WYSIWYG

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MFA Thesis of Alex Linfield
NSCAD 2019

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-words


EXIT

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Land Acknowledgment

I would like to acknowledge that this thesis, exhibition, and the research that made it possible was conducted almost entirely in Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq People. This territory is covered by the "Treaties of Peace and Friendship" which Mi'kmaq Wəlastəkwiyik (Maliseet), and Passamaquoddy Peoples first signed with the British Crown in 1726. The treaties did not deal with surrender of lands and resources but in fact recognized Mi'kmaq and Wəlastəkwiyik (Maliseet) title and established the rules for what was to be an ongoing relationship between nations. As a person of settler identity, I recognize that many parts of this agreement have not been properly honored. I am happy to have attended NSCAD because of how engaged with aboriginal artwork, politics, and decolonizing education some of my mentors have been. Much discussion in this MFA program has centered on the TRC and I am thankful for this, but soon it will be time to ask what is next. As this next step begins, I am happy to lend my ally ship, and to remain critical of my government and place of privilege.

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What is an Image?

For as long as I have thought of myself as a practicing artist I have continually attempted to understand what an image *is*, and while this may sound like an easy task - attempting to gain any deep understanding of that which lacks depth itself has proven more than difficult.

The question of "what is an image" contains most of its obstacles within its utterance. "Is" – implies presence, but if what an image "is", is present, then what is it made of? What does it look like?[1] I only ask because I worry that we currently lack the cognitive tools to think about the sensory prosthetics which new media offer and as the present slips into the past a feeling of transition inevitably advances into simply being. For as far as I can understand it, technology and media seek invisibility by design. It is only once the tool begins to rust and slip into a past that its entire structure and meaning becomes visible. But what does this mean for a tool which seems to lack sufficient material existence to rust, break, or wear? I am of course talking about digital images and media. Added to this is the already difficult task of separating the essential qualities of our images from the ghillie suit of content it wears.[2]

The content of an image is all foreground. It covers a substrate or surface which allows for its fixity or fluidity of communication. The essence of "image" lies between the content of what is seen and the material it creates its surface out of, but it seems to evaporate once the content is removed, leaving the viewer with just the material. My time spent here at NSCAD has been focused on this foreground/background relationship of the image. Many of my attempts to turn the image around in order to see it from the back have proven unsuccessful, but as of late I have attempted a new methodology to presence the "essence" of the image.

1 This is likely an impossible question, which is why I think it can only be expressed through visual art.

2 I often use "digital media" and "digital image" interchangeably because the digital image can be described to have many forms.

The Presence of "Absent Presence"

How do we study media and technology when it has become our primary model of knowledge production? Since Derrida, the typical model for distilling the essence of media has returned to the presence of absence. However, Derrida and deconstructionists alike would find the irony here placed on the word "essential". This term's undoing lies in the fact that if we were able to find this "essence" it would make everything else involved extraneous and inessential. Quickly digital cameras, screens, and Instagram dissolve and we are left with nothing tangible to hold onto in the search for what our representational media is at an essential level. Vilem Flusser describes new media as a black box with an exterior program.[3] We play within the program of the camera but fail to shine some light into the box. Life on the exterior of the program simply leaves us knowing how to manipulate inputs to gain outputs. We understand the tool only by its exterior and attempts to open the black box unsurprisingly cause its internal workings to also become exterior surfaces. The point here is that turning the lights on makes it so you can no longer see the darkness. However, perhaps the black box can be re-oriented by being re-presented rather than opened, since this is what re-presentations often afford us - a different and simpler view of something larger and more abstract. But first we need to know a bit more about our contemporary modes of image making if re-presentation might be our only way in.

New media is a background which is only ever present when completely covered by foreground. It is one of the largest producers in material culture but can be described to lack material itself. The apparent contradictions which quickly boil to the surface when thinking about new media only begin to make sense once we dig through its crust to reveal the artifacts behind it - namely code (the oscillations of I/0 that create the sensory experience on the screen). While I will establish a theory around binary codes. "I" will appear later in this paper. Instead I plan to start rather unintuitively with "0" - the agent of absence.

3 Vilém Flusser. Towards a Philosophy of Photography.

~~Zero~~, an Empty Whole
The number zero is perhaps an amount in the same way that black is not considered a colour. Zero is the absence of a numeral, but more importantly it is the presence of the absence of a number. It is a tool to make certain that nothing (or at least the concept of nothing) is present. An empty hole that describes a more tangible whole elsewhere. Zero is not only the presence of absence, but the representational and conceptual marker of immateriality. Zero is the inside of an empty jug - essential to the vessel because without it the chunk of vitrified clay would have no function. Zero is the immaterial that defines the material, the negative space that defines the sculpture. Zero returned to me as an object of interest when I questioned what was so "new" about new media. The answer can only be found in a closer study of the term "new media" and its origins.

John Durham Peters categorizes our original media as "water, fire, sky, and earth"[4] pointing to how we may have forgotten this due to living "in a time when it is impossible to say whether the nitrogen cycle or the internet is more crucial to the planet's maintenance."[5] If media once meant the physical elements which constituted the communication, then does this place "new media" as simply defined by media's negative dialectic? If media is material (wood, plaster, stone etc.) then is new media "new" because it is immaterial in comparison? I decided that I would entertain this dichotomous theory of media/new media in order to provoke a new perspective on images and media. I also began to become excited by the difficulty of re-presenting and materialising this immaterial model of media.

4 John Durham Peters. The marvelous clouds. Toward a philosophy of elemental media. 2-3

5 Ibid.. 2

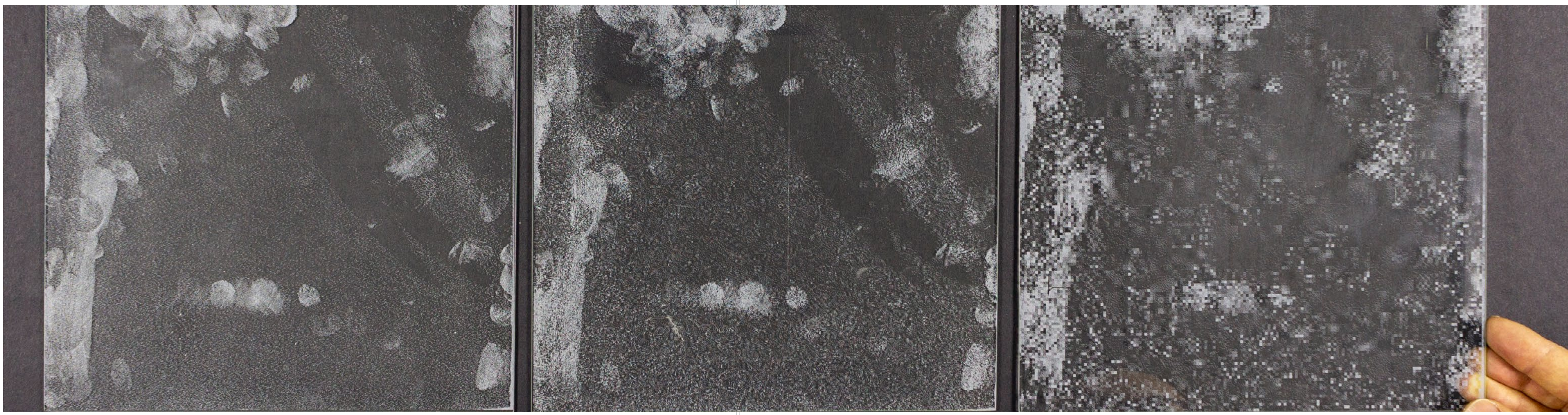
In my final exhibition work I looked to the discourse of sculpture and "old" media in order to possibly materialize the space between the image and its communicating surface. After all, sculpture is a medium concerned with the presentation of "essentially volume, not scene"[6] and it was through granting *virtual space* a more tangible *material space* that I began to see progress in my work. Regarding the difference between sculpture and an image-plane Susanne Langer describes sculpture as a medium concerned with the presentation of essentially volume. "The volume, however is not a cubic measure, like the space in a box. It is more than the bulk of the figure; *it is a space made visible*,[7] and is more than the space the figure makes visible."[8] If sculpture "is a space made visible" Then sculpting the virtual space of an image may generate visibility beyond the surface of the picture plane. Furthermore, it may take space considered virtual and instead presence its virtues in space. The resulting objects could provide us with artifacts capable of bringing something new to the conversation around new media.

6 Susanne Langer. Feeling and form: a theory of art. 88

7 My emphasis, Not Susanne Langer's.

8 Susanne Langer. Feeling and form: a theory of art. 88

Present Day Artifacts
What would a study of material culture of the image look like? Would it look like Art History - studying the content and context of the image? Or would the model of archaeology be more fruitful – studying the artifacts of media. But these could not be the typical artifacts such as a pot or tool because media artifacts already exist by a different nature. Within the world of the image a media artifact is always what archaeology would describe as midden. It is the unwanted material of the image. The noise. It is a presence of the media not completely put forth by the content. While an image is a residue of what it depicts, the media artifact is the residue of the image's presence - the presentation of the representation.[9]



Images of dust and fingerprints printed on glass evidencing varying levels of compression artifacts.

What happens then if material culture becomes a background or a vessel for new media's immaterial object known as "image"? Heidegger's jug comes to mind with this question, not only because of previous metaphors I made in this paper using vessels as media models, but because as he discovers the jug's "thingness" is not the jug itself – it is instead what it holds and how it pours out. This metaphor holds a striking resemblance to McLuhan's "the medium is the message" but makes a relationship to understanding media through media's previous meaning of material. The works in my exhibition WYSIWYG attempt to apply Heidegger's object lesson concerned with old media to seemingly immaterial new media and digital tools. In doing so the works conflate the material presence of the object with the more immaterial artifacts of media. The result is a jug or vessel made entirely of seams, which pours out from a plugged opening. A separate representation of how we represent the world to ourselves and the translations involved as we move towards being a society bathed in new media.

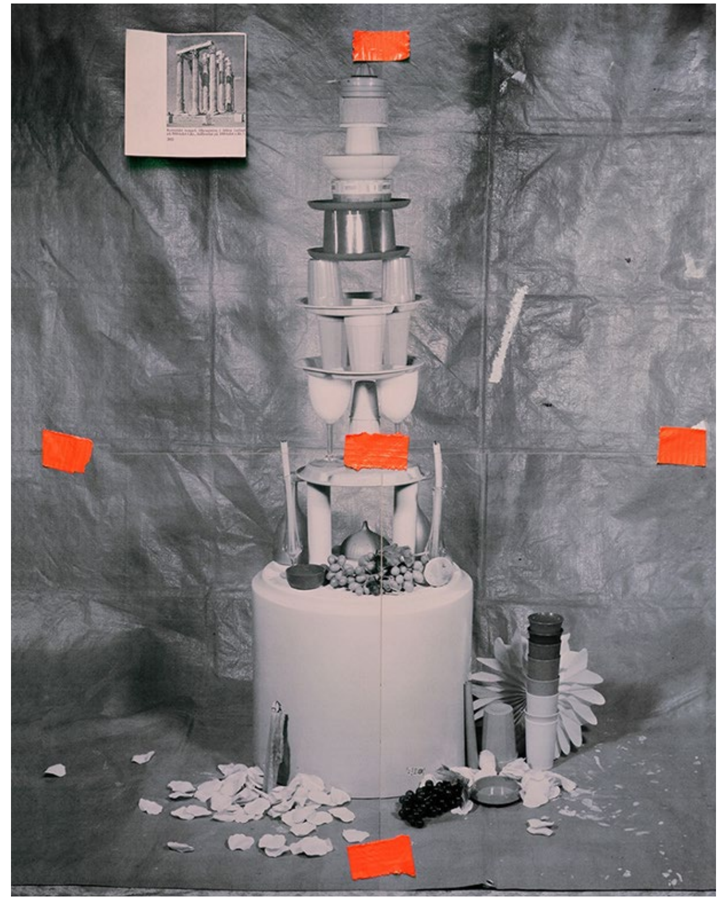
9 Originally asked by Craig Leonard during my studio advising.

Methodology / Exhibition Reflections

Influences & Intent

Christopher Williams, Cutaway model Nikon EM

Artist Christopher Williams is well known for fixing the gaze of the camera back on itself, but their work does not help flesh out the essential, immaterial qualities of an image. Instead William's work primarily develops an image of the hardware employed in the production of an image. The camera, photographer, and immediate apparatus are given presence and representation in both the system of creating the image and the image itself. But this cannot be said to describe the essence of an image any more than a footprint's apparatus of production does. A mirror does not foreground the presence of absence created by new media nor does it create a representation of what it is. By contrast, the work of Canadian photographer Sara Cwynar has been a large influence on my practice since my BFA.



Sara Cwynar, A Flat Death

What has held my interest with Cwynar's practice is the compression and conflation of space, image, and object which I receive from viewing their work. Nothing in Cwynar's photo is what it is (representationally). Even the surface of the photo is withheld by the image's depiction of its own seams. Here the image becomes object and the image's depicted objects become image. The thing most sharply in focus in Cwynar's images are always the seams and what hold them together.

My intent is not to focus on the apparatus of image media and its tools but rather to use the residue of material culture as a background and vessel for the artifact we know as "image". In my thesis work, banal and general materials/objects take the background. In this sense a re-versal takes place between image and object in which the nature of the image becomes a tangible sensory object and the content of the image becomes the screen (background). The seams, breaks, and distortions of digital images are highlighted as content rather than noise or unwanted signal, breaking the surface tension of the object. Repetition and objectification often linked to the production of truth invert, revealing flaws in the concept itself and deconstructing truth from within its own system of production.[10] This un-truth to material not only points to the way media constructs our expectations and observations of the object but more importantly demonstrates that the only experience we have of truth now is to know/experience how truly false our experiences through contemporary media are. These artworks are not deceptions, they are representations of our representations, redundant and reproduced as we have already come to expect everything to be. They demonstrate a mind able to see the world as a collection of surfaces for projecting fantasy onto and an environment which can only be understood in the ways it is unabashedly false.

Relationship to Language.

Unique to the digital image is that unlike other photographic media the digital image is made of language (code). The fact that the digital image even still resembles "the look of a traditional photograph … is mostly due to the work of computational processes designed to make these data packages look familiar and homely."[11] The digital image itself is an imitation of photography's modes of imitation. This in part is why I saw it appropriate to

10 I view truth as often being produced by a framework. For example, truth in science is directly related to reproduction in that an experiment is false unless its results can be reproduced faithfully.

11 Daniel Rubinstein. The Digital Image. 5.

create a separate representation of digital media and images but also a reason for needing to utilize text as image and image as text within the work. If the occurrence of the digital image as visual is simply a skeuomorph[12] then we likely need new ways to read and interpret them.

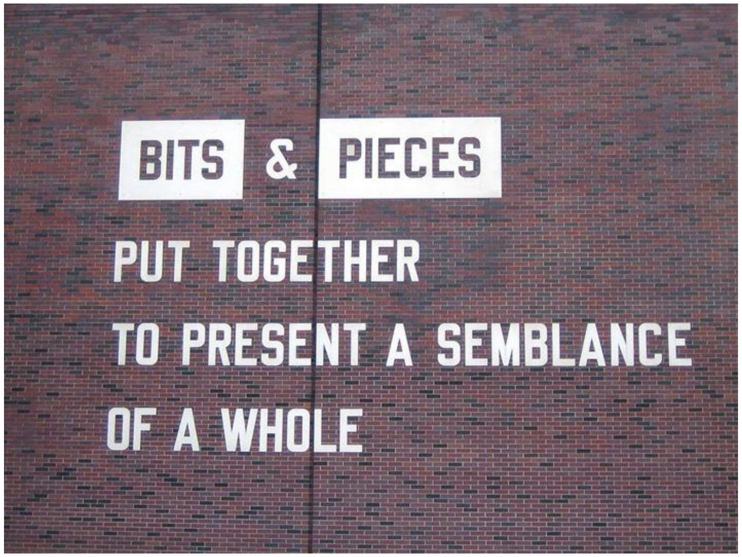
Analogue photography is termed analogue because it has an analogous relationship to the physical world, whereas digital photography is perhaps more linked to a model of the mind, ideas, and language.[13] In light of this I have attempted to engage with digital language in similar ways other artists have taken on materializing the English language previous to me. This idea came to me while reading "Programmed Visions" by Wend Hui Kyong Chun in which Chun describes the difficulty programmers had copyrighting software. As the patent office saw it, software was just a format for instructions. I paused for a long time on this claim that software was "just a format for instructions" because it reminded me so much of the conversation around instruction/text based conceptual art. I knew there had to be cues I could take from this period of art in order to delve further into digital language. This glaring similarity between software/code, and text/instruction based artworks was also affirmed for me after attending an exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art titled "Programmed". The Whitney Museum draws similar parallels as I have regarding this connection. In response to the exhibition the Whitney's website states the following:

"Lawrence Weiner and Joseph Kosuth, both leading figures of Conceptual art, use language as their material to highlight the linguistic nature of all art and to shift emphasis from the object to the idea behind it. W. Bradford Paley's more recent digital work also makes language its material but by displaying the code that generates his work. The pieces by these three artists all consist of the very instructions through which they have been created, self-reflexively erasing oppositions between form

12 Daniel Rubinstein. The Digital Image. 5.

13 Vilém Flusser. Towards a Philosophy of Photography.

and content and folding them into one. Paley's work draws attention to the fact that digital art—regardless of its visual appearance—always has a layer of code and is produced by the software used to create or manipulate it." [14]



Lawrence Weiner – Bits & Pieces

The materialization of language (and dematerialization of the art object) is central to the practice of Lawrence Weiner whom at times re-interprets what language is from within its own system while including tactics borrowed from concrete poetry. My works on glass in themselves are digital interfaces given that they come from highly manipulated digital images as well as being media inscribed with textual data by my physical digits themselves. The pieces also in some cases take the form of concrete poetry in order to access concepts such as binary code, fidelity, and transparency through folding form and content into one. Such is the case of the piece on the other side of the movable wall as the viewer enters the space.

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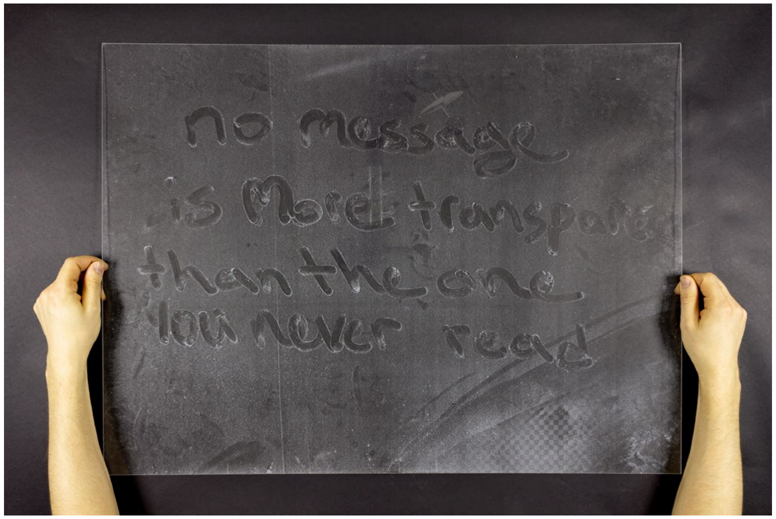
14 Whitney Museum of American Art. Rule, Instruction, Algorithm: Collapsing Instruction and Form. https://www.whitney.org/exhibitions/programmed?section=3&subsection=1#exhibition-artworks.

The work displays a text reading "the only job that starts at the top is digging a hole". The text is self-referential in its form and content as it reads from top to bottom. The work is both presenting a representation as well as representing its own structure of representation when it gains "concrete" form. The language creates pause in the processing of its representation once its framework is materialized. There might however be a more consequential word for the process that the viewer is being made aware of in the works reading other than "framework". Program may be a more useful interpretation for what the viewer is being made aware of here. In reading the text (which also embodies the form of image) the viewer experiences what it is like to read an image made of language.

While some of the text work presented in the exhibition is likened to concrete poetry in order to materialize the invisible language of a digital image, there are also other works In the exhibition that simply point to what is so new about "new media" - both textually and in terms of materiality. For example, the re-definition of transparency invoked by the message "there is no message more transparent than the one you never read" is written both on a transparent surface but also above the digital artifact of the photoshop "transparency backdrop". The text also alludes to a separate set of data which is present in the work but illegible. This of course is the digital code which birthed the surface the viewer is reading - the inside of the black box which generates the surface and its linguistic program.



What is so "new" about "new media"?

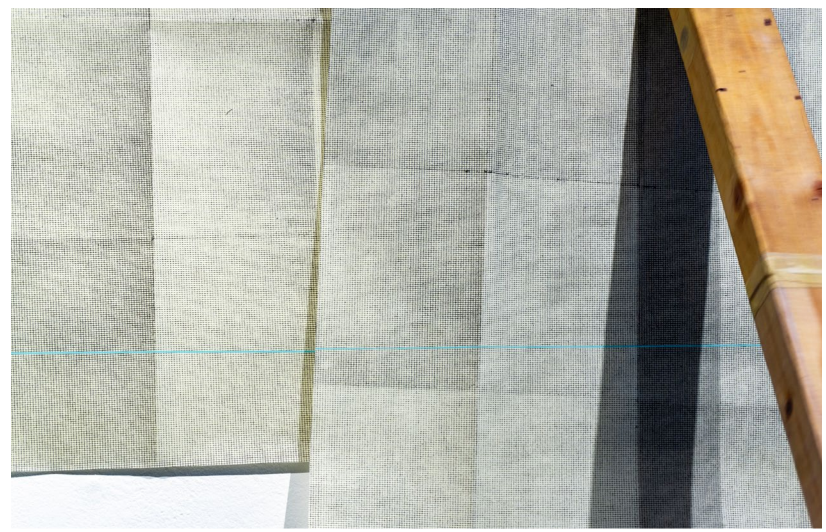
I have already established that media in its earliest definitions simply means materials (wood, clay, pigment, steel) and that perhaps new media is defined in the negation of this previous term. Within this defining system new media is setup as oppositional to material media. However, when I state this, I do not mean that the digital image lacks infrastructure. Anyone paying attention knows that this isn't the case considering the popularising of smart phones has put a little piece of Africa in everyone's pocket. But it still stands that the digital image is differentiated from past media because it is an impression formed out of language (code). Following my previous choices to "sculpt" a digital image it became quickly apparent that what I was doing was an act of conflating the "new" and the old. Just as my glass inscribed by a finger is referential to both meanings of "digital" interface (fingers & computational devices) - my representations of new media are pushed into existing by the use of media's previous definition. In this conflation a hybrid media is condensed into a single artifact(s). A total dataset of media placed and stored in one space to be accessed by the viewer.

On paper the exhibition would seem to be the key to unlocking the essence of media and images and in some respects it does. The presence of absence, an important aspect of all of our representational tools, is presented here with some visual certainty. The exhibition is in a sense the presence of the presence of absence. In the exhibition new media is vitrified within its previous meaning, digital images made of code are translated into a format we can process, and media "artifacts" presented for consideration in our previous understanding of the word confront and confuse the viewer. However, for whatever reason this separate representation of our representational tools still allows for so much withdrawal. The results are paradoxical as one might come to expect reading this document. No media is actually presenced here (in both meanings of the term media- new and old). The "dusted" surface of the glass presents a manipulation of material for communication which isn't any more present than the digital screen it metaphorically represents. In this situation the viewer is surrounded by the presence of something which is absent. That which is absent (but represented) is media and we find ourselves relying on representations again to know this.

Notes on Heidegger.
My attempt to find the essence of media and images no doubt has direct similarities to Martin Heidegger's work "The Question Concerning Technology". Within the essay Heidegger does away with the instrumental definition of technology (the means to an end) as well as the anthropological definition (human activity). To be succinct in my explanation, Heidegger eventually lands on technology's essence being related to revealing. In particular, technologies (and techniques) reveal a kind of truth or "aletheia". Pushing this hypothesis further he separates modern technology as being different from its previous forms because its essence is "enframing" – a different form of revealing, stating: "Enframing means that way of revealing which holds sway in the essence of modern technology and which is itself nothing technological."[15] In my work both modern and pre-modern media are interrogated but not necessarily to reveal enframing itself. Rather my interest lies in the connected term – "reveal". Heidegger makes use of etymology frequently in his work without ever applying this tactic to "revealing". Reveal, is composed of two pieces. "re" of course means "again" but veal comes from the latin origin of velum meaning "veil". Hence if the essence of technology is a way of revealing it is also a way of re-veiling (concealing) what is present. Revealing inevitably brings forth a surface, which conceals another.

15 Martin Heidegger. The question concerning technology, and other essays. 20.

Lumber digitally printed at various levels of focus.



Folds real and photographic interlaced into one surface. A perfectly level Adobe Photoshop guideline spans the seemingly arbitrarily placed prints.

In this supporting document to my exhibition I have proposed not to simply provide further explication but to instead opt for a similar approach found in my visual art applied to the material of language and writing. In this supporting document I explore etymological roots and associations of the language of media and technology. The hope here is to find the linguistic residue of the image and new media. Especially in consideration that the digital image is an image made of language itself. To do so I have explored a list of terms and concepts linking to digital media in order to find the source code to digital source code. I expect this will be an ongoing part of my practice.

If "sense is the faculty of intuition in the presence of an object"[16] then what does sense become in the presence of the object through media? Is it a further experience of the object and hence more data, or not an experience of the object at all and hence a deceptive representation? A conversation for myself is to try and understand where digital technology is taking definitions of experience and knowledge. This is the beginning of a very early user's guide to our newly invented sensory prosthetics.

Technology as an entity is not new, it simply strives to always inhabit the form of new. The cell phone in my pocket is built on an endless amount of discoveries, concepts and material relationships existing long before its user's felt the need to "reach out and touch someone"[17]. Even software now more commonly referred to as "apps" had to jump over the same legal hurdles as such a banal technology as lined paper. In their own times both were originally viewed as essentially just a combination of rules and instructions and hence un-patentable.[18] The question which confronted both software and blank printing was: how can you copyright instructions and rules which are more a model of a mental process

16 Immanuel Kant. Objective and Subjective Senses, 209

17 AT&T. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OapWdclVqEY

18 Wendy Hui Kyong Chun. Programmed visions: software and memory. 4

than an object or material itself ?[19] Something remained invisible to those adjudicating the copyrights of both software and blank accounting sheets, but as we know a technology which functions invisibly is usually the mark of its effectiveness. Software after all "is the invisible whole that generates the sensuous parts."[20] Source code and hence language then is likely the artifact we should be more closely scrutinizing since it so easily remains a vapor of the mind.

From the brush, the stylus appeared and from the stylus, we find ourselves now plugging inputs on keyboards made of glass and light smeared with finger grease and pocket lint - a little glass screen that collects a layer of our genetic DNA as well as metaphorical DNA through metadata. We cannot study all of these tools, which replace each other unless we understand what it is that binds them and carries them forward. That persistent node is of course language. The typewriter may die but language moves on like a virus to the next, reincarnating itself in a new technological body with new affordances and agency each time. While source code provides the language for modern computing based on binary language, binary itself is built off of previous linguistic concepts. Source code is a language that at this point in time many of its users cannot speak or read, however, we can begin to see its foundational structure through the words it is so inherently birthed from.

19 Lisa Gitelman. Paper knowledge: toward a media history of documents. 34

20 Wendy Hui Kyong Chun. Programmed Visions: Software and Memory. 1

A Source Code to Source Code.
Constance Classen's Words of Sense inspires my framework for an attempt at understanding our media senses. Classen doggedly un-encrypts language related to the senses to find its roots in previous uses. This process of probing etymology and metaphor lays bare the structures of meaning involved, because as Carolyn Korsmeyer posits:

"Metaphors, are fundamental forms of our awareness of our condition: metaphors of space, metaphors of movement, metaphors of vision. Metaphor is not merely a linguistic phenomenon, but more fundamentally, a conceptual and experimental process that structures our world."[21]

A simple but illuminating statement when combined with media theorist Wendy Hui Kyong Chun's thesis of Programmed visions - Software and Memory, claiming that "New media proliferates 'programmed visions,' which seek to shape and predict—even embody—a future based on past data."[22] but most importantly that "these programmed visions have also made computers, based on metaphor, metaphors for metaphor itself." These metaphors which are used to express our experience and knowledge of the world hold their origins in written and spoken language but mutate into altogether new definitions on the other end of coding languages. Hence an etymology of the digital is in order.

In unearthing the etymological roots and associations of the basic metaphors and words which birthed the structures of our media I hope to uncover a more relatable "source code" underlying digital technologies. In doing so I hope to shed some light on what Vilém Flusser repeatedly describes as the "black box"[23] of media and technology built on opaque programming languages, operating in

21 Carolyn Korsmeyer, Philosophies of Taste: Aesthetic and Nonaesthetic Senses. 39

22 Wendy Hui Kyong Chun. Programmed Visions: Software and Memory.

23 Vilém Flusser. Towards a Philosophy of Photography.

the background, located in an ever-present elsewhere. A radical act considering, "the word radical derives from the latin radix- or root. In its medieval incarnations, the term implied going to the origin—and therefore the essence—of something."[24] Hence we shall begin with the "radix" language of binary language which all digital media is built upon and "information" is oriented by.

A Certain Binary is Born
The question concerning technology has largely been how technology changes our orientation to the world and how we should consider our orientation to technology in return.[25]
As we provide servo functions for the technology we need to consider the outcomes and what is amputated to allow for these new technological prosthetics.[26] I will begin exactly there - at the beginning of digital language to understand what a more accurate orientation to digital language may look like. René Descartes in his search for certainty created the digital age well before the term was ever coined. In his search for certainty Descartes posits "ego cogito, ergo sum"[27], better known as "I think, therefore, I am"[28]. Descartes becomes from then on a "thinking thing". The agent of the mind-body split, placing an unaware awareness that he is "I" and "I" is himself due to the presence of his thinking. But this begs the question of which typeface Descartes "I" is in.

Unannounced to Descartes, binary language had just been invented. I being Descartes / the presence of Descartes and 0 being the presence of not Descartes. It is no small leap to assert that in some ways Descartes had positioned his mind and search

24 Vittoria Di Palma. "Radical Thought" E-flux Journal.

25 Martin Heidegger. The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays.

26 McLuhan Marshall. The Gadget Lover: Narcissus as Narcosis. 42 - 44

27 Encyclopedia Britannica. "Cogito, Ergo Sum."

28 Ibid.

for objective truth within media and language. Perhaps this is an explanation as to why it is now so easy to confuse an experience of our media for our own experiences. Language objectifies phenomenon and qualities of experience from subjective qualia of taste, smell, touch, and sight into objects of language. As Peter Schwenger describes, “The death of the thing, then, is the price we pay for the word.”[29] If so, what does this mean for digital experiences and knowledge literally crafted entirely from digital language (code)?

I	0
Portrait of Descartes	Portrait of *not* Descartes

Digital Digits

It can’t be proven whether Descartes was inadvertently the first digital thinker but with the certainty it brought to the world its structure rippled outward through time. Digital originally referred to our ten digits.[30] Our ten fingers served as the first computers but were in turn replaced by ever more complicated calculators. And just like we discarded our fingers as counting machines, the hands of timekeeping tools were also converted into digital displays made of numbers. While the hands on so many clocks have disappeared our digits have still remained both figuratively and literally in digital interfaces. However, now their function is far less sensual than their analogue interfaces. Buttons, dials, and sliders have almost completely disappeared

29 Peter Schwenger. Words and the Murder of the Thing. 99

30 Douglas Harper. Etymology Online “Digital”

from contemporary digital technologies leaving nothing to touch but the screen or image itself. Paradoxically “touch” is no doubt essential to the touchscreen but our digits no longer gather their own touch based sensory data in the digital interface. Instead, they provide inputs to the interface to serve our often more valued distal senses of seeing and hearing. In a sense the hands have been removed literally and metaphorically from our digital timepieces as well as other digital interfaces, leaving them as servants to the eyes and ears. Finally, while digital clocks no longer have faces we have now have Face Time.

Meaning in Touch

To touch in the digital world means a movement of agency in one direction rather than force matched with incoming sensory data. Like the saccharine jingle of AT&T, the ability to “reach out and touch someone”[31] through telecommunications doesn't necessarily mean that you can be touched in return.[32] A phenomenon all too real in the re-militarization of digital technologies such as drones - a frightening split between minds and bodies where victims are literally touched by the agency of drone pilots and in turn these pilots are untouchable and untouched by their targets (literally and sometimes figuratively). Just as the instructions which built early source code were not material enough to constitute a copyright, the daily phenomena of the drone pilot occupies an uncanny valley of experience perhaps insubstantial enough to even call them real fighter pilots. To put this in perspective, some drone pilots have never even seen one of the aircraft they pilot in person.[33] Either we aren’t getting what it is we are seeing through the digital interface or we aren’t seeing what we get.

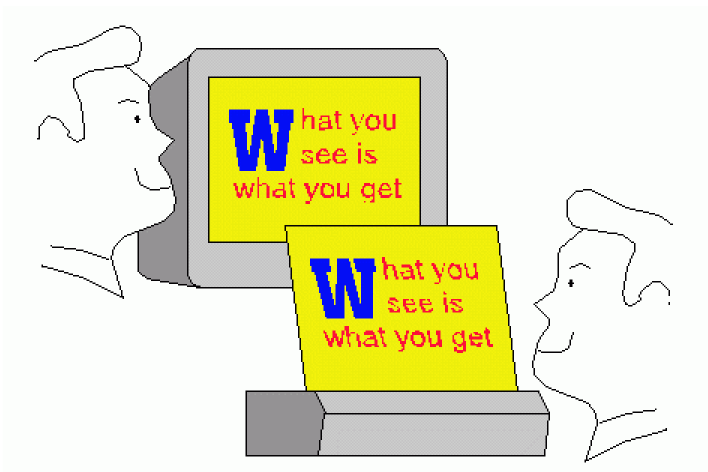
31 AT&T. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OapWdclVqEY

32 Kris Paulsen. Here/there: Telepresence, Touch, and Art at the Interface. 7

33 Ibid. 171

WYSIWYG

The digital screen and its interfaces not only reveal a change in the conceptualization of touch but also the more "objective" senses. Another computing term useful in illustrating this shift is "WYSIWYG". What you see is what you get, refers to interfaces which could reproduce their visual data faithfully in their materialized forms. However opaque this term may now seem in modern lexicons, it once meant a contract of transparency between machine and sight. An understanding that what is seen is what you are looking at. This sentence is purposefully confusing because WYSIWYG interfaces became the norm and assumed structure of most digital media. What you see is what you do in fact "get". But if you turn this term around, the layers of code, data mines, and vast networks which hug the globe are what you do not see and hence are not meant to get. The cliché of "seeing is believing" could perhaps be balanced in the digital experience by asking what would happen if you could see the apparatus that provides these sights.

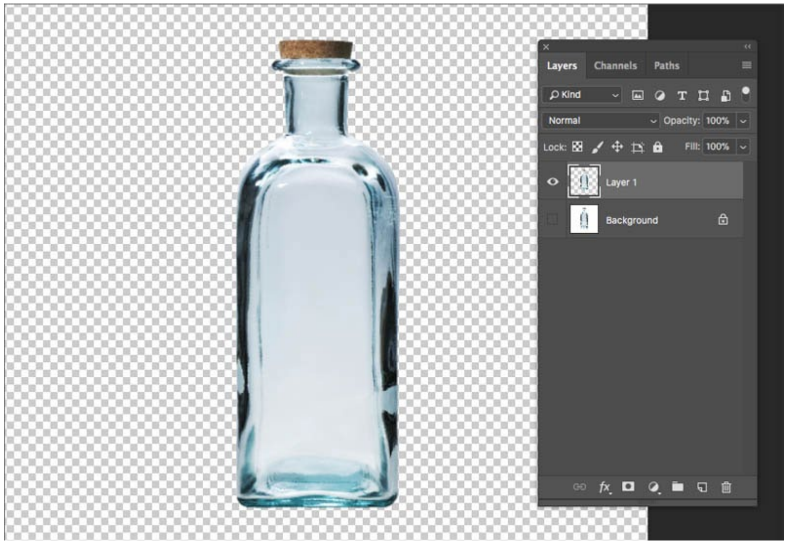


Note the subject also becomes reproducible in Clip Art's depiction of a WYSIWYG interface.

Transparency

Digital interfaces concerned with the know/show function of media are sometimes best understood in the ways they fail or attempt to communicate concepts. The word "transparency" quickly reveals its antithesis when applied to the digital image and its apparatus of production and distribution. The transparency physically and metaphorically lacking in digital images is systemic to the entirety of the apparatus. It's shortcoming being that images on a screen cannot actually be communicated as transparent, because the interface cannot and will not communicate what is behind it. Even the sensory information of objects made of glass and translucent materials are rendered wholly opaque. The light emanating from the screen or light reflecting off of the digital print is mistaken for the light of an environment of its own - a world full of objects and relationships to be entered and experienced rather than a surface controlling a fixed "objective" viewpoint for experience. Light usually augmented by weather and environment (subjective light) are controlled and fixed within the image plane of the screen, making it into a singular object/objective sight. Instead of the constantly changing and unfixed light reflecting off and through the bottle, a backdrop of checkered panels at half tonal saturation is draped between the image and apparatus, acting as a camouflage between digital concepts of transparency and previous definitions. If as Tim Ingold argues: "the weather enters into visual awareness not, in the first place, as a thing we see, or even as a panorama, but as an experience of light itself "[34] then we should question what it means that we can only see light emanating from the screen rather than into it. Is this how the screen exits the world of subjective light and seemingly enters our senses-scape as an objective form of sight? Transparency, it seems, can only exist visually and metaphorically if it is a programed virtue of the virtual.

34 Tim Ingold. The Eye of the Storm: Visual Perception and the Weather. 377



"Transparent" Adobe Photoshop background.

Virtues of the Virtual

The digital realm is sometimes referred to as virtual space or virtual reality, but what is contained in this label? We often picture virtual reality, as the antithesis to reality itself but its origins would speak to a different lineage of meaning. Virtual stems from the word virtue or "virtus", meaning "moral strength, high character, goodness; manliness; valor, bravery, courage (in war); excellence, worth..."[35] Given this origin story, virtual is meant to describe something containing or built upon ideals. The term virtual entails that it contains these ideals and is in essence as good as the real thing.[36] While users of the virtual know it to be not wholly the same, there is still the metaphorical understanding that it is just as good as experiencing the real visuality of the something. Perhaps the key phrase here is "in essence". Virtual, meaning the essence connotes that the essential properties are communicated in the virtual form of something. All other experience or knowledge of what is being

35 Douglas Harper. Etymology Online. "Virtual"

36 Ibid.

essentialized is hence extraneous. In this linguistic system both our underlying faith of the virtual is simultaneously revealed and deconstructed.[37] A 3D model or photo of something is at a base level understood to be the essence of the thing, but how can it be that there is something missing from it if it is the essential properties? To see an image of a rock is virtually the same as seeing the rock itself, but to touch an image of a rock is surely different than to feel the textural data of a rock.

Language is both the cause and explanation for this object being wholly split apart. "The unity of the object does not lie behind its qualities, but is reaffirmed by each one of them: each of its qualities is the whole."[38] But, as the object's described qualities are extrapolated from the experience as definable virtues, a lack in both is created. The image of the rock cannot possibly provide the same experience the object holds just as the object in some small respects ceases to be whole once its virtues are able to exist elsewhere simultaneously. This Derridian "Différance" brings to question whether the original experience is emptied by the copy/descriptive media and if the virtual experience becomes a more purely distilled and hence *more* "real" piece of the object.

An Archaeology of Artifacts

The term "artifact" has seen a significant shift because of visual media. It is currently possible to identify two very separate uses of the term. This shift points to an inadvertent focus on what we are looking at than what we may be looking for. Artifact in its archaeological and original connotations refers to the "artificial production" or "anything made or modified by human art."[39] It also manifests its meaning from the collision of the words art & factum, resulting in a term for, "thing made".[40] Viewing this term

37 Jacques Derrida. Of Grammatology

38 Maurice Merleau Ponty. Exploring the World of Perception: Sensory Objects.48

39 Douglas Harper. Etymology Online "Artifact"

40 Ibid.

in the world of archaeology an artifact is then an object created as cultural production rather than by natural means. This is reinforced in the ways we search for artifacts by digging through the dirt (more commonly referred to in archaeology as the matrix) in order to find the objects of cultural production. The dirt (matrix) is recorded in the process and then discarded after processing. We seek out archaeological artifacts because they contain information about the human past. They are an extension of our senses through objects recalling memories we never had. The viewing of the objects tells us how they were put together, conceptualized, and used. Because we are holding the object we tap into some shred of how it might have been held hundreds or thousands of years ago. But, how does this compare "artifact's" use in images and virtual representations? Digital artifacts are an object distinctly different and their relationship to experience describes as much about the image as it does our relationship to it. An image artifact is the visual or auditory presence of the media within the recording. Lens flare, pixelation, crushing in .JPG files, and interlacing, "come in the way of our perception of (in this case) the photographic image."[41] The digital artifact is the unwanted visual elements of the image. A strange and meaningful contrast to the artifacts of the past which we seek so fervently. Matrix also remains in relationship to digital artifacts but in this case, it refers to the code which creates the image. In making the switch to experiencing media rather than the objects they are based on we find ourselves digging through artifacts instead of dirt and searching for uncorrupted high fidelity matrice. Does the perspective of digital media proliferate a reversal of the nature / culture dichotomy, in which what we see in the image (objective content) is likened to natural material (matrice/dirt) and the artifact is then viewed as the unnatural qualities of the image which aren't the product of cultural production? Belief in this relationship would be a belief that the image is natural phenomena and not created or constructed by culture. We should continue to be wary of this as the image presents itself with increasing fidelity.

41 Yi Zhao. The Chicago School of Media Theory. "Artifact."

.Jpg of a greek vase depicting Helios (god of the sun and sight) subjected to compression artifacts.

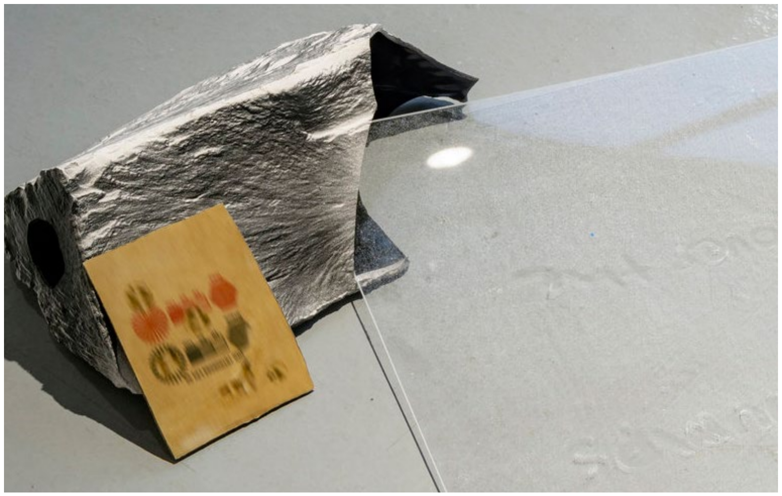
Trust "in-fidelity"

Fidelity is the most important term in creating an understanding of digital language. This is largely because it explains the pervasiveness of the digital image's hold on visuality and the increased turn towards an ocularcentric paradigm. Fidelity hails from its origin as "fidelis" meaning: "faithful, true, trusty, sincere,"[42] as well as fides meaning "faith".[43] This should come as no surprise since someone who is unfaithful to their partner is described as guilty of infidelity. How does fidelity then relate to images and recordings, which are so intrinsically attached to the idea that seeing is believing? As a photographer, I know the term fidelity to mean something very different than trust, truth, and faithfulness. Fidelity in the apparatus of photography means a quantity of sight and not a quality. Fidelity in the world of the camera means the number of pixels or "picture

42 Douglas Harper. Etymology Online "Fidelity"

43 Ibid

elements"[44] which encompass the whole image. More pixels means more sensory data for the eyes, an object with a richer and denser surface than the last. However, these two concepts of fidelity, one qualitative and one quantitative, still remain enmeshed in an inverse of each other's meaning. As the camera gains greater and greater fidelity our trust of its representations should diminish. That is, unless now: "all we do is see so that now we are blind."[45]



Technology / Technique

The thesis exhibition which made use of several of these linguistic translations, either as fuel for text pieces or inspiration for material choices, also finds a great deal of its structure in the modes of re-translation exhibited here. The exhibition looks to represent new media through reduced and simplified representations based on the past and present of media. However, the problem with the Derridean decree that there are no outside texts closes the door on any possibility of escape. The exhibition instead materialises a circular dependency on itself to further decode and in turn re-code its findings. Revealing, after all, is simply placing an image of what is underneath onto the surface you wish to unveil. Even Descartes in trying to be certain of his own consciousness was dependent on equating "I" with his mind in order to see it. The exhibition also participates in this inability to exit itself as a technique of knowing or "know how", in that the objects are still only representations and hence fail again to bring the viewer anything outside of a representation. Their explanation and ability to be understood is locked within their own system of meaning and hence they will only ever bring us something as a stand in which represent a larger more abstract thing. This leaves us trying to understand our technologies related to representing the world back to ourselves through the techniques or "know how" that necessitated them originally.

44 Francesco Casetti & Antonio Somaini. Resolution: Digital Materialities, Thresholds of Visibility.

45 Metahaven. Black Transparency: The Right to Know in the Age of Mass Surveillance. 58

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