value and

significance. Ultimately, we can see everything - not just an object itself but its connections to the world - as justified, alive, and “right”.

Siegel wrote, “A broken bit of stone doesn’t seem the most correct object in the world, but placed by some black velvet, the stone, in its brokenness, can appear to do something right. At least it makes the velvet mean more. A broken bit of stone in twilight does add something to the twilight, while presenting itself handsomely.”

On Flow State

Some of my first excitement and passion towards art came in the form of an addiction to the moments during creation when we achieve the feeling of flow state. A kind of elusive thing that’s infinitely harder to find as soon as you're looking for it.

Sitting in front of that painting, the manuscript, the screenplay, a hemisphere of your brain slips subtly numb. That mental voice, your voice constantly discerning, simmers down to a white noise which seems to lull all awareness into a single focused tone. A single line of thought, never overwritten or interrupted.

Opinions without judgment become perception and all you do is perceive.

You follow a path which snakes its way, systemically searching for the knowledge that something is right. It tells you where to stop and what to do. And as you have,

another appears and you drone on this way onward and deeper. The work becomes a collection of checkpoints of rightness. And all that’s required is that you continue.

When you step back afterwards, and see where you've been, its almost foreign. The feeling has faded and you're not exactly the same as who you’ve been being. As you discover what you’ve done, you reexperience those points of rightness as a viewer, with the deep pleasure of having been the one to bring it about. The only one who could. You judge again, you form opinions, and at each one you arrive a feelings of personal justice.

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These are the experiences and concepts that have defined my relationship to art and my interests as an artist. My goals as a student have been to fortify that relationship and learn how to incorporate it more deeply into my life. In school we learn, we change, we develop, and we often pull away from these underlying instincts which connect us all to the creative process. We move towards understandings which make our art more accessible, and applicable, consumable, and marketable. And we judge our work and others on the degrees to which we achieve that. We make art with the pillars of critique and grading systems in mind and each week we reinforce that relationship.

We learn to build out our purposes for making, our pursuits of thought, and our intentions - into monuments. Then loom them over our work as certificates of its significance and right to exist. Art must communicate instead of art is communication.

We learn - to achieve. Learn a lesson, create a project, critique it, make it better, critique it, and so on… The social environment of a classroom becomes a place to boast the progress of that kind of “upward” movement. We’ve been inside that process now for our entire lives.

It can be confusing to understand how the desire for that kind of success within our processes of learning, exist beside the nature of learning which more closely resembles exploration, discovery, and life. We’re being taught what it means to be an artist as well as how to be artists. We learn how to discover and experience art, we learn the kind of learning we still need, and then we must begin the process of unlearning everything else.

Animating Without

I haven't animated ever, but I’ve been making a series of animated shorts. The shorts are each inspired by a variety of my own past projects. They’re created over material like written stories, which then inspired screenplays, which were intended for film or video. Over personal experiences with strong visual language. Impressions from

books I'd read. Poems - of sculptures - of obsessions. Over photos, people, and conversations.

I fundamentally have had so little interaction with animation as a medium that I feel void of judgements for what constitutes good and better, what could, should, or shouldn't be. Sitting before the entirety of it's capabilities, I haven't any reverence or learned appreciation for the nuances of its communication. I also certainly do not understand its techniques, methods, or strategies almost in the slightest. Which grants me this: I don't feel like I will ever mean much to the paths animation carves out for itself within art, and I don't need to. I have a convenient excuse to not have any expectation to. That feels both relieving and entirely foreign. Like a rejection of some of those learned approaches which make us feel we must be equipped in some way to elevate our creations to the level of art. That our arts value lives in standards we must rise to meet.

The lack of personal power might make it seem like a questionable choice for my culminating senior project. But what feels interesting to myself and to this project, is that I'm experiencing this somewhat helpless dynamic as a gift and as freedom. "Animating Without" involves an entirely internal learning process, one without the responsibility to exemplify itself to anyone, which holds special potentials.

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There’s potential in learning solely through doing and experiencing. Uninfluenced, unimpressed, you lean entirely into you’re own artistic desires and urges. Without the frameworks of success, you have to establish your own motivations and goals. Why am I making this, gets taken further. Why do I want it to be this way? Why this and not something else? There's an honesty that comes from that and the genuine pursuit of something as enough in and of itself. There’s a clarifying of the hierarchies that fuel motivation. One where personal “rightness” can sit unchallenged at the top, as long as it’s entertained.

To take brutal personal advantage of a medium, so that it becomes nothing more than a vessel to pore into whatever fragments and forms a person sees fit. To fulfill exclusively self-indulgent urges. To find the way a painting can speak, a film degrade to prose, stories sit back into sounds and hollow space. If there’s nothing more expressed than just the shape of that will, it would all be right and enough.

My Senior Exhibition

My animation came out to be about four minutes long. It was created in After Effects and then edited in Premiere. It featured drawings made in Illustrator and a sound design composed by me with music and sound effects. It was shown in the gallery along with three sculptures. The work commented on the feeding practices in American society of ultra-processed foods to children in school settings. The animation prompted viewers to reflect on the addicting nature of these foods which is felt in their compelling

shapes, colors, and consistencies. Vibrant depictions of the snacks contrast gloomy, grey-scale children. White a foreboding chorus of kids singing floods the background.

The animation combines a jovial realism with surreal depictions of small children. The informal style of the artwork plays to the hand-drawn aesthetic of adolescents and school children. The opening scene focuses on the face of a girl, linking us to the perspective of an other as oppose to an objective, literal, reality.

Making my animation, “Ultra-Processed Adolescence”, was a battle against itself. Learning a medium while bringing an idea to life was a constant balance of compromise. Dozens of endeavors that got worked on and figured out and tried, taking time and energy, to ultimately be abandoned because in the first place better decisions should have been made on their approach. A so also a dozen expectations to constantly be questioning. I would say I spent a hundred hours animating the project,

but I really spent a hundred hours trying to animate, trying to learn, and much less actually creating. I learned more than I did, and I suffered through ignorance certainly more than I enjoyed accomplishments.

I experienced how the setup, the preparation and planning of how you're gonna accomplish something, are crucial to the quality of your output. The strategy of the making, when done well, can be a force which propels you forward as you progress. If your techniques within the program are causing you constant problems, you spent all your energy trying to achieve the bare minimum of an effect. And questioning if you'll be able to at all. When things go right from the beginning, and you know generally in what ways they'll continue to, you achieve what you set out to do first and foremost. Then you indulge in the fun of working it, aesthetically, until it becomes the unique thing that does justice to your idea.

There are some approaches to the process and problem solving of digital art that are more efficient than others, and experiencing them is the only way to learn. While I didn't have that, I understood from my work learning new softwares in the past the importance of good workflow. I decided it was important to define deeply the ideas of the art first, the things about it that grabbed my interest and motivation in the first place. I had the sense that if the "why" wasn't rock solid, that weak point would creep its way beneath the stages of the process that come next. I wanted to wander through the work, and I certainly did a bit, but the ways I could provide myself with direction were important to achieve the deadline and expectations I'd set for myself.

Without the basics, you spend so much energy doubling back, going over where you've been, searching for the feeling you can continue moving forward. Time wasted, energy, momentum lost and mustered again over and over. In the case of this project, my what and why were strong motivation. I had standards for the visuals I needed to express. I started with a story plot, then made a visual shotlist. The light knowledge I had from using the After Effects program in the past guided my expectations for what could be achieve, probably in a conservative way that kept my ambitions a bit humble.

As I began trying to bring the plans together I encountered problems, so many. I couldn't achieve the goals of the art. I remembered from a motions graphics class speaking with the professor about how creating projects in After Effects feels like getting really good at tricking the program into doing what you want. And in order to do that, you have to have experienced the personality of the program. I spent the majority of my work on this project doing exactly that.

Technologically, my lack of knowledge was a constant drain on my mental resource. Forget flow state when your brain feels like your laptop fan trying to cool itself down on your lap.

I cant help but wonder at what the final project would look like if I had all the experience and understand about the process of animating that have now, when I began. Those thoughts have me looking at the finished animation like its the shotlist and storyboard for something else, something greater that I'm capable of.

I feel so grateful to this project and proud of what I created in the end. I feel a hunger to achieve more. If all that extra time and energy I spent learning was still worth it in the end, I imagine what im going to feel when I create more *with* more. I feel endowed with skills. I feel like I took a cash course. I feel like I learned so much.

Sculpturally

My project involved three sculptures to be shown in conjunction with the animation. One sculpture was a large metal horse trough filled to the brim with a medley of ultra-processed snacks. The piece, titled “Feed”, featured a 32-ounce animal feed scooper perched on top of the mound of snacks, inviting viewers to explore the abundance of the food and establishing a comparison to industrial feeding techniques for livestock and the concept of bulk buying. The presentation of the food as a medley was reminiscent of the dry millet used to feed cattle and hopefully served to decontextualize the iconic foods as effectively variants of the same shapes and colors and textures.

Two more sculptures sat to either side of the trough and animation. Each involved two, worn elementary school chairs, undersized for little children, perched on top of horizontal podiums. The chairs were positioned back-to-back, their legs entangled and awkward, almost slipping off the podium in precarious balance to express a state of turmoil or imminent breaking down. Thick brown rope bound the chairs at their backs, recreating a motif of hostage and kidnapping, being trapped or forced. On the seats of each of the four chairs, piles of an individual, iconic snack foods sat. The piles were immortalized, stacked together and balanced dramatically to push the boundaries of reality and present the food as something slightly unreal and unnatural. As a final element, genuine drawings done in a real school by elementary-aged kids lay trapped

under the feet of the chairs, pinned to the podium. The colorful innocence of the pictures represented a repression or oppression of the genuine innocence of adolescence.

Conclusion

The presence of multiple mediums in this project, from physical sculpture techniques to digital animating software, was a perfect culminating representation of my practice as an artist. The experience of studying and learning a whole new medium that would become a vital part of such an important project is authentic to the passion and desire to discover expression that has always driven my art. Embracing and understanding these things about myself is one of the most valuable things I've learned in my time in this program. And I've come to appreciate that more in writing this essay

and completing this project. It’s also the reason I’m able to create art under my own rules and follow the feelings of rightness that justify art for me.

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