

A DISCOURSE IN STILLNESS: THE LANGUAGE OF SILENCE

By

DUSTIN MICHAEL PRICE

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the committee appointed to examine the thesis of  
DUSTIN MICHAEL PRICE find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted

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Nik Meisel, M.F.A., Chair

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Io Palmer, M.F.A.

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Kevin Haas, M.F.A.

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Abstract

by Dustin Michael Price, M.F.A.  
Washington State University  
May 2009

Chair: Nik Meisel

My work is an investigation of the direct correlations between the act of contemplation, discourse, emotional stillness, and the making or experiencing of my work. My process often involves a repetitive, physical act in search of self-dissolution and meditation. During this repetitive process, I conceptually and aesthetically consider topics that involve the limitations and possibilities inherent in elements of discourse. I understand that my process repeatedly gives way to questions that cannot be answered, but I believe attempting to understand these questions is often just as significant as answering them. It is my hope that the viewer can come to this understanding as well. My work embodies personal cognitive reactions to imagery, materials, and labor, but I feel this process can also be encompassing to the viewer. The viewer contemplating the work parallels my own investigative and process laden practice, becoming both a process for the individual and a metaphor for the work.

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## **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this to my family, the salt of the earth.

DUSTIN MICHAEL PRICE  
MFA GRADUATE THESIS  
WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY  
MAY 2009

A DISCOURSE IN STILLNESS: THE LANGUAGE OF SILENCE

My work is an investigation of the direct correlations between the act of contemplation, discourse, emotional stillness, and the making or experiencing of my work. My process often involves a repetitive, physical act in search of self-dissolution and meditation. During this repetitive process, I conceptually and aesthetically consider topics that involve the limitations and possibilities inherent in elements of discourse. I understand that my process repeatedly gives way to questions that cannot be answered, but I believe attempting to understand these questions is often just as significant as answering them. It is my hope that the viewer can come to this understanding as well. My work embodies personal cognitive reactions to imagery, materials, and labor, but I feel this process can also be encompassing to the viewer. The viewer contemplating the work parallels my own investigative and process laden practice, becoming both a process for the individual and a metaphor for the work.

My aesthetic decisions are arrived at when I realize a conceptual and visual stillness occurring both within the work and myself. During this process interesting questions are raised; is this stillness that is present in the work a direct response to my own stillness, or is my stillness a direct response to the work? It is at this point that I know the piece is finished although certain aspects of individual works will often inform other pieces'. One can see that there is a discourse within each piece and also between the works themselves. I am fascinated by taking elements of discourse completely out of context and reflecting on whether they hold any resemblance to their original existence. This act interests me because I feel perceptive shifts in context occur at some level in nearly all forms of communication. I question to what extent these shifts occur.

When I incorporate imagery of Charlie Chaplin into *We Are Just Fine* or *Tilting at Windmills*, I am considering Chaplin's ability to communicate non-ontological information utilizing film, body, text, and contrasting that consideration with what I perceive as my own ability to communicate. If I incorporate a representation of Chaplin's work does my own reproduction of the scene carry any of the original emotional content? Or, is the image so far removed it loses any emotional impact, or does it create a completely separate response? How many different reproductive filters can an original element pass through before it is only a superficial representation of itself, or before it becomes something completely different? I investigate this further by representing the piece itself, by taking a



Polaroid of the Chaplin image. I then took a Polaroid of the first Polaroid, and repeated the process. I placed these images directly on the piece in an attempt to illustrate the similarities and differences between all four elements.

It was at this time that I realized that in a normal viewing situation (i.e. viewing a television, computer screen, advertising element) the viewer is most likely not able to view the representation and the actual element being represented at the same moment. I felt that the Chaplin piece was finished but I wanted to investigate this further. This led me to the, "Tilting at Windmills" piece; a title that refers to a British phrase that describes the act of fighting invisible or imaginary characters. It is taken from Don Quixote's conversation with Sancho Panza about javelining the windmills he thought were giants.

This piece is similar to the Polaroid's in that I have taken a photo of the Chaplin piece, then brought the photo up on a computer screen and shot a photo of the screen. I then repeated this process 9 times until finally reaching the filtered image of Chaplin seen in the piece. I then show an enlarged cropped area of the photo demonstrating the interpretation and communication between the camera, computer screen, printer, and artwork. Through this process I investigate the reality of the mechanically reproduced image in contrast to the reality of the actual object. I found that much of the visual information was lost between the camera, computer, printer, and artwork. Creating an image that was an approximation of the original but in itself did not exist, much like the difference between looking out a window, and looking at a photograph of what exists outside that window.

I am interested in the affects of representations, copies, and repetition on truth and superficiality. The act of writing, “We Are Just Fine,” nearly 10,000 times is an investigation into the power of repetition and language. I investigate if the act of repeating the phrase, “we are just fine,” can act as a catalyst for meditation, similar to a mantra. Will this lead me to facetiously believe we are not fine? Will this act allow me time to contemplate the legitimacy of this phrase? Or, will I find that this repetitive act invokes no emotional or cognitive response?

I am interested in allowing the viewer to contemplate what the “real power” of this phrase is, or if the phrase even carries any type of power. Does the fact that it is repeated to such an extent convince the viewer of its validity as a statement, or make no difference? Does it make them feel better reading it, or being unable to read it, “What they don’t know can’t hurt them.” Do the words lose their power if they are indecipherable, or become stronger? Does not having a direct experience of the act make a difference when viewing the visual outcome? Is a copy of the handwritten element as powerful as the original? What does my body and psyche now know about this phrase after physically repeating it nearly 10,000 times?

We very often see one of the limits elements of discourse when they are used in an attempt to communicate non-ontological information such as an ephemeral moment or intangible elements like thought, time, or emotion. I feel *We Are Just Fine 10,000 Times* invokes a stronger notion of time and contemplation than clearly writing or saying the words, “I thought about this phrase while writing it for 26 hours?” I also believe there is

more of an emotional impact in viewing the vast text field, than would be in just writing a single version of the phrase, “We are just fine?” This understanding of the work and process leads me to ask, does, *We Are Just Fine 10,000 times* illustrate that the imagery exists beyond my previously considered limitations of elements of discourse? If so, does this piece communicate more than language alone could or does?

This question inspired the third and final piece in *Tilting at Windmills*. I felt the act of writing we are just fine 10,000 times often did lead me to moments of self dissolution, while at the same time being completely present in the moment of writing each phrase. I felt grounded, while having no sense of self. I employed the camera to take a photo of the, *We Are Just Fine 10,000 Times* drawing. I used a short depth of field and a shifting perspective to produce an image of what appears to be an empty landscape of cracked mud that dissipates off into the horizon. This imagery mirrors the abstraction of repetitive movement through space and time. I also feel this dissipation of the image as well as the inability to read the text is an intriguing allegory for the questions raised through out my investigation.

*The Sound of Falling Snow*, constructed by nearly 18,000 strips of found book paper individually placed, is based on a similar concept. I study the capacity for repetitive physical labor to aid as a catalyst for personal reflection and meditation. I am interested in deconstructing the book and word, both conceptually and physically, and investigating what is still communicated. Are the more ephemeral or amorphous qualities attempted by communication better represented by the word or the purely visual element, or a

combination of elements? Does taking the pages apart release the language from its formal, structural, and/or conceptual constraints, or just create new ones? Can you even destroy formal, structural, and/or conceptual elements when considering communication, or only change them? I believe in the latter. I also utilize visual and physical repetition as a method to create, or eliminate, power and importance. I am interested in intentional and unintentional moments of self-dissolution and what affect loss of self-awareness has on the art object, psyche, and ideals of freedom.

Through this work I also reflect on labor. The more physically involved work such as *The Sound of Falling Snow* is extremely laborious. What kind of cognitive and emotional affects does repetition have on labor? If you are subjected to the monotony of the same labor, day after day, what happens to your heart and mind? What are the effects of the violence of physical labor have on an individual? When I say the, “violence of physical labor” I am referring to the physical toll labor has on your body as well as the strenuous aggressive physical and emotional acts one is involved in through out the process of manual labor. This interest in labor also pays homage to my family, whom labor relentlessly on their ranches in western South Dakota but are still some of the most joyous individuals I know. I was raised in an environment of repetitive manual labor. There was no way to escape it. We had work to do and the only way to get it done was by doing it. It was a great lesson in the differences between direct experiences/knowledge and indirect experiences/knowledge.

I knew at a very young age, the vast cognitive, physical, and emotional difference between seeing 20 miles of barbed wire fence out the car window, and the experience of building 20 miles of barbed wire fence. I realized early on that there is a kind of violence involved through the direct experience of manual labor that can only be known through that act. I wanted to subject myself to this violence in *The Sound of Falling Snow* in an attempt to better understand the direct experience of violence as apposed to the indirect experience of it. I carried these thoughts on manual labor into *The Sound of Falling Snow*. The shape of the overall piece harkens back to the original page or book form. The book objects found throughout the installations are an allegory for the structures, rules, limitations and possibilities inherent in the field of language. In an attempt to show the books flatness I dissect the book giving views of the space inside the book and between pages. The blank book pages also serve as metaphors for the more ephemeral or amorphous qualities inherent in text, language, and visual imagery as means of communication

The repeated use of the leaves in the *untitled tree* represents an ephemeral notion of fear. Leaves are delicate in nature if the leaves fall, they will be lost to the winds, uncovering the branches, and leaving the tree naked and susceptible to the elements. An attempt is made to cushion their fall by placing soft white pillows underneath the tree. Protecting and collecting the leaves upon the pillows, represents an act of fear. Fear interests me because I feel elements of discourse are often used in propagating fear. I am also interested in entertaining the notion that intrinsically these images of the Buddha

(leaves) are not the Buddha, but merely a representation of the Buddha. Consequently, the Buddha leaves are inherently superficial and, are at some level, representative of a falsehood. The tree, as a structure, also reflects an emergent configuration that is reflective of the growing structures of human knowledge, weighed down by its own possibilities and responsibilities. In using thousands of blank white pages while manufacturing the Buddha's, I have incorporated the blank page as a metaphor for the possibilities inherent in text, language, and visual imagery as means of communication. By repeatedly destroying the blank page, I explore whether or not the repeated destruction, violence, or censorship of these possibilities has any affect on their ability to communicate.

My work has been an investigation into the correlations between contemplation, discourse, emotional stillness, and the making or experiencing of my work but also about the poetry and education of inquiry. During the making of this body of work I have considered many questions, questions that often cannot have any one true answer. These questions are often difficult to understand and consume. One might say, that there is no point to such a question but I adamantly disagree. On the path to understand these questions I have come across many answers for questions I did not realize I had even asked. I have enabled a situation of personal growth that involves the persistence of life. Perhaps most important, I have realized when the waters quiet I can see my reflection, and in that reflection there is no difference between the sky and myself; we exist together.