DETECTING AMBIENT PRESSURE

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a reflection on an experience that I had in a bathtub in 2013 and the following four years of self-introspective research into how my brain works. The left-brain interpreter portion of the human brain relates experience to the conscious mind through storytelling. Stories play an integral role in understanding how to navigate our world. The brain's self-censoring executive functioning operates on the stories we tell ourselves. Metacognitive awareness can result in the mind releasing from storytelling to find a place between stories. This experience is familiar to all of us who have come out of a movie theater to find ourselves caught between the story of an engaging movie and the story of our own lives. I call these experiences between stories epistory intervals. Epistory intervals can be rejuvenating breaks from the authority of thought. Installation art is an adaptable platform that can allow for the exploration of a variety of mental states because of its exploratory nature, self-reflective capacity and lens of inquiry.

PROLOGUE

Our metacognitive ability to reflect on our own consciousness is an amazing mystery. From Buddhist philosophy‘s concentration states to the Brechtian breaking of the fourth wall, cultures around the world have been investigating and describing various states of consciousness for thousands of years.[1, 2] Due to developments in modern neuroscience, we know more about the brain than ever before. Despite thousands of years of research into the human mind, our common vernacular to describe consciousness remains limited. I have found it helpful to use the term, epistory interval, to describe one particular mental state that has informed my practice. This term refers to a momentary disinvestment in the authority of thought that leads to a feeling of calm.

While discussing consciousness, let us first establish that conscious awareness exists in a wide range. Often times we think of consciousness in terms of binary thinking; either something has consciousness or it does not. Even though we are capable of very self-reflective levels of consciousness, much of our time is spent being about as conscious as a mouse reacting to stimuli and this is completely normal.

THE EPISTORY INTERVAL: TELLING THE STORY BETWEEN STORIES

Graduate school in Fine Art has been a prolonged period of self-introspection instigated by some serious mental confusion. Before graduate school, I went through some kind of crisis accompanied by the collision between two polar opposite emotions. While living abroad for six months, I had many happy experiences and felt like there was a lot that I had accomplished. At the same time, a cancer unknown to me progressed to stage four. While I was living with an undiagnosed cancer, my body knew something was wrong and I moved much more slowly. I spent several hours a day in the bathtub. It was actually pretty wonderful.

Soon after diagnosis, my dread of cancer combined with the previous contentment of accomplishment. It felt like my life was a pleasant book that was coming to its timely conclusion. So began a confusion that would last a few years. During the earlier mentioned weeks of bathtub time, I often sat with my thoughts in silence until the pace at which I experienced time slowed. This period of pleasant slowness lingered for months. I felt a disconnection from my usual thought patterns. There was a detachment from the authority of stories told within my mind, by my mind. This thesis is a reflection on the nature of thought and our relationship to the stories we tell.

Stories are the way we understand why things are the way they are. Joseph Campbell's monomyth of the "Hero's Journey" is such a powerful and recurring story because it explains how a heroic character became heroic. From the hero's tale, we can ascribe meaning to our own life stories. Likewise, once we discovered the story of evolution, we are able to better understand the development of species across time and

our place among them. Stories are how we understand our world and ourselves. Neuropsychologist Paul Broks says “What we normally think of when we think about ourselves is really a story; a story of what has happened to that body over time.” [3, 4]

There are times when the interval between mental story engagements can be extended and we find ourselves caught in the transitional space between two stories. While caught between stories, mental chatter quiets and the mind often focuses on what is directly obvious. Mental attention may shift from planning what to do next, to thinking, “Wow, this is strange. Here I am, aware of myself for the first time in a while.” This is the mental state that I am referring to as the epistory interval. This mental state is temporary and the mental footing is tenuous. It tends to come along with the knowledge that another engaging story will soon take its place.

Although talking about the epistory interval can be off-putting because it can be difficult to describe, I have found that most people can relate to the feeling with familiarity and fondness. For example, many people have experienced the odd feeling of an uncoupled mind after waking up from a nap, content to watch dust motes drift through the air. A similar interval can be experienced when coming out of a movie theater in the daytime while expecting the night but seeing the sun's light still patiently waiting. A commonly experienced interval is felt after finishing a Netflix binge of an entire series, one can momentarily experience a strange disconnect with reality. Similarly, one can experience a pleasant interval just after finishing a captivating book, while not quite ready to let go of the characters and rejoin society in attending to everyday life’s needs.

We are granted a similar perspective shift when we sit quietly outdoors watching an animal go on with its chores tasked by nature. The perspective shift granted can be reminiscent of the sensation of smallness when contemplating the immensity of the universe we live in and the unyielding flow of time through the study of Astronomy or stargazing.

Being aware of one's own coming death can result in an extended interval between the story of one's life and the mystery of death. Without much time to live, thoughts of the future lose authority over direct experience.

I believe that when recognized, there is value in these intervals between stories. The value in these moments is the granting of an alternative perspective through which to view one's own life. The epistory interval is a temporary release from the authority of the urgency of one's thoughts. We are momentarily reminded that there is a wide world going on outside of our own personal stories and aspirations.

There is nothing magical or esoteric about the epistory interval. We all have small opportunities to experience epistory intervals every day. Nearly all of the intervals between stories are brief and go unnoticed. This mental state only becomes relevant to us when we direct our metacognition towards it.

The feeling tone that the epistory interval incites is often reminiscent of childhood and can be easily mistaken for childhood nostalgia. As was my case until an encounter with near death, many adults have led busy schedules and not had time to appreciate an epistory interval since childhood and therefore associate the experience with childhood nostalgia. For those adults in which this is the case, I have good news: the epistory

interval is entirely different from childhood nostalgia and is absolutely possible to be part of a healthy adult psyche.

In 1975, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi began publishing about a different mental state called Flow Psychology. In his 1990 publication, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, Flow is a psychological state of getting lost in doing that can commonly be understood as being in the zone. Entering into a flow state can increase overall performance and can result in a great mood. Csikszentmihalyi writes, "… the more time a person spent in flow during the week, the better was the overall quality of his or her reported experience." [6] I can understand that flow state is strongly correlated with highly creative work, but it is important to note that it is not the only way to be creative. Creativity is far more complex than simply getting in the zone, but some ways of creativity thrive on flow state.

The happiness brought about by flow state is a happiness that differs from the giddy and fleeting excitement of getting what we want because it does not come from getting anything. I think there is a greater value to engaging in a state of flow than Csikszentmihalyi foresaw. Getting completely lost in doing something often provides a stark enough contrast between two activities that it becomes easier to recognize the space between stories. For example, after an intense workout, it is common to experience a "high" while catching one's breath.

Flow state and the epistory interval share a similar quality, the quieting of mental chatter. In neuroscientist Jill Bolte Taylor's book, *My Stroke of Insight*, she writes of her experience of having had a stroke that inhibited her mental chatter. When talking about

the experience she says it was, "… just like somebody took a remote control and pushed the mute button." She affectionately refers to that quiet mental state as "Lala-land". "I had found a peace inside of myself that I had not known before. I had pure silence inside of my mind." She continues, "It was all of the present moment." When asked if she had thoughts, she replies, "I had joy" and continues, "I lost all definition of myself in relation to everything in the external world." [7]

While release from thought might be freeing, thinking is an essential part of navigating social terrain. Jill Bolte Taylor had to relearn to have mental chatter in order to rejoin society. "I did not have that portion of my language centers that tells a story through language, that language was gone. I got to essentially become an infant again." What fascinates me is that she speaks of learning to regain mental chatter as a sacrifice to rejoin society. "In order for us to communicate with language, we pull ourselves away from another kind of experience. I do believe that there are times when you need to let your brain chatter be quiet." [8, 9] While trying to explain the experience of her stroke, the interviewer interrupted Jill Bolte Taylor while laughing to ask, "Did you have a deadhead period in your life by any chance?" [10] This is a perfect example of the unfortunate societal dismissal of contemplative matters.

This distaste for the contemplative life has led to a culture of distraction in which discussing the fact of mortality becomes less of a reflection of a fundamental truth and more of a waste of time. If we have free time, we often get bored if we do not engage with a story. Csikszentmihalyi points out that because of the rise of the booming entertainment industry, we can witness others entering into a flow state rather than do it

ourselves. "We do not run risk of acting on our beliefs, but occupy hours each day watching actors pretend to have adventures, engaged in mock-meaningful action." [11]

Mental distraction inhibits both flow state and the epistory interval. In modern culture, one can find any length of media to entertain one's self for any amount of time. People never have to be bored again. From the length of an airplane trip to a visit to the toilet, it is possible to never have to be alone with one's own thoughts. As American writer and political activist, Anne Lamott puts it, "My mind is like a bad neighborhood, I try not to go there alone." [12]

THE FALLIBLE STOWAWAY: THE MIND

We often think of ourselves as our brains. As if in our brain resides a tiny person in a control tower directing the movements of the body. Science is showing that this way of viewing the self is incorrect. Most of the things the brain does are not related to conscious thought at all. From regulating our pulse to releasing hormones, the brain is very busy with activities that we could not control even if we desired to do so. For example, it is impossible to exhale all of the air from one's lungs to completely deflate them. The brain has unconscious checks and regulations over many of our conscious actions. We are unaware and not in control of most of our body and brain functions.

In David Eagleman's book, *Incognito*, he explains the conscious brain as a stowaway on a steamship. The steamship is a metaphor for one's entire body.[13] Somehow, there is a notion that this stowaway on the steamship is the captain or perhaps even the entire ship. The brain is not completely conscious and the conscious mind is certainly not the complete brain. While every part of the brain is concerned with the well-being of the organism, each part of the brain is focused on different tasks. The conscious mind stands out and appears to be the steamship captain because it happens to be the only one onboard who can speak a modern language. Most of the brain cannot communicate with the conscious mind at all.[14]

The left-brain interpreter is an area of the brain coined by professor of psychology Michael S. Gazzaniga at the University of California, Santa Barbara. This part of the brain creates explanations for what we experience in the world in story form. Jill Bolte Taylor says, "Language is an ongoing information processing, it is the constant reminder,

I am. This is my name. This is all the data related to me." [15] The left-brain interpreter is always present and is what brings our past and present experience together to give a sense of a unified self.

An unaltered brain has two hemispheres that interact through a corpus callosum. In some cases of brain injury, the corpus callosum can become severed and inhibit the two hemispheres from communicating. The left hemisphere of the brain would not have access to what the left eye is seeing since the information from the left eye is sent into the right hemisphere. When shown a disturbing photograph in only the left eye, someone with a severed corpus callosum would have a physical reaction to what they see but the storytelling portion of their brain, the left brain interpreter, would not have access to the visual information to pin the disturbing image with feeling sick. When asked what is wrong, the left-brain interpreter can be caught in the act of storytelling when the patient rationalizes a response having to do with eating something bad or coming down with a cold.[16] The brain is a natural storyteller.

The left-brain interpreter can be seen in physically unaltered test subjects as well. In a study known as the Nisbett and Wilson stocking study, participants were asked which of four stockings they preferred from on a display. After selecting their preferred stocking, participants had to give explanations for their reasoning. Participants came up with a variety of explanations for liking one stocking over the other having to do with texture or other qualities. Most participants chose the stocking on the right. The vital piece of information that they were missing was that the four stockings were identical.[17] Again, the conscious story telling part of the brain will find its reasons even if it has to

make a story up. The actual reason that most participants chose the stocking on the right was because the majority of people tend to feel more comfortable with things that are presented on their right, but clearly their reasoning did not take this into account.

Cognitive scientist Ryan Scott said in an interview, “But in many other regards, what we think we’re basing our judgments and decisions on clearly isn’t the case. We can– And that, that can be shown time and time again. A lot of the – a lot of our confidence in the basis of a judgment is post hoc. We seem to be justifying the decisions.” [18] Making room for momentary breaks between mental engagements can provide a space to reassess the accuracy with which the left-brain interpreter is deciphering reality. As twentieth century essayist Anaïs Nin wrote, “We do not see the world as it is, but as we are.” [19]

FINDING UNKNOWNS: THE CREATIVITY EXERCISE

During some time that I took off from school, I spent several months at a cabin with no Internet. I was able to engage in distraction-free and playful learning as I wrote and illustrated several short stories. This rediscovery of my own carefree creativity was actually my own version of a creativity exercise similar to those assigned to students as part of the Ideation and Creativity Artz 110 curriculum. Many of the stories that I wrote take place in a cave, underwater or on another planet. These places represent the unknown and lend themselves well to creative story generation. I turned my own process into a creativity exercise, titled "Finding Unknowns". It goes as follows:

> Please complete one of the following sentences with as much story as you like.
> "Deep in a cave, I found…"
> Or, "On the ocean floor, I found…"
> Or, "On another planet, I found…"
> After completing your story, please illustrate it on the back.

This creativity exercise is a record of varied levels of engagement with creative storytelling. Participants who fully engaged with the exercise experienced storytelling with parallels to flow state. Participants with low engagement levels experienced a variety of hindering factors.

After receiving 127 results from participants, ages 7-65, I created assessment criteria to assist in evaluating the level of engagement participants had with the exercise. I am aware that there is an inherent problem with me being the creator, distributor and assessment criteria evaluator. It is important to keep in mind that this particular portion of my research has not undergone scientific rigor; the results are one artist's interpretation

of gathered creativity exercises. The following assessment criteria rubric was used to gage the creativity exercise results.

Zero- overly simplistic, essentially opting out of the creativity exercise
One- settling for a cliché or undeveloped story
Two- thoughtful illustration or storytelling
Three- innovative and unwilling to settle for cliché
Four- personally invested in the creative process and effective storytelling combined with illustration

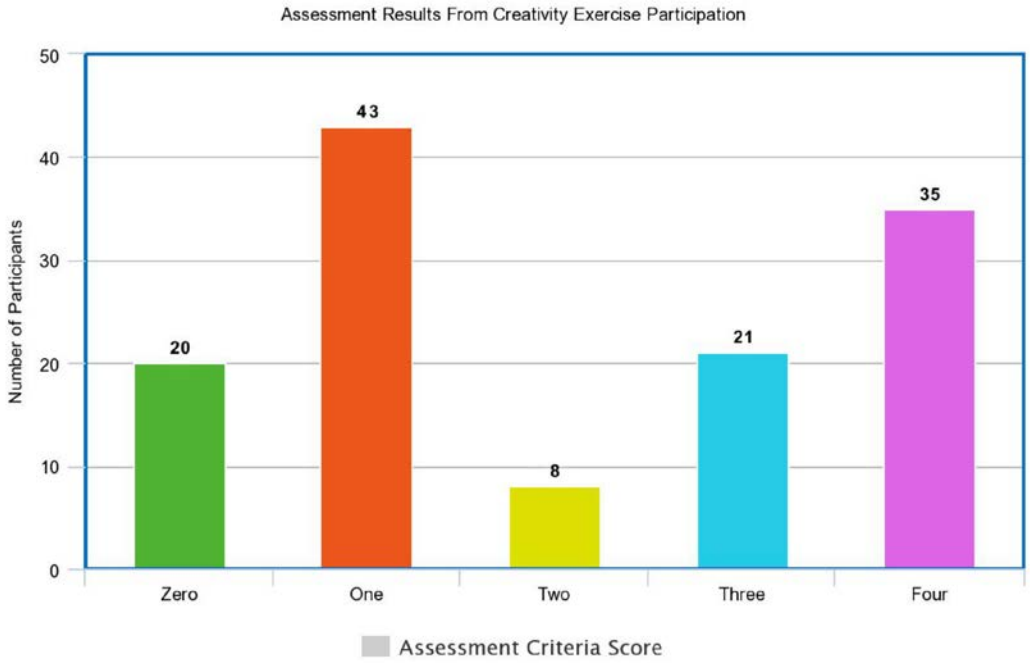

Table 1. Assessment Results From Creativity Exercise Participation

As you can see, the levels of engagement seem to be split between low levels of engagement and very high levels of engagement. The anonymity of the creativity exercise lent some participants the freedom to create without fear of judgment and others the ability to disengage and essentially bypass the exercise. There was no credit or punishment associated with the exercise, so what keeps people from engaging with their own creative storytelling?

In the frontal lobe of the human brain resides an essential set of controls known as the executive functions. These make possible the cognitive control of behavior, such as working memory, mental flexibility, and self-control. To be specific, executive functions allow for maintaining focus, thinking before acting, suppressing temptations and manipulating ideas.[20] Executive functioning is responsible for the feeling that we are in control of our actions and thoughts.[21] Even an anonymous creativity exercise that is designed to be pressure-free will trigger self-regulation in most individuals. Self-censoring executive functioning operates on basis of stories told by the left-brain interpreter to the conscious mind.

After finishing their stories, I asked participants to write about the experience of storytelling pertaining to whether or not they thought about what others would think. Something many participants reported was a hesitation due to their own internal voice saying what to avoid writing. In general, people seemed terrified to participate in this exercise. “Some things in our heads are just not fit to share”, “… there are always things in your mind that don’t seem right to put down on paper for others to read.” “At first, I felt awkward. The storytelling seemed too childish. I tried to find sophisticated ideas so I could be impressive.” Some participants reported not having any thoughts while creating, but the majority of participants’ stories were influenced by the pressure of others potentially seeing their work. I should note here that sometimes work was reported as being improved because people would see the results. So pressure does not necessarily limit engagement. Worry and fear appeared multiple times in participants’ reflections.

We cannot direct our conscious mind down multiple avenues at once. Worry over what others might think will likely inhibit creativity, flow states and epistory intervals, but can also increase personal commitment in some cases. It should come as no surprise that part of our everyday conscious experience involves avoiding emotional pain while navigating difficult social hierarchies, attending to responsibilities and expressing ourselves. Instead, I want to ask you to take a look for yourself. Even if you do not consider yourself an anxious person, please reflect on the following questions.

How aware are you of your own executive functioning?
How does executive function keep you out of danger?
How does executive function censor you?
What kind of stories do you tell about yourself?

DETECTING AMBIENT PRESSURE: THE EXHIBITION

I have taken considerable time to introduce the conceptual framework behind my thesis. Here, I take a more detailed look at the exhibition and the professionals that have informed my work.

There is a distinct self-reflective aspect to this thesis that is present in the white vinyl questions on the walls and the text between stories in the storybooks. These questions function as metacognitive triggers. The questions within the books and on the walls of the gallery are textual cues to reflect on the raw facts of one's mental experience.

I have included these metacognitive triggers at the beginnings and ends of each written story and at the beginning and end of the experiential story in the darkened room. Metacognition can have a powerful effect if applied at just the right moment when the mind is willing to let go of one captivation and before the next story grabs the mind's attention.

Visualizations are often paired with lingual stories in our minds. The importance of visualizations in storytelling informed my decision to include the stories that I wrote. The art installation within the dark room is a compiled visualization of events of imaginative discovery within the featured written stories. I wanted to bring to life these experiences of the immersive creative flow state that I had while working at the cabin.

The books are my first attempt at writing and illustrating a series, as well as, my first attempt at watercolor. There is something powerfully vulnerable about the amateurish quality of these books. Although these books are far from skillful, it is important for me to share them. There is a sense of genuineness about them because they

are themselves records of my attempt to rediscover my own creativity. They are also my rejection of the self-protective and self-censoring tendencies of my executive function. The books are visual artifacts of the flow state of learning a creative skill. Intended for any age, the stories regularly create dialogue relating to the strange phenomenon of consciousness. One example can be found on page 55 of Time Traveling With Grannie, “There was something familiar about being a dinosaur baby. Life as an infant is similar across all of time, maybe.“

I admit that the level of engagement in these books will likely be limited. I decided not to push the prominence of the books within the show. I do think viewers willing to engage with the books will understand their relevance. Ultimately, the presence of the books adds context and supplemental material for further investigation for those interested. Though a bit unconventional, I consider the stories to be adequate substitutes for an artist statement. They also have an integral role in establishing the self-reflective and playful atmosphere of the entire exhibition.

The darkness within the installation room also contributes to the playful atmosphere of the show. I knew that darkness would be an essential component in transporting the viewer to a psychological space. A darkened space allows for the viewer to explore with less distraction and at a slower pace. The visual field of a smartphone flashlight in darkness shrinks to illuminate only what is immediately obvious. User controlled light with limited luminosity allows for one piece of the artwork to be uncovered at a time. This piece-by-piece aspect of discovery enables deeper immersion due to less visual distraction, sense of an unraveling storyline and the effects of

anticipation. Furthermore, the agency granted by a handheld light encourages close inspection of the artwork that can fuel and focus the innate curiosity inherent in anyone who sets the time out of their day to explore an art installation.

Panels running along the wall are covered with red earth and contain varied amounts of natural debris. Fossil-like sculptural forms are embedded in the red earth and make for exciting discoveries. Some fossils reference plants while others reference animal morphology. Plant fossils were fabricated by soaking and spraying Canadian thistles or other combustible material in deflocculated slip and then using a kiln to burn out the organic material. Other fossils were made by hand pinching forms and then using a glaze with high thermal expansion. The thermal expansion caused the glaze to have a cracked texture into which I rubbed red earth to create the appearance of fossilized age. Some handmade fossils displayed are a giant trilobite, a three-panel Titanoboa skeleton and a Pterodactyl skull. The panels also host some novel surprises taken from creativity exercises. Some examples are, “A cache of old mittens and a cache of old hands.”, My soul trapped in shattered glass”, “Several new specimens” and a fossilized shoe.

Branches extend from the panels and hover over white walls. The white walls are the perfect canvas for one of the main features of this installation. As a viewer walks through the darkened space with their flashlight, the branches create thin wraith like shadows that creep and dance with the moving light source. I expect most visitors to the gallery to get lost enjoying their control over the play of shadows throughout the space. The sense of play in this exhibition contributes to an atmosphere of safety that can make

it easier for some to let their guard down, similar to the way a playful icebreaker can ease social tension in a group setting.

The panels themselves hold no definite story. I decided to include a combination of events from numerous stories that are presented in the first room. This combined space of collective imaginings results in a space that is simultaneously subterranean, underwater and otherworldly. While there is a main entrance to the darkened space, viewers are able to wander freely within the space to discover their own interpretation of a story.

A black curtain divides the light and dark spaces. A curtain references theater and the entering of a psychological space in which we routinely suspend our disbelief. I also avoided using directly recorded natural sounds such as crickets, water dripping or wind. Instead, I decided to fabricate unidentifiable sounds that still contribute to creating atmosphere while not feeling like a direct and lifeless imitation of nature.

Composed in an A flat minor scale, the main track that I used for the sound in this exhibition fluctuates from gradually heightening cresting crescendos to absolute silence. The sound, too, is meant to reflect psychological space. I designed this sound to be suggestive of the epistory interval. The viewer engages in viewing for 10 to 20 seconds of gradually increasing sound, then the sound disappears and the viewer/listener might not notice that the sound has left until the next sound begins to emerge. In this way, the sound is much like our thoughts.

It was important for me to include something that could further the element of suspension of disbelief and perhaps even baffle some gallery-goers. Arthur C. Clarke

once wrote, "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." I purchased a breaking edge speaker from a Kickstarter made of an ultrasound speaker array. This speaker is called the “Soundlazer” and directs sound in a beam in a similar way to how a laser directs light. This unidirectional speaker is one contributing factor to the evocation of the childlike curiosity innate to all of us.

It occurred to me that the Helen E. Copeland Gallery is an excellent space to explore the mental states and the transitions between them because the space is a gallery and a hallway; it is part of many of our daily commutes. By creating an immersive cave-like psychological space, the act of coming back into the mental space of school becomes a huge mental gulf to leap. Just as we are taken aback by the daylight after leaving the movie theater during the day, heading back to the corridors of Haynes Hall will provide a chance to spot the mental space between stories.[22]

THE PROFESSIONALS: INFLUENTIAL ARTISTS

Many in the creative fields explored concepts directly related to the epistory interval. Installation and sound artist, Janet Cardif is fascinated by the strange phenomenon that occurs inside a movie theater. Tens of strangers gather together to sit in front of a giant projection of quickly timed still images with surround sound. While watching a movie, we can be completely absorbed in the story even though lurking in our peripheral vision is the theater, curtains, people and even an exit sign. Roland Barthes calls this the ‘cinema-situation’.[23]

She critiques the ‘cinema-situation’ in an installation made in collaboration with George Burres entitled, the “Paradise Institute”. In this installation, visitors enter a cinema-like setting and put on headphones. As the film begins, the viewer's attention is quickly grabbed by the sounds of the many distractions found in a cinema. The chewing of popcorn, a whispering lady, the rustling of clothes and a ringing phone become the focus of the piece. By working from the relatively new term, Janet Cardif was able to create a dialogue through her work to further investigating an often-overlooked aspect of mental experience.

Janet Cardiff & George Bures Miller’s “The Storm Room” has been wonderfully informative as to how to transport a viewer out of their personal mental space through narrative. The narrative for the piece is simple and relatable. The viewer enters the room to find themselves secure indoors while a terrible storm rages outside. Buckets set on the floor collect water falling through a false leaky roof. Encased in double windows, continuous artificial rain falls while thunder and lightning complete the story. I imagine

walking from this installation to a bright sunny day effectively highlights the distinction between being in the storm and being back to one's own life story.

The first time that an artwork has ever been able to move me in a way that disconnected me from my own personal storyline was when I walked into Yayoi Kusama's installation entitled Fireflies. Yayoi Kusama's "Fireflies" explores the convergence of artificial reality and real life through surrealist installation. The room was disorienting, enchanting and playful in design. I also found the simplicity of hanging LED strands that were infinitely reflected by surrounding mirrors to be brilliant. The illusion of infinite space and motion was not complete until a gallery goer traversed the space, consequently bumping into the strands, inducing a dizzying dance across an entire field of vision. The room was able to successfully remove audience members from not only their own storylines, but also the museum context.

Another Japanese artist that I have been inspired by is Motohiko Odani. Odani's 2012 video installation, "Inferno", is a dodecagonal room filled with projections of water falling in slow motion. The audio for this room, created by Kai Takashima is something between the impetuous roar of a waterfall and a single endless note of Carl Orff's O Fortuna. Needless to say, the sound is unsettling and shocks the audience out of their personal dialogues to something visceral and immediate. While I decided not to take the shock approach to transporting the viewer, the unmelodic quality of the sound in the installation inspired my own sound work. The sound becomes similar to overwhelming white noise, or perhaps, impenetrable darkness.

Discussing artists using darkness, Claire Bishop writes, “They seem to dislodge or annihilate our sense of self-albeit only temporarily-by plunging us into darkness…” Later in the passage Bishop continues, “At its extreme, this lack of orientation can even raise the question of whether it is accurate to speak of ‘self-awareness’ in these circumstances.”[24] Here, Claire Bishop is speaking of installations that utilize complete blackness, a blackness that is seldom encountered in modern life. While the level of darkness that I utilize is broken by viewers’ flashlights, users’ bodies are similarly obscured. “…one does not sense one’s boundaries, which are displaced in the darkness, and one begins to coincide with the space.”[24] This passage from Claire Bishop’s foundational book, *Installation Art*, illuminates how a viewer can get lost in an immersive space and enter an unselfconscious state of flow.

James Turrell’s work addresses phenomenological perception in a way that few artists can. Bishop writes “Rather than grounding the viewer’s perception in the here and now, Turrell’s installations are spaces of withdrawal that suspend time and orphan us from the world.” Turrell’s work is met with a variety of responses. Some feel a deep relaxation while others experience anxiety. The spectrum of experience possible from Turrell’s work becomes viewer dependent. Whether or not one experiences relaxation or anxiety while experiencing one of Turrell’s installations can be an insightful piece of information for self-reflection. While Turrell proclaims that perception is the “Object and objective” of his work, the work does not outwardly encourage self-reflection. “Turrell’s works do not make us ‘see ourselves seeing’ because, as George Huberman has observed, ‘How indeed could I observe myself losing my sense of spatial limits?’”[25]

When Huberman speaks of losing one's sense of spatial limits, what Huberman is expressing is that while we are lost in a story or state of flow, our self-reflective capability changes, but I personally would not say that it disappears. Concerning immersive experience, it is possible to be self-aware while in a state of flow. In my mind, that combination of self-awareness and flow state are accompanied by the mental dialogue, "This is amazing" or "I don't want this to end". Perhaps what disappears is self-conscious anxiety rather than metacognitive self-awareness.

The textual aspect to my thesis work is also informed by contemporary artwork. One artist that I am directly informed by is Jenny Holzer. While her pieces are often seen through the Feminist lens, the work can also be looked at psychologically. Her work is particularly successful because of the way that it triggers self-reflection in some of the most meaningful places possible. The text, "ABUSE OF POWER COMES AS NO SURPRISE", was displayed in the center of the Empire State's booming metropolis, Time Square. One Holzer piece that I find informative is a piece of text taken from a book of poems from author, Erik Sagajewski. The text "DON'T ALLOW THE LUCID MOMENT TO DISSOLVE" is projected into the sky. The text is incredibly self-reflective and subtly causes a viewer to become self-aware of the moment they are experiencing and their inability to keep their moment of lucidity from disappearing.

The playwright Bertolt Brecht used several methods of distancing his audience from his plays. This distancing effect known as, Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*, utilizes self-reflective strategies during performances like breaking the forth wall. Brecht writes in his essay "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting" that he was informed by traditional

Chinese theater strategies. Brecht was interested in reminding his audience that they are in a play in order to keep the audience from emotional investment in the characters. Alienation from empathy towards characters was employed to encourage viewers to remain critical observers. In a similar way, I create opportunities for the viewer to witness the theatric nature that thought can take but I do not alienate audiences from their own thoughts.

My work utilizes the explorative quality of Yayoi Kusama's installation "Fireflies" and some of the self-obscuring techniques that James Turrell's work investigates. Detecting Ambient Pressure adds a self-reflective element to the installation experience that is informed by text art and theater for which only the user can be responsible to experience. As an artist, I utilize installation art to create opportunities to investigate nuanced mental states like the epistory interval. Audience members can choose how to engage with this exhibition for themselves and everyone's experience of the exhibition will be different.

EPILOGUE

Throughout history, many terms have been used to describe nearly all of the complexities of conscious experience but our common vernacular is still developing. As our understanding of the brain progresses, opportunities to further understand and explain nuanced mental states become available. Even though psychological experiences like flow states and epistory intervals are subjective, most people can relate to these mental states. Promptly timed metacognitive awareness can result in rejuvenating breaks from the authority of thought. Installation art can play a role in creating opportunities to experience a variety of mental states due to its exploratory nature, self-reflective capacity and lens of inquiry. At the end of each story is an opportunity to experience an interval between stories.

What happens between stories?

ENDNOTES

1. *Samadhi* is a Sanskrit word that translates to meditative concentration.
2. The Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* is a German term that translates to the alienation effect and is used for reminding an audience they are witnessing theater.
3. Broks, 2010
4. Some relevant vocabulary imported to the USA from Buddhism has been in common use since as the 1950s. In recent years, mindfulness has become a buzzword and is used in corporate settings like during pre-meeting meditation sessions at Google. I do not mean to discredit the mindfulness movement at all, I think it is inspiring and long overdue for our culture to become more self-reflective. For this paper, I will be using the term metacognitive awareness rather than mindfulness because of the vagueness of the word mindfulness. In the common vernacular, mindfulness could mean anything from paying attention while listening to the news to a complete transcendental awakening. "Present awareness" is part of experiencing the epistory interval. There is definitely a sense of being present when experiencing the space between stories, but it is the vagueness of the term "Present awareness", that is part of the problem that we face with our current common vernacular. It is possible to be presently aware of one's cluttered mental space or while completely engaged in a story. The term "Present awareness" covers far too broad of a range of experience. Just as much as work is dependent on the available tools, our capacity for complex discussion pertaining to nuance mental states is dependent on our available vocabulary.
5. Csikszentmihalyi, 1990
6. Csikszentmihalyi, 1990
7. Bolte Taylor, 2010
8. Bolte Taylor, 2010
9. Heavy drug addicts also seek a disconnection with the thinking mind. Drugs and alcohol are popular at parties because of the associated release of inhibition and good feelings that come from being around others without annoying mental chatter. I suppose the epistory interval grants a similar desirable relief. I argue that what many drugs grant is more akin to what Jill Bolte Taylor experienced, the relief from thought all together. The distinction that I want to make here is that thought does continue during a epistory interval, perspective on those thoughts is what changes. For this reason, I had to adjust my original nomenclature from the "no-story interval to the epistory. The prefix, "epi", can mean "after" and also, "close to", which better suits this mental state because it is not the mental state of having no conscious thought whatsoever. However, it is the mental state that happens just after and subsequently before being engaged in a story. During these intervals, thoughts are no longer stories that enthrall the conscious mind.
10. Krulwich, 2010
11. Csikszentmihalyi, 1990
12. Lamott, 2005
13. Eagleman, 2011
14. McRaney, 2016

15. Bolte Taylor, 2010
16. McRaney, 2012
17. Nisbett and Wilson, 1977
18. Scott, 2015
19. Multiple credits over a long human history. This particular credit has been awarded to Anaïs Nin.
20. Diamond, 2012
21. McRaney, 2016
22. I can understand that an overly self-reflective space will have the opposite effect from what I fear many assume I am aiming towards. Let us be clear about my intentions. I am not aiming to push people into an epistory interval. I am inviting people to consider the pervasiveness and relevance of stories to their mental states. It is likely that some will not engage with the artwork, but this is true for all shows. This is true for everything we present to the public sphere. I do think it is possible and necessary to provide education experiences and opportunities for the public to learn about new ways to interpret one's mental information. Apart from within this thesis paper, I decided not to include any usage or definition of the epistory interval within my thesis exhibition. I think it is an experience that we are all familiar with and bringing it up as an expectation would probably not make it any more accessible within the space.
23. Ursyn, 2015
24. Bishop, 2010
25. Bishop, 2010
26. Bishop, 2010

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APPENDIX

IMAGES

Image 1 – Reading Table

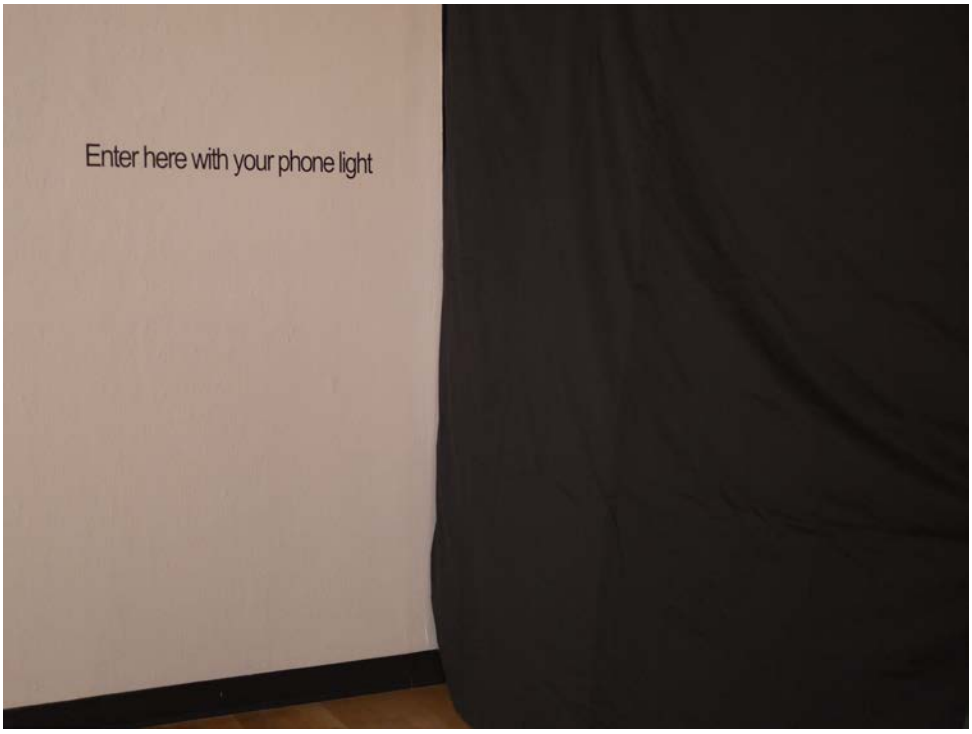

Image 2 – Directions and Entry Curtain

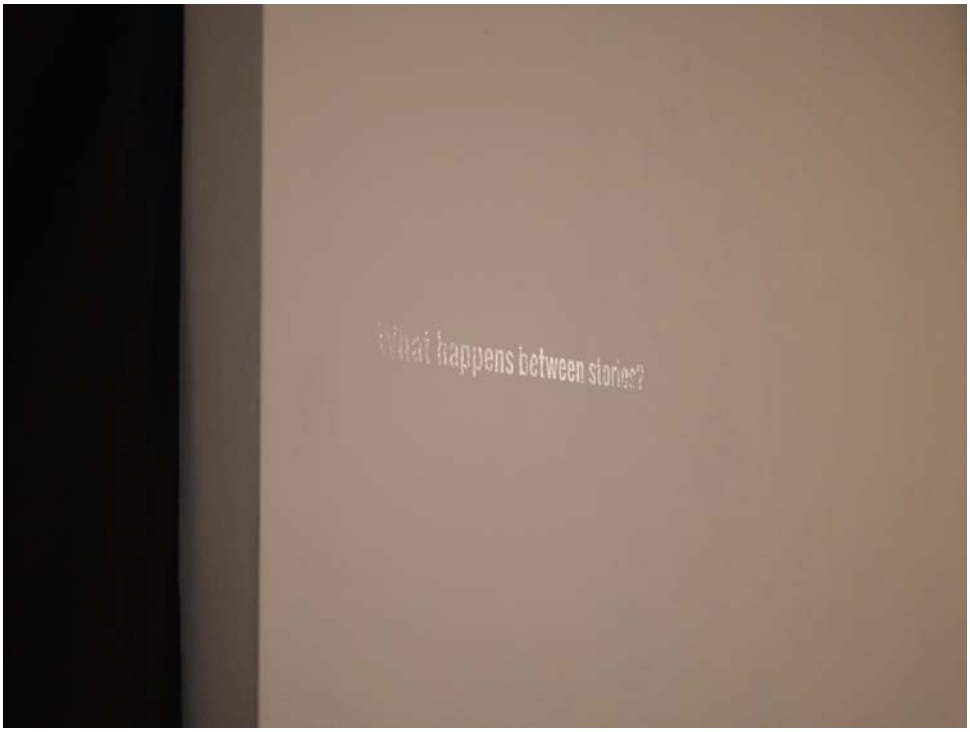

Image 3 – White Vinyl Lettering 1

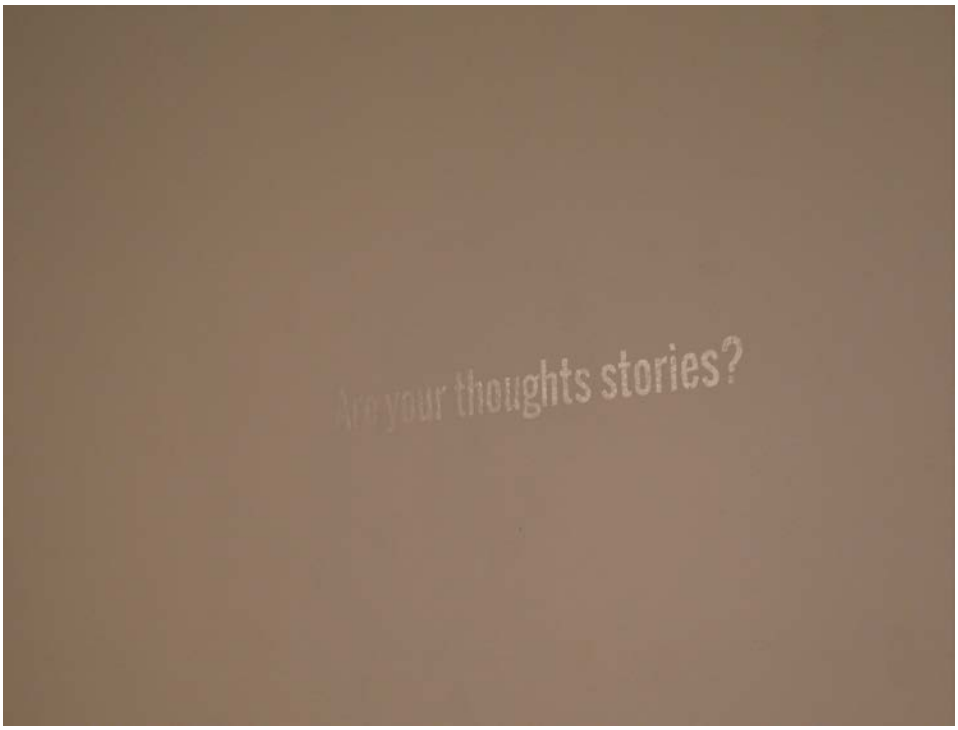

Image 4 - White Vinyl Lettering 2

Image 5 – Illustration of Grannie Discovering a Trilobite

Image 6 – Trilobite Fossil

Image 7 – Illustration of Grannie Discovering a Titanoboa Skeleton

Image 8 – Titanoboa Skeleton Fossil

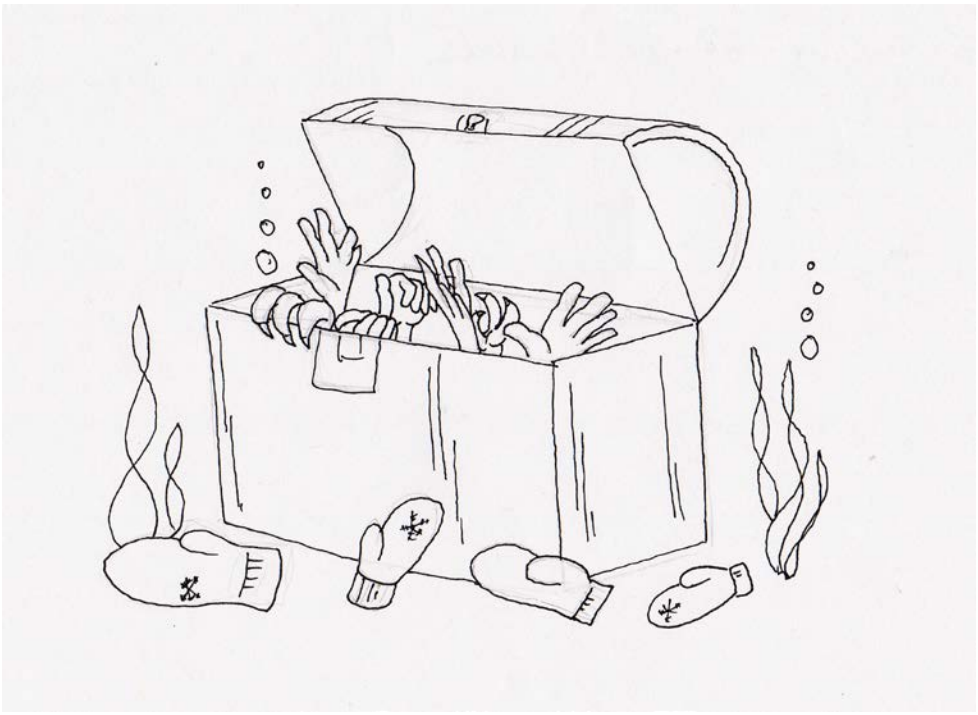

Image 9 – Creativity Exercise Example 1

Image 10 – A Cache of Old Mittens and a Cache of Old Hands

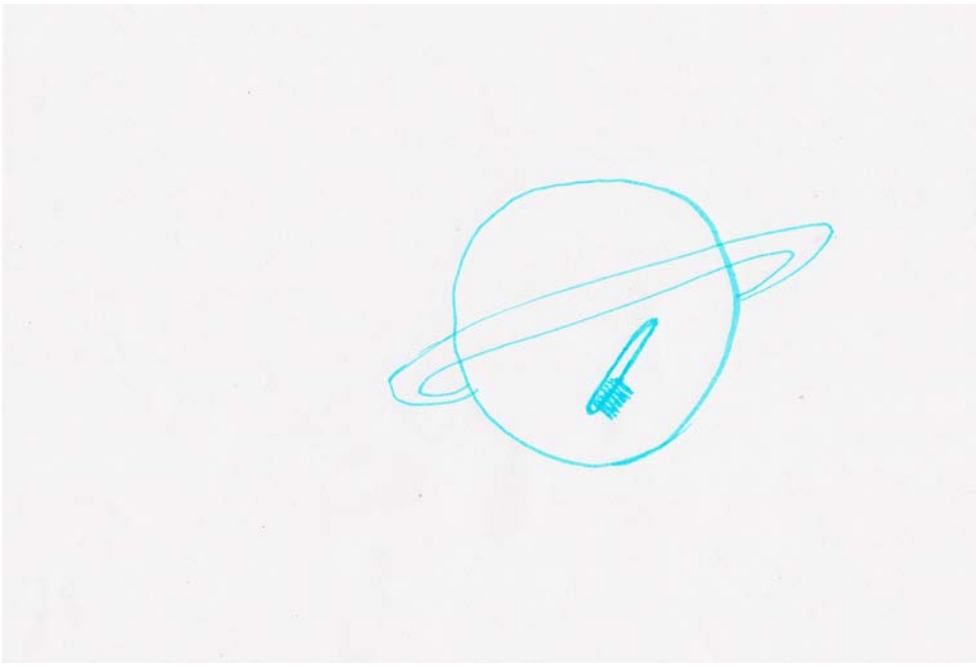

Image 11 – Creativity Exercise Example 2

Image 12 – My Toothbrush

Image 13 – Point of View Discovery

Image 14 – Plant Fossils

Image 15 – Shadow Play Action Shot 1

Image 16 – Shadow Play Action Shot 2

Image 17 - Several New Specimens 1

Image 18- Several New Specimens 2

Image 19 – Pterodactyl Skull

Image 20 – Rib Fossils