

Acknowledgements

For the challenge of contemplating consciousness...

I would like to thank my parents for being who you are. I am so very lucky to have learned from you and for allowing me the freedom to make choices (good and bad) in how I want my life to be. My sister, Jeanette who is never afraid to present a challenge and for embodying the characteristics that I admire, my uncles Jim and Jim who showed me the possibilities of life as an artist, and for my entire extended family and your unconditional acceptance and encouragement. I would also like to thank my mentors over the years including Louie Laskowski for teaching me to love traveling and exposing me to Photoshop back in 1996, James Nakagawa for “pushing” my conceptual creativity, being an inspiring artist, and trusting me as an assistant, and Jason Salavon for including me on your artistic journey, providing pivotal feedback on my work, and for your friendship. I would especially like to thank my interdisciplinary camaraderie, Jenny Garnett, Mike St. John and Temple Cunningham. You all made this graduate experience life changing. I can not give thanks enough to the faculty and adjunct faculty and staff in the Interdisciplinary department at Columbia especially Jeanine Mellinger, Paul Catanese, Matt Harris, Jenny Magnus, Bryan Saner, David Jude Greene, Mat Rappaport, Sherry Antonini, Mel Potter, Clif Meador and the rest of the members that are the gears of this department. And last but not least, I want to thank my roller derby family, The Chicago Outfit. I have learned so much about myself as a human being, a leader, a listener, an athlete, a teammate, being empowered and humbled, and gaining a sense of confidence that would have never have happened without you. <3

Michelle Graves
Transgression Through Your Breath, 2012

Abstract

I personally get caught up in the fascination with technology, constant access to the Internet and social networks and the overload of unnecessary information that is our modern chaotic society.

I have been searching for a calm within the chaos. It has been a cyclical journey of hyper-analytical self-reflection. This Hegelian-esque¹ cycle consists of experience, emotional reaction and hyper-analyzation, with the latter being a main source of material for my art making. All the while, my body exists in the present. My heart pumps my blood energizing my brain and the rest of my organs. But, the most important, semi-controllable, essential bodily function vital to the process of energizing blood cells and relaxing the body is breathing. Therefore, a way for humans to find a calm within the chaos despite our modern chaotic society is to focus on the breath. I challenge myself to remember to breathe. Subsequently, I challenge my audience to transgress, cross the boundary past all distractions into the self, find a self-awareness, a calm within the chaos, through the simple use of the breath.

For my Columbia College Chicago Interdisciplinary Arts and Media MFA thesis, I have created an opportunity for the viewer to pause and reach a personal association with breath or breathing. This installation guides the viewer through a variety of entry points like handwritten text pertaining to breath, video projection of specific vocabulary pulled from the handwritten text, and most importantly an interactivity utilizing the viewers breath to trigger the videos.

The title of the installation is *Transgression Through Your Breath* with transgression meaning to cross the boundary, past all distractions, into the self. I use this term in reference to Bell Hooks and a quote from her book, "Art on My Mind: Visual Politics," page 133. "To transgress I must move past boundaries, I must push against to go forward. Nothing changes in the world if no one is willing to make this movement."²

A large source of material for this installation's language comes from my interdisciplinary approach to research. I focused on aspects of breath and breathing through the lenses of anatomy, neuroscience, quantum physics, phenomenological and existential philosophy, empiricism, and Kabbalistic thought.

My goal is that by providing an opportunity for the viewer to interact with their own breath, also provides an opportunity for them to think about their own breath, which is a form of self awareness, and a key element in the initial steps towards transcending the calm within the chaos.

¹ Mueller, Gustav E. "The Hegel Legend of "Thesis-Antithesis-Synthesis"" *Journal of the History of Ideas* 19.No. 3 (June 1958): 411-14. Print.

² Hooks, Bell. *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*. "Being the Subject of Art." New York: New, 1995. p. 133-135. Print.

Table of Contents

Cover Page.....
Acknowledgements.....1
Abstract.....2
Table of Contents.....3

Thesis

Is Experience Quantifiable?.....4
Text and Consciousness.....7
Death as a Basic Concern: Inner Reflection.....10
The Heart as a Metaphor for Life.....11
The Breath as the Intersection Between Poetics
(Consciousness) and Science.....12
The (An) Answer.....14

Visual Interpretation and Documentation

Transgression Through Your Breath.....15
Documentation.....16
Conclusion.....20
MFA Retrospective.....21

Bibliography.....22

Appendix

List of Projected Text.....25
Artist Statement.....26
Biography.....27

Is Experience Quantifiable?

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, *experience*³ is a “direct observation of or participation in events as a basis of knowledge” or “the fact or state of having been affected by or gained knowledge through direct observation or participation.” Humans have experiences constantly and throughout their entire lives. They have a choice to place their bodies out in the world, or not. An essential choice that humans have is the option to *process* the experiences within their individual perspective. If the individual chooses to participate in their thought process and learn empirically from experiences, they will gain a deepened sense of self-knowledge and self-intellect.

There is an amount of honesty that coincides with experience. During the actual experience, it is factual, real in a sense. The recollection of an experience is derived from the perception of the individual who had the experience. John Dewey refers experience as a continuous flow of entities significant to the individual. “Experience in this vital sense is defined by those situations and episodes that we spontaneously refer to as being “real experiences”; those things of which we say in recalling them, “that ‘was’ an experience...Because of continuous merging, there are no holes, mechanical junctions, and dead centers when we have an experience. There are pauses, places of rest, but they punctuate and define the quality of movement. They sum up what has been undergone and prevent its dissipation and idle evaporation.”⁴ However memory is not lossless. A person’s attention to their hierarchy of values will determine the perceived memory of an experience. One *chooses* what to remember in accordance to what is valued as important or significant within the realm of a consciousness.

Experience can be quantified by looking at the timeline of an individual's life. Zoomed out to see a large portion of the timeline displays chunks of time that can be categorized by the constant activities, i.e. school, occupation, or a relationship. Zoomed in to the timeline reveals specific happenings, some banal, some extreme, some that can permanently change the individuals perspective and thought process. “You can never go back to the way you once were because of experience.”⁵ This process is called learning. We learn by way of inputting experiences through the senses and processing them in the brain.

*I believe that we all have a unique, individual, singular train of
thought that can be thought of as the timeline metaphor described above.
From the day we are born, our bodies exist in time, in the present moment.*

³ Experience. 2012. *Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, Incorporated. Web. Retrieved 4/30/12 from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/experience?show=0&t=1335841207>.

⁴ Dewey, John. *Art as Experience*. New York: Minton, Balch &, 1934. 36-37. Print.

⁵ Graves, Michelle. *Broken*, 2009. Video. (1:44)

Within our bodies, the brain processes a train of thought that races along a synaptical path, engined by the individual's breath, and heartbeat. This is all contained within time. All external experiences that an individual's body goes through are framed by the physical senses and leave a trail of memories and associations along this neurological path in the brain. When a train of thought 'engine' runs along a path that is familiar, it triggers or associates memories and emotions that are brought back to the present moment and used in the individual's reaction to an experience. We, as humans, place subjective and objective value on experiences that highly influence reactive traits in present moments. Therefore an individual's essence is comprised of all experiences had by that individual, considering the experiential intensities. –Michelle Graves

However, is experience truly quantifiable? Is existence quantifiable? Is consciousness quantifiable? “Philosophers have flung themselves head-long at this problem for quite some time with little more than bruises to show for it, because when all is said or done, the only way to measure precisely the similarity of two things is for the person who is doing the measuring to compare them side by side – that is to *experience* them side by side. And outside science fiction, no one can actually have another person's experience.”⁶ Philosophers like Aristotle René Descartes, Immanuel Kant, G.W.F. Hegel and Jean Paul Sartre attempt to quantify their personal perspective by writing massive comparative theories agreeing and disagreeing with their peers and predecessors. They write their belief systems in the framework of philosophy as a legitimization of their ideas as a “truth”...or at least a truth for those that agree. Even after theories are written on paper, the *text* needs to be read to exist in public as in how art needs to be seen to exist in the same way. The issue of interpretation of a quantification of an idea or theory, even if it can be proven, is still subjective.

This dilemma has not stopped some theorists from attempting to “quantify” experience. The educational intentions of the research of Dr. Clare W. Graves (1914-1986) (of no known relation to myself, though were both born in Indiana) became widely used as an integrated approach to leading and leadership theory. He was a professor of psychology at Union College, New York when his students asked a seemingly simple question of which psychology theory was the correct one. He took this question upon himself and began a system of measurement focusing on adult maturity. After a 30-year span of collecting over 40,000 essays from students describing the mature adult personality in operation, “Dr. Graves developed what he called *Emergent Cyclical Levels of Existence Theory (ECLET)*. In this theory, humans are exposed to a variety of life conditions which give way to mental capacities to solve them. In Graves’ theory, human development can be grouped into value systems that are in agreement with [what works well in a leadership situation.] This is the culture or the value systems of individuals in an organization or a much larger social system like a country or a particular ethnicity.”⁷

⁶ Gilbert, Daniel Todd. *Stumbling on Happiness*. New York: A.A. Knopf, 2006. 39-51. Print

⁷ Taborga, Jorge. *How Organizational Archetypes Manifest at Each Level of the Gravesian Value Systems*. The Integral Leadership Review. Learner

Don Beck and Chris Cowan who worked with Dr. Graves, continued his theory in a book called *Spiral Dynamics: Mastering Values, Leadership and Change* (1996), which widely popularized Graves' theory after his death.

A seemingly less successful theorist, possibly even a fictional man (also coincidentally originating from the Midwest) was named Geoffrey Sonnabend, born in 1888. He was an Associate Professor of Neurophysiology at Northwestern University, at Evanston, Illinois. His story is told in an exhibit at the Museum of Jurassic Technology, Los Angeles, as well as in a book about the museum by Lawrence Weschler titled, *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder. Part 1: Inhaling the Spore*⁸ describes the connections between the objects, ideas and exhibits at the Museum of Jurassic Technology. Page two begins the epiphany of Chicagoan Geoffrey Sonnabend and his "Theory of Forgetting and the Problem of Matter." He had a nervous breakdown after neurological research on carp and as a result went to a resort in Argentina. There, he attended a concert of Romanian-American vocalist, Madalina Delini. He left "electrified" finding out that Delini suffered from Korsakov's syndrome that is a loss of all short-term and immediate-term memory with the exception of the music she sung. That night, he conceived the beginning of a theory on memory that would slave over for the next decade. In the audio recording at the museum display of Sonnabend's theory, *Obliscence, Theories of Forgetting and the Problem of Matter*, he is quoted, "Forgetting, not remembering, was the outcome of all experience." "Sonnabend believed that this phenomenon of true memory was our only connection to the past, if only the immediate past, and, as a result, he became obsessed with understanding the mechanisms of true memory by which experience decays...In its most basic form Sonnabend's model of obliscence consists of two elements: the Cone of Obliscence and the Plane of Experience." His diagrams consisted graphically of a cone and plane with the intersecting line known as the "Spelean Axis [which] can be thought of as the individual's line of sight or perspective."⁹ There is a wide moat of mysteriousness that surrounds the Museum of Jurassic Technology and its inhabitants. Consequently a deeper understanding of Sonnabend's theory seems unproductive yet his melancholy story surrounding his theory is simultaneously inspirational.

I myself have dabbled with the challenge of quantifying experience. How difficult could it be? The language of mathematics is shorthand sentences and I began to see equations in my contemplative writing. A few examples: if every experience processes a memory and an emotion, then (E)xperience is equal to (m)emory plus (e)motion, or $E=m+e$. Starting at birth, humans have experiences and continue to have experiences until death. Each (E)xperience has a level of intensity (λ). And (V)alue is placed on (E)xperiential intensity (λ) which can read $V=\lambda(m+e)$. Unfortunately, I do not have the amount of confidence in the shorthand equations as I do in the philosophizing of longhand variable algebraic equations to represent a process of experience, so I digress.

What can be said about the legitimacy of these quantitative theories? What makes Dr. Clare W. Graves'

Papers, August 2011. Retrieved 05/20/12 <http://integralleadershipreview.com/3158-organizational-archetypes-and-the-spiral-dynamics>

⁸ Weschler, Lawrence. "Part 1: Inhaling the Spore." *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder*. New York: Pantheon, 1995. Print.

⁹ "Obliscence, Theories of Forgetting and the Problem of Matter." The Museum Of Jurassic Technology, 1936. Web. Retrieved 09/07/11

theory seem more legitimate than Sonnabend's? Do the theories live on through the perspectives of a believer and a sceptic, respectively, so became the outcomes of these particular theories? For whom was I strenuously contemplating the quantification of experience when my true audience is art critics, not mathematicians? Can equations on experience be considered art? I believe so, in any case, if the theories are presented in the context of art, just as Marcel Duchamp can present and defend a urinal as art. But then the discourses of theories in the context of art become too easy for a traditional philosopher and even art critic to discard or discredit theories that have a seemingly adequate foundation of scientific and poetic research.

Text and Consciousness

“From a very young age [in our 20-21st century society] we are taught that science is objective and that subjective response has no value in describing reality.”¹⁰ But intellectuals were not always taught that science is in a hierarchy over art. They were of the same importance and much more intersected as a practice during the Renaissance era, for example. Interdisciplinarity thrived among the masters like Leonardo Da Vinci and Michelangelo who socialized and collaborated with mathematicians, musicians, architects, etc. It was through their well-informed, well-rounded mental perception, as well as through the study of physical perception, that masterpiece paintings and sculptures were created via commission of the church and upper class society. I find that being an interdisciplinary artist gives me the permission to research, formulate and interpret any discipline or medium that touches my line of inquiry of emotively and subjectively describing my perspective of reality, as long as I stay intellectually honest and informed of the larger cultural world beyond my physical perspective.

“In the society that has come into existence since the Middle Ages, one can always avoid picking up a pen, but one cannot avoid being described, identified, certified, and handled – like a text. Even in reaching out to become one’s own ‘self,’ one reached out for a text. The “text” as Steven Sharviro observes, is the “postmodern equivalent of the soul,” a fact only recognized within the newfound interest in alphabeticism over the last two decades.”¹¹ As I mention above describing written theories, a text needing to be read to exist is parallel to Shaviro’s observation that “text is the postmodern equivalent to the soul” with postmodern meaning the communication between two entities or individuals. A soul has an innate desire to exist and communicate with its surroundings. Text, as well, has an innate desire to be read and communicate to the reader of its existence. However text is not natural, it is human made. Subsequently text is metaphorical for consciousness.

Text as an art material seems to have gained momentum beginning around the 1900's with Bauhaus design and Art Nouveau posters and through the late sixties anti-war movement. And now, with our lightning

<http://www.mjt.org/exhibits/delson/oblisci.html>.

¹⁰ Griffin, Susan. *The Eros of Everyday Life: Essays on Ecology, Gender and Society*. New York: Doubleday, 1995. Page 15. Print.

¹¹ Rotman, Brian. *Becoming beside Ourselves: The Alphabet, Ghosts, and Distributed Human Being*. Durham: Duke UP, 2008. Print.

speed movement into technology, modern society has become accustomed to an instant gratification. Communication has become less personal and more abundant. The need for communication across multiple cultures has become apparent. The tradition of the artist's task is to follow this communicative movement and either embrace or resist it.

The use of commands and phrases as direct communication from the artist to the viewer is a thread of the postmodern era that resisted minimalism. Barbara Kruger¹² and Jenny Holzer¹³ are prime examples of female artists utilizing text to produce bold statements communicating political comments and commands pertaining to the societal issues surrounding them. They both became part of the public eye in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Kruger uses bold minimal imagery paired with simple, sharp, designed phrases like, "Your body is a battleground," and "We won't play nature to your culture." Holzer created a collection of "Truisms" taking on a sometimes humorous stance relaying messages with the possible intention of instilling "common sense" into the viewer like "Being sure of yourself makes you a fool," "Boredom makes you do crazy things," and "Don't place too much trust in experts." The use of text in both of their work broke a barrier between the artist and viewer by being in direct communication with their audience. There became a literal voice, or consciousness behind the art.

Moving into the 1990s and 2000s, Sean Landers, an artist who largely uses text and stream-of-consciousness as material, explores the vulnerability of human nature. One of his early pieces is a large-scale canvas with solely handwritten chunks of banal text titled, *Fart*, 1993.¹⁴ "Our thoughts are our primary experience of life because we walk around behind our own eyeballs and our brains are constantly reeling all day long and then at night time in our dreams. So it is the soundtrack, it is the primary experience of life is your consciousness...it's the most available material [for art]."¹⁵ Landers' emotionally raw, tangential handwriting is speckled with misspellings and errors representing and embracing the imperfections in his character. I regard finding and examining Sean Landers' philosophy and textual artwork pivotal in embracing my own use of performative handwritten text, as well as emphasizing my vulnerability and mistakes. I find thoughts a challenge to transcend into words, but one of the most blunt yet interpretable means to relay a message from the artist to the viewer. Another example of text in art is Tracey Emin's tent sculpture, *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995*¹⁶, matter-of-factly lists inside the tent the real names of people she has slept with. One of her better-known neon text sculpture states, "Love Is What You Want"¹⁷ from 2011. Emin uses herself as the subject in her art. Pulling from her perseverated thoughts, she uses the output of art as a means to analyse, learn, and move forward in her life.

¹² "Home - Barbara Kruger - Photograph Collage, Advertising, Slogans, Art." *Home*. Web. Retrieved 05/02/12. <http://www.barbarakruger.com>.

¹³ Holtzer, Jenny. *Truisms*. Truisms (1977 - 79) and Essays (1979 - 82) 22.05.09 – 05.07.09. Web. Retrieved 09/07/11. http://www.betweenbridges.net/j_holzer.html.

¹⁴ "Sean Landers." *Sean Landers*. Web. Retrieved 05/02/12. <http://seanlanders.net/work.html>.

¹⁵ "A Discussion with Sean Landers." Contemporary Museum of Art St. Louis, 10 Jan. 2011. Web. Retrieved 05/01/12 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V9IXZvtg5h8>. (excerpt at 4:45)

¹⁶ Emin, Tracey. *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995*. Tent Sculpture. Destroyed in 2004.

¹⁷ Emin, Tracey. *Love is What You Want*, 2004. Neon Sculpture, London, England.

In artwork, whether an artist uses simple phrases, commands or stream-of-consciousness writing, text intends to be read. An artist may not claim an intention for the viewer to read the text, but it is the intention of text's form and functionality in the context of art that gives the viewer the choice to read, associate and interpret the text.

This is why I inherently use text in my artwork. It is representative of my consciousness that I strive to find meaning in. It allows me the capability to guide the viewer by the hand to a specific intentional place, then to let go and give them the choice to continue exploring, or not. Miranda July's inspirational installation, *The Hallway*, 2008, does just that. She built a hallway obstructing the viewer's direct pathway with a series of signs written in second person. The viewer has to zigzag back and forth reading each sign, some humorous, some contemplative, as if the hallway represents the entire lifetime of the viewer. Through a durational range of emotions, July completely immerses the viewer in a narrative of her consciousness.

Deb Sokolow's narrative wall size drawings are immersive as well. She integrates non-fictional places and happenings with an elaborate, exaggerated, fictional overtone. Her piece titled, *Someone tell Mayor Daley the pirates are coming*, 2005,¹⁸ took up three entire walls of the 12x12 gallery at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. Tangential polyps connected by drawn lines, arrows, and illustrations with text descriptions, piece her narratives together to create the whole story. The immersivity and communication with viewer is what strikes a cord between these July and Sokolow. The relationship between artist and viewer becomes intimate as the viewer momentarily steps into the artist's world, accomplished by utilizing text.

Text in art asks for an amount of interpretation by the viewer in spite of its inherent bluntness. Text and language can ask the reader or listener to empathize with a mood or feeling. Todd and Marakesh Frugia seize the chaos of text, language, and performance to display moments of intellect within. They are highly influenced by Samuel Beckett and his storm of existential ideas as well. Their installation, *Towards Ash and Anxiety*, 2009¹⁹ consists of a television displaying a dark, eerie figure with mouth open, handwriting on the wall crescendo-ing out from the television and live subtle audio and voiceover of a woman reading the text from a notebook. The handwriting on the wall is non-linear negative phrases in the sense of inadequacies. Performative aspects of the Frugia's add a level of intensity to immersing the viewer into an interpretation of the modern chaotic society. The intensity level, balanced with a meditative or epiphanal state is an aim in my text-based artwork.

Employing text as material to convey the *perspective* of the artist is undoubtedly an engaging form of expression, in my opinion. Interestingly, it is the individual's perception that cannot be disregarded in numerous fields of research as in Experience, Consciousness, Neuroscience, Spirituality, and even Quantum Physics. All that an individual actually knows is framed by their unique perception. There is no *scientific* way to truly know the perception of another human being...yet. The unknowns of the brain and its link to consciousness are currently overtaking the lives of neuroscientists like Cristof Koch who has an “instinctual (if “romantic”) belief

¹⁸ Sokolow, Deb. *Someone Tell Mayor Daley the Pirates Are Coming*. Digital image. 2005. Web. 7 Sept. 2011. Retrieved 04/24/12. http://debsokolow.com/section/30827_Someone_tell_Mayor_Daley_the_pirates_are.html.

¹⁹ Frugia, Todd and Marrakesh. *Toward Ash and Anxiety*. Video Documentation. 2009. Rooms Gallery, Chicago, IL. Web. Retrieved 09/08/11. <http://vimeo.com/22847735>.

that life is meaningful”²⁰ and he is determined to find that meaning, at least for himself.

So what do we do with our lives that we are living especially if we only really truly know our personal, unique perspective of consciousness? All that I truly know is my own unique perspective along with the values I have obtained through experience and ideals that I contemplate. Hence, this is the basis of my art material. I consider my interdisciplinary body of art an impetus-cyclical-metacognitive-empirical-retrospective and prospective self-expression, a simultaneous simplification and complication to challenge myself with.

Death as a Basic Concern: Inward Reflection

*Love and hate and fear, the great themes of birth and death and consciousness are age-old themes, the fascination of understanding them in a historical context, to see how different cultures dealt with them, solved their equations. They are so unsolvable and mysterious in the positive sense of the word, and therefore life-giving. Something that is not solvable and doesn't have an answer gives life because it propels one to continue with the quest. I get somewhat frustrated that more people aren't thinking of the great themes in life as being in the domain of art.*²¹ – Bill Viola

An initial interest the mysteriousness of consciousness is rooted in my experience with death. I first went through the tragedy of losing my older brother to a car accident in 1993. I already considered myself an emotive artist at the malleable age of 13 when my perspective was pulverized like my brother's little blue Chevrolet disintegrated by an SUV at full speed. My whole being, mind and body, inward and outward perspective, became aware of death. To be aware of death is to become aware of and potentially believe in life. In Sartrean existentialism, there cannot be a positive without the negative in a belief. "...Belief is a being which questions its own being which can realize itself only in its destruction, which can manifest itself to itself only by denying itself."²² I became aware of my own life through contemplating my brother's death.

Many religions also use this idea of extreme polarity to acknowledge life. Christianity uses the guilt from Jesus' sacrifice as a reminder to live life with virtue in order to be worthy of his nature and ascend into heaven after death. "For God's will was for us to be made holy by the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ, once for all time."²³ Buddhism also uses death as a pivot point to acknowledge life. "Remember all life needs force you to move outward. If you want to move inward, death must become a basic concern; otherwise you cannot move inward. That is why it happened that persons like Buddha,

²⁰ Koch, Christof. *Consciousness: Confessions of a Romantic Reductionist*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2012. Inside Cover. Print.

²¹ Viola, Bill, and Robert Violette. *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House: Writings 1973-1994*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1995. p. 177. Print.

²² Sartre, Jean-Paul, and Wade Baskin. *Jean-Paul Sartre: Essays in Existentialism*. Secaucus, NJ: Citadel, 1972. p. 184. Print.

who became deeply conscious of death, started moving inward. Only when you become aware of death you will create the need to look back.”²⁴ Reflection is a crucial element in acknowledging one's self-awareness and individual existence as well as a tool for considering the subjective and objective parts of an experience. An individual can consider what their perception was and how others perceived them during an experience to gain self-knowledge by analysing reaction and placing value on that reaction.

Reflection enables a process of learning and movement toward personal growth. Bell Hooks uses the term “transgression” referencing death and describing the confines of the living body. “To acknowledge death is to transgress...To transgress I must move past boundaries, I must push against to go forward. Nothing changes in the world if no one is willing to make this movement.” She talks about the body as the “first site of limitation...The fact the word *transgress* appears most often in discussions of the sexual is an indication that the body is the fundamental boundary of the self. To transgress we must return to the body...I must be willing to face indeterminacy, contingency, the reality of dying...To know death is to transgress.”²⁵ As a sister, granddaughter, friend of people who have died, and as an artist, I live by the challenge of constant self-reflection and life analyzation, perseverated by the acknowledgement of death. I carry and hold the memories of my loved ones who have died in my heart. My heart continues to beat. I use a metaphoric movement of my blood circulation and thoughts to maintain a momentum of emotive expression and push past my personal boundaries or “transgress,” aiming for a level of personal enlightenment.

The Heart as a Reminder for Life

Motivation and momentum are a challenge to maintain in itself. In a meditative reflection, I (attempt to) clear my mind of all memories, let go of emotions associated with those memories, and concentrate on interior of my physical body. There is a movement within my body. Blood circulates through my veins pumped by my heart to my fingertips, toes, and brain and back to the heart. Breathing in the oxygen from the atmosphere our body exists in goes through the oral and nasal pharynx, through the trachea, split by the carmina to the right and left bronchus, through the bronchioles that are like tree roots, to the alveoli sacs where the chemical displacement of oxygen and carbon dioxide occurs. Single-cell wide capillaries that allow every blood cell, pumped by the heart to the lungs, to be re-charged with oxygen and pumped back out energizing every single organ in the body surround the alveoli. This is a cycle worth meditating on.

In the moments of tragedy or occasionally while recalling a tragedy, a physical pain or heaviness is felt in the heart. This phenomenon has been scientifically proven that during an experience of tragedy, fear or extreme stress, a surge of cardiac troponins are released, causing slight temporary paralysis in the left ventricle

²³ "Hebrews 10:10." *Holy Bible: New Living Translation*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1996. Print.

²⁴ Osho. "Several More Looking Methods." *The Book of Secrets: 112 Meditations to Discover the Mystery within: an Introduction to Meditation*. New York: St. Martin's, 2010. 322. Print.

²⁵ Hooks, Bell. *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*. "Being the Subject of Art." New York: New, 1995. p. 133-135. Print.

of the heart. This paralysis causes that chamber to fill with blood causing the actual “heavy heart” sensation. This occurrence is called Takotsubo Cardiomyopathy or “Broken Heart Syndrome.”²⁶

The “Broken Heart Syndrome” is probably a factor of why Aristotle believed that “the heart, not the brain was the center of sensation and movement. “...The motions of pleasure and pain and generally all sensations plainly have their source in the heart.”²⁷ They do plainly have an instant *affect* on the heart.

In my artwork, I use the heart as a metaphor for storing emotion and the memories of those who have died because of the fact that the heart is immediately affected when we experience tragedy or any extreme emotion, even happiness. Remembering and physically feeling your own heartbeat is a simplistic and realistic way to remember that you are alive.

The following is the text of a prayer card describing my belief of where our memory or “soul” goes after we die. The prayer card is one object of a shadow box sculpture titled, *Overanalyzation of an Experience*, 2009 which I consider homage to my family that has past away. I imagine this being the traditional Catholic prayer card handed out at my own funeral with the opposite side displaying an image of the “sacred heart.”

And I believe there is a place to go after we all die. It's in the hearts of those we leave behind, those that we love, those that love us. In them we leave behind certain memories and emotions from intersecting experiences that are shared as well as the specific interaction that influenced your own reaction. The inspiration and motivation that comes out of love is how we can live on in other hearts. The goal in life is to create relationships. Inspire each other. Motivate those around you by being motivated. It is a feed off of each other for those who are slightly closer. It enables an allowance for more extreme emotions; a higher intensity level that can allow for a deeper understanding of happiness as well as sadness. - M. Graves (05/20/1980-xx/xx/xxxx)

Breath as the Intersection of Poetics (Consciousness) and Science

What is the first action a human usually takes after feeling a sense of relief? They take a deep breath. Breathing deeply with control activates the parasympathetic nervous system, the opposite of the sympathetic nervous system, which triggers nervousness, sweaty palms, heightened heart rate and breathing. “The activation of the parasympathetic nervous system encourages relaxation of muscles, slowing the heart rate and lowering the blood pressure. It assists the breathing to return to its normal rate, digestive juices flow, bladder and bowels are ready to function, the pupils constrict and immune functions, such as the production of white blood cells are re-

²⁶ Tako-Tsubo Syndrome. Web 20 Oct. 2011. <http://www.takotsubo.com>

²⁷ Gross, Charles G. “Aristotle on the Brain,” *Neuroscientist*. July 1995 vol. 1 no. 4. p. 245.

commenced.”²⁸ In a case of stress or extreme experience, remembering to control the breath brings calmness back to the brain. Thoughts re-organize and become clearer. But remembering to control the breath is yet another challenge.

*Our bodies exist in the air we breathe. We communicate by vibrating our vocal chords with the air we breathe. We form relationships by simply sharing the air we breathe. I can learn to control my breath that calms my heartbeat that balances the chemicals in my body to therefore calm the thoughts in my brain.*²⁹

Breathing is the most important, semi-controllable, essential bodily function that humans are capable of practicing. The practice of breathing can initially be dated back thousands of years to yoga practice. “In these earliest times, the sole purpose of yoga was the attainment of the highest spiritual goals: self-realization, enlightenment, and the liberation of the individual soul.”³⁰ Around 1500 A.D., yoga started to shift focus into more of a simple physical practice of postures or “asana” and breathing or “pranayama.”

“Pranayama” is a Sanskrit word loosely meaning “extension of the life force.” This life force or breath or soul or primordial ether or origin of will “is steeped in more mythology than any other psycho-physiological process.”³¹ Julie Redstone states, “the view that nothingness is filled with something, though not something we can see or measure, takes us from the realm of the physical into the realm of the spiritual... For there is an analogy that can be made between the way sub-atomic particles operate - the way they come into and go out of existence - and the way individual consciousness has the potential for operating as it evolves. For example, we can hold the possibility that individual consciousness, like sub-atomic particles, has the capacity to ‘un-fold’ and ‘en-fold’ as particles do - hovering between being and non-being, and that this dual awareness is the result of an evolving awareness, a consciousness infused by Divine ‘breath’.”³² It is a consciousness capable of learning and creating thoughts and imagery to describe itself.

This idea of consciousness associated with quantum physics is the significant point of intersection that holds fascinating mysteriousness, a space for spiritual or creative interpretation. It is a space that only exists because of human curiosity and contemplation. Quantum physics would not exist without the individual consciousness. The documentary, *What the Bleep do We Know?* Gives a fascinating conglomeration of science and philosophy explanations including a statement from Amit Goswami, Ph. D., “Quantum physics only calculates possibilities [by measuring waves of information through different perceptions.] If we accept this, the question then immediately becomes who/what chooses among these possibilities to bring the actual event of experience? So we directly, immediately see that consciousness must be involved. The observer [or

²⁸ Streeten, MB, DPhil, FRCP, FACP, David H.P. "The Autonomic Nervous System." *NDRF*. Web. Retrieved 05/02/12. <http://www.ndrf.org/ans.html>.

²⁹ Graves, Michelle. *DEATH → HEART → BREATH*, 2011-12. Performance. (9:50)

³⁰ "The History of Yoga." *Learn the History of Yoga*. Web. Retrieved 03/20/12. <http://www.discover-yoga-online.com/history-of-yoga.html>.

³¹ "The Breathable Body & Asthma Free Arizona." Web. 02 May 2012. Retrieved 03/20/12. <http://thebreathablebody.com>.

³² Redstone, Julie. "THE IMPERMANENT/PERMANENT SELF." *Light Omega*. Web. Retrieved 03/20/12. http://www.lightomega.org/Impermanent_Permanent_Self.html.

consciousness] can not be ignored.”³³ Albert Einstein even came to a conclusion when he reached a point of allowing mysteriousness to exist alongside conscious experience. “The fairest thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science...it was the experience of a mystery – even if mixed with fear – that engendered religion”³⁴ or a belief system for explanation of the mysteriousness. Therefore we should not, and basically cannot ignore ourselves, or our physical bodies, in this information-saturated, chaotic world of conscious mysteriousness.

The (An) Answer

Writing, analysing, comparing, philosophizing, are just one way to discuss the intersecting point of poetics, or how I think of individual expressive consciousness, and physical science. Within the individual’s unique perspective, perception of experience, and embedded emotional values, is the capability to choose what to think about or choose what to believe.

Choosing or the simple act of thinking is an embodiment of consciousness, an alternative to textual consciousness. While thinking, the body is unconsciously alive moving along in the present with the momentum of time. Our hearts pump our blood energizing our brain and the rest of our organs. However, the most important *semi-controllable* essential bodily function is breathing. We are capable of consciously practicing the control of breathing that triggers the parasympathetic nervous system, which simulates digestion, stores energy, slows the heart rate, and dilates blood vessels for better blood flow. Slowing the heart rate and activating blood flow has a calming effect on individual’s thoughts.

I personally get caught up in the momentum of technology, social networks and constant internet access that dominate our modern chaotic society. I have been searching for a calm within the chaos, the impossible epiphanal moment when I realize what the purpose of my life is, through the lens of art making. A way to break through the wall of chaos and distractions is to transgress. Transgress past the boundaries of our modern chaotic society, past the physical body into the self, and find self-awareness. Reflect inward toward the self to focus on the breath.

To combine the semi-controllable breath with a system of self-reflection and acknowledgement is to intersect the poetic and scientific properties of an individual. The intersection of a mental self and physical self is consciousness. A conclusion to this intersection, in its simplicity, is to consciously take a breath. Consciously breathing is an embodiment of both poetics and science.

²³ *What the Bleep Do We Know?* Dir. William Arntz, Betsy Chasse, and Mark Vicente. Perf. Marlee Matlin. Lord of the Wind, 2009. Film.

³⁴ Einstein, Albert. "The Meaning of Life?" *The World as I See It*. New York: Philosophical Library, 1949. 5. Print.

Transgression Through Your Breath

For my MFA thesis exhibition in the Interdisciplinary Arts and Media department at Columbia College Chicago, I have created an opportunity for the viewer to pause and reach a personal association with breath or breathing. This interactive installation guides the viewer through a variety of entry points like handwritten text pertaining to breath, video projection of specific phrases pulled from the handwritten text, and most importantly an interactivity utilizing the viewers breath to trigger the videos.

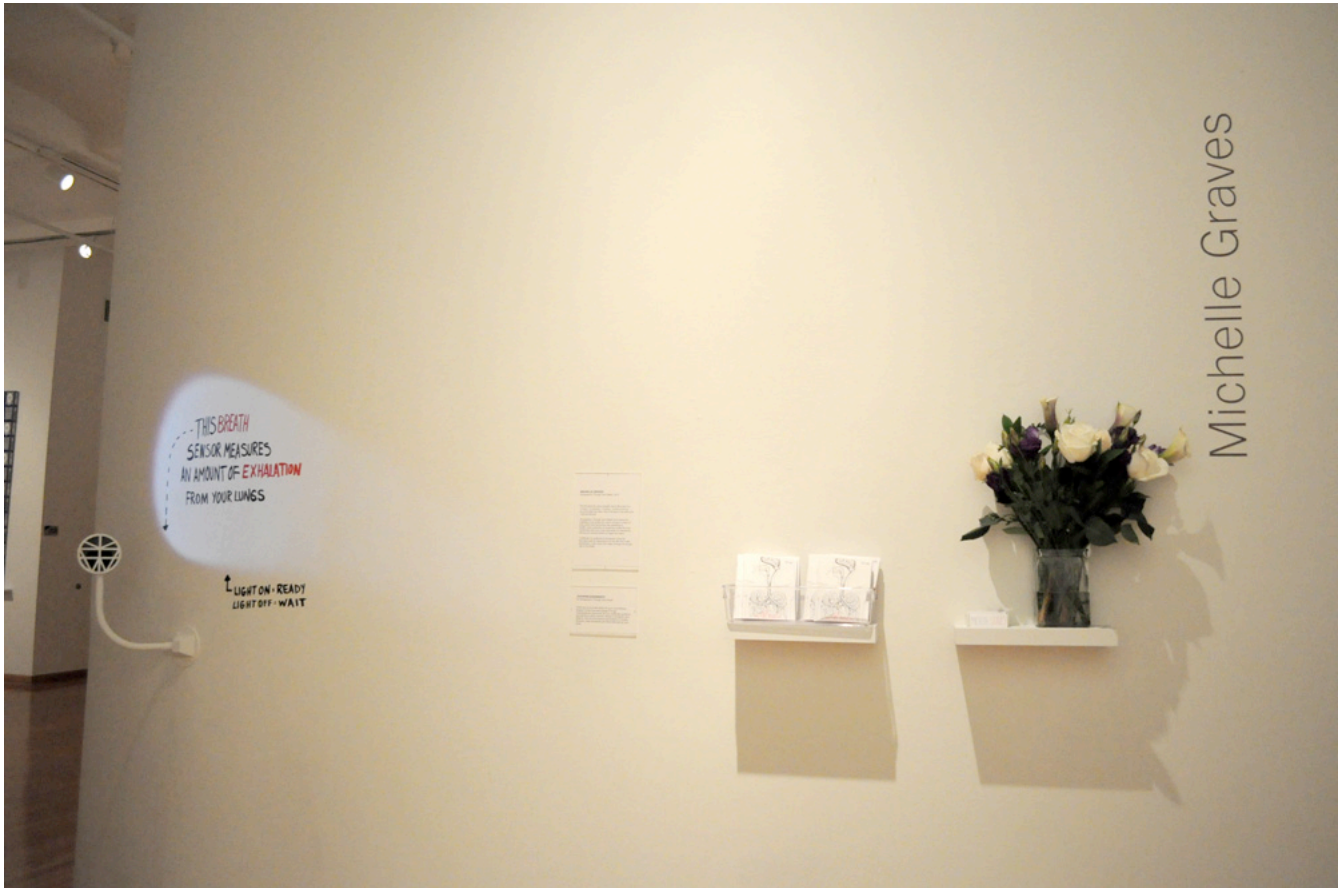
The title is *Transgression Through Your Breath* with transgression meaning to cross the boundary, past all distractions, into the self. I use this term in reference to Bell Hooks and a quote from her book, “Art on My Mind: Visual Politics,” page 133. “To transgress I must move past boundaries, I must push against to go forward. Nothing changes in the world if no one is willing to make this movement.”

A large source of material for THIS installation’s language comes from my interdisciplinary approach to research. I focused on aspects of breath and breathing through the lenses of anatomy, neuroscience, quantum physics, phenomenological and existential philosophy, empiricism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Kabbalism.

For the interactivity of the installation, the viewer is required to blow across a sensor that contains a condenser microphone component picking up an audio level measurement processed in Isadora. Isadora then calculates the maximum level value of the strength of the viewers exhale and outputs that value to trigger a specific video for the projection of moving text. The trigger is almost simultaneous to the breath interactivity simulating words coming from the viewer’s breath. The triggered text video is associated with the strength of the viewer’s breath. The weaker the breath is associated with more anatomical information about the lungs and breathing while a stronger breath triggers more philosophical and existential phrases on breathing. (Please see the appendix for a list of the 20 different phrases.)

The projected phrase then glides across the wall to overlay a 12’x16’ display of text handwritten directly on the wall. It is at this point the viewer has a choice to follow the projected word revealing the massive display of handwritten text. The *projected* word slowly dissolves into a spotlight that hovers over the same *handwritten* word, giving the viewer a focal point and more contexts to the viewers “chosen” word.

My goal and conclusion for my thesis is that by providing an opportunity for the viewer to interact with their own breath, also provides an opportunity for them to at least think about their own breath, which is a form of self awareness, an embodiment of poetics and science, and a key element in the initial steps towards transgression and attaining the calm within the chaos.



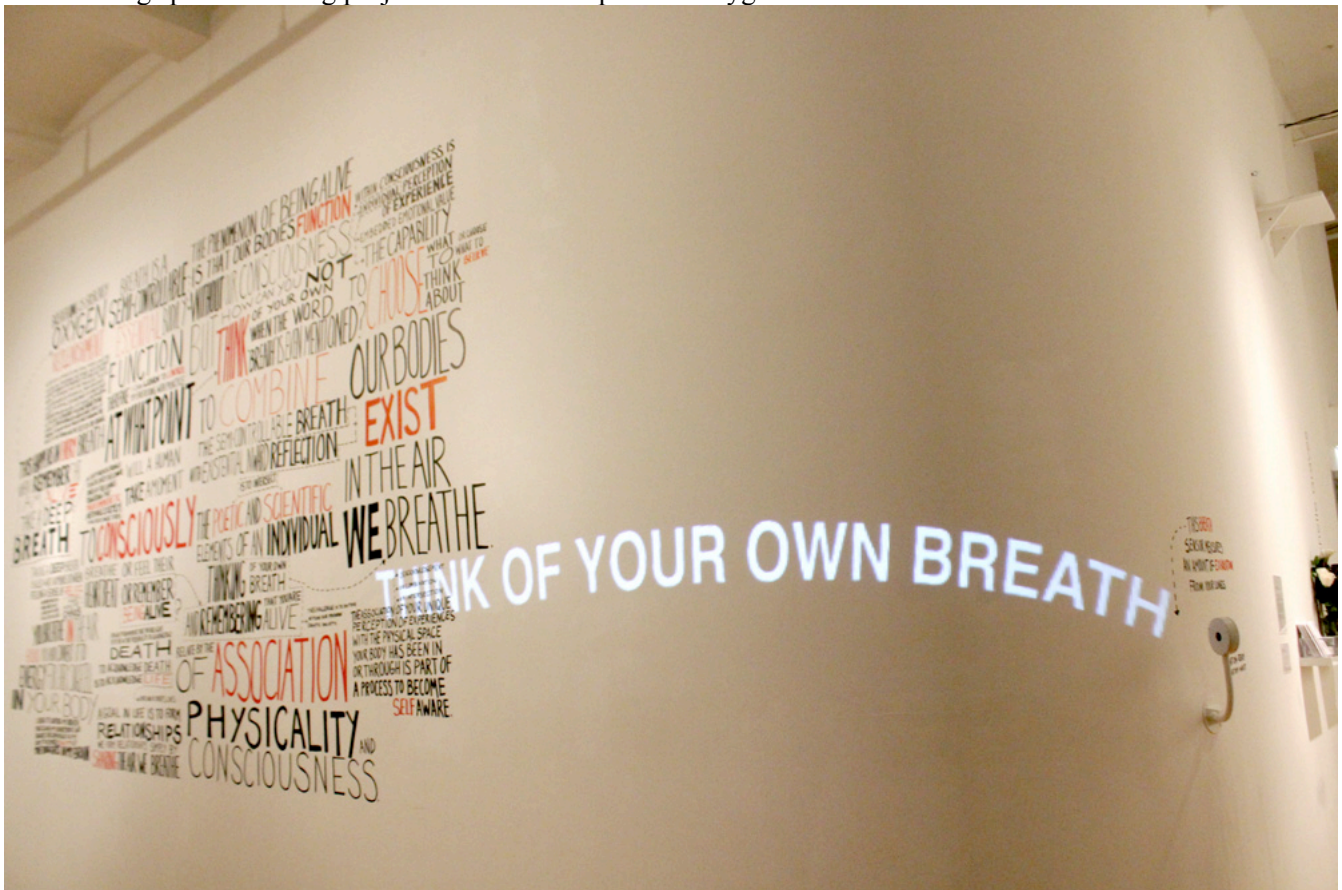
Wall detail of breath sensor and *Take a Deep Breath*, Zine Vol. 5 accompany.



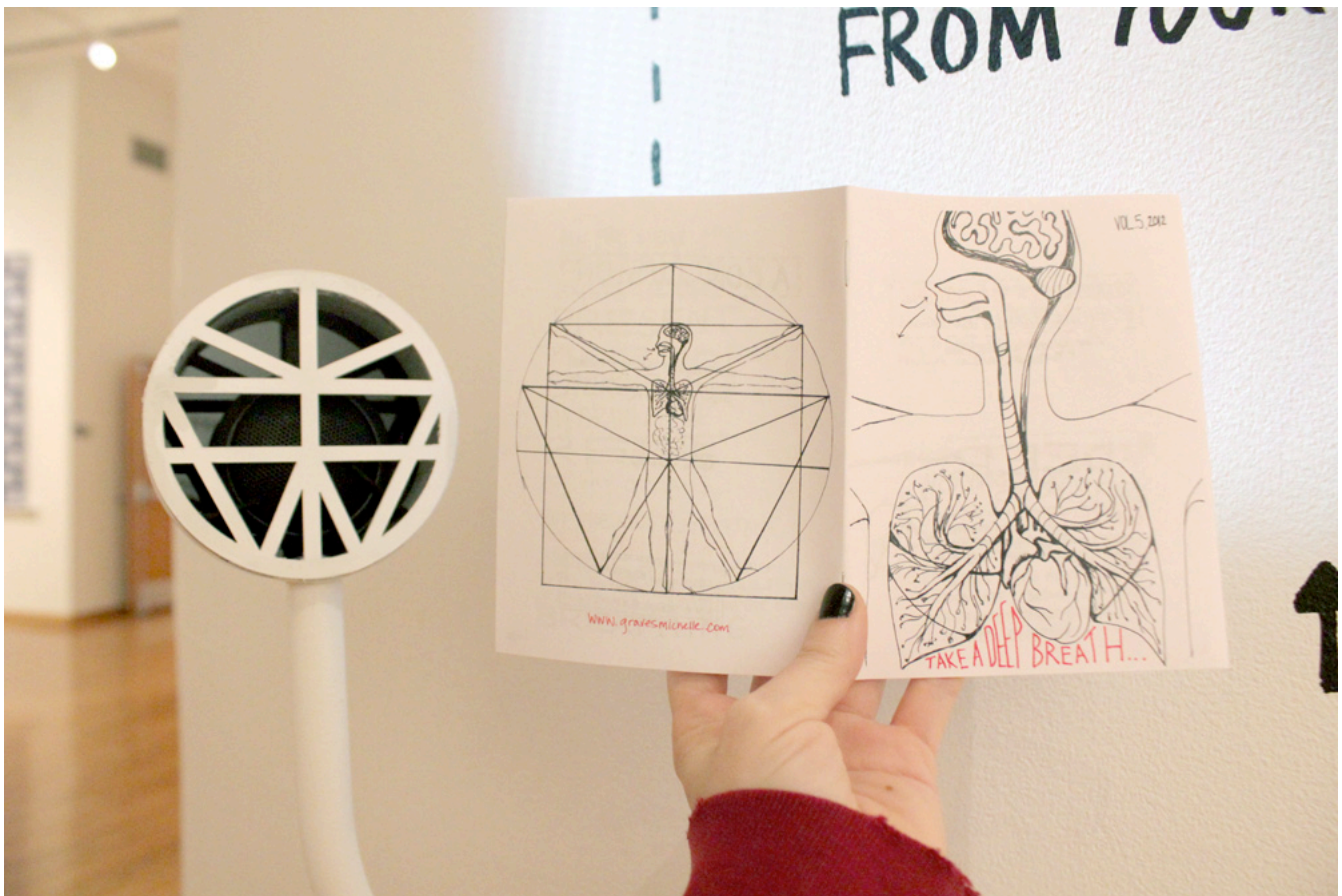
Action shot of breath sensor being triggered to project video.



Final resting spot of moving projected text for “Replenish Oxygen.”



Action shot of moving projected text.



Detail of sensor and *Take a Deep Breath* cover.

Michelle Graves
Transgression Through Your Breath, 2012

Conclusion

In conclusion to observing viewers interact with *Transgression Through Your Breath*, I feel that I successfully reached one of my goals to simply get the viewer to acknowledge their own breath. Through the various entry points of interactivity with the breath, a massive wall of text all pertaining to breath, a zine containing philosophies on breath and breathing, most viewers became conscious of their breath. Even when the sensor was disabled, a viewer mentioned that he still became conscious of his breath by reading the display of text. The ultimate goal of this installation is to get the viewer to transgress past the boundaries of chaos and the physical body and find a self-awareness however an initial step towards this enlightenment is to become conscious of the breath. It has ultimately made me hyper-aware of my own breath leading to a better awareness of my capability to control it and calm my chaotic thoughts.

Michelle Graves
Transgression Through Your Breath, 2012

MFA Retrospective

I would consider a retrospective of my MFA career in the Interdisciplinary Arts and Media Program at Columbia College Chicago to be cohesive. I maintained an essence of my long-term line of inquiry dealing with text, anatomy and consciousness and pushed myself to obtain a better articulation describing it. I am very glad to have chosen this department to work with because of the freedom allotted to explore concepts and mediums as well as the resources available to learn with. I have also learned a great deal in leadership through my student government involvement. Becoming president of IMAGE Unit reinforced my innate skill to get the job done as well as promote and encourage others to participate along the way.

Michelle Graves
Transgression Through Your Breath, 2012

Bibliography

ANATOMY

BRAIN

Streeten, MB, DPhil, FRCP, FACP, David H.P. "The Autonomic Nervous System." *NDRF*. Web. Retrieved 05/02/12. <http://www.ndrf.org/ans.html>.

HEART

Gross, Charles G. "Aristotle on the Brain," *Neuroscientist July 1995 vol. 1 no. 4 245-250*

Tako-Tsubo Syndrome. Web. Retrieved 10/20/11. <http://www.takotsubo.com>

LUNGS

Graves, Michelle. *DEATH → HEART → BREATH*, 2011-12. Performance. (9:50)

"The Breathable Body & Asthma Free Arizona." Web. 02 May 2012. Retrieved 03/20/12. <http://thebreathablebody.com>.

"The History of Yoga." *Learn the History of Yoga*. Web. Retrieved 03/20/12. <http://www.discover-yoga-online.com/history-of-yoga.html>.

DEATH

"Hebrews 10:10." *Holy Bible: New Living Translation*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1996. Print.

Hooks, Bell. *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*. "Being the Subject of Art." New York: New, 1995. p. 133-135. Print.

Osho. "Several More Looking Methods." *The Book of Secrets: 112 Meditations to Discover the Mystery within: an Introduction to Meditation*. New York: St. Martin's, 2010. 322. Print.

Sartre, Jean-Paul, and Wade Baskin. *Jean-Paul Sartre: Essays in Existentialism*. Secaucus, NJ: Citadel, 1972. 184. Print.

Viola, Bill, and Robert Violette. *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House: Writings 1973-1994*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1995. p. 177. Print.

EXPERIENCE

"A Discussion with Sean Landers." Interview. *You Tube*. CAM Channel, Jan. 2011. Web. Retrieved 09/14/11. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V9lXZvtg5h8>. (excerpt at 4:24)

EXPERIENCE (cont.)

Dewey, John. *Art as Experience*, . New York: Minton, Balch &, 1934. 36-37. Print.

Einstein, Albert. "The Meaning of Life?" *The World as I See It*. New York: Philosophical Library, 1949. 5. Print.

Graves, Michelle. *Broken*, 2009. Video (1:44)

Experience. 2012. *Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, Incorporated. Web. Retrieved 4/30/12 from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/experience?show=0&t=1335841207>.

Gilbert, Daniel Todd. *Stumbling on Happiness*. New York: A.A. Knopf, 2006. 39-51. Print

QUANTIFICATION/ORGANIZATION

Mueller, Gustav E. "The Hegel Legend of "Thesis-Antithesis-Synthesis"" *Journal of the History of Ideas* 19.No. 3 (June 1958): 411-14. Print.

Hesla, David H., *The shape of chaos: an interpretation of the art of Samuel Beckett* / David H. Hesla University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis: 1971

Taborga, Jorge. *How Organizational Archetypes Manifest at Each Level of the Gravesian Value Systems*. The Integral Leadership Review. Learner Papers. August 2011. Retrieved 05/20/12
<http://integrallleadershipreview.com/3158-organizational-archetypes-and-the-spiral-dynamics>

Weschler, Lawrence. *"Part I: Inhaling the Spore."* *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder*. New York: Pantheon, 1995. Print.

TEXT

Emin, Tracey. *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995*. Tent Sculpture. Destroyed in 2004.

Emin, Tracey. *Love is What You Want*, 2004. Neon Sculpture, London, England.

Frugia, Todd and Marrakesh. *Toward Ash and Anxiety*. Video Documentation. 2009. Rooms Gallery, Chicago, IL. Web. Retrieved 09/08/11. <http://vimeo.com/22847735>.

Holtzer, Jenny. *Truisms*. Truisms (1977 - 79) and Essays (1979 - 82)
22.05.09 – 05.07.09. Web. Retrieved 09/07/11. http://www.betweenbridges.net/j_holzer.html.

July, Miranda. *The Hallway*. Video Documentation. 2005. Commissioned by the Yokohama Triennial, 2008. In the Collection of The Hara Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, Japan. Web. Retrieved 09/07/11.
<http://vimeo.com/1976212>.

Kruger, Barbara. "Home - Barbara Kruger - Photograph Collage, Advertising, Slogans, Art." *Home*. Web. Retrieved 05/02/12. <http://www.barbarakruger.com>.

TEXT (cont.)

Landers, Sean. *Fart*, 1993. Web. Retrieved 05/02/12. <http://seanlanders.net/work.html>.

Sokolow, Deb. *Someone Tell Mayor Daley the Pirates Are Coming*. Digital image. 2005. Web. 7 Sept. 2011. Retrieved 04/24/12. http://debsokolow.com/section/30827_Someone_tell_Mayor_Daley_the_pirates_are.html.

Rotman, Brian. *Becoming beside Ourselves: The Alphabet, Ghosts, and Distributed Human Being*. Durham: Duke UP, 2008. Print.

SCIENCE

Griffin, Susan. *The Eros of Everyday Life: Essays on Ecology, Gender and Society*. New York: Doubleday, 1995. Page 15. Print.

Koch, Christof. *Consciousness: Confessions of a Romantic Reductionist*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2012. Print.

What the Bleep Do We Know? Dir. William Arntz, Betsy Chasse, and Mark Vicente. Perf. Marlee Matlin. Lord of the Wind, 2009. Film.

Appendix

Michelle Graves

Transgression Through Your Breath, 2012

List of Projected Phrases

In the order of being triggered from weakest to strongest breath:

1. Semi-Controllable
2. Take a Deep Breath
3. Trigger the Parasympathetic
4. Replenish Oxygen
5. Acknowledge
6. Think of Your Own Breath
7. Learn to Control
8. Energize Each Blood Cell
9. Slow the Heart
10. Associate
11. Intersect Poetics and Science
12. Choose
13. Reflect Inward
14. Perceive Your Experiences
15. Remember
16. Become Aware
17. Consciously Breathe
18. Find a Calm Within the Chaos
19. Form Relationships
20. Exist

Michelle Graves
Transgression Through Your Breath, 2012

Artist Statement

The Principal fact about modern man's life is that it is 'a mess,' 'a confusion,' 'a chaos'...to find a form to accommodate the mess, that is the task of the artist now. - Samuel Beckett.

Michelle Graves uses an empirical, formulaic, Hegelian-esque cycle of processing the bombardment of technology, constant access to the Internet, social networks, and unnecessary information that infiltrates the Western 21st century experience. Her text, research, and media based art is a visual and theoretical search for the calm within the chaos of an individual (or her personal) existence. The quantitative analytical cycle is a means for a structure to “accommodate the mess” that is our modern chaotic society.

The cycle consists of experience, emotional reaction and hyper-analyzation with the latter being a dominant material in the artwork itself. This emotive material is a self-reflection pulled from Graves' banal or intense experiences, intersected with scientific and belief system research. This combination produces a measurement for “legitimizing” answers to simple and age-old questions contemplated during this impetus cycle. Some attributing fields of research are neuroscience, anatomy, phenomenological and existential philosophy, empiricism, quantum physics, Buddhism, Christianity and Kabbalism.

Graves exhibits a challenge to the audience for her Columbia College Chicago, Interdisciplinary Arts and Media MFA thesis. The challenge is to transgress, cross the boundary past all distractions into the self, find a self-awareness, a calm within the chaos, through the simple use of the breath. The title of the interactive thesis installation is *Transgression Through Your Breath*, using the term “transgression” in reference to *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*, by Bell Hooks. “To transgress I must move past boundaries, I must push against to go forward. Nothing changes in the world if no one is willing to make this movement.”

The focus on breath and breathing in *Transgression Through Your Breath* provides an opportunity for the viewer to have a “choice” in association, with breath or breathing. The choice is given through a variety of entry points in the installation. There is a 12x16' mural of handwritten text pertaining to breath, video projection of specific phrases pulled from the handwritten text, and most importantly an interactivity utilizing the viewers breath to trigger one of the 20 different videos. A specific projected phrase is triggered according to the strength of breath exhaled into the breath sensor. Once triggered, the projected phrase floats from the breath sensor as if the words came from the viewer's breath and floats across the wall towards the mural of text. Once the projected phrase overlays the mural, the projection morphs into a spotlight hovering over the same handwritten phrase giving the viewer a focal point and more scientific or philosophical content to their “chosen” phrase.

The intent of the artist is to provide an opportunity for the viewers to interact with their own breath. Subsequently, it provides an opportunity for her or him to think about his or her own breath, which is a form of self awareness as well as a key element in the initial steps towards transcending the calm within the chaos.

Michelle Graves
Transgression Through Your Breath, 2012

Biography

Michelle Graves (b. 1980) is an interdisciplinary research artist drawing inspiration from fields of neuroscience, anatomy, quantum physics, phenomenological and existential philosophy, empiricism and belief systems. The common thread throughout these fields of research is a mysterious element. Graves sees the mysteriousness in death and consciousness, for example, as an opportunity for interpretation and generative for an infinite amount of material for art making. She interprets these ideas mainly using text in a non-linear fashion embedded in installation, media, or traditional paper.

Graves received her BFA in Photography from Indiana University Bloomington where she focused on digital and video work. She received the Dwight Follett Graduate Fellowship to attend the MFA Interdisciplinary Arts and Media department at Columbia College Chicago. She has exhibited her work in Tokyo, London, New York City, Los Angeles, and extensively in Chicago and the state of Indiana.

www.gravesmichelle.com