

ABSTRACT

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Lauren Shea Little Hofer, Master of Fine Art, 2014

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Prevailing research in neurobiology suggests that the brainstem is the housing for the self. Because the brainstem is the connector of the body and the mind, this implies that every embodied action plays an inseparable role in self-formation. The images in this exhibition are linkages of past and future autobiography. They are indexed recordings of a body generating maps and crossing boundaries. These boundaries are of the self that was, and is, and will be.

THE INDEXICAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY.

By

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Chapter 1: Biological Narrative

“... narrative is biological before it becomes linguistic and literary.”

—Paul John Eakin (Living Life, 75)

In and As Bodies

Algebraic concepts were initially difficult for me to learn. Witnessing my frustration, my mother provided me with a textbook that instructed me to act out the equations. I drew a chalk continuum of negative and positive numbers on the sidewalk outside of our house. For each math problem, the book's instructions directed me to walk the paces of the sidewalk slabs that corresponded to the numbers on the continuum. I understood algebra when I used my physical body to solve equations.

Neurobiologist Antonio Damasio is the founder and director of the University of Southern California's Brain and Creativity Institute. His research on the biological origins of consciousness has provided an argument for the biological relationship between human emotions and human rationality. In his 2011 TED Talk, “The Quest to Understand Consciousness,” Damasio states, “You cannot have a conscious mind without the interaction between the cerebral cortex and the brainstem; you cannot have a conscious mind without the interaction between the brainstem and the body.” The work in this thesis exhibition is a poetic exploration of how this reciprocal relationship of material embodied practices and the sense of self forms autobiography.

Informed by Damasio's research, Indiana University Emeritus professor of English, Paul John Eakin, writes extensively about neurobiological approaches to self-representation in autobiography. Both he and Damasio affirm, “...self and

narrative are deeply rooted in our lives in and as bodies.” (Eakin, Narrative) In his book, *Living Life Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative*, Eakin writes, “... identity and identity’s story are derived from the body in the first place; we are first and last embodied selves.” (Eakin, *Living Life*, 59)

Humankind is constantly in the mode of self-invention through daily non-conscious and sub-conscious living. We comb our hair, we take showers, and we eat meals. All of these bodily actions form our selves. We ingest ideas, we grind thoughts, and we iron out problems. These actions of the mind do the same work. We also use our bodies to consciously invent ourselves. Exercise, physical labor, and making are obvious modes of self-improvement and invention. How our embodied selves interact in and with the world has a profound effect on our sense of self. “...the body’s story not only serves as the substrate of the identity narratives we tell and write, but provides as well important insight into their function and value as maps of our lives in time.” (Eakin, 153)

The Brainstem

The brainstem is the system that attaches the body to the cerebral cortex, bridging the body’s nervous system to the main part of the brain. All physical sensations pass through this neural system, mapping new and reinforcing existing brain processes. The brainstem also serves as the body’s regulatory system “...from metabolism, basic reflexes, and the immune system at the lowest level, to pain and pleasure behaviors, drives and motivations, and finally to emotions and feelings –the feelings that tell us that all these activities are taking place.” (Damasio, 31-37) This hypothesis approximates the brainstem as a neurobiological conductor for the sense of self, implying that every embodied

action plays a role in the formation of the self and self-narratives. Neurologist Oliver Sacks puts it this way: “It might be said that each of us constructs and lives a "narrative," and that this narrative is us, our identities.” (qtd. in Eakin, 1)



Fig. 1: Knot. Documentation from Misericordia

Chapter 2: Embodied Knowing

We know objects (and ourselves) through the use of our bodies. In 2012 a team of researchers from National Institutes of Health performed a study to find out what it means to “know” an object. They were attempting to distinguish object knowledge through perceptual, linguistic, and motor modalities. They studied three sets of participants some learning to name knots, some learning to tie knots and some learning both. The participants who learned how to name and tie knots knew the objects better than their counterparts. Their study concluded, “...linguistic and especially perceptual-motor experience with novel objects can markedly change how these objects are represented in the brain... The findings

thus lend support to an embodied notion of object perception by demonstrating that experience with an object influences that object's perceptually-driven representation in the brain." (Cross, Cohen, De Hamilton, Ramsey, Wolford, Grafton).

The use of linguistics is inseparable from embodiment; the speech-act¹ is another mode for the use of the body. A speech-act is an utterance that accomplishes a performative action like a promise, a caution, or a declaration (e.g. "I forgive you" or "I pronounce you husband and wife"). Analogously, embodied movements accomplish autobiography.

Gestures like a handshake or a kiss cannot be understood linguistically. They can only be known through the embodied act. We know tying our shoes only by taking up its laces and tying bow. We know riding a bicycle only because of the practice of sitting on its seat and peddling. Knowing is defined by its object. To know something is to be conformed to it and by it, to embody it, to perform it, to take it on as your own.

Metaxological

Embodied action is translated through the brainstem, the intermediary for the spinal column and the cerebral cortex, into tangible neurological pathways. Plato used the Greek word "metaxu," which translates as the preposition "between," to refer to the dynamic exchange of abstract ideas and the material world. Modern and contemporary philosophers have developed this word into a theory of intermediaries. Metaxu is simultaneously a barrier and a connection through

¹ I am specifically referring to an illocutionary speech-act. See Austin, J. L. *How to Do Things with Words*. Cambridge: Harvard UP; 1962. Print.

which interactions between two parties happen. Simone Weil, modern philosopher and Christian mystic, describes metaxu as follows: "The world is the closed door. It is a barrier. And at the same time it is the way through. Two prisoners whose cells adjoin communicate with each other by knocking on the wall. The wall is the thing which separates them but it is also their means of communication. It is the same with us and God. Every separation is a link." (Weil, 200) Much like the prison wall, the brainstem operates as a metaxu for the body and the self.

Contemporary philosopher William Desmond refers to metaxu as all of human life being the between of nothing and infinity. Desmond's view opens up the concept of metaxu as something immaterial like the space between dialogues. "If I question you, you must be silent to hear me, and I must again be silent to listen to your answer. The interchange of address and reply are framed by silence, silence that also qualifies the space of communication between us." (Desmond, 114) Many of the works in this thesis exhibition are recordings of metaphysical instances of metaxu.

Liturgical

The material embodied practices are references to liturgy. Liturgy is not only the words congregants say during religious services, it is also the way in which congregants use their bodies (i.e. sitting, standing, kneeling.). James K. A. Smith, Professor of Philosophy at Calvin College defines a liturgy as, "...rituals that are formative for identity, that inculcate particular visions of the good life and do so in a way that means to trump other ritual formations." (Smith, 86) Liturgies form our narrative selves.

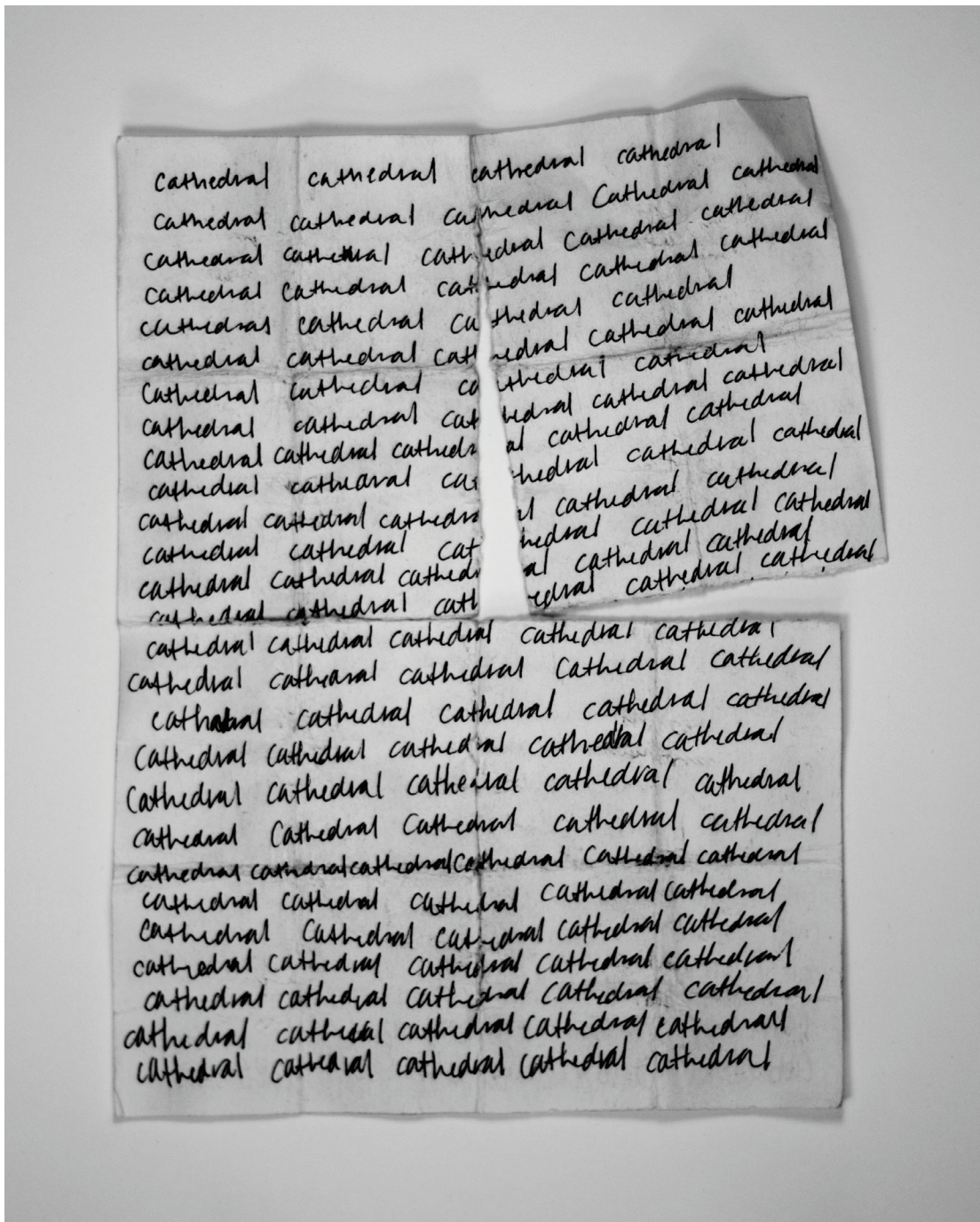


Fig. 2: Folded paper. Documentation from Cathedral

Chapter 3: Making

I am exploring these threads of research through performance and a recording process. My approach is to use time, sequence, and superimposition to make cinematic images that are an index of autobiography. They are like speech-acts, converting actions into wordless narratives of self-formation. With the use of objects and gestures, I record performed repetitive actions as bodily metaphors for the conditions of being a person. This is a way to consider how embodied activity influences neurological habits. For instance, the repetitive tying of knots can intimate the effort to hold on to a memory.

The practice of making is a liturgy with rhythm and rest, stasis and motion. These are images composed through simultaneous appearances of past and present events. Time in these works is bi-directional, rendering autobiographical acts as a way to reorient past narratives and frame future ones. Time is evident as a visual confusion of superimposition and collapse giving each image an apparitional quality.

With each bodily articulation an intractable mark is made etching a map in the body through which autobiography is collected, understood, and shared. Each image is an index of action and together they are volumes of pre-linguistic and pre-literary autobiography –a narrative reification of self in formation.

In the following chapters are informal thoughts about the elements that make up the recordings and a small collection of poems. The poems are an extension of the visual body of work. Both types of writing are an invitation to thread together ways of engaging with the visual work.



Fig. 2: Folded paper. Documentation from Cathedral

Chapter 4: Misericordia

A knot is a marker. Tying one is an act to remember the passing of time, to remember to do another activity, or to trigger a memory.



Fig. 4: *Lauren Shea Little*, *Misericordia*, 2014.

Chapter 5: Compline

Fabric is closest to us. It is our second covering, the intermediary between our bodies and the world. To roll something in fabric is an act of preservation. We roll costly objects in fabric to keep them safe from decay.

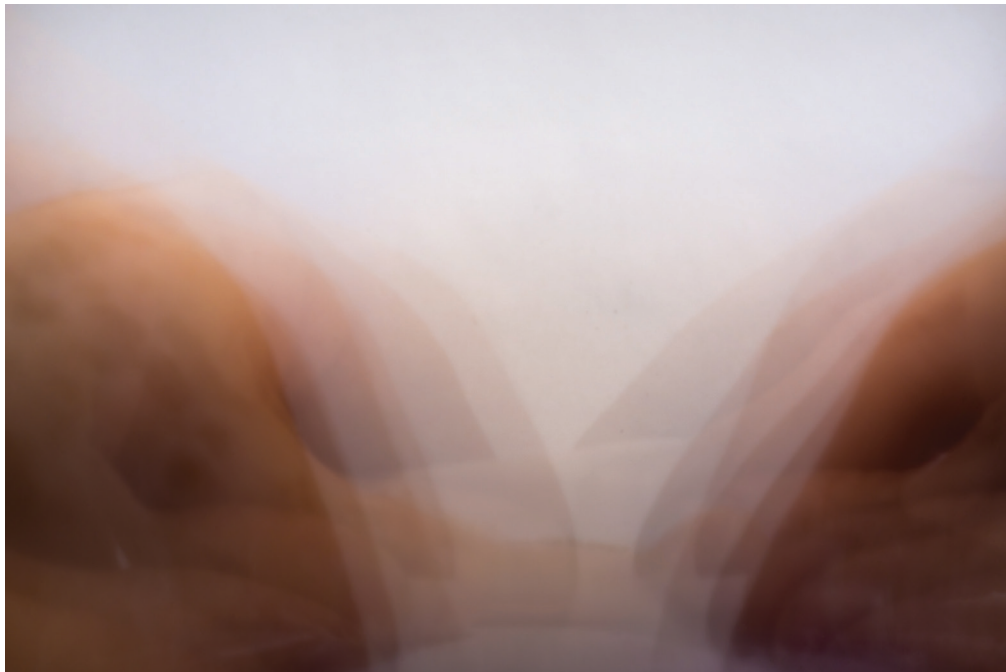


Fig. 5: *Lauren Shea Little*, *Compline*, 2014.

Chapter 6: Physical Particularity is a Gift

Bread is sustenance. It has to breakdown and be ingested to become something else. The whole becomes pieces again and again. The act of rending is also an act of memory.



Fig. 6: *Lauren Shea Little*, *Physical Particularity is a Gift*, 2014.

Chapter 7: Buttes in the Borderlands

Buttes in the Borderlands

In the dusky borderlands are two buttes
Each holding one end of a wire
Like restful breathing they throb in and out, forward and back
It's unclear what they are making
They say to me
—wait, this is a gift and it is for you

For months I watch them work
Their weighty movements are deliberate and tender
The work ends
They offer to me what they have made
I tread forward and take hold of it

I clasp it and my cheek strikes the ground
What a strange and wounding gift was made for me
I examine it closer and then I see
This gift is a future memory I never had
As in tears I reach again and cradle it near
I hear the makers say
—be still, be still
—in remaking remade
—you are in a thin place
—good care you must take

Chapter 8: Deep in My Chest Pocket

The act of rowing is a forward and backward motion. It is a reaction force—an act of pushing against to propel forward.



Fig. 7: *Lauren Shea Little*, *Deep in My Chest Pocket*, 2014.

Chapter 9: That Sacredness Under My Hand

To make a stitch is a hand in motion—one uniting act of bodies. A suture binds a thing sundered to bring it back to health by making it whole.



Fig. 8: *Lauren Shea Little*, *That Sacredness Under My Hand*, 2014.

Chapter 10: Affection Turning

Affection Turning

I amble through holographic mountains
Whirring, reverberating highlands
This country is slippage of stillness and motion
I hear coughing like wheelwork on an open, serpentine track
The mountains rumble and chug forward
They take me up and roll me in

Keep me safe
Wrap me tight

I catch sight of affection turning and returning

Chapter 11: Cathedral

“To fold, to lay one part over another, to reduce the length by doubling over, to enwrap, to bend, to concede defeat, to become doubled, to collapse, to embrace” (Merriam-Webster).

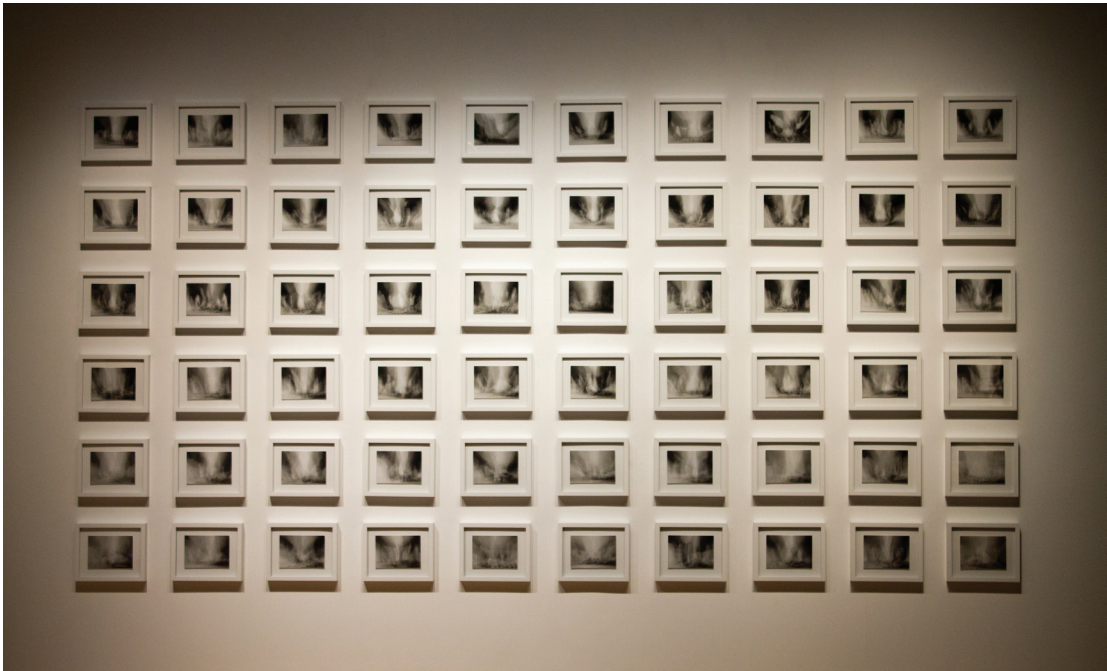


Fig. 9: *Lauren Shea Little, Cathedral, 2014.*

Chapter 12: Ashes (937 Metaphors)

Ashes, ashes, we all fall down.

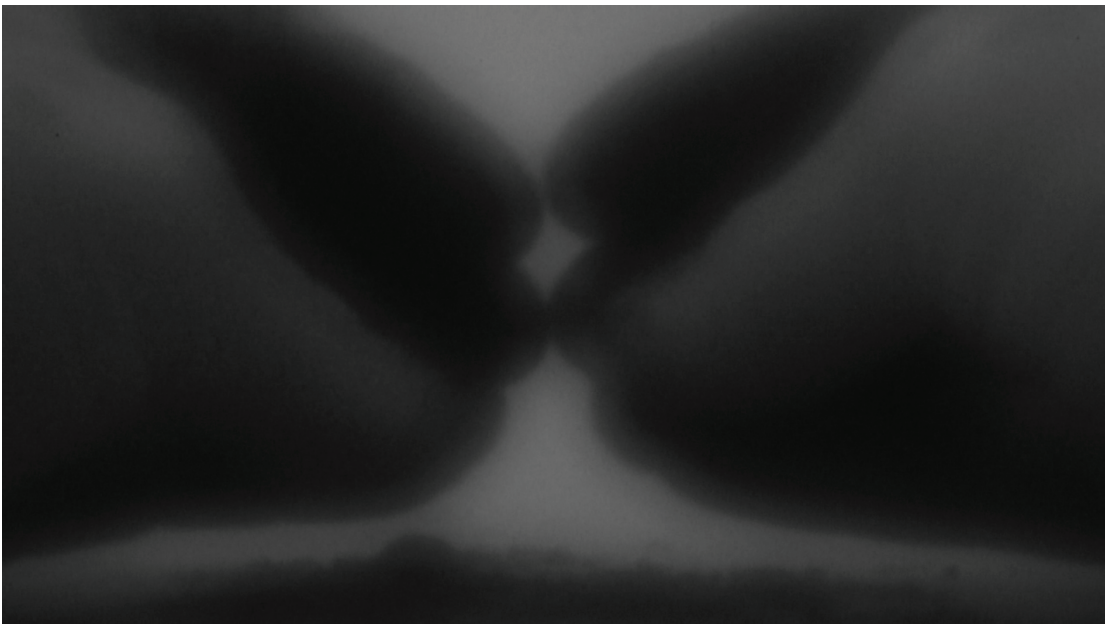


Fig. 10: *Lauren Shea Little, Ashes (937 Metaphors)*, video still, 2014.

Chapter 13: The Ash and the Spring

The Ash and the Spring

I watch the tension of colorless forms before me
They make advances at each other, smothering the in-between
Like two faces moving near for a kiss
It's wonderfully slow
I grow unsettled in the waiting
But it's not two faces they are my hands

I watch.

I keep imagining the water and the tree
I need them near to know their being on my frame
I press the particulates harder and harder into my hands
This is how I feel them
This is how I know them in ways I can longer

The water says to me,
 –I make the salty sea sweet.
 –I make the city glad.
I long for this –I long for her.

The tree tells to me,
 –My leaves are for healing.
So I grind the mountain ash into my flesh
I push and press the stinging cinders
I need whatever breath I can have from him

I ache to feel them both on my face.

The grey film covers me, bruises me, buries me
I hear my heart beating in my chest
I hear the blood rushing in my head
There is patience here and protection

Chapter 14: Epilogue

“...I have been thinking a great deal about the body these last weeks... I wanted to talk about the gift of physical particularity and how blessing and sacrament are mediated through it. I have been thinking lately how I have loved my physical life”

—John Ames

from Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*

These images are linkages of past and future autobiography. They are indexed recordings of a body generating maps and crossing boundaries. These boundaries are of the self that was, and is, and will be. Not only does the brainstem act as a metaxu but also the actions themselves are intermediaries like sacraments are intermediaries for the spiritual world. These liturgies created by neurobiological habits can be regarded as speech-acts that tell a story for conditions of being a person; conditions of embodiment, memory, conflict, preservation, wholeness, collapse, embrace, and lament. They are wordless narratives, doxology, and sacramental acts of autobiography. a role in the formation of the self and self-narratives. Neurologist Oliver Sacks puts it this way: “It might be said that each of us constructs and lives a "narrative," and that this narrative is us, our identities.” (qtd. in Eakin, 1)

Chapter 15: Installation Images



Fig. 11: Installation View 1



Fig. 13: Installation View 2



Fig. 12: Installation View 3



Fig. 13: Installation View 4



Fig. 14: Installation View 5

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