

*(searching for shadows)*

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**Abstract**

*(searching for shadows)*

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This thesis outlines the art practice of artist Paul Baughman. His work investigates the role of the individual as it relates to agency, power, and change, in the context of contemporary society. His research systematically looks for unseen potential hidden in the role of the individual, and the systems that house this individual, that are currently blanketed by shadows.

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**Statement**

My work ranges across photography, video, performance, printmaking, drawing, installation, and sculpture. I generate systems and structures to create boundaries that permit me to constrain, contextualize, and measure elements of my life that I do not understand. Through my work, I deconstruct my position in contemporary society in order to investigate the role of the individual as it relates to agency, power, and change. Systematized acts of labor enable me to explore how the individual participates in a society whose infrastructure determines much of this individual's participation.

## Practice



### *Starting Point for a Larger Process*

There are many disciplines of rock climbing, each with their own focus. I primarily boulder. Bouldering is climbing without rope protection on rock that is relatively low in height, not huge cliff faces, but boulders that are upwards of thirty feet tall. In bouldering, focus is placed on the body moving across the rock, which enables me to challenge myself to make the hardest movements possible.

I've been climbing for about fifteen years and at some point this activity transitioned from being just a physical one to a mental one as well. It is now an activity of problem solving through the marriage of body and mind, where at times, the cognitive self takes a backseat to intuition and sensorial perception. Climbing is filled with moments of projection, action, and reflection.

Climbing is a constant negotiation to maximize control of my body and my mind. Through acts of preparation and consideration, I attempt to take this infinitely complex activity and distill it down to its most basic parts, to find the easiest path through the most difficult route. I search for the root of a problem through control and precision to understand how, why, when, and where to move.

How do control and precision translate into action, after all, climbing is based on the action of the body moving over the surface of the rock? It's all about connections; points of contact mediated by the core of the individual engaging the rock. Contact. Pressure. Friction. Movement. I make contact with the rock at focused points, finite positions, and predetermined locations, then I apply pressure to generate friction. This friction provides some amount of stability and out of this stability comes movement.

Sometimes these points of contact are very close together. Sometimes they are very far apart. Sometimes they necessitate a literal jump from one to the next. It is between these points where success and failure are measured. It is between these points where the individual creating the connection is measured. And, it is between these points where the individual explores and discovers.

I climb because of this process of exploration and discovery: the process of mentally working through a problem before attempting to physically move through it. I test the accuracy of my prevision by engaging a problem. At times, I forcibly quiet the cognitive side of my brain so that intuition can take control over my movement. I take a step back so that I can reflect on the results of my actions. And I begin this process over and over again. My process always starts with a specific boulder problem and all of the nuances contained therein.

*Language and Boundaries*

In my art practice, language is synonymous to the boulder problem of my climbing as a starting point for a larger process. Language is the important component of my work as it is the curiosity that initiates and the form built on top of its own foundation. Each one of my works is a word, a sentence, or a paragraph, that collectively piece together an observation. For us to consider anything we need to pull it inside of language, as language is our cognitive point of contact. Thus, everything that we contextualize becomes a part of language. My practice makes visible my thinking through the world in which I exist, so, that I can build on an ever evolving language surrounding contemporary society.

A work that has impacted my view of language is Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs*. In this work there are three points of contact each representing the idea of a chair; a physical chair sits between a to scale photograph of this chair and the dictionary definition of the word chair printed on a similarly sized text panel. A viewer depends on the connections between these points to gain an understanding of a chair, or at least to get close to an understanding. *One and Three Chairs* is about signs, signification, and the slipperiness of language. As we engage one point of contact and apply cognitive pressure (by attempting to fully understand this specific point) there is friction that brings us pause, but there is also movement, and, it is this movement from one point to the next that intrigues me.

So, then, taking inspiration from Kosuth, how does one work with something as slippery as language? How does one find anything concrete in a source that is plastic—malleable, changeable, unstable, transitory, in a constant state of flux? How does one keep up when everything becomes a part of language, or, more to the point, once considered and/or contextualized becomes language? How can one find stability on ground that is constantly shifting and expanding? Thinking back to rock climbing, when I engage a specific rock there is an existing system of boundaries that define that rock. Inside of these boundaries I find points of contact between which to explore. I enter a finite space inside of which I can apply pressure.

Part of my process is establishing systems and structures to create boundaries inside of which I can work. I mine my own experiences, confusion, and intrigue, to generate arbitrary parameters between which I can place myself. I see my practice as a field of boulders scattered on the hillside of my life, a hillside of language. As I move through one component of language other components appear. This expansion shifts the form of this hillside, and as a result, its shape mirrors my movement.

### *Component Parts*

What happens when movement occurs on this hillside? What happens when systems of language start to decay? What happens when a boulder in my practice begins to be consumed by the ground upon which it rests like Robert Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed*? Decomposition is a way that the earth generates balance. Matter becomes matter becomes matter. Micro systems are broken down and ingested by macro systems. One system feeds another, which is itself part of an even larger system; and so on and so forth. If we zoom out to look at these systems, we can begin to see everything muster, collect, come together, and overlap, as they break down. It starts to look like the contents of a mixing bowl with fragments of systems rolling over one another, touching each other, combining together.

In her essay *An Ecology of Practices*, Isabelle Stengers states, "an ecology of practices does not have any ambition to describe practices 'as they are'; it resists the master word of progress that would justify their destruction. It aims at the construction of new 'practical identities' for practices, that is, new possibilities for them to be present, or in other words to connect. It thus does not approach practices as they are... but as they may become," (186). In other words, new practices should not seek to destroy older practices, but, should instead find connections that enable the two to grow together, inciting change through a process of morphing instead of an act of exploding.

In this essay Stengers is explicitly discussing Capitalism, but, if we take this idea of non-destructive movement and focus it on our mixing bowl, we see that as these systems fragment, they begin to make contact with one another. If we zoom in on this, we find that there are connections being born between portions; portions of the old systems that couple together to make the new. New systems that don't replace the old ones, but, instead, exist alongside these older systems. This growth shifts the landscape of the bowl by applying pressure to its pliable structure, forever altering the form that houses these multigenerational systems.

Structures and systems in my own practice don't break apart into non-existence as they are consumed by a continually shifting and expanding ground. Rather, they break down to their component parts, and then to the parts of those parts. It becomes a conversation of filtering language again. It is infinite. What comes into view about the component parts is their duality as a smaller portion of a larger system, as well as, a larger system for even smaller portions. There is not a top down hierarchy of a singular macro system fueled by micro systems. There instead exists a series of systems not linearly arranged, but rather, married together as one grand system that is rhizomatic in structure. This architecture does not contain a singular starting point for all connections, because all of the points in this system act as a point of departure. This system is rolling around itself, rubbing up against itself, entangled by its own connections. It has no distinguishable beginning or end. It is a structure that filters out like roots of grass covering a hillside full of boulders. These boulders are pressed into this system, a part of its structure. This system is itself a starting point tumbling through a mixing bowl that is forever expanding.

I see my practice as a system of connections in which each work informs the other, thereby generating an interconnected conversation that swirls around me as a component part of a larger conversation. Through my work I am trying to understand the complexities of this larger conversation by exploring how I am connected to—as well as, how I participate—in contemporary society as it is the mixing bowl that I tumble through.

*Searching for Shadows*

When I deconstruct my position in contemporary society I look at internal aspects of my own engagement, in addition to, external factors placed upon me while in this position. I'm trying to understand the culture in which I exist, the role of the individual in this culture, and how change can occur in such a way that historical abuses of agency and power are not duplicated. There is unrecognized potential to affect change in ways that are currently invisible, in the role of the individual, and the systems that house this individual. This unrecognized potential is blanketed by shadows.

A shadow in this instance should not be thought of as a space lacking light, but instead as something that has yet to be considered or contextualized. A shadow here is a perspective—a goal, a question, a thought, a trajectory, a lesson, a place for change, a starting point—that has been left out of the knowing light. We can think about this duality of light and shadow as a two sided coin. We can only ever see one side of this coin at a time, thereby, making it impossible to ever fully know this object. To “see” the coin in its entirety there has to be a reliance on an apparatus (such as a mirror, photograph, memory, etc.) which will only ever have the capacity to portray. This unseen side is the shadowed side. This withdrawn side is where the potential for movement can be found; it is where the next point of contact hides. As we reach out and latch on to this shaded position the coin turns, and thus, we are always left with a shadow to pursue. My work is a constant pursuit of shadows as a shadow is something that has yet to be brought into language. Language is never fixed. It and its use should always be evaluated and built upon so that new perspectives can morph into existence.

In his essay *System Esthetics*, Jack Burnham states that, “in evaluating systems the artist is a perspectivist considering goals, boundaries, structure, input, output, and related activity inside and outside the system. Where the object almost always has a fixed shape and boundaries, the consistency of a system may be altered in time and space, its behavior determined both by external conditions and its mechanisms of control,” (4).

As I tumble through society, I am looking out from the top of my hillside to see the larger conversation in which I participate. I am trying to find the shadows of my world so that I can turn the coin of my own life. I am considering, “goals, boundaries, structure, input, output, and related activity inside and outside the system,” (Burnham 4); the system of my own practice, and the system that houses this practice. And, I am trying to do so by not, “approach[ing these practices] as they are... but as they may become,” (Stengers 186). Every movement that I make alters the shape of contemporary society. My actions are a component part of the language that will make tomorrow out of today. Having an understanding and awareness of how I balance my own weight as I participate in the creation of tomorrow is critical. It is in the shadows where the role of the individual expands. As I search for shadows this position of participation simultaneously becomes more clear and more complex. This search is therefore like language. It is constantly shifting and expanding. It is infinite.

Baughman Paul

## Work

*Untitled Reflection, 2015*

Light Fixtures, Light Bulbs, Clamp, Mirrors

Variable

Two nearly identical light fixtures are placed on opposite sides of two opposing mirrors that are sandwiched together with a clamp. There is a reflection on both sides of this sculpture. The two lights are placed in such a way that as a viewer moves around the sculpture there are moments when the reflection of one fixture lines up perfectly with the physical fixture on the backside of the mirrors as that reflection breaks the framing of the mirror. This generates a blending of reality and fiction, or, of perceived space and actual space. What happens when I move through life and look back?

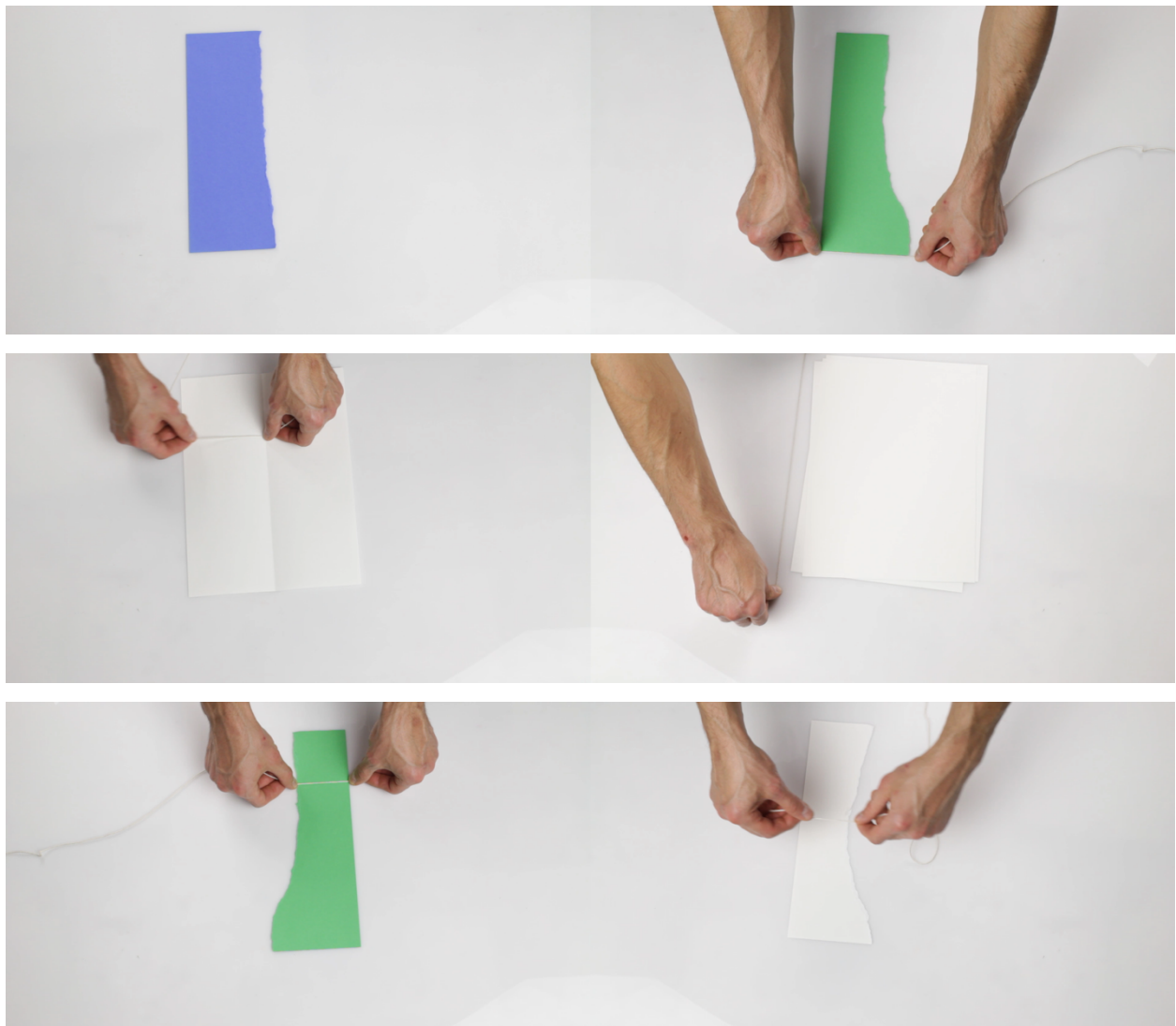


Baughman Paul

*Untitled Measure, 2015*

26:46 Minute Single-Channel Video with Audio

Nine different colors of plain construction paper, all the same size, are manipulated in three different ways: by either making a stack of three, by folding the paper in half lengthwise, or by tearing the paper in half lengthwise. Each of these manipulations are then very accurately but arbitrarily measured with a string that has no marks. This paper is altered by an external factor and its new state is then measured in such a way that that measurement is simultaneously objective and subjective.

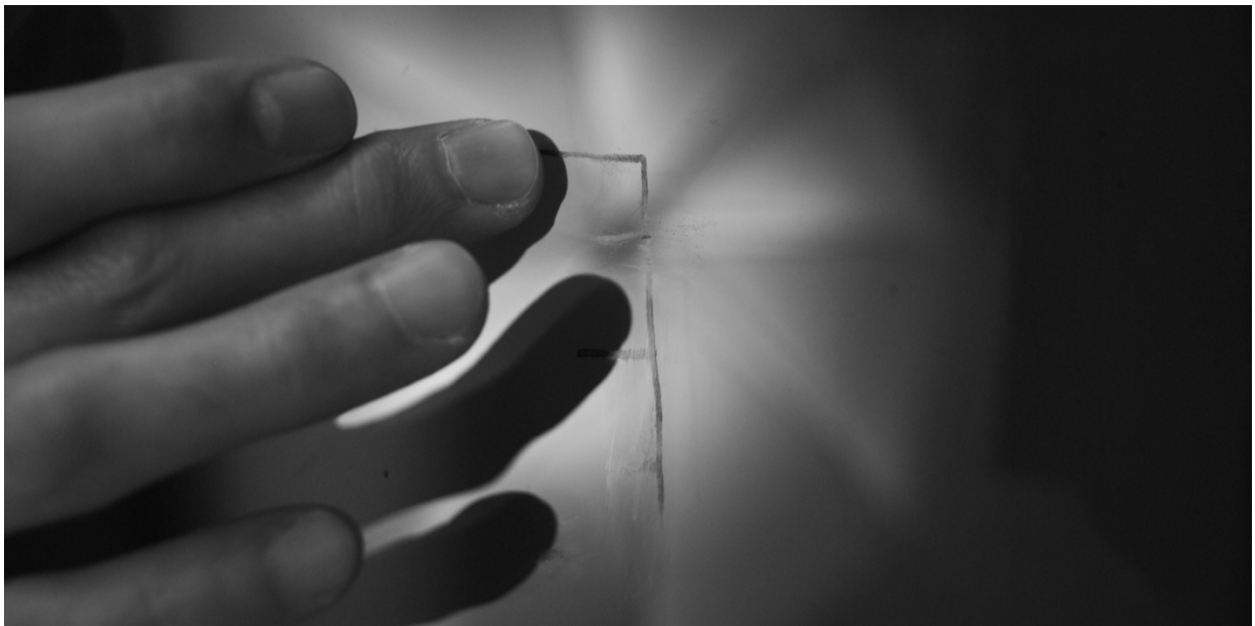


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*Luminance*, 2015

6:30 Minute Single-Channel Video with Audio

Luminance is a measurement of the intensity of light emitted from a surface. Through an etymology traverse you can connect the word luminance to stature and to the body.



Baughman Paul

*New Bonds, Old Bonds, 2015*

Shou Sugi Ban Finished Birch Plywood, Shou Sugi Ban Finished Purple Heart Wood

17" x 10" x 10"

The Shou Sugi Ban finishing technique preserves wood through the destruction of its surface by use of flame, water, and labor.



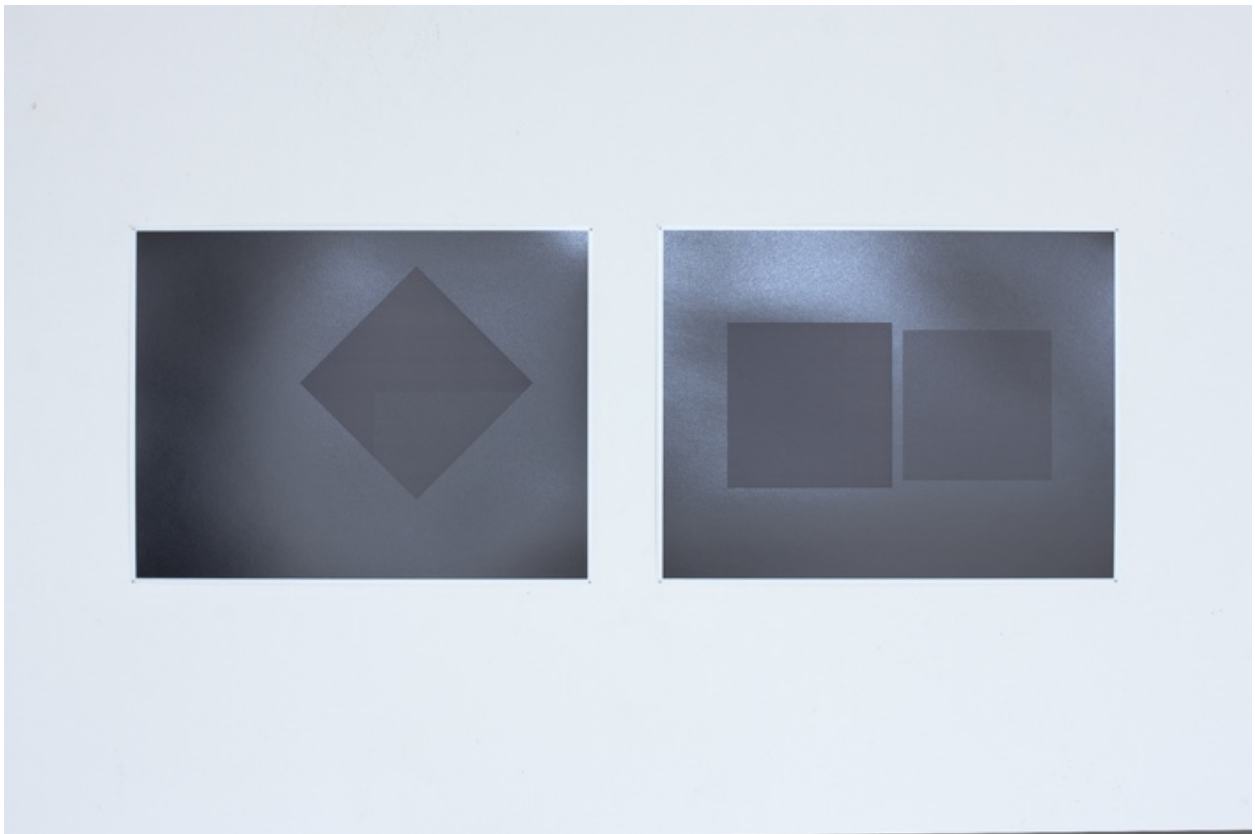
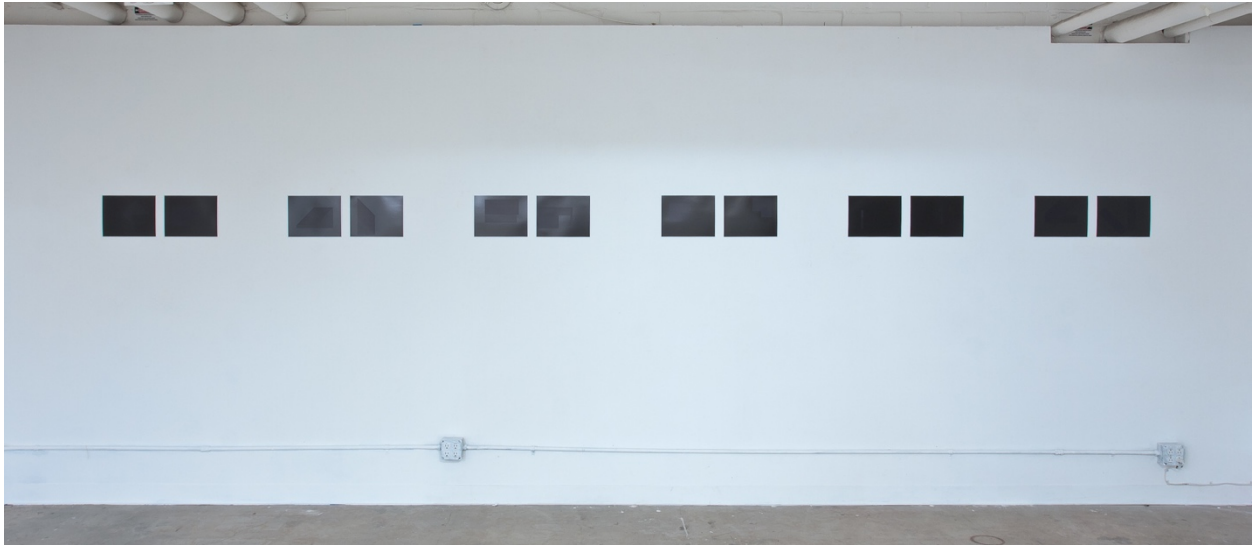


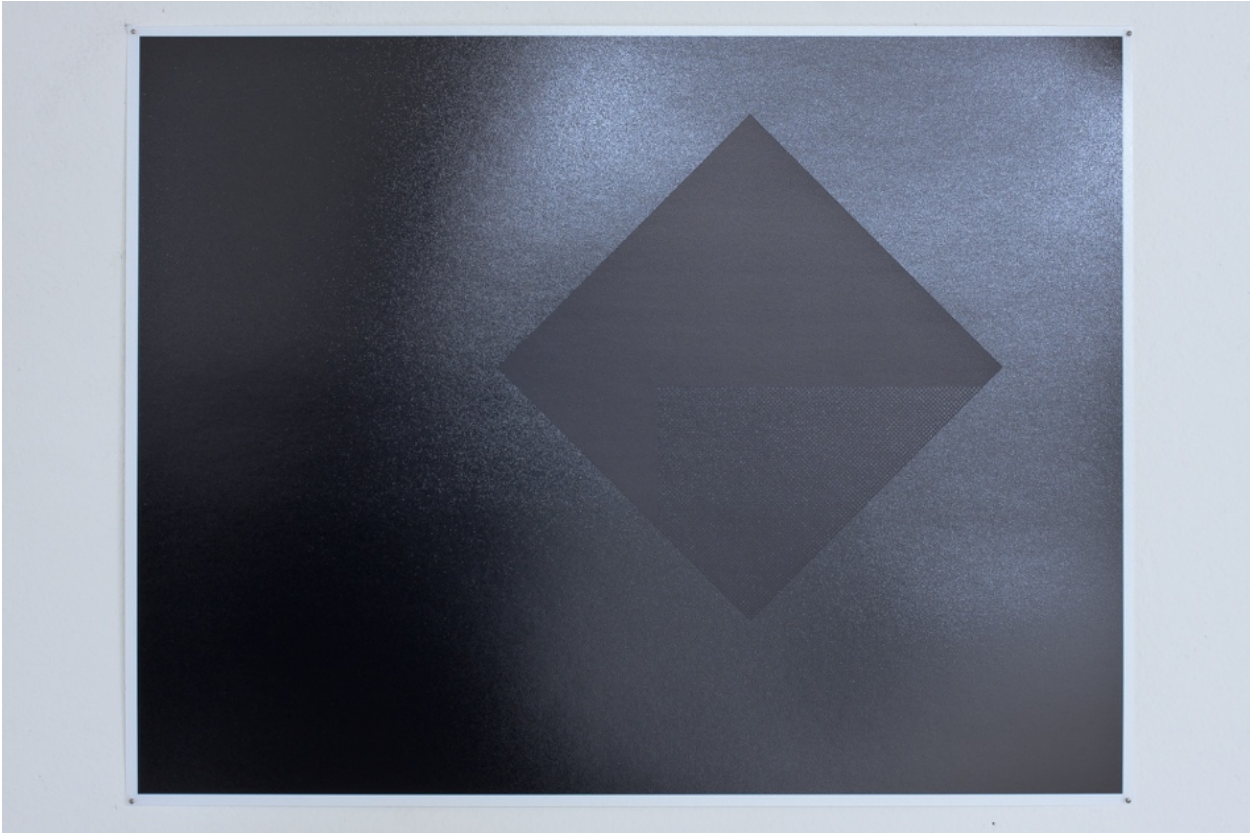
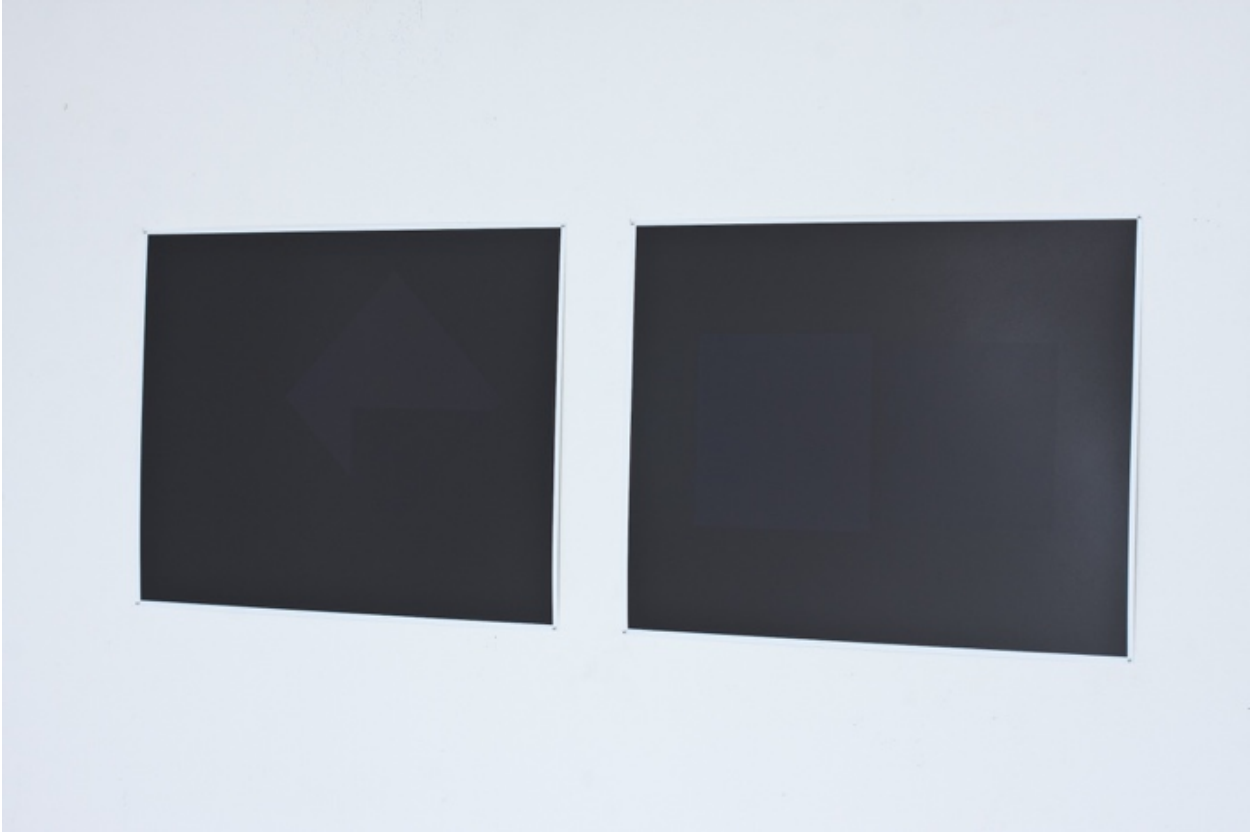
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*Searching Shadows for Tomorrow*, 2015

Archival Pigment Prints

(12) 8.5" x 11"





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*What Happens if I Stay Here a While*, 2015

5:40 Minute Single-Channel Video with Audio

In this video I am an active agent in affecting my own value on a grey scale and by the end there is only a trace left of the individual that I was before.



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*98 Manufactured Horizon Lines, a Binder Clip, and a Mirror, 2015*

Paper, Ink, Binder Clip, Mirror

1" x 10" x 10"



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*attempting to repair*, 2016

9:49 Minute Single-Channel Video with Audio

In this video, I am conducting a series of jaw exercises designed to aid in clarity of the voice while simultaneously trying to make a frosted piece of Plexiglas transparent again.



Baughman Paul

*(balancing one's own weight inside a shadow of antithetical sides)*, 2016

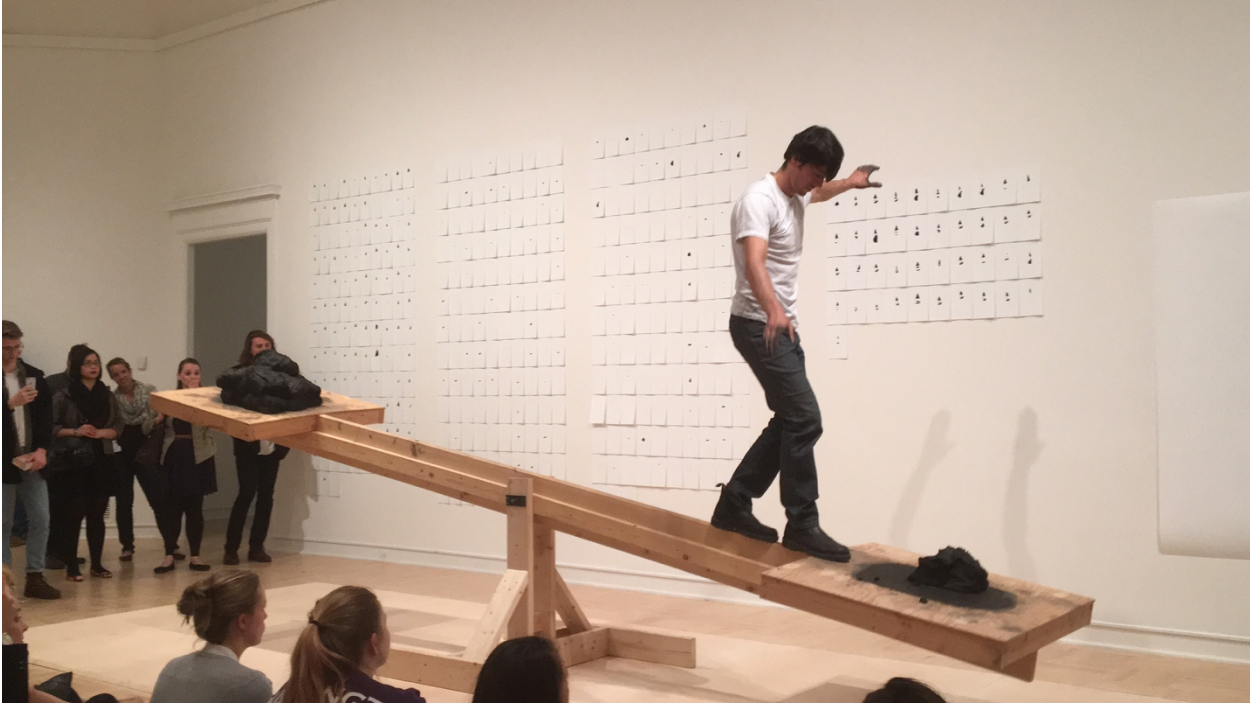
Pigment Prints, Wood, Steel, Clay

Variable

What happens when two antithetical systems come together to discuss the same thing? How does an individual balance both their transmission and reception of language when these two sides attempt to communicate? What does it mean to be either impartial and objective or biased and subjective? How, when, and why would one shift between these two positions?









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