

brief notes

Mark von Rosenstiel

written sporadically between September 6th - 22nd 2017

On the Mode of Existence of Narrative and Structure explores the various relationships that exist between us and the stories we create. The title of the show is a play on the title of a paper by Gilbert Simondon, On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects. There's a lot we could talk about in relating parts of the paper back to the works, but sometimes in things like this it is better to talk about what certain destinations look like versus details of the transportation that takes us there. Source material can be a bit like nice leather seats in the car on a boundless road-trip: they definitely help enjoy the passing scenery, but they're not necessarily critical to describing your experience.

the space above and below us

the space above and below us examines the way we exchange information with the world around us. Our experience is the result of a combination of internal and external information loops in which we embed ourselves. This is to say that we exchange information with ourselves ("Why was I so in love with my childhood pet parakeet?"), between ourselves and our environment ("That bird is red."), and combinations of both ("Look at that red bird that looks like my childhood parakeet").

These exchanges and the structure they create define entirely what we believe to be the Self¹ and what we understand to be the environment around us. It is in the structure of information exchange in and between these spheres that we manufacture absolutes. And by "absolutes" I mean constructions that we can continually orient ourselves to in order to gauge who we are and what we believe in. Easy examples are religion and science. An idea like "God" means that no matter how far flung I become in the solar system of my life, I can look to this idea that is like a sun to orient me to my existence. An absolute can also be something like a cultural norm that we take for granted because we don't assume it to be of any particular interest. It's just what happens. All the time. It surrounds us.

Say you're in a bar and a song comes on to which strangers suddenly start singing along. That action communicates something about the people singing. It highlights a norm between those people, and even if you don't know the song, you would understand it to be indicative of a relationship that exists between those people and when/where/how they were raised. You may

¹ I think of the Self as a volume with a dimensionality that is defined by axes that are broad categories of information exchange. Like if a room is defined by height, width, and depth, my Self could be defined by the desire to build, coffee, and family. Except imagine "desire to build", "coffee" and "family" were more broad categories and there were A LOT more of them. In that way our experiences are a lot like stuffed animals, that we try to cram into this volume of Self as best as possible. Everyone is just a weird shaped toy trunk, shoving stuffed animals in as best as we can.

even now relate yourself to it, since you, too, are sitting in the same bar as part of this community. That's information exchange. And its structure is considered absolute enough that no one questions what is happening.

An interest of mine is this assumed absoluteness that we take for granted. There's an absurdity, but also a beauty, in how we choose to buttress our experience. Spiritual and cultural information channels seem so rigid and certain; we forget that we made them not the other way around. They're a bit like a solid block of ice sitting in a room just above freezing: it looks like something that has existed for all time, but eventually you start to notice the pool of water forming around it.

Like singing songs in a bar, the construction of trees and hammers is a structure that has assumed absoluteness. The tree trunks seem immovable and the hammer and stakes firm in their structure and mechanical repetition. While we can physically place ourselves within it, we accept it as being an already firmly defined space.

What allows us to engage past the definitive nature of the physical structure is the soundscape that is created. Each hammer actually exists in a virtual world, where it behaves like a billiard ball, given energy from its own part of the sound wave in the room. When two virtual billiard balls hit, their corresponding hammers strike their spike. However, this soundscape itself is created, in part, from us being there. The sound of the people in the room and the hammers themselves, alter the pattern that the hammers strike their spikes. We are intrinsic to the space that is created. As we stand among the seemingly rigid structures of trees and hammers, we see the hand we can play in shaping the space we create with them. We do so not just directly through the soundscape, but also through the spikes that with every beat are ever so slightly changing the structures we considered absolute and in turn we are helping shaping the 'absolute' and the experience for those that follow.

So a question emerges about how to reintegrate and orient oneself to absolute information channels in order to gain something more from it. This piece is about recognizing narrative space and our own agency to shape it where we didn't think any existed. It's like walking down the dusty lane in an old western town and suddenly realizing that it's a movie set and all the buildings are just facades. They still serve their purpose, but there is an expanded set of possibility that now lies in your hands.

stories I try to tell the same never are

I've always been curious about how stories change with time. At times there is a deliberate desire to change our appearance to the outward world and, therefore, alter the narrative thread of how we tell a particular story. I could have held the door for a stranger because I saw they needed help and were holding lots of bags. Or, I could have held the door for a stranger because I momentarily forgot where my keys were, paused while opening the door, and then looked up to find them too close to walk away without feeling rude. But there is also a shift that

occurs as we, the storyteller, change internally with each retelling of a tale. Everyone thinks of some iteration of their past self as some stranger, but for some reason we always project ourselves into the future just as we are. We are some tomorrow's strangers to ourselves.

Because of this we're forced to reconsider our relationship to a story over and over again, even if we've already told it a 1000 times internally and externally.² And it will become something different in each retelling; we become different in each retelling. But there's a moment where we hold the story perfectly, before it is broken and must be re-consumed.

As the previous work speaks to information channels, this piece is more concerned with the structure that digests those information channels; the structure of Self and its relationship to narrative. There's a relationship in this work around environment (the wood slats leaning against the wall) and the Self (the sculptural element of beams) through wood created from various dimensions that are multiples of 5, 7 and 8. The Self is created from 5" x 8" rough cut pieces of fir, while the environment are 2" x 5" slabs. This is a nod to the idea that the Self is created through a relationship with its environment. It can't exist alone. And structurally they echo their counterparts in the real world: myself (somewhat of a tangle) and the environment around me (ordered and spaced evenly).

The main element of the work is the drawing of the same narrative thread over and over into the larger sculptural element. It is the retelling of the most simple idea, with the Self constantly changing as is its relationship with the environment. The geared mechanism both encompass a timekeeping³ analogy as well as a representation of information retention as the gears move towards the source motor. The faces of the gears were custom laser cut. The pattern on them was created through a program I wrote that continually removed more and more portions of each gear's face. These portions that were removed, were calculated off of multiples of 7, which mirrored the relationship of the number of teeth on each gear which are also multiples of 7. The numerical relation is meant to buttress the idea that internally created structures, while arbitrary, are best to be made as consistent as possible⁴. As the gears get closer to the source motor,

² Imagine you had a childhood dog that you loved so dearly and then one day in a park, a similar looking dog came up and bit your hand. I think the story of your childhood dog would likely change. Even if just a tiny bit.

³ While making this work, I thought a lot about ships carrying timepieces as a way for them to properly navigate longitude. I like this idea of a container (ship or person) carrying a mechanism that allows them to fulfill their purpose.

⁴ A perceived static-ness of Self also means we don't generally have a dimension of "I Love Yellow Stuffed Animals" and then add another that is "I Hate Stuffed Pikachus", although, while not quite so flagrant, we all carry equally paradoxical contradictions without consciously acknowledging them.

their faces become more solid.⁵ Although the beams obviously never change, the gears within are constantly adjusting with the continued pull of thread.

The question all this raises is about the process of storytelling itself as being as important as the actual story. This piece speaks to the passage of time and eventual demise of any thread of narrative, but the beauty of still telling it up until that last moment of clarity, when the final thread breaks.

many ways of blue

In the earliest days of railroads, there was this big problem with trying to coordinate train schedules over long distances. Everyone would just sit around hoping their train would be on time. And they'd also be hoping a super delayed train wasn't on the same track coming in the opposite direction. Then the telegraph came along and every station started tapping out information to every other station about the status of trains coming and going from their station.

However, this proved an incomplete solution: train schedules got good up to a certain distance from a particular station, but after that specific distance, trains were just as late and were smashing into each other just as often. The issue was that everyone was receiving crazy amounts of information at a certain point that they were supposed to then push down the line to the next station. What we now consider standard business communication structures, with managers in charge of information that is disseminated downward, emerged from the dire need to better communicate train schedules.

Similarly, but with simultaneously at a more microscopic and universal level, there is research now testing the theory that spacetime is result of quantum entanglement. Essentially, when particles are entangled they can transmit information instantaneously across any amount of distance. It's theorized that this instantaneous transmission of information shapes the spacetime of the universe. Taken to an extreme, this begs the question: if you can communicate everything instantaneously, do narratives exist or matter?

The two examples are pointing out that the rate at which we digest and pass on information ends up being inseparable from the mediums in which the the information can be digested. Sort of like RNA/DNA. One makes the other which then is part of the process which will then make the first. Recursion. The medium is the message as Marshall McLuhan said.

⁵ A lot of what we internalize also tends to become more opaque. Maybe it's a bit like our first ideas that we don't know what to do with that end up in a junk drawer in the kitchen, and then through time we realize we have enough of a similar thing, like paperclips, so we make a little bucket for paperclips and we don't ever have to think of what to do with them anymore. They have somewhere to sit undisturbed.

These machines are each recording the amount of blue in the room. The idea of the amount of blue is pretty arbitrary, and could be approached in many different ways. These machines each float around on top of a live video stream of the room. They then explore regions of interest in the room and compare the amount of blue where they are to that region of interest. The marks they make on the floor are representations of the distance they are to their corresponding region of interest and the difference in the blues between themselves and those regions of interest.

Although each segment they are drawing starts off looking pretty different, as time goes on their respective areas start to look pretty similar. Limiting information and the structure in which it is shared creates locally specific narrative, but over time, information around the same event becomes squashed into a simplified description. A single narrative.

The questions raised are around information, representation, and interpretation. For example, large data analytics is increasingly playing a greater role in our lives, often through representations that fall outside the ability for humans to comprehend their meaning.⁶ At certain junctions, the data that is represented stops having meaning to the recipient and it is more the general choice of how the data is represented that starts to take on meaning.

little pointless actions can be the hub of a wheel

This work speaks most directly to the title of the show. Simondon had this idea about a wheel hub being a perfect object. In the olden days carts were dragged through streets, by placing logs in front of each other. Logs that the cart had passed over were taken from the back and placed in front of the cart to be used again.

A wheel hub is basically creating this action on its own, by placing a bearing continually to the front of the wheel. It fulfills and encapsulates its desired use perfectly. But Simondon argued that in this perfection, the object creates its own identity and sets itself in motion to be used outside and within many new applications; applications we maybe never have seen and so the object ends up becoming a catalyst, creating change in its inventor.

The thing we make, in turn makes us.

The video plays on this example he gives and my own vivid memories of logs used in the streets of old Seattle to help facilitate dragging large loads around. From this starting point, the video zooms out into found footage of many repetitive motions in the last year of my life. The

⁶ On the opposite end of the experiential spectrum, there are stories of people who after doing aid work for a year or two in the jungles of Congo, are placed in some small village in the desert as they wait for their next assignment. But they are unable to leave their accommodations, because the scale of their environment is too overwhelming; they are used to seeing only one or two meters ahead of themselves, and suddenly, in the desert, the horizon of the planet is the only boundary. The information scale of a jungle becomes normalized over time and they almost literally become incapable of seeing the forest for the trees.

idea is to simply highlight this idea of repetition in little moments of day, highlighting them, putting attention into them and drawing them into their own moment. In this way they are held as an individual and then are no longer pointless action but a broader narrative around the fact that process and repetition itself is what can delineate time and create meaning.

There's a desire to create grand narratives in our lives because progress makes us feel like we're going SOMEWHERE. I have a feeling this desire might be a very American thing and a lot of people like Foucault argue about the illusion of progress as a way to just highlight current power structures. The understanding of smaller actions being important to process and in turn driving progress in some manner or another is worth considering.