

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: Operator Advances Into Brush at Full Throttle  
Jeremy Thomas Kunkel, Master of Fine Arts, 2020

Thesis Directed By: Professor Foon Sham, Department of Art

I am compelled by the underlying conflicts that feed conditions into the contemporary landscape. Conflicts stemming absurdities such as abuse and neglect by fostering a false sense of disconnect into the sedentary individual. Structures of power, progression and control are hegemony framed as ideology that demands a mass and momentum; Like sedatives, dulling cognizant intuition, codified rhetoric is seductively buried into objects, digital feeds, and other means. This pulls the individual away from the reality of the world, creating a false landscape and redesigning individual habitus to align with a given narrative, or purpose, outside of the self. As these conflicts evolve in broad strokes through society into conditions, I am compelled to look beneath the surface, distilling the foundational corruption that I perceive. My work collides with and disrupts this momentary intersection, where objects and other processes, imbued with the language of society, are apprehended by individual intuition.

# **OPERATOR ADVANCES INTO BRUSH AT FULL THROTTLE**

By

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Thesis submitted to the faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts 2020

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## **Chapter 1. Approach to theory:**

Compelled by conditions in the human landscape I investigate conflicts that these conditions stem from and distill further to the individual, which I find to be a foundational element of this conflict. I look at the individual as the as an intuitive being existing in both a physical reality, and an internal reality.<sup>1</sup> Externally, the individual exists on a platform meant to engage with the natural world and its elements, and with society and its manufactured artifacts. It is by apprehending these external engagements, receiving them through various sensory inputs, that they become experiential knowledge traversing across an incomprehensible chasm inward to be assessed and categorized by the internal individual. A conceptual process reliant upon on intuitive faculties. Internally, the individual is an archive, a history of these external engagements.<sup>2</sup> The basis for history and future engagements. I would argue that this, in part, is what makes us the individuals we are. What I find problematic, however, in this intuitive means of apprehending is the frailty, the ambiguity, this traverse from experience to internal apprehension that lies at this threshold. This moment and place as an intersection is susceptible to the interventions of false deceptions, and narratives that redirect the individual away from what is real, It is also through a willful ignorance that the

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<sup>1</sup> Husserl, Edmund, *Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness*, Indiana University Press; 1st edition, January 1st, 1964

<sup>2</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, State University of New York Press, 1996, p. 4

individual chooses the sedative, to become an actor to the agency of its subterfuge.

Ultimately, this ambiguous space between experience and apprehending is inevitably mysterious, it makes us, often isolated, but beautifully and uniquely ourselves. It allows two sides, the external and the internal, to be deceptive, be deceived, to lie, left confused, or abused. It is incredible or damaging to no end. It is a conundrum, we may see the same thing and stand together in amazement of something awesome, or become the momentous atrocities echoing through mechanisms of rhetoric, pushing us to point fingers at each other while pulling out guns in disagreement.

## Chapter 2. Goldsworthy: Intuition and nature<sup>3</sup>

I am drawn to Andy Goldsworthy's work and find correlation in my own work to what he addresses. Through rearranging natural elements Andy Goldsworthy presents subtle, intuitively driven narratives about being, and the natural world. Through a simplified craft he pushes sculptural forms out of natural objects into existence, forms that represent some effect from what might seem outside of the natural process, thus giving a nod to human intuition.

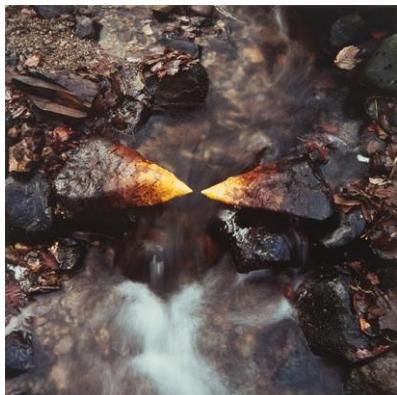


Figure 1 - Andy Goldsworthy, *Two Stones Laid Across a Stream Covered with Elm Leaves*, 2002, <http://www.artnet.com/artists/andy-goldsworthy/two-stones-laid-across-a-stream-covered-with-elm-tG65NI10SoG6lns3SN9syA2>

Yet at the same time these temporal works recede back into nature, tying humanity to the natural world. I find a relevance in illuminating this connection between intuition and the natural. However, unlike Goldsworthy, I utilize the artifacts of society to confront the individual's ambiguous relationship with the real world, and perceptions of it that are often led astray by false narratives. While Goldsworthy does tap into the societal architecture, his work accepts a balance with nature and society. Lying on sidewalks

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<sup>3</sup> Goldsworthy, Andy, *Rivers and tides*, Film. Thomas Riedelsheimer. San Francisco: Roxie Theater, 2002

collecting raindrops and crawling through trees found in urban landscapes, he uncovers the architecture of society, while illuminating the unexpected, and the natural the underlying, all encompassing, process humanity is within.



Figure 2 - Andy Goldsworthy in *Leaning into the Wind*, a Magnolia Pictures release. © Thomas Riedelsheimer, all rights reserved. Courtesy of Magnolia Pictures, 2018

### **Chapter 3: Bas Jan Ader**

Another artist whom I associate with through their attempts to reconcile the internal conflict is Bas Jan Ader. Through his work he accepts the idea that an individual is reconciled to nature and conflicted with the architecture of collective influence within humanity. Ader's, individual actions do not point at broader society, but focus more on the conflict between two individuals, and the conflict between the internal self and being. In one of his filmed performances, he intentionally suspends himself by his hands from a reasonably high tree branch, forcing himself into a futile position that leads to inevitable fatigue and failure as he eventually falls to the earth. While Goldworthy engages the natural and creates what illustrates intuitive alterations, Bas Jan Ader allowed himself to be the absurd form within nature to describe human relationship to it through iterations of matter of fact revelations.



Figure 3 - Bas Jan Ader, *Broken fall (organic)*, Amsterdamse Bos, Holland, 1971/1994. Silver gelatin print, 18 x 25 inches. Copyright the Estate of Bas Jan Ader / Mary Sue Ader Andersen, 2016 / The Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy of Meliksetian | Briggs, Los Angeles and Simon Lee Gallery, London.

While Ader's work is an interchange between himself and the world, the purpose, I find, is to present a true action that can be comprehended as such, and in doing so illustrate the ambiguous nature of expressing experience and meaning between each other. Distilled I find these to be illustrative investigations into this conflict between what is the internal intuitive and the external world of both the natural and humanity. Like both Goldsworthy and Ader I look at the complexities of understanding experience, the complications of society's interventions, and the ability to convey between one another. However unlike both I purposefully initiate my work with material that is immediately connected to the momentum of the condition, and work backwards to the underlying conflict. If an object or artifact is an element within my work, the distillation of its form is meant to pull the viewer towards what the condition has moved them away from. To simplify relationships by utilizing a form that projects both societally imposed notions intertwined with the reality of a form without.

## **Chapter 4. Background: A Path to Process**

When I was young I spent hours in my father's shop digging through numerous unnamed boxes and crates filled with discards and leftovers; used and old. A sea of metal gadgets, fabrics, electrical and plumbing parts, wood scraps and engine remnants. Everything was quite disorganized, yet this disarray was an intertwining river of mystery that presented possibility. This possibility flowed into a compelling activator of a growing curiosity as I moved through years of different places, experiences, and interactions with people and artistic disciplines. In the darkroom I learned to push emulsion beyond reticulation and created graphed light filter systems to push tonal range, shadows, and highlights. I've pushed the breaking thresholds of various woods and filmed someone running up an escalator, purposefully repeating the scene over sixteen times to acquire a sense of fatigue that the piece needed. I push limitations to better understand the threshold of materials. Some results purposeless? I would argue each lead to a next thought or opened another direction. Over the years I have formally studied a number of artistic disciplines; printmaking, casting, painting, and papermaking and worked in numerous trades. I've crawled through attics running wires as an electrician, and worked in a machine shop deburring helicopter parts, flipped burgers and sold roses on the street. I was a mechanic, welder, and a lifeguard in the army. Later, a bartender, carpenter, bouncer, barista, plumber, set designer, cabinet maker, exotic dancer, and a door to door vacuum salesman. From my father's shop to the numerous disciplines and exposure to life, these are all parts of my evolution as an artist; an artist who has allowed this evolution to become a broad based practice working in a hybridized fluid process of craft and concept. As a collector of objects and artifacts I look at the imbued rhetoric layered upon this material and how it is entangled with society and the

individual. I find objects becoming vehicles of information, forms of subterfuge codifying, and indoctrinating the individual with contemporary agendas. Yet, unlike the codified object imbued, the individual willfully chooses to, or not to, submit to them. I engage these entanglements of rhetoric, artifacts, society, and the individual they intertwine between each other and I allow my own intuition to apprehend this information, and akin to a conductor, orchestrate the fragmented language into organized visual forms. Because of this fluid process I am not tied by any material or any method of craft, I remain flexible entering into projects by allowing my conflict and struggle of intuition to be the intersection, the orchestrator between the constant flux of material and objects. Allowing the authoring of a visual language to connect both realities. An example of this would be to say that at times there are materials or demands of a project that require fragments of one discipline combined with another discipline to create a project specific method. Other times I might find analogous relationships between new material explorations and preexisting knowledge. All coalescing into a continuously evolving interchange of intuition and making. To consider these processes in the act of making would be damaging to the process. In fact, contemplating these interwoven complexities it is often a task best left away from the work itself. Left in the subconscious background I the process as simple as natural forms weaving and colliding through a flowing river. A simplified description of a complex process I have often used is driving an automobile. When learning to drive an automobile, focus is on all the necessary elements that driving down the road in a mitigated safe manner require, addressing what is in front, on either side, and behind.



Figure 4 - *Aetna Drive Trainer*, <https://www.motorcities.org/story-of-the-week/2017/Remembering- the-early-days-of-driver-s-education>

Navigating requires attention to obstacles and speculating possible outcomes to be prepared for possible problematic outcomes. A daunting task when one really considers the human facilities required to move down the road without flying off a cliff. But years later we hop into the seat, with a cup of coffee, select some satisfying music, and next thing we arrive. With all the attention and awareness of driving worn into a subdued recess of our mind, no thoughts about signals, lights, or the thousand other drivers flying down the freeway.

## **Chapter 5. Craft**

Craft is a broad term that encompasses many actions and mediums of making. It is the capacity to perform skilled actions to create a form, and to intuitively translate concepts through skilled actions. This capacity of craft is the culmination of skill, knowledge, and integrity. Skill, both mental and physical, is formed over time through repetition of physical action and accumulated memories of failures, which progresses towards knowledge and refinement of experience. Together knowledge and skilled action are orchestrated by the faculties of intuition dictating conceptualized aesthetics into realization. Integrity in craft is the responsibility to a dedicated, monogamous, relationship with a course of actions that maintain optimal engagement of skill, knowledge, and a continuous progression towards refinement. The outcome is a product of intuitively driven craft implemented with skill, conviction and integrity. Consider the process of using a hammer. To accurately swing a hammer and hit a nail on the head with conviction requires repetitive experience, and conviction to hold a nail while swinging towards it with a hammer. I say this because hammering a nail is something that is easily described, but not easily performed with solidified confidence. Until one has hit their finger several times and hammered something hundreds if not thousands. There is an accumulated memory to swinging a hammer, and a memory from hitting your finger as well. While the implementation of the craft process is often associated with disciplines related to forms of utility, the actions I take are not what one would associate with what purposeful actions a craftsperson, that builds cabinets or custom motorcycles. A cabinet maker or custom motorbike maker's goal is to complete pieces that are meant to be an expected form, cabinets that work as cabinets do, or custom motorcycles that go,

stop, and turn as expected. A craftsman's process of building a piece of furniture or designed form works at a level of precision and implements numerous methods and tools within their craft. When working with wood, special joining techniques, saw blades, and carving tools are used because they are in line with and the most effective means of woodcraft. Consider the laminating process of two pieces of wood, the act of gluing them together. The glue is applied to two pieces of wood and a moment of time allows the glue to soak into the fibers, this allows the glue to draw into the wood further deepening the network of fibers that participate in the bond. Following this there is time and pressure. The two pieces are mated together, and some form of clamping is applied to ensure a measured amount of pressure is kept during the drying time. Then there is sanding and other finish work to likely eliminate remaining inconsistencies. Larger faults and aberrations are mistakes in craft for the craftsman and would often demand a replacement or at least some form of repair. However, unlike the craftsman, my pursuit of craft is not always aimed at refinement or perfecting form. Fault, failure and consequence I allow to intentionally exist. Erratic actions and intentionally less controlled tool use are sometimes a process that I purposefully engage with to invite aberrations into the work. It is complicated to disregard knowledge of craft and an ingrained sense of muscle memory, not to mention the wary actions that tend to hit a finger here and there. The result is an accumulation of fragmented scars, dents and other varying aberrations of consequence. As I have described earlier, my practice is a fluidly informed process that demands an openness to the direction of the work and the outcome less reliant upon a present goal. Unlike the craftsman who controls the outcome of a predetermined goal, I work in a purposefully undirected process, setting myself parallel

to the other influencing factors of the process, navigating each project as it evolves. Imagine the purpose of a conductor in the process of conducting an orchestra that is performing a piece of music. The music may not belong to the conductor, but it is the conductor who is the facilitator of how the work is seamed together. It is the craft of the conductor to guide the pieces of the language into a refined whole in time. Thus, in my craft, I act as this conductor, as an orchestrator of aesthetic and informational compositions composed of material and actions. I maintain openness to the affecting influencers and in turn orchestrate the conclusions of their effects. What leads to this resolve is a fluid interchange of informed outcomes and actions. It is a cycle where intuition informs action related to making, then apprehends the outcome of these actions, and in turn informs the next course of action. It is not a complex action but it is one that bridges internalized faculties of apprehension with the external faculties of actions in making. This process of craft in action is one of the integral parts of my overall practice. What is intentional are these actions that purposefully mimic the process of intuitive faculties that actively compel my actions as a person in society, in the physical world.

## **Chapter 6: Organ Discarded**

Looking through craigslist, I came across an advertisement of a church organ, large square wood tubes, round metal pipes, keyboards, blowers, pedals, and other associated parts. As a collector of artifacts, these were dangling threads of possibility, and in the process of picking it up I discovered that it was two organs. Both were worn and weathered sitting in a basement scattered throughout a vacant home, and both from a different church and different ideologies. Walking around the home I took in the scene that surrounded me, organ pieces randomly placed in different rooms and mixed amongst a myriad of other things. Some things appeared to be organized in a personal way, like abstract memories. Different parts of the organs were scattered throughout, and it gave the impression of an ideological agenda having been discarded. When brought to my studio, the parts were haphazardly arranged into collections together. Elements were grouped primarily by size and material, with other components organized relative to their shapes and similarities. Lead pipes were dense, stout and heavy with malleable cylindrical walls. Sound reverberators, flat round discs with motors on top were like motorized hats, and the steel pipes were reminiscent of giant flues coming out of industrial chimneys. The square wood tubes were, to me, the most interesting, with the largest twelve inches square by ninety-six inches long, and the smallest, an inch square by eight inches long. They consisted of various components, small cleats, removable air intakes, and adjustable tuning plungers, and the surfaces were inundated with scrapes and deep scores across the weathered finishes.<sup>4</sup> Random notes were written on some with references to music, repairs, and about which church the organs belonged to. Originally

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<sup>4</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Organ: Musical Instrument*,  
<https://www.britannica.com/art/organ-musical-instrument>

the entire cast of pipes would have been organized into ranks by timbre and pitch, with a rank being a set of pipes that had the same timbre, but different pitches.



Figure 5 - Jeremy Thomas Kunkel, *Organ pipes*, 2020

It is easy to see how the pipes of the organ were often associated with individual voices of a congregation, a community or entire social entity. With a range of individual sounds being activated by a single organist, to direct and organize a collection of sounds into one singular purposeful arrangement, like a pulpit for politics, orchestrating the masses into a movement. It was this information that began to make connections between the wood pipes and frameworks of society, the conditions of codification. Contrary to the reference to society these wooden pipes were just wood, a natural material. An element that is part of the natural world, a world that is composed of many elements, an uncategorized world. Uncategorized until it is collected, organized by society, then purposefully manufactured, crafted, into a form, and labeled with conditional rhetoric and sent off to become a part of an embedded language. Having placed the wooden pipes into an area together the differences between them and the collection together began to resonate ideas of society, how associations through form and language are drawn

together. Focused upon the wooden pipes I began considering the collection and its myriad of differences, defects, written information, and stamping embedded into sides. Similarities were also noticeable, with purposefully crafted square tubular forms, the wooden plungers, flutes and cleats.



Figure 6 - Jeremy Thomas Kunkel, *Plunger*, 2020  
Figure 7 - Jeremy Thomas Kunkel, *Organ Tube End*, 2020



Conceptually the sounds that these objects produced also resonated a wide range of characteristics, while at the same time a continuity between them. Both individual and part of a larger form. A larger form that might reference humanity, society, or more inclusive, the natural world. In this there is a conversation about what is stamped into the pipe form, or the rhetoric slipped into an individual's habitus of being,<sup>5</sup> versus the ability to see, from the self, to apprehend the reality presented, the relationships and balance within the world without the intersection of codified notions. Through a process of

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<sup>5</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, London, Routledge, 1984, p.170

distilling I began to remove identifiable markings, histories of aberrations, dents and aging, discarding parts from each pipe, such as the cleats.



Figure 8 -Jeremy Thomas Kunkel, *Cleat*, 2020

Continuing this process of reduction, in an erratic and loose process, I sanded away most of the discernable information, leaving fragments of writing, stamped musical notes, and other subtle references.



Figure 9 - Jeremy Thomas Kunkel, *Sanding*, 2020

Allowing the simplified form to push to the forefront, leaning more toward ambiguity for the viewer when first encountering the work. Similar to hiking through the woods and

finding subtle differences in the landscape that suggest someone had been there before, with leaves covering the floor of the forest, yet visible indentions of a path, or a river that has a place suitable to cross and in nearing it finding trees laid out in a bridge like form. I again reflect upon Andy Goldsworthy, and subtle notions that lead natural forms into a nearly impossible collection that indicates our intuitive existence. In distillation of these manufactured materials I worked in reverse, pushing away the codifications and identifiers leaning towards this ambiguous place, while leaving subtleties, indentions creating threads a viewer could grasp after a moment of being disconnected from the expectations found in normalized conditions. As the pieces became distilled, the concept of being and being in a place began to resonate as an individual is to themselves, as a natural form, of natural elements. However, while distilled, they remained intuitively crafted, square tubular, artifacts. A purposeful intuitive reach towards the natural in one direction, and to the manufactured notions associated with society. I thought about the relationship between the individual pipes, how they related to one another, how they might relate to one another within an arrangement of all of them together, as a whole entity, a society. I began a process that not only created differences between the individual pipes, but intentionally allowed stages that would inform an outcome I could not foresee, an orchestrated chaotic arrangement. Focused upon the individual pipes, each was cut at various measured points in different angles. For example, for one cut through a pipe at forty-five degrees, the latter half would be rotated one half of a rotation then glued back onto the first half to create a ninety-degree angle in the pipe. Another cut might have been twenty degrees, that when rotated and glued back together would result in a forty-degree angle. In each pipe this was done most often about three to four times,

with others receiving more cuts, thus more angles. Lastly, the forms were sanded to create a cohesiveness across the collection of pipes, then sealed causing the wood to normalize and suggest a semblance of artifact and origin. With this action, I purposefully maintain a thread between the natural and the manufactured worlds.



Figure 10 - Jeremy Thomas Kunkel, *Organized Chaos*, 2020

It is important to note the individual form precedes the larger more complex overall form, and while the larger is dependent upon the individual, I cannot draw a conclusion that the individual is inherently dependent upon the larger form. What conclusion could be reached that would surmise the dependency of an individual to society other than something contrived? I would say none. The individual is of the natural world and the manufactured structure is a product of the individual's intuition within the natural world. Without preconceived notions about the outcome, the individual forms are crafted aesthetically and compositionally unto themselves, presenting as singular objects in their own rights, with their own identities. Imagine that had I begun building the overall form

while creating the individual forms, what influence would the growing form present to my intuition? And in turn affect my decisions in the reconstruction of each pipe's form? Would I alter individual forms to be more cohesive with the evolving larger form? Would I be influenced even subconsciously, even though I was making a conscious effort not to? Interjected into society the individual is influenced knowingly and unknowingly by information through forms and actions, I am no different, and find it necessary to restrict myself, my own intuitive faculties. The final form is dependent on working through a long series of engagements between individual forms, such as individuals interacting, formulating relationships through conversation and argument. From the beginning through to the end of the final form there is no anticipated or known outcome before it is realized in the moment. In this fluid process, the growing composition takes on a life of its own, where relationships between forms, angles, negative spaces and intersecting lines of the individual pieces interact with each other to form a greater whole.

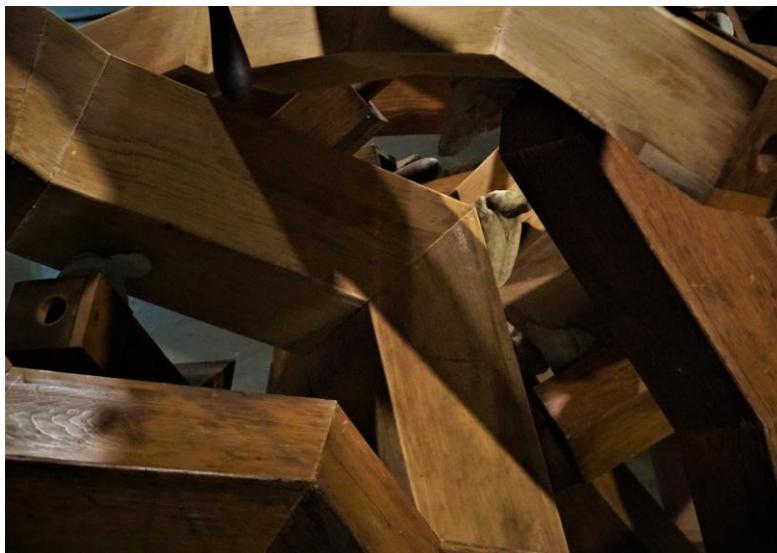


Figure 11 - Jeremy Thomas Kunkel, *Intersections*, 2020

## **Chapter 7: Conclusion; The Brushcutter**

Looking at this work through a conceptual lens, I think about an architectural form created from hundreds of thousands of mechanisms, all of which are designed with the larger form as their purpose, and oriented towards the goals of this larger form. Unlike an architectural form, however, where mechanisms and manufactured devices are conceived to perform specific tasks, society is formed of individuals not innately designed to serve. In order to participate within it, individuals, reliant upon their cognizant abilities to apprehend and translate perceptual information, slowly navigates through experience and information. It is this fragile ambiguous intersection that is enticed by data transmissions, television's rabbit hole, cell phones and other seductive mechanisms that redirect the individual habitus, way of being, towards a prescription, a reliance upon information, and away from the experiencing the apprehension of moments. In this work, the individual is engaged within a landscape of chaotic yet fluidly organized forms. A representation of the societal landscape. The individual maintains its own identity, but amidst the chaos lines and intersections create visual entanglements that make isolating one form out from the other. Engaged in a sustained structure this larger form is dependent upon each supporting connection that is provided by the individual forms and utilizes each one's connection to the other in order to secure the stability of the whole. Contemporary society propels the individual into actions through information, and this momentum drives other individuals into similar actions. What actions are of our own volition, of our own thought process, without engaging in a web search or news fodder? Through the methods of craft both the concept of the internal individual is brought forth in the singular forms of the sculpture, through the

distillation, the restructuring, random angles and differences between them. Conversely, other intentional actions, aberrations and fragments of information lend themselves to the codified history, and falsified landscapes. Driven by this, individuals line up to defend what is supplanted as real, spouting rhetoric and rushing into actions. Running into forests and cutting down trees, pushing more and more towers upward, in order to gain more access to information, more information to be maintained. Willfully ignorant, we become the ones writing code to fill the heads of the generations to come. Near the end of this project I came into possession of a manual for a Brushking, illustrating a mechanism designed to aggressively advance into a naturally overgrown landscape.

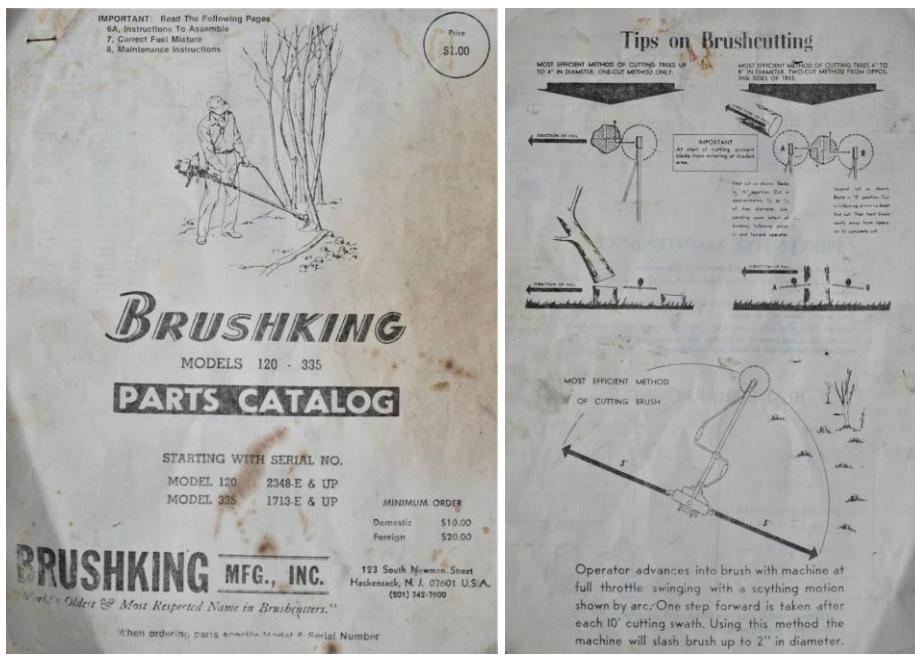


Figure 12 - Brushking MFG., INC., *Brushking manual*, Hackensack, New Jersey

Broadly chopping, cutting and leveling whatever set in the path of the operator. On the last page of the manual there is an instructional statement that reads, “Operator advances into brush with machine at full throttle swinging with a scything motion shown by arc -.”

I find this directive, aimed at the individual, a parallel between what this work addresses, a broad and blind engagement into what lies in front of the individual. An engagement without apprehending what it is we are walking into. The work is in some ways about the brushcutter with both the machine, and the means to apprehend. Pulling from this I have titled the Work “Operator Advances into Brush with Machine at Full Throttle”. Distilled and abstracted, this form is obscure, and demands visual attention. It requires, at the very least, a notion of individual contemplation of what is real and in the present moment. Purposeful, the work is meant to be viewed uninformed creating a momentary fragmentation of the ambiguous and push back against the seductively organized chaos.

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