

ABSTRACT

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I am interested in the concept of the narrative and how an idea can be taken through a series of events from one location to another location altogether. This focus on narrative was sparked through an attraction to the format of the comic book. A comic book requires two visual elements to convey its meaning: imagery and text. I am seeking to find an unnatural balance between the two elements and how the alteration of one and the absence of the other can affect the original story. This alteration is representative of how information of any kind is presented by one party and then received, in its original or altered form, by a secondary party.

PushPullPow

By

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Chapter 1: Not as planned

Simple repetition of materials was becoming stale. I had employed it for the last several years and its presence and more its domination of my work was no longer completely satisfying. Up until this moment my work had been a combination of minimal, formally based elements; basic shapes combined into basic constructs and then filtered through the process of the repetitive object. The problem that I was having was that the simplicity of the shapes and forms had become routine and ultimately tired. I was making work that looked good and was well balanced but lacked a consistent conceptual theme. It was too easy to cut paper, process it in whatever form and package it as finished. What I was searching for was a concept or product that contained the basic principles of repetition but also allowed for a stronger underlying theme to be present.

Chapter 2: The Turning Point

I began working on a large-scale drawing composed of half-inch lines. (See images #1 & #2) The motivation of the piece originated from tonal backgrounds I had seen in several comic books and I was interested in how the use of multiple perpendicular lines could construct an atmosphere and separate foreground from background. Once finished, the piece that came from this research still felt too close to what I was trying to get away from, but it had lead me to half of what I was looking for, the source product.

While working on the line drawing I focused on a specific aspect of the comic and had ignored the basic nature of what a comic is: a lot of little parts forming a larger whole. I started breaking down the comic book in two ways, first by looking at the basic format of repeated picture panels and word balloons, how these elements worked together and how they contributed to the flow of the story and secondly I began to look at the specific stories. What's the difference in tone between a spandexed superhero and a World War II story? How does color affect the mood of the comic? How is the dialogue treated in relation to the illustrations? This last question intrigued me the most. Because a comic uses pictures as well as text to convey a story there is no need for "he said, she said", instead you have word balloons that point out all the directional information for you. (See image #3)

I started experimenting with the word balloons and the imagery, seeing if I could disconnect one from the other in some subtle way. I knew that I didn't want to remove one over the other; it was important at that time to see some ghost of the original relationship. I went back to what I had previously done with the line drawing and how I

had used simple lines that were taken from atmospheric renderings. I began overlaying the illustrations with four levels of crosshatching lines while leaving the word balloons blank. Through this process the imagery slowly began to fade and the balloons being the brightest element on the page to pop forward. (See Image #4) This separation of the two elements made me begin to think about how confusion, misrepresentation and even being tongue-tied can disrupt a conversation. Essentially I was focusing on the loss of understanding. Now that the balloons did not have a character to attach themselves to clarity of the story was a slightly askew.

Chapter 3: Man or Superman?

Because I felt comfortable with the concept and the material I could began experimenting with specifics comics. These experiments were angled towards tone of story and the basic design of the comic format. The story was important to me in that I wanted it to be somewhat generic with generic characters. I felt that if the original story was based on the idea of confusion or miscommunication then that could only aid my end goal. Had I used a Superman comic book it would be fairly easy to distinguish what Superman was saying compared to a normal person. So with these ideas I knew that a few things would have to happen: superheroes were out and mysteries, because by definition they withhold key information, could provide the perfect story to work with. I didn't want to actually change the story, for example if a character had murdered another character I didn't want to reverse that action solely for my project, I felt that keeping the original story intact would isolate the confusion to my focused parts of the imagery and text.

Through several attempts at adjusting the order of the individual picture panels I realized that by placing two pages next to one another altered the order in which you read them. Instead of reading from top to bottom of one page you began to read from the top of the first page to the top of the second page and so on. The individual pages became one large page. (See Image #5) This simple reordering would leave the original story intact and when read in the new format would derive its confusion from our instinct to read from left to right and from top to bottom.

Chapter 4: Working With the Balloons

As I worked through the process the illustrations began to be pushed further and further into the background until they eventually disappeared altogether. The structure that was left was free floating word balloons that were in their original positions according the pages of the comic but without any ground or bordering to orient them to the story. (See Image #6) I wondered if losing the imagery altogether compromised the intent of the work. The conclusion was that the shape of the balloons and their relationship to each other could hold the position of imagery as well as the illustrations could.

Being trained as a painter I have an affinity to the wall as a support for work. As my work became more sculptural I didn't move into space but remained where I had been, flat. I feel that a three dimensional construct that is attached to a wall is less inviting than a pedestal or floor and requires more of an effort on the part of the viewer to experience the work. So the comics being flat material fell nicely into a wall installation.

I considered different approaches to applying the balloons to the wall. Painting or screen-printing were certainly options but I felt that keeping the balloons as paper was a comfortable connection to what they had come from. By photocopying the comics I could look back to the original in that a copy machine is a cheap and instantaneous reproduction, much like a comic is a cheap reproduction of a comic artist's work. Also I enjoyed the mid-tone quality the photocopy produced. It seemed to add to the low budget relationship between the piece and what I was working from. Many comics today are printed on glossy paper which stands up better to fading, but prior to this improvement of

paper quality all comics were printed on newsprint, a material that could decay within a few years or even months if not treated properly. As a child I didn't enjoy the glossy comics, they reflected light just enough and forced you to hold the comic at odd angles to read it. This reflection also seemed to affect the tonal quality of the illustrations; the light would bounce off the page and brighten the dark area instead of being absorbed. So the photocopy paper reacted well to lighting and through the process of copying had a tone that infused the paper with an unnatural color, something less than white, unclean.

Since paper was to be used this meant that glue or tape would be the easiest methods to begin with. I started tests with double sided tape on the back of each balloon and found that while it took some time to visually measure and cut the tape it did allow for repositioning should a mistake be made. This seemed like an acceptable compromise.

In order to apply the balloons to the wall and keep them in the page structure that I had created proved to be one of the more tedious and frustrating aspects of the work. For the finished piece I had decided to create a large-scale wall installation composed of sequentially repeating comic pages. To keep the story contained in small sections I created squares of each full comic story. The first row included pages one through four, the second five through eight and the last row was nine through twelve. For the dimensions that I wanted this came out to one hundred and forty story squares.

Chapter 5: The Highly Repetitive Adventures of Arthritic Man and Carpal Tunnel Boy

The majority of my previous work had had a girth to it simply by the nature of the repeated object, but for the new work that same girth needed to be surpassed. I wanted the piece to work both as object and as experience. On one hand it is a thing that has been placed on a wall, it has physicality and although it's flat paper it is three dimensional, rising just slightly from the wall. On the other hand when standing close to the work the boundaries move past the viewer's peripheral vision and become more about location and your presence in that location. I wanted the viewer to not only be aware of the piece as a thing but also to be aware of themselves amongst the piece.

Due to its size and construction nature my work has always required a laborious process phase. This process is integral in my work in that it allows me to visualize the final outcome, plan my method of attack and then work through the process; all the time moving towards the end product in stages rather than bouncing from one part to another. The construction process also works as kind of meditative period for me; I configure the workload set out to complete the task in a stable and relaxed manner. With the current piece I knew that I had to stick rigidly to the planning and production process or else I might reach the installation time and have stage one, three and five ready but two and four were yet to be completed. So I set myself to cutting the balloons. Because the balloons were such an irregular shape I couldn't rely on any quick, multiply cut such as from a guillotine or a hole punch, this was to be done the old fashioned way, a simple pair of sharp scissors.

Working through these physically minimal tasks became rather soothing. I could

accept visitors to my studio and hold a conversation while maintaining the exact same amount of work output as if I were alone. I began to play movies and television as background action and noise to pace myself. An hour usually meant about fourteen to sixteen pages cut. So by the time Magnum had escaped the Dobermans, made out with the lady and shot the bad guy I had done a fraction, albeit a small fraction, of that page set. I also would reward myself once a certain aspect of the work was finished. For example once I fished cutting a stack balloons I could then take a drink of water but not before I was finished. Winning these small battles for myself eased the knowledge that I had 13,000 more balloons to cut.

Chapter 6: Installation

As the installation week approached I was checking, rechecking and triple checking all of the figures to be sure I had what I needed and just as importantly time that I wasn't doing any unnecessary work. Through this checking I began to look at the practicality of the comic squares. After timing myself I found that I could tape and apply the balloons to the squares at a maximum of four to five a day, and this was generous. My estimated plan was to do no less than fourteen a day so it was needless to say that something needed to be done. After a few hours of pacing and cursing myself for not figuring this out sooner I decided to abandon the plan of multiple squares for the installation and use only one. Before I had planned to make one square for each whole comic, then I would take the word balloons and apply double-sided tape to the back and align them onto the back of the squares. Next all I needed to do was to press the square onto a preset pencil grid on the wall and pull the square away leaving the balloons in their original placement. Physically the plan worked but it took too much time away from cutting the balloons and ultimately was too time consuming even for itself. One square could easily take up to two hours.

The new plan was to cut out the shapes of the word balloons from one square and to use that as a stencil in placing the balloons on the wall. This would only require a short amount of time to prepare the square and leave the remainder to focus on the cutting and applying of an adhesive.

There was also a eureka moment with the adhesive. Double-sided tape worked well for adhering the balloons to the wall but was rather time consuming and like the use

of the multiple squares took too much of my attention away from cutting. I remembered a product I had used in my undergraduate studies called Studio Tac. Basically it's a sheet of wax paper covered with thousands of microdots of glue. All you have to do is lay your paper on the dots apply some pressure to transfer the dots and then peel the paper off. What you're left with is a piece of paper with one side covered entirely with glue dots. This was perfect; it allowed me to remove costly time in measuring and cutting.

The installation week was now upon me. I started by lightly drawing a grid for the horizontal and vertical borders of each comic square and then moved into placing the balloons on the wall. The process of stick each individual balloon to the wall was very time consuming but it afforded me several things; initially it allowed me more time for cutting the balloons and now it gave me greater accuracy in the final location of each balloon. I could immediately see if one balloon was crooked when compared to its neighbor.

The first few days of installing soon began to feel like it was all an impossibility, especially after seeing the other students come in, drop off their work and leave. So I was back to the treat method; for every square I attached I could drink or snack or walk to the other end of the gallery to stretch my legs but only if I finished the current square. (See image #7)

I have my studio equipped with several styles of chairs to accommodate different modes, and moods, of working. I quickly adopted this method for the installation. I was installing the squares in columns and there were five squares to each column. The bottom square I did while sitting on the floor, the second while sitting in a low chair, the third

was a combination of standing and using a small stepladder and the forth and fifth while using a larger ladder. The physical strain of working on the ladders was enough to justify this method. It also broke up the work into more manageable victories. I knew that once I had finished with the larger ladder that I could then sit for the next ten to twelve minutes.

When I could look from one side of the piece to the other and tell a distinct difference I knew that completion was not far. Eventually I was finished. (See images #8 & #9)The most distinct feeling I remember feeling was as I was walking to my car that evening I noticed that I wasn't carrying twelve boxes of envelopes filled with uncut word balloons. I felt naked and completely unprepared. I had been living with this thing everyday for four months and now that it was gone I felt less complete. A tall, stiff bag of nachos and my couch soon cured that ailment.

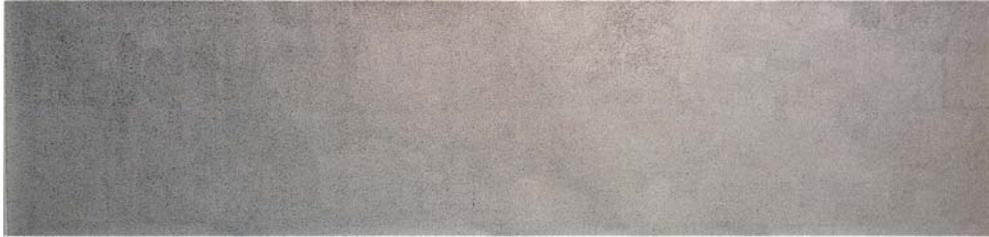
Chapter 7: I Would Like to Feel My Hand Again

Although I feel that this project was a successful one I am still interested in developing it further. For instance I've left the wall a flat, consistent white to provide an unobtrusive surface for the balloons. In the future I would like to experiment with background colors and their affect on the mood of the story, this goes back to the idea of the superhero versus the soldier comic. I am also thinking about the orientation of the applied balloon squares. I now wonder if the work is too symmetrical; for this piece I am content but would like to try a more freeform approach to emphasize areas and perhaps experiment with layering more to adjust the spacing between the balloons and in turn affect the tonal quality.

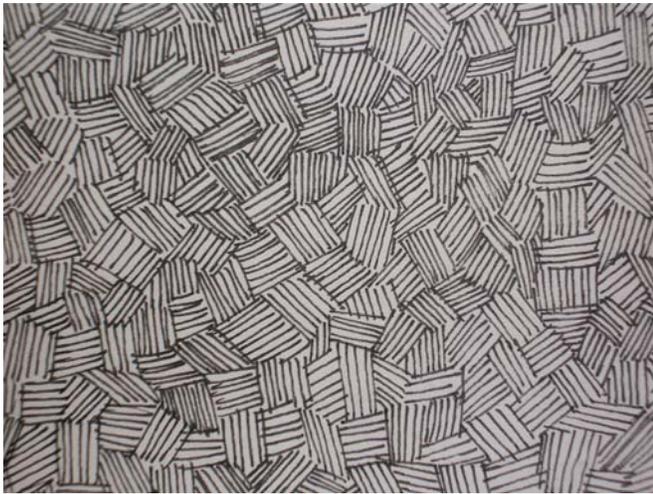
Whichever method I adjust or change I am certain that I need to recuperate from this experience. This project was as much a physical journey for me as it was a conceptual one for the development of my work; and as pleased as I am I would mainly just like to feel my hand again.

Images

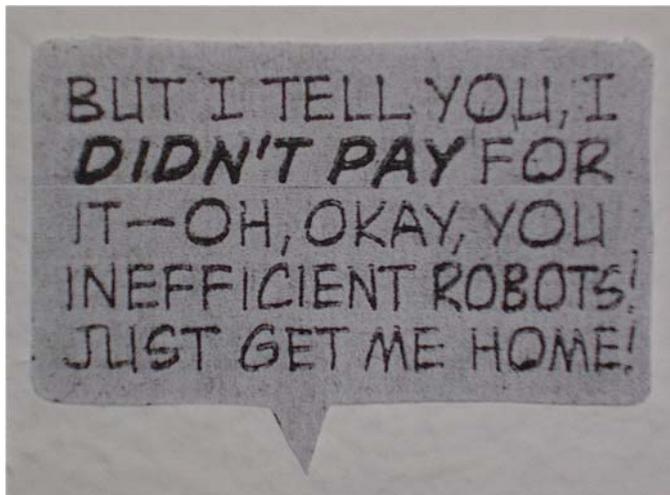
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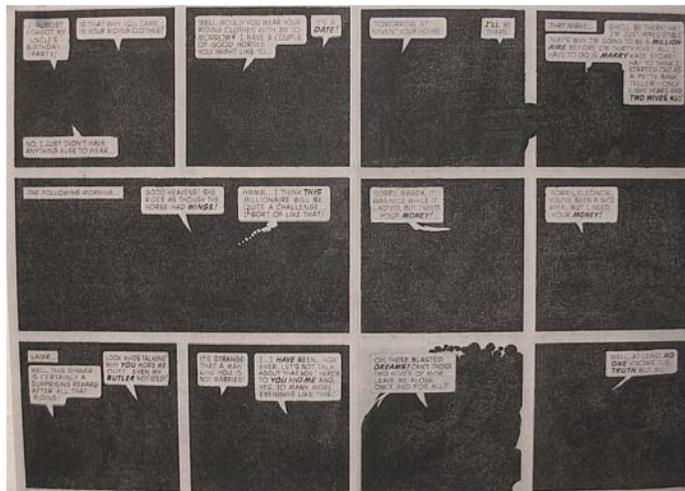


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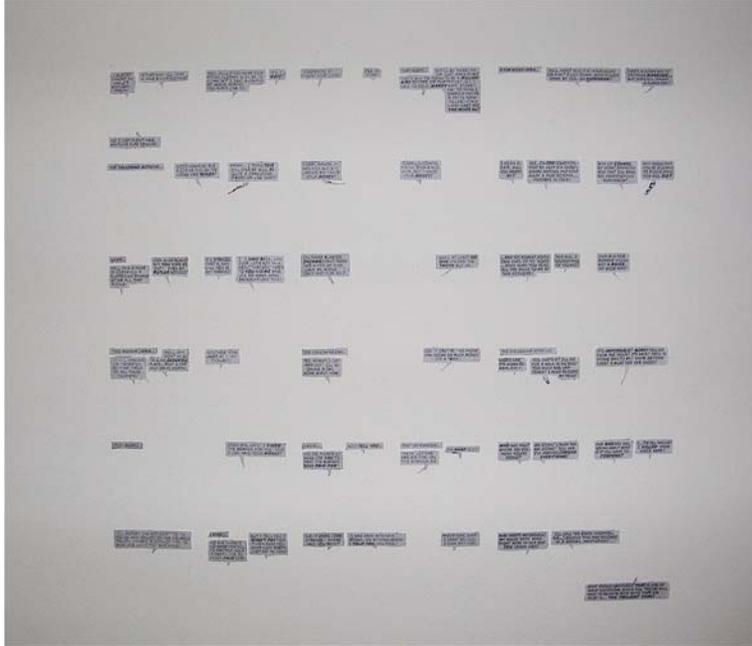




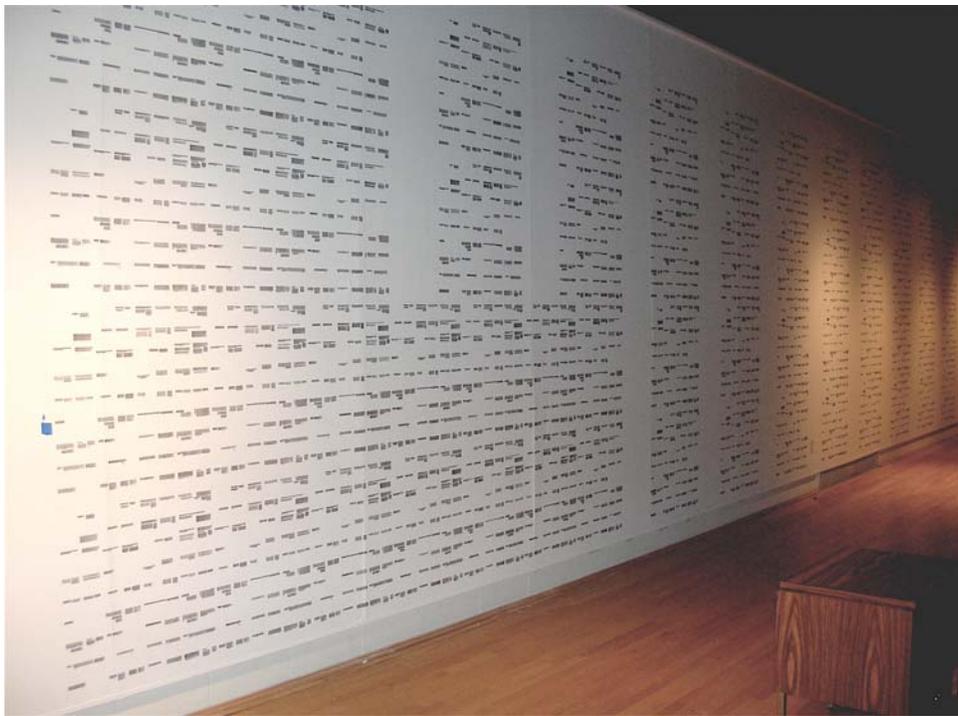
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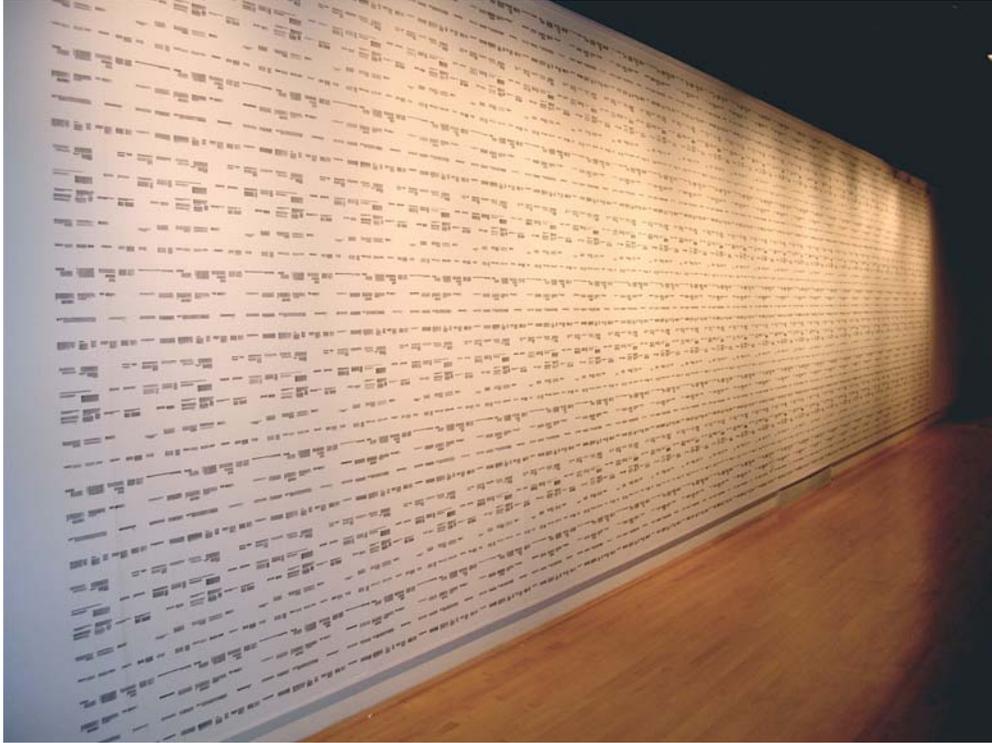


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