

ORDINARY EFFORT

by

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A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts, Visual Arts
Boise State University

December 2013

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BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY GRADUATE COLLEGE

DEFENSE COMMITTEE AND FINAL READING APPROVALS

of the thesis submitted by

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Thesis Title: Ordinary Effort

Date of Final Oral Examination: 17 October 2013

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DEDICATION

For Rachel and little Jack

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to Caroline Earley, Chad Erpelding, and Craig Peariso for feedback and guidance, and to the undergraduates I taught. You have all helped oil my link in the chain.

ABSTRACT

The thesis is primarily concerned with how the search for knowledge is driven by a quest for certainty, resulting in a compulsion to fix knowledge in explicit rules and procedures. Rather than producing a satisfactory sense of stability, this produces comedy and tragedy as human endeavors play out against a backdrop of arbitrary structure.

Three videos explore this problem through the lens of professional sport, where the quest for certainty is evaluated against the application of rules, against rules governing the action of the body, and against the attempt to circumvent the rules. Theoretical background is provided by examining the work of John Dewey, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and sociologist Michael Polanyi. Art historical context is provided by examining the video works of John Baldessari, Bruce Nauman and Paul Pfeiffer, and the wall drawings of Sol LeWitt.

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INTRODUCTION

ORDINARY EFFORT is the effort that a fielder of average skill at a position in that league or classification of leagues should exhibit on a play, with due consideration given to the condition of the field and weather conditions.

This standard...is an objective standard in regard to any particular fielder. In other words, even if a fielder makes his best effort, if that effort falls short of what an average fielder at that position in that league would have made in a situation, the official scorer should charge that fielder with an error.

—Official Rules, 2013, Major League Baseball

Human beings are in the business of making the subjective objective. The introductory quote does just that. It demands that the scorekeeper in a Major League Baseball game evaluate a player's performance relative to the skill level of his or her (eventually) peer group, with "due consideration given" to environmental variables, and claims this can be done objectively. Presumably, the scorekeeper will know that a major league player should catch a particular fly ball in light rain, whereas a minor league player could only be expected to catch the same ball if its trajectory brought it two feet closer to the glove. To say that this is objective seems foolish on the face of it.

Rather, this judgment seems rooted in a deep sense of familiarity with the performance of players at different levels of the game. It is a judgment based not on empirical standards, but on lived experience. Nevertheless, the authors of the rule book claim that this is an objective standard, presumably because objectivity is inarguable and therefore carries with it a greater force of authority.

I have always had a deep sense of unease about this arrangement. Objective decisions are easily defensible, but only in a bean-counting, bureaucratic sort of way. Subjective judgments account for the meaningful—that is, the interpretive—quality of life, but they are inherently unstable. Privileging one over the other might work when deciding baseball games (contested calls notwithstanding), but it hardly seems like a good solution when approaching the moral or existential questions in life.

American philosopher John Dewey addressed this problem in a series of ten lectures (the Gifford Lectures) delivered in 1929 and later collected in a book, *The Quest for Certainty*. Dewey traces the roots of the problem to the ancient Greeks, who rightly understood that experience is not constant and therefore cannot give us an understanding of “necessary” truth. Even when well understood, experience can only give us “contingent probability.”¹ This is because truth relating to experience is particular; if one wishes to seek the universal, it can only be found in pure reason. Following this Greek formulation, western philosophy divided knowledge into its pure form (theory) and its applied form (practice) well into the twentieth century.

Dewey reasoned that there is a structural problem with this arrangement. The force of moral and existential problems resides in our daily lives; it is only because we experience problems that we seek solutions. In the Greek scheme, we appeal to certain principles for guidance in making the right decisions, but the principles gain their certainty precisely because they are divorced from reality—and theory divorced from reality is, by definition, inconsequential. Moreover, theoretical knowledge violates its

¹ Dewey, 1984, p. 21

own integrity when it claims to be able to resolve practical problems. “After degrading practical affairs in order to exalt knowledge, the chief task of knowledge turns out to be to demonstrate the absolutely assured and permanent reality of the values with which practical activity is concerned! Can we fail to see the irony?”² Dewey’s solution is to abandon the separation of theory and practice, to construct a new philosophy that “renounces the traditional notion that action is inherently inferior to knowledge and preference for the fixed over the changing.”³

In short, the quest for certainty is a distraction that prevents us from getting useful and meaningful things done.

And yet, the compulsion to find definitive answers—to locate certainty—remains. Whether it takes the form of empirical research, philosophical investigation, meditation, or the creation of art, the human urge to seek clarity in knowledge is persistent. Even Dewey’s turn to action cannot escape this compulsion, since action can be described and fixed in explicit terms. There is no shortage of rules and procedures in the world telling us how things are, or ought to be done. What Dewey accomplishes is to turn over the authorship of those rules and procedures to individual control, giving them temporal rather than universal resonance. The degree to which people believe in the universality of their rules is the degree to which they are fooling themselves.

I make art because my desire to know (wherever that knowledge is located) is still rooted in a quest for certainty. This is not to say that I will find certainty, which I have

² Dewey, 1984, p. 28

³ Ibid. p. 29

just admitted is a kind of delusion. Rather, the work is about the *compulsion* to find certainty, and how that compulsion manifests itself in the establishment of rules and procedures that structure human action. It is not about rules as such, but about the need I seem to have for them.

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues that philosophy can be useful only if it is aware of its own effect on perception.⁴ One cannot think about external phenomena without considering how the act of thinking about them affects one's perception of them, hence altering the experience of them. This is a bit like the problem of measurement in quantum mechanics, where the attempt to measure an outcome changes the result of the outcome. In this sense philosophy is necessarily self-reflexive. Anything creative works that way. Art has to be aware of how it defines its own reality, just as we should ours.

The tension comes from trying to pin this down explicitly, because the explicit formulation alters the experience. There is a paradox here; the need to understand destroys what it seeks to understand. Thus, my tortured relationship to rules and procedures, which—in my view—are attempts to provide clarity that ultimately impose ideology.

The artwork in the thesis exhibition explores this problem through the lens of professional sports, which are perhaps the ultimate example of structured human action. By separating the rules and procedures of professional sport from their normal use, the videos reveal our relationship to these rules to be alternately ridiculous or tragic.

⁴ Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 61

This written thesis will provide context for the three videos of the exhibition, considering each in turn. Early video works by John Baldessari and Bruce Nauman will be considered, as will the structural methods of Sol LeWitt and Paul Pfeiffer. The question of certainty will be considered as a form of “tacit knowledge,” according to the work of sociologist Michael Polanyi, and the question of how tacit knowledge is acquired will be considered in relation to the individual body and the collective social experience.

THE WORK

Making the Call

Making the Call is a two-channel video projection that takes American football officiating as its central motif. The two projections are shown side-by-side, each running as a loop of independent duration. As the videos play, the phase relationship between the images changes with each loop. I will discuss the work first in terms of its narrative content, then in terms of its aesthetic qualities and their relationship to the early video work of John Baldessari.

In the projection on the left (**plate 1**), the artist is shown in a full-length shot standing and looking down. The room is empty except for a microphone mounted to a boom in the upper left of the frame, a chair on the right, and a row of pages on the floor. Although it cannot be seen in the video, these pages contain diagrams of all the major hand signals used by referees in the National Football League. From time to time, at irregular intervals, the artist assumes one of the signal poses and calls out the associated ruling as loudly as possible, then returns to the resting position.

The projection on the right (**plate 2**) shows a montage of controversial plays from professional sporting events. Sometimes the players are shown in action, sometimes the officials are shown making the call, sometimes there is arguing amongst the parties involved.

Juxtaposing these images highlights the uncertainty of the empirical. In the introduction of this thesis, I discussed the difficulty of making a value judgment—whether or not a given performance constitutes “ordinary effort”—based on the outcome of circumstances on the field. But there is, at times, just as much difficulty determining the outcome on the field even before a value judgment can be made. The montage of contested calls should make this clear enough, but simply viewing this montage does not take the viewer anywhere outside the usual frame of reference of a spectator watching football. To do this, the work needs the image on the left.

It is clear that the figure acting out judgment calls is not making the calls in relation to anything in particular. It is simply a performance for the camera, proceeding methodically through the calls as their diagrams appear on the script on the floor. There is some variety in the pacing and the quality of the shouting, but otherwise the plot is the same. The viewer knows what will happen next, even if how and when it happens are unpredictable. The variety keeps the viewer engaged but the action is fundamentally static, acted out in a featureless space for no one.

Together, the two videos give us the theory and the practice side of Dewey’s summary of Greek philosophy. One is content to act out the rules in the abstract, the other shows how often they fail in actual practice. The narrative structure of the work suggests that clear ideas dissolve into chaos when released into the world.

The aesthetic construction of the work, however, is more immediately striking to the contemporary eye because it uses obsolete technology. The performance video was recorded to VHS cassette tape using a Sony AVC-3200 camera, a black and white model manufactured in 1970 and marketed primarily to educational or corporate institutions.

The resulting image exhibits the lack of clarity typical of the era, which is emphasized because this particular camera is failing. Unable to achieve a stable vertical hold, the image jitters and drifts randomly. The lens does not quite focus. The vidicon tube (the vacuum tube that senses the incoming image) requires a great deal of light to transmit a clear image, but the studio lights are not up to the task. Additionally, the audio was recorded to the VHS cassette using an excessively loud input signal. Therefore, it exhibits a great deal of compression and distortion typical of overloaded magnetic tape. All of these factors bring the artificiality of the performance to the foreground.

This artifice refers to John Baldessari's 1971 work, *I Am Making Art*. In that work, Baldessari stands alone in a room (part of a stool can be seen in the lower left corner of the frame), assuming a series of random poses while uttering the phrase, "I am making art," with perfect deadpan irony (**plate 3**). Baldessari's video (which is also black and white and blurry, but was state-of-the-art technology at the time) is a satire of his contemporaries, most likely Bruce Nauman or Richard Serra, who made short films documenting actions performed by the artist in the studio. Each had their motivations. Serra's *Hand Catching Lead* (1968) shows just what the title indicates, collapsing the distinction between the artist's process and the artist's product (**plate 4**). Nauman's *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square* (1967-8) also shows what the title indicates, but places the emphasis on his body as he deliberately walks, heel to toe, around the square allowing his hips to assume a ridiculous contrapposto with each step (**plate 5**).

Baldessari's work takes the same form as Nauman and Serra's, but speaking the phrase, "I am making art," mocks the other artists by reducing the matter of their

intention to a banal catch phrase. This allows the work to function simultaneously as homage and parody; as Baldessari put it, the spoken word “hovers between assertion and belief,”⁵ which it manages to do because of his deadpan delivery. Baldessari’s work is conceptual in that it asks us to consider what the role of intention is, in both his work and that of others.

If Baldessari’s work functions as a satire of Process art, *Making the Call* functions as a satire of conceptualism. Instead of using contemporary technology in a transparent manner—simply to document a performance, where the technology is so of-the-now that it goes completely unnoticed—*Making the Call* uses deteriorating technology to suggest the failure of a historical moment. Ultimately, the questions raised by conceptual artists in the baby-boom generation may have produced nothing more than a rabbit-hole of clever games, where meaning cannot be located because it hovers between assertion and belief. The legacy of this development is that the use of technology in *Making the Call* can also be interpreted as the artist’s nostalgic desire to return to that time, when legitimate challenges to the status quo could still be made.⁶ It might also mean that old technology is a signifier for authenticity, or the authority of the past.

Making the Call therefore suggests a number of things about rules and procedures: that they are contextually specific (as in the referee’s calls or the relationship

⁵ Tucker, 1981

⁶ This notion is based on Julian Stallabrass’ *Contemporary Art: A Very Short Introduction*, in which he argues that most art today, no matter how radical its program, is ultimately absorbed by the market system and turned into homogeneous commodity. The notion that art can criticize the dominant culture by virtue of its autonomous authority has always been an illusion; one that is all but impossible to sustain under advanced capitalism. It might be argued that opposition still has force under repressive regimes; consider the censored work of Ai Weiwei, or the destructive acts of the Russian collective Voina. Still, Stallabrass would argue that even those artists achieve significance on the global level by packaging their exotic identities for consumption by Western elites, hungry to fill a void of authenticity.

of one artwork to another), empirically difficult to apply (as in the contested calls or the reading of Baldessari's intention), and that they have a limited shelf life (the performance actions of process art, which were already ripe for satire in 1971).

How to Shoot Free Throws

If abstract rules pose so many difficulties in the quest for certainty, it might be useful to approach the problem from another angle. In this section, I examine "certainty" not as a constant, abstract principle, but as an attitude regarding what can be known and what cannot be known. Most people feel certain about something. The question is where the basis of that certainty lies.

John Dewey and Maurice Merleau-Ponty both constructed philosophies based on the idea that knowledge is rooted in personal experience. I will expand on this by summarizing sociologist Michael Polanyi's theory of tacit knowing as knowledge rooted in the action of the body, revisiting the early video work of Bruce Nauman, and applying the ideas to my second video work, *How to Shoot Free Throws*.

Phenomenology

Maurice Merleau-Ponty aimed his "criticism of the constancy hypothesis"⁷ at rationalists and empiricists alike, attacking the two dominant strains of Western philosophy that descended from the mind/body dualism of the Greeks. Rationalists had it wrong for the reasons John Dewey cited, and Empiricists had it wrong because they found only fixed qualities in things, a formula which emptied experience of mystery and

⁷ Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 58

reduced it to an accounting procedure.⁸ Merleau-Ponty's solution, similar to Dewey's, was to consider sense experience as an active engagement of the world that imparts meaning to the objects we encounter, constituting not just our consciousness of the object but consciousness itself. One's perception of experience is "a creative operation which itself participates in the facticity of that experience."⁹ In effect, we have a say in what is factual and what is not. In this determination, there is no prior Ego or object of consideration; these are created out of their momentary interaction and there is nothing outside of this. Merleau-Ponty concludes that the individual is thus free to take complete control of his or her experience, unhindered by anything "implicit or tacitly accepted"¹⁰ as true.

Introduction of Tacit Knowledge

Michael Polanyi disagreed with this outcome. A Hungarian polymath born to a Jewish family, Polanyi cultivated a distinguished career as a physical chemist before turning to sociology later in life. In youth, he fled anti-Semitism in Hungary, spent the Weimar years in Berlin working among luminaries such as Einstein and Max Planck, and fled again to England as the Nazis rose to power. He wrote over 200 research papers but eventually became less interested in practicing science than in thinking about it, and the University of Manchester allowed him to switch his chair from physical chemistry to "social sciences," a position created to accommodate his interests.

⁸ Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 52

⁹ Ibid. p. 61

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 60

Polanyi was deeply concerned by the way scientific rationalism had been used to further the aims of the Nazis and the Soviets, and he distrusted efforts by English socialists to bring university research under the direction of central planning.¹¹ In an effort to counter the dangers he associated with hierarchical control, he sought to devise a philosophy of science that was empirical in practice but built on a foundation that was personal and prejudiced—necessary components, he felt, for science to engage in free inquiry and to find truth.

While Polanyi's accomplishments were impressive in his day, today he exists as a second-string thinker who is referenced—as he is here—for his formulation of “tacit knowledge,” the notion that “we can know more than we can tell.”¹² We can recognize a face without being aware of the features that constitute that recognition. We can ride a bicycle but cannot explicate the knowledge in a way that allows a person who has never seen a bicycle to pick one up and go. Whatever the task, the apprentice must learn not by reading but by watching and doing.

This idea appealed to me because I felt, as a blue-collar worker for nearly 20 years, that there was *some kind of knowledge* embodied in my hands, even if I couldn't say exactly what. Whatever it was, it felt certain. Polanyi's assertion in *The Tacit Dimension* that “our body is the ultimate instrument of all our external knowledge, whether intellectual or practical,”¹³ had a ring to it; it demanded further investigation.

¹¹ Shapin, 2011

¹² Polanyi, 1966, p. 4

¹³ Ibid. p. 15

The Structure of Tacit Knowledge

Polanyi's view turns on the assumption that explicit language can never fully communicate the experience of one person to another. The best the author can do is to evoke sensations that the reader may already know and which, taken as a whole, represent by analogy the experience the reader does not know. Eventually, the reader must experience the real thing. As Polanyi puts it, "any definition...denoting an external thing must ultimately rely on pointing at such a thing."¹⁴ This is, after all, how children discover the world; by pointing at things. Apprehension of the total entity comes first; dissection and analysis come later.

In this respect, Polanyi's theory draws upon Gestalt psychology to examine our experience of the world. Elaborating on the example of facial recognition, he shows that appearance is constructed from constituent parts; the shape of the nose, the eyes, the relative proportions, the distance from one to the other, etc. But one recognizes the face without being consciously aware of these parts. They are known only because of what they contribute to the object of our attention.

Our knowledge of these components is thus considered "tacit," in the sense that we know what these parts contribute without needing to articulate it. One may explore the constituent parts, defining exactly what they are and what they do; or one may examine the original subject as a constituent part of something else. The process of discovery extends in either direction along a hierarchical tree. Noses are parts of faces are parts of bodies are parts of humans are parts of societies, etc. Polanyi reasons that this

¹⁴ Polanyi, 1966, p. 5

notion, when carried to its logical conclusion, shows that the most rational of theories is ultimately predicated on knowledge that is taken for granted. He strikes a conservative rhetorical note at this point, asserting that anything tacitly accepted is based on the authority of others; namely, religious and cultural traditions or the work of scholars who have preceded us. His philosophy, rooted in the same assumptions as Merleau-Ponty, takes the right-leading fork in the road.

Polanyi's challenge was to explain exactly how these relationships occur. How is it that sense experience, which is the source of all knowledge, may be extended to include the most abstract forms of theoretical reason?

The answer may be found by looking to procedural actions of the body. Polanyi begins by examining the way a person develops familiarity with the use of a tool.¹⁵ Initially, one is aware of the way the tool feels in the hand, and of the way that feeling changes when the tool is applied to other objects. With experience, one becomes less aware of interacting with the tool and more aware of the tool acting on the object. The tool becomes, perceptually, an extension of the body; "...we incorporate it in our body—or extend our body to include it—so that we come to dwell in it."¹⁶

For Polanyi, "indwelling" is a more analytical and active version of empathy, or of the Gestalt principles discussed earlier. He states that empathy and Gestalt suggest a passive kind of experience; one feels empathy or recognizes another entity through

¹⁵ Polanyi and Merleau-Ponty share the same example of a tool; a blind man's stick. Polanyi delivered the Terry Lectures (upon which *The Tacit Dimension* was based) at Yale in 1962, the same year Merleau-Ponty published *Phenomenology of Perception*. Polanyi may be borrowing this example.

¹⁶ Polanyi, 1966, p. 16

exposure to stimuli, without necessarily analyzing the process. Indwelling, by contrast, describes a conscious response that is brought to bear on physical experience. It indicates the “emergence” of intent. This construction is similar to Merleau-Ponty’s constitution of consciousness through sense experience.

Sociologist Richard Sennett develops this line of thought in his book *The Craftsman* when discussing the grip of the hand. “Grips are voluntary actions; to grip is a decision.”¹⁷ He notes that popular slang phrases such as “get a grip” draw a direct connection between physical action and thinking clearly. Whether Sennett was thinking of Richard Serra’s *Hand Catching Lead* is unknown.

With Polanyi’s concept of indwelling at hand, one can return to Bruce Nauman’s early film and video works, which appear to enact the thinking-doing connection with a similar goal—to achieve an activated empathy—in mind. In works like *Bouncing in the Corner, No.1*, or *Bouncing Two Balls Between the Floor and Ceiling with Changing Rhythm*, both from 1968, Nauman performs the physical tasks of the titles—consciously, conspicuously, and repetitively—for the duration of the film or magnetic tape reel. The viewer is allowed to choose whether to experience the work as spectator or as identifier; that is, with expectation or with empathy.

*If you really believe in what you’re doing and do it as well as you can, then there will be a certain amount of tension—if you are honestly getting tired, or if you are honestly trying to balance on one foot for a long time, there has to be a certain sympathetic response in someone who is watching you. It is a kind of body response; they feel that foot and that tension.*¹⁸

¹⁷ Sennett, 2008, p. 151

¹⁸ Meigh-Andrews, 2006, p. 228

Nauman's description sounds much like what Polanyi is after, but it is also a bit of wishful thinking. It only works for the viewer who is particularly open to the experience of watching Nauman in action. Watching a Nauman video *can* evoke feelings of boredom or tension, but the feeling is often directed *at* the work rather than alongside it. Rather than feeling the tension in Nauman's foot, the viewer feels the tension of simply waiting for something to happen. For this type of viewer, the expectation of a conventional, linear narrative—suggested by the medium of film or video—is denied, resulting in frustration rather than empathy. Nauman succeeds at eliciting feelings, but they are not always the sympathetic response he hopes for.

And yet, they are still the feelings Nauman intends to evoke. He implies that boredom, frustration, exhaustion, and anxiety are conditions of modern life, and his work makes the viewer aware of that through physical means. The viewer may not be standing on one foot, but the viewer is nevertheless standing, for a long time, focused on one very boring thing. The experience of watching his video is analogous to being in it. An overarching idea such as “Modernity” is never articulated, but the idea of it is communicated tacitly. If certainty is to be found in the work of Bruce Nauman, it is hard won and without consolation.

The Authority of Michael Jordan

My own video exploring procedural action of the body takes the form of a basketball tutorial. *How to Shoot Free Throws* is a single channel video projected onto a wall, approximately six feet high and eight feet wide. The image is that of a cheap plastic child's toy, now much larger than its original size. The toy consists of a basket perched atop a small post affixed to a base that incorporates a holding spot for a small plastic ball

and a mechanism that launches the ball into the air when pressed. The toy rests on a wood surface that has lines painted on it, much like a basketball court (**plate 6**).

A voice begins to narrate. “Free throw shooting. Let’s start with free throw shooting.” The voice belongs to Michael Jordan, world-renowned basketball superstar. As Jordan describes a common misconception—that the free throw is easy, when in fact it is quite difficult—a hand enters the frame. The hand places a small plastic ball in the toy and attempts to launch the ball into the basket. The shot misses. The hand retrieves the ball, reloads, and tries again. Jordan discusses the body mechanics involved in free throw shooting. This action repeats for some time, as the hand tries to master the shot.

The audio was sampled from a YouTube copy of an instructional video cassette that Michael Jordan sold in the 1990s. The video was made in my studio, using the toy found inside a Christmas novelty gift. Pairing the audio and video throws them into a critical dialog.

The most immediate result is that Jordan’s narrative is difficult to visualize when alternate yet related imagery is presented. Try though one may, it is difficult to picture what he is describing when a different image is competing to fill that mental space. The video disrupts the usual interpretation of the audio. Similarly, the toy is no longer viewed simply as a toy; it exemplifies Jordan’s narrative. The meaning of each component is altered by the other, demonstrating a certain vulnerability in the integrity of each.

The image seems to gain the upper hand. Using a toy to illustrate the directives of the world’s greatest authority figure in basketball effectively infantilizes the narrative. The wisdom of the master is reframed with an image of plodding stupidity. This is subtly reinforced by the triggering of an electronic drum sample each time the toy launches the

ball. The sound is intentionally dull. It adds emphasis to the shot, but it is the same kind of emphasis one experiences when banging one's head against the wall.

Or, perhaps, bouncing two balls between the floor and ceiling with changing rhythms. *How to Shoot Free Throws* engages with Nauman's early work by considering the contexts in which certain procedures are valued and others are not. Nauman was working in a limited sphere (the practice of visual art) and in a severely restricted setting (his studio). By incorporating the instructions of Michael Jordan, this video uses found material to orient the viewer toward a consideration of the cultural context in which action takes place, rather than just the action itself.

The informed viewer is directed to somewhat obvious questions about celebrity, authority, social vs. entertainment value, and the attendant financial rewards that may be gained in one setting but not another. Why should putting a ball into a hoop ten feet off the ground be any more important than putting a ball into a hoop ten millimeters off the ground? Why does putting a ball into a hoop matter in the first place? Does it matter more if a man does it than a woman? Judging from the status of the WNBA in American culture, one might conclude—unfortunately—that it does.

How to Shoot Free Throws is an echo of John Dewey's criticism of the Greeks. If theory has no resonance without its relation to practice, practice has no resonance without its relation to context. The sense of psychological certainty that might be gained through tacit knowledge of the body does not mean much unless it is located in culture.

The Danger of Procedural Thinking

If the viewer does not have a baseline level of knowledge about professional sports, then the work will read as an examination of procedural action divorced from meaning. In this reading, the work functions much like Nauman's, by creating a viewing experience that is roughly analogous to the subject matter being depicted. It is tedious. It takes time. There is a feeling of anticipation before each shot, wondering whether it will go in the basket or not. There is disappointment, and eventually reward. Occasionally, several shots in a row are successful, giving rise to optimism or even joy. Inevitably, this is dashed. But the practice continues, endlessly, because the acquisition of skill requires constant practice in order to maintain efficacy.

After some time passes, the voices of two additional basketball coaches (one male and one female) are brought into the audio mix, giving the viewer (or the hand in the video) competing sets of directives to accomplish the same task. The viewer now has a choice about whom to listen to, but the information being delivered is still ultimately about the same thing.

How to shoot a free throw—as an example of procedural knowledge—thus becomes a metaphor for any mechanism that fixes the individual's role in society while simultaneously allowing that individual to feel a sense of freedom and control. According to French critical theorist Herbert Marcuse's model, "the individual's performance is motivated, guided and measured by standards external to him...and his liberty is confined

to the selection of the most adequate means for reaching a goal which he did not set.”¹⁹

The conditions of modern life prevent people from critiquing it effectively because the procedural tasks available to them—the tacit means of learning—are entrenched in the structure of the status quo. We become objects of instrumental efficiency, highly skilled practitioners of the specialized training that we choose to master, as selected from predetermined options.

That is not the kind of certainty I wished to find. No one likes to believe—particularly those living in a surplus economy—that they cannot control their destiny. The ability to guide one’s life is, after all, why skill is acquired in the first place. In Martin Scorsese’s film *Taxi Driver*, Robert DeNiro plays a mentally disturbed Vietnam veteran working as a New York City taxi driver who seeks advice from an older, wiser cabbie played by Peter Boyle. Boyle’s character, The Wizard, offers this advice: “Look at it this way. A man takes a job, you know? And that job—I mean, like that—That becomes what he is....You get a job, you become the job.” DeNiro’s character replies, “I don’t know. That’s about the dumbest thing I ever heard.”²⁰

Reading the Rules

The final video in the exhibition, *Reading the Rules*, looks at the question of whether a sense of certainty may be achieved by gaming the system: by manipulating, skirting, or outsmarting the rules. The subject is baseball. In this video the formal arrangement of *How to Shoot Free Throws* is inverted. Rather than acting out the artist’s

¹⁹ Arato & Gebhardt, 1988, p. 142

²⁰ Schrader, 1976

performance on video with a soundtrack composed of found audio, *Reading the Rules* utilizes found video and performed audio. It is played on a standard television measuring approximately 17” on the diagonal.

The audio component is a recitation of the entire rule book of Major League Baseball. The video that plays against this is footage of Mark McGwire hitting his 62nd home run in a single season, breaking the coveted record set by Roger Maris and earlier by Babe Ruth. McGwire is shown hitting the ball at the beginning of the video and then, through a series of edits between McGwire and others in the stadium, he is shown continuously celebrating as he circles the bases for the duration of the rule book recitation (**plate 7**). This takes almost four hours. He is finally shown reaching home plate at the end of the work.

For an audience familiar with the history of sports, McGwire’s status as a steroid-user determines the content of the video. A cheat, shown at the height of his greatest achievement, is juxtaposed with a dry reading of the rules he was supposed to obey. The didactic quality of this is obvious, but the viewer cannot escape the hint of complicity that resides in the reaction of the audience. This is the event they came to see. The great home run derby of 1998 saved baseball from the doldrums of player strikes (the World Series was cancelled in 1994), declining viewers, and the dominance of pitchers (which produced slow, low-scoring games). Athletes like McGwire brought the fans back, even as the suspicious bulk of his upper body grew to alarming proportions. The audience *knew* he was juiced, but few would concede it.

In effect, the audience possessed two bits of tacit knowledge and weighed one against the other. They knew McGwire was a cheat but they also knew it was socially

unacceptable to suggest the possibility that this was true. Michael Polanyi would have us believe that tacit knowledge remains tacit simply because it is not the primary focus of one's attention; in theory, it might be described if attended to with sufficient detail. But he fails to account for the most dangerous reason knowledge remains tacit—the reason exhibited by the crowd cheering McGwire as he runs the bases. Tacit knowledge remains tacit because it is embedded in the social fabric, in how people *collectively* behave rather than just individually.²¹

At its most benign, collective tacit knowledge might govern whether it is socially acceptable to say “hello” to a stranger, or whether or not one should leave a tip for service. The skills that handle these actions remain the same across cultures, but the correct responses differ.

At its worst, collective tacit knowledge can produce mass denial or delusion. In a poll conducted by Dartmouth College in 2012, 62.9% of self-identifying Republicans agreed with the statement, “Iraq had weapons of mass destruction when the United States invaded in 2003.”²² Almost fifteen percent of Democrats agreed as well. In *Reading the Rules*, the approval of the crowd is heard as a constant presence affirming McGwire's accomplishments, like the drums of war. His celebration becomes tragic, but also predictable. It is predictable because that is what cheating is intended to produce; the known outcome, a sure thing, a certain conclusion.

²¹ “Collective tacit knowledge” is proposed by Harry Collins, a sociologist at Cardiff University. His book *Tacit and Explicit Knowledge* updates Polanyi's theories by using mechanical and computational models of behavior to discount the notion that the body can be a site where knowledge resides, since all bodily actions may theoretically be simulated by advanced programming and robotics. He finds the social dimension to be far more compelling. (Collins, 2010, p. 119)

²² Valentino, 2012

Exegesis on Sol LeWitt

In art, the certain conclusion has been explored through system-based methods of design. Taking spontaneous action out of the process can yield work that offers exceptional clarity of form, suggesting a dialog between the certainty of an abstract idea and its physical manifestation. The early wall drawings of Sol LeWitt do this by utilizing simple geometric shapes such as the line, the square, and the arc, arranged in predetermined combinations according to a given sequence. The written plan is copied onto the surface of the wall, becoming part of the drawing. In *Wall Drawing #260*, (**plate 8**) the subtitle describes the components: *on black walls, all two-part combinations of white arcs from corners and sides, and white straight, not-straight, and broken lines*. In Plate 8, the individual components of the design can be seen in the upper right. The dense grid beneath these components provide the key for every possible combination of pairs. The large drawing to the left is a portion of the design executed at full size.

In this arrangement, the viewer is able to compare two kinds of explicit statements: the set of written instructions and the image that was eventually produced. Somewhat like a geometry textbook, the work may be read as a problem in the form of a statement and a solution in the form of an image. This gives the viewer two kinds of denotation to consider, the written and the visual. The question amounts to asking where the “idea” one is considering—that is, the certainty—actually resides; in the text of it or in the lived experience of it. This dialog between conception and perception is at the heart of LeWitt’s work.

LeWitt’s writing embraces this dialog in maddeningly self-contradictory statements. On one hand, he defines conceptual art as being that art where “all of the

planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair.”²³ In this scheme, ideas are always primary, and “the artist would mitigate his idea by applying subjective judgment to it.”²⁴ This indicates a Platonic ideal is at work, where the wall drawing is a pale representation of its essence, like the shadows in Plato’s cave. On the other hand, LeWitt also states that, “the artist cannot imagine his art, and cannot perceive it until it is complete,”²⁵ which makes clear that the idea cannot exist without its execution; much like Merleau-Ponty’s formulation of the constitution of consciousness. Indeed, since “ideas of wall drawings alone are contradictions of the idea of wall drawings,”²⁶ LeWitt contends that the presentation of the idea alone would be illogical.

The austere forms of LeWitt’s work in the 1970s mask a disposition that is opposed to rationalism, even as it operates with a high degree of logic and order. LeWitt believed that formalist art in the Greenbergian sense was rational in nature, but that rationalism leads to nothing new. It simply repeats its own decisions, whereas irrational decisions lead to new things. This seems to be a reasonable response to the reductive tendencies of the day, Greenberg’s oddly anti-intellectual streak that calls for each discipline to “narrow its area of competence”²⁷ to the point where anything not purely formal should be excluded. LeWitt saw his art as a massive resurrection of content,²⁸ since it was all about the ideas; but then, as we have seen, those ideas could not exist without their formal realization either.

²³ Stiles & Selz, 1996, p. 822

²⁴ Ibid. p. 824

²⁵ Ibid. p. 824

²⁶ Gross, 2012, p. 226

²⁷ Harrison & Wood, 2003, p. 774

²⁸ Gross, 2012, p. 269

Of all his directives, the one that most clearly sums up LeWitt's approach is the fifth instruction in *Sentences on Conceptual Art*: "Irrational thoughts should be followed absolutely and logically."²⁹ Whatever you decide to do, make a system of it. Follow your procedures. Carry out the plan. In this respect, the character of LeWitt's practice appears aligned with the concerns introduced at the beginning of this thesis; he uses visual art as a way of locating certainty through structured action, regardless of the genesis of that action. Given this, it becomes interesting to consider what happens when one kind of structured action—the rules governing baseball—are pitted against another kind of structured action—the effort to circumvent those rules.

The Certain Outcome of Mark McGwire

Reading the Rules conceives of Mark McGwire's march to the record book as an attempt to override one kind of certainty with another kind. This notion is manifested formally by organizing his trip around the bases in an orderly, comprehensive series of permutations based on the methodology of Sol LeWitt. The individual camera shots in the original, televised sequence are as follows:

1. McGwire celebrates at first base
2. Sammy Sosa walking in right field
3. McGwire running
4. McGwire's son, wearing a smaller version of his father's uniform
5. McGwire passing second base
6. Sosa removes his glove and begins clapping
7. The crowd, cheering
8. Sosa clapping again
9. McGwire reaching third base
10. Sosa clapping again, with a ribbon falling from the air
11. McGwire approaching home plate, acknowledging the crowd

²⁹ Gross, 2012, p. 214

12. A final shot of Sosa clapping

If these shots are assigned letters matching the person in the shot, the order is:

ABAC
ABDB
ABAB

Note that the letter “A,” the shots of McGwire, occurs five times. If these five shots trade places, shuffling around like a game of musical chairs, they may be rearranged to form 120 unique sequences of images (see Appendix B). The clips are so ordered. This series repeats five times to fill out the reading of the text. Including the introductory and closing sequences, McGwire rounds the bases 602 times throughout the course of the video. As he runs, the action around him remains constant. Like a Sol LeWitt wall drawing, McGwire manifests every possible nuance of his performance with utter certainty before the play is complete. The fact that his joy is authentic is a curious characteristic of this performance. Triumph, even when the game is rigged, still tastes sweet.

McGwire’s main rival in the race for the record was Sammy Sosa, of the Chicago Cubs. Coincidentally, McGwire’s Cardinals were playing the Cubs the night the record fell. In *Reading the Rules*, Sammy Sosa is the outfielder shown clapping as he slowly walks toward the infield to congratulate the winner. McGwire’s son is also shown briefly, from behind, wearing a boy’s version of his father’s uniform. There is a certainty to their

presence as well; the friendly competitor (who also eventually tested positive for steroid use³⁰) and the proud son both occupy familiar roles in a familiar story.

For the viewer who is unfamiliar with this history, the work may still be experienced as an exploration of social conventions (collective tacit knowledge) surrounding sporting events. In this case, a seemingly never-ending celebration plays out on the screen while a detached voiceover subordinates it. If one did not understand English, the content of the narration would be lost. But one might still notice that the voice has been edited in order that every breath or long pause has been deleted. Just by closing the gaps (9,842 of them), five hours of narration were reduced to four. The lyrical quality of the vocal narration is eliminated, calling attention to the importance of the most tacit component of speech, silence. As a result, the drama of the event, even of the narration, is neutralized by repetition and constancy. There are no lows, no pauses, no breaks in rhythm, just one never-ending high; the guarantee of a peak moment that never ends, its potency drained by the certainty of its conception.

Paul Pfeiffer uses similar tactics to reconsider media spectacle in general. Early works established formal devices used throughout his oeuvre; found video used in a short loop, displayed on a tiny LCD monitor mounted to the end of a pole cantilevered from the wall, and a title that draws a direct connection to a historic work of art. One example, *The Pure Products Go Crazy* (1998), loops a clip from the film *Risky Business*, in which Tom Cruise's character writhes face-down on a sofa during the famous living room dance scene. He is continuously, endlessly writhing (**plate 9**). The title refers to the opening line

³⁰ Schmidt, 2013

of the William Carlos Williams poem, *To Elsie*: “The pure products of America / go crazy.” In this poem, Williams’ subject is rootless modernity, which Pfeiffer considers through popular cinema’s glorification of upper-class, white-male teen-age fantasy.

Pfeiffer’s sports-related work draws on Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle* as its primary theoretical background. One example is *The Long Count (Rumble in the Jungle)* which digitally alters the Ali-Foreman fight to remove the boxers; what remains are ghostly perturbations of an audience watching an empty boxing ring. As Julian Stallabrass says, these are “works that take mass-media spectacle and simply remove the spectacle.”³¹ This summary is correct in that the sense of drama is erased along with the boxers, but incorrect in the sense that the work does not remove the spectacle; rather, it reveals the bare bones of the spectacle in the form of one audience (the viewer) watching another. One is left with history that has no history, an empty hull of an image that may be filled with anything because, in Pfeiffer’s words, “what you are really affected by is nothing more than the spectacle itself.”³² Pfeiffer’s work suggests that certainty, if found anywhere, is to be found in the blank expression of the viewer’s face while staring at a screen. *Reading the Rules* implies that this expression might be a smile.

³¹ Stallabrass, 2004, p. 104

³² Gonzalez, 2003

CONCLUSION

The “constancy hypothesis” (Merleau-Ponty’s term) may have been laid to rest in theory but the quest for certainty retains a stubborn currency in life. Politicians invoke the idea when speaking of fixed principles that guide action; spiritual leaders can do this too. Bureaucrats define certainty in terms of administrative rules. Bakers find it in a recipe book. Intellectually, I know that none of these things will satisfy a theoretical definition of certainty, so the question to consider is why people put stock in such ideas at all.

My work looks at the question of certainty as a compulsion to create structure in life where structure appears to be absent. It is not about a particular kind of organizing principle, but simply about the need to organize one’s life according to a principle that is personally credible. For some, this might be an adherence to rules. For others, it might be the development of a skill. Still others might pursue personal gain as the ultimate guarantor of certainty.

These ideas are all ways of looking at an old question: if the notion of certainty goes missing, what do you replace it with? Dewey gives us “experience,” Merleau-Ponty gives us the “phenomenal field,” Polanyi gives us “tacit knowledge.” Popular culture gives us sports. None of these things claim to guarantee fixed outcomes, but they all give us structures on which to organize activity, which provides some measure of comfort. The work in this exhibition considers the notion that, in the absence of certainty, the need for structure is still certain.

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APPENDIX A

Plates



Plate 1: John McMahon, two stills from the left channel of *Making the Call*, 2013. Analog video transferred to digital, b&w, sound, 16:26, looped.



Plate 2: John McMahon, two stills from the right channel of *Making the Call*, 2013. Digital video, color, sound, 2:24, looped.



Plate 3: John Baldessari, two stills from *I Am Making Art*, 1971. Video, b&w, sound, 18:40. www.eai.org

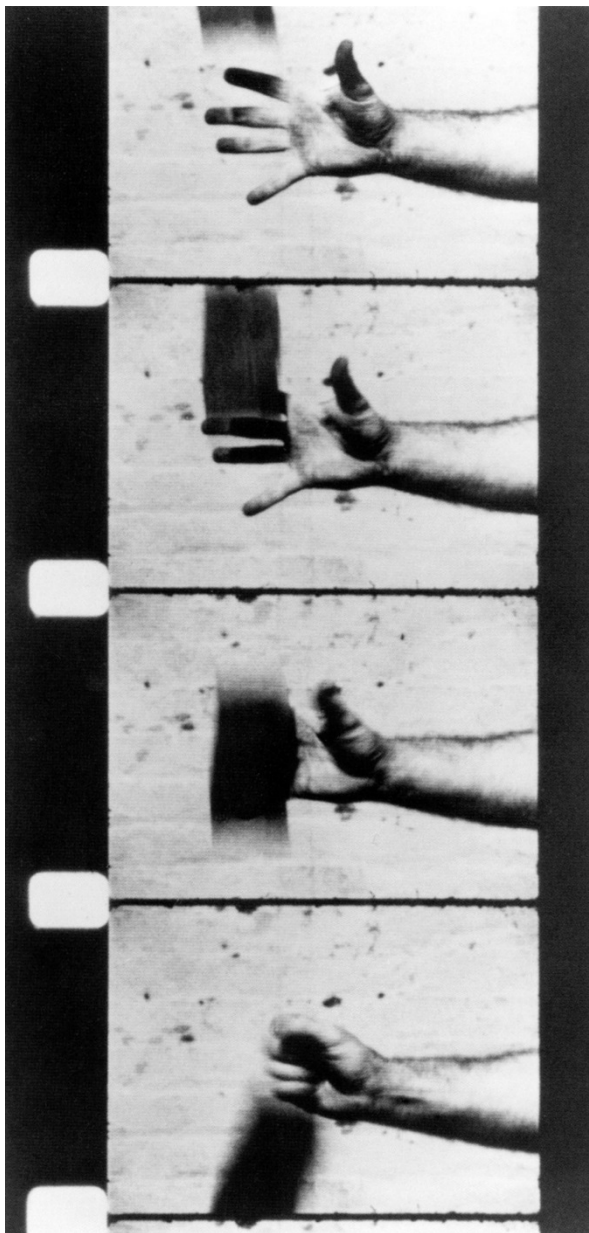


Plate 4: Richard Serra, filmstrip from *Hand Catching Lead*, 1968. 16mm film, b&w, silent, 3:02.



Plate 5: Bruce Nauman, *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner around the Perimeter of a Square*, 1967-8. 16mm film on video, b&w, silent, 10 min.
www.eai.org

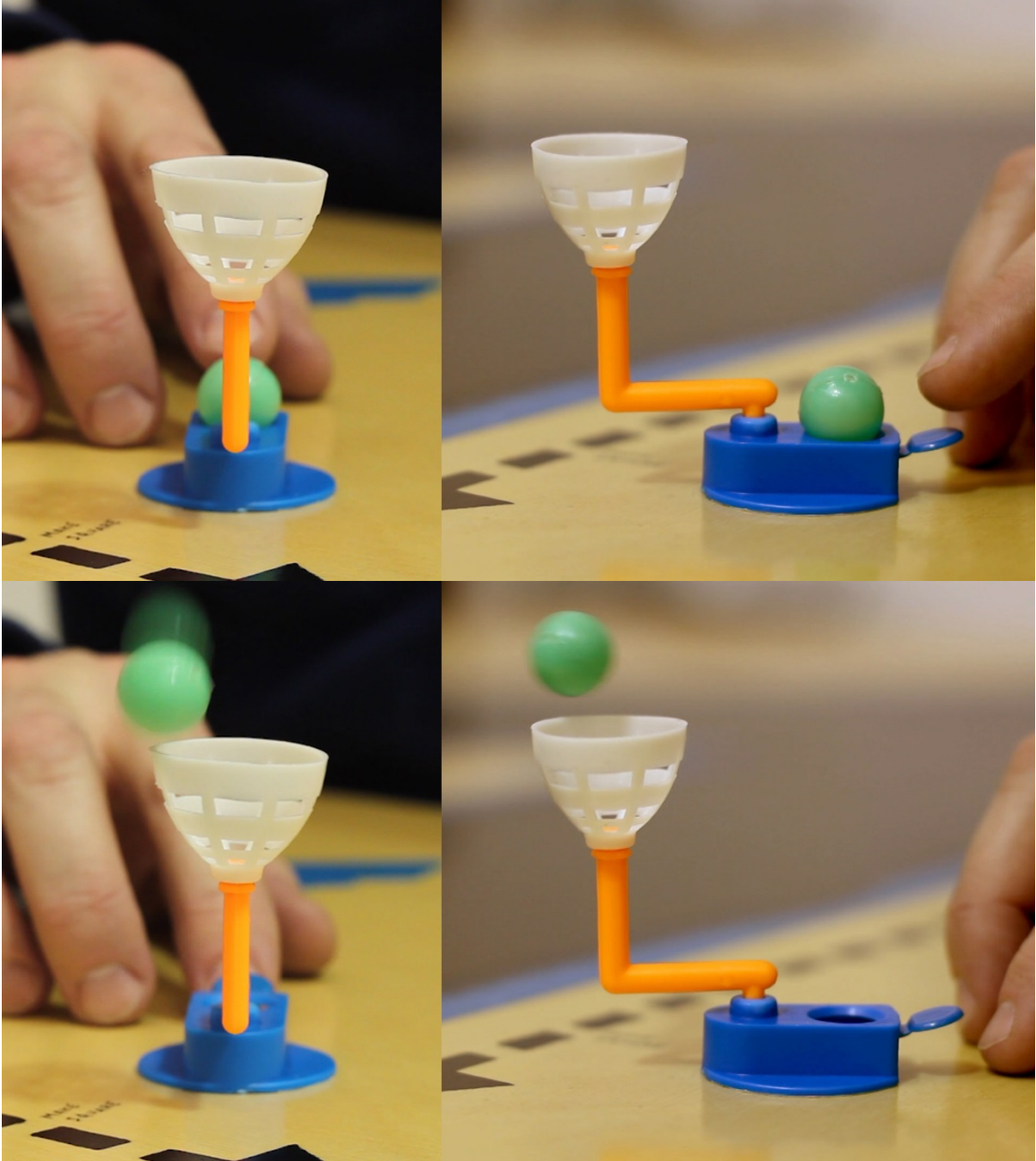


Plate 6: John McMahon, two stills from *How to Shoot Free Throws*, 2012.
Digital video, color, sound, 7:59.



Plate 7: John McMahon, two stills from *Reading the Rules*, 2013. Digital video, color, sound, 3:55:05.

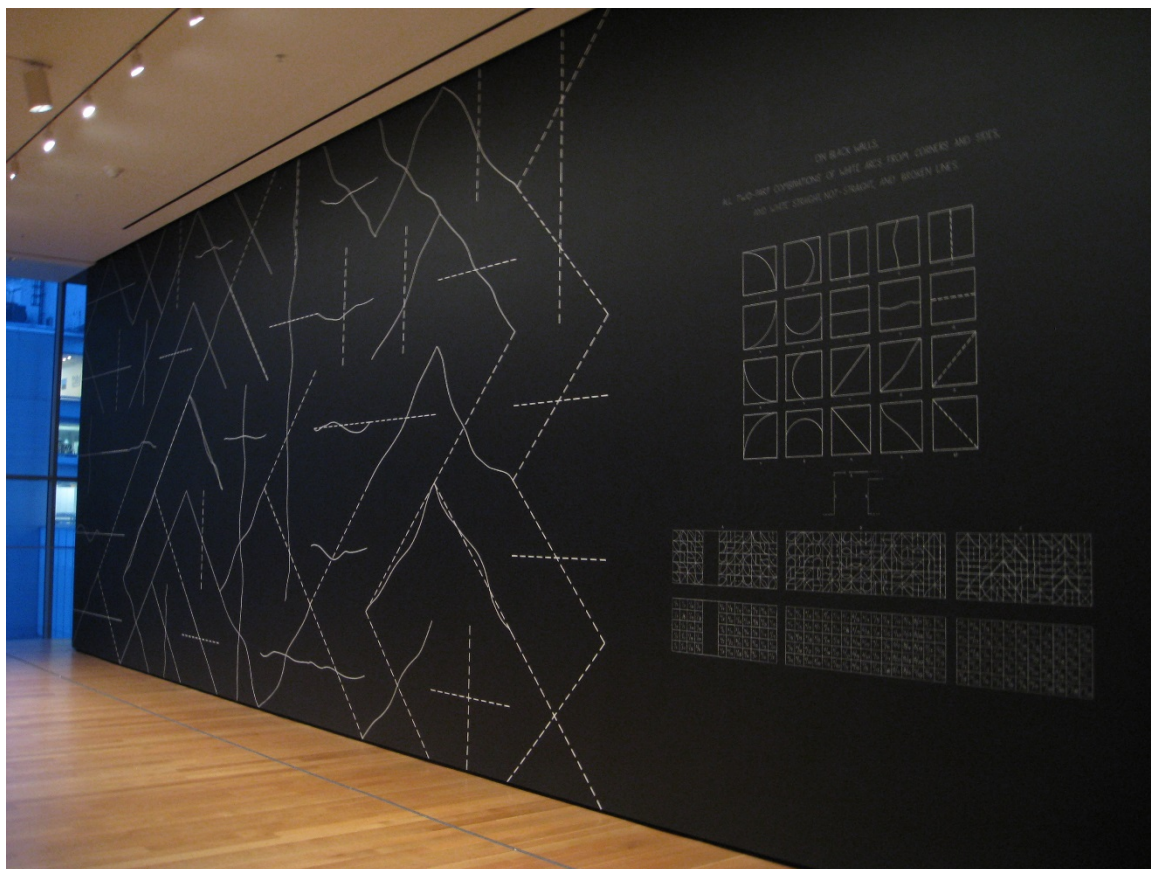


Plate 8: Sol LeWitt, *Wall Drawing #260*, 1975. Chalk on painted wall, dimensions variable. Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Plate 9: Paul Pfeiffer, still from *The Pure Products Go Crazy*, 1998. Digital video, DVD player, miniature projector, and metal armature; color, silent, looped; image, 3 × 4 in. (7.6 × 10.2 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

APPENDIX B

Table of Shot Sequence in *Reading the Rules*

In *Reading the Rules*, there are five shots of Mark McGwire running the bases.

Those five shots may be arranged according to the table below to produce 120 unique sequences. Mathematically, this is the result of the factorial expression of the number 5:

$$5 \times 4 \times 3 \times 2 \times 1 = 120.$$

Sequence	Order of Shots
1	1 2 3 4 5
2	1 2 3 5 4
3	1 2 4 3 5
4	1 2 4 5 3
5	1 2 5 3 4
6	1 2 5 4 3
7	1 3 2 4 5
8	1 3 2 5 4
9	1 3 4 2 5
10	1 3 4 5 2
11	1 3 5 2 4
12	1 3 5 4 2
13	1 4 2 3 5
14	1 4 2 5 3
15	1 4 3 2 5
16	1 4 3 5 2
17	1 4 5 2 3
18	1 4 5 3 2
19	1 5 2 3 4
20	1 5 2 4 3
21	1 5 3 2 4
22	1 5 3 4 2
23	1 5 4 2 3
24	1 5 4 3 2
25	2 1 3 4 5
26	2 1 3 5 4
27	2 1 4 3 5
28	2 1 4 5 3
29	2 1 5 3 4
30	2 1 5 4 3
31	2 3 1 4 5
32	2 3 1 5 4
33	2 3 4 1 5
34	2 3 4 5 1
35	2 3 5 1 4
36	2 3 5 4 1
37	2 4 1 3 5
38	2 4 1 5 3
39	2 4 3 1 5
40	2 4 3 5 1
41	2 4 5 1 3
42	2 4 5 3 1
43	2 5 1 3 4
44	2 5 1 4 3
45	2 5 3 1 4
46	2 5 3 4 1
47	2 5 4 1 3
48	2 5 4 3 1
49	3 1 2 4 5
50	3 1 2 5 4
51	3 1 4 2 5
52	3 1 4 5 2
53	3 1 5 2 4
54	3 1 5 4 2
55	3 2 1 4 5
56	3 2 1 5 4
57	3 2 4 1 5
58	3 2 4 5 1
59	3 2 5 1 4
60	3 2 5 4 1
61	3 4 1 2 5
62	3 4 1 5 2
63	3 4 2 1 5
64	3 4 2 5 1
65	3 4 5 1 2
66	3 4 5 2 1
67	3 5 1 2 4

68	3	5	1	4	2
69	3	5	2	1	4
70	3	5	2	4	1
71	3	5	4	1	2
72	3	5	4	2	1
73	4	1	2	3	5
74	4	1	2	5	3
75	4	1	3	2	5
76	4	1	3	5	2
77	4	1	5	2	3
78	4	1	5	3	2
79	4	2	1	3	5
80	4	2	1	5	3
81	4	2	3	1	5
82	4	2	3	5	1
83	4	2	5	1	3
84	4	2	5	3	1
85	4	3	1	2	5
86	4	3	1	5	2
87	4	3	2	1	5
88	4	3	2	5	1
89	4	3	5	1	2
90	4	3	5	2	1
91	4	5	1	2	3
92	4	5	1	3	2
93	4	5	2	1	3
94	4	5	2	3	1

95	4	5	3	1	2
96	4	5	3	2	1
97	5	1	2	3	4
98	5	1	2	4	3
99	5	1	3	2	4
100	5	1	3	4	2
101	5	1	4	2	3
102	5	1	4	3	2
103	5	2	1	3	4
104	5	2	1	4	3
105	5	2	3	1	4
106	5	2	3	4	1
107	5	2	4	1	3
108	5	2	4	3	1
109	5	3	1	2	4
110	5	3	1	4	2
111	5	3	2	1	4
112	5	3	2	4	1
113	5	3	4	1	2
114	5	3	4	2	1
115	5	4	1	2	3
116	5	4	1	3	2
117	5	4	2	1	3
118	5	4	2	3	1
119	5	4	3	1	2
120	5	4	3	2	1