M0MENTARY LAPSES

Alice Salyer

East Tennessee State University

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MOMENTARY LAPSES

A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Art and Design

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art

by

Alice Salyer

May 2019

Kelly Porter, Chair

Catherine Murray

David Dixon

Keywords: mixed media art, glitch art and theory, entropy, Spectacle, vintage x-rays, digital decay
ABSTRACT

M0MENTARY LAPSES

by

Alice Salyer

The artist discusses her Master of Fine Arts exhibition Momentary Lapses, held at Tipton Gallery, February 25-March 8, 2019. The mixed media works and video examine the intersections between digital, somatic and societal decay through the mediation of the digital image by physical anthropogenic efforts.

Themes in the work include glitch art and theory, entropy, memory, decay, and loss. Contemporary American society’s desensitization associated with the oversaturation of digital imagery is discussed, as well as Guy Debord’s theory of the Spectacle, and the artistic practices of Kurt Schwitters and Robert Rauschenberg.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The exponential growth of the digital realm is changing humanity physically, mentally and spiritually both on an individual and a societal level. Common human experiences are now mediated through digital technology. The digital space increasingly acts as interpreter or provider of facsimile experience. My thesis work mediates the digital image through physical, anthropogenic efforts. It is a reversal of the translation and manipulation of human experience through the limitations of the Digital. This method is my way of examining the intersections between digital, somatic and societal decay.

The digital glitch is a critical component of this work. In using glitches as a part of my process, I am exerting control over the Digital while embracing the capricious nature of the glitch. The themes inherent in working with glitch as an art form are particularly suited to addressing the issues of humanity’s surrender of control to digital technology. The visual glitch, if noticed at all, can cause the viewer a momentary jolt; an uncomfortable awakening, as they are abruptly brought out of the trance-like state induced by digital media production or consumption. It is an instant in which the viewer is shown, for just a fraction of a second, that what they are perceiving as reality are just glowing squares that sometimes lose their proper order.

This loss of order can be compared to the processes of decay experienced by both organic and inorganic entities in the physical world. Decay is a theme that is inherent in the digital glitch, the rise of digital technology as a whole, and human experience. Likewise, it is the nature of the human body to break down, much as it is the nature of the things we build to eventually return to the earth. The natural processes of deterioration, as well as unforeseen accidents inherent to the human physical condition, are analogous to the sudden corruption of digital images, or glitch. While both digital and somatic decay are naturally occurring phenomena, they evoke a sense of the mysterious and uncontrollable. As such, decay is a recurring presence throughout my work.

The cycles of growth and decay can ultimately result in total disintegration, sometimes leaving only subtle indications of the objects having once been present in the world. ‘Ghost’ is a term with
various meanings, including presence, spirit, trace or shadow. It is often used to describe incidences of residual energy, or evidence of presences or objects that have disappeared from the physical world. The causes of glitching are often unpredictable, as ghosts have reputations for being. My work often incorporates reflections and shadows — the traces or artifacts left behind. Digital imagery frequently includes artifacts, which are unintended evidence of the process of digitizing information. The fuzzy areas of jpg compression or moiré patterns in a scanned image are examples of this phenomenon. Chimera, a synonym for ghost, is a thing hoped for, that ultimately proves illusory, much like the promises of new technology. It is also an organism that contains genetic material from different species, formed by intentional manipulation. Ghosts remain outside the realm of everyday human perception, so too are possibilities for artistic investigation hidden in the tools we use daily.

When work days involve staring at a screen for hours on end and being at the mercy of technology to bring projects to fruition, having the unexpected occur may be a source of subversive joy. This unexpected occurrence is sometimes the digital image glitch. The glitch provides both the opportunity for artistic experimentation and the risk of not knowing the result. X-ray imagery of the internal secrets of the human body and the desire to produce a physical object combined with the digital glitch provides the elements to create the work in this thesis show. As X-rays reveal unseen structures of the body, glitches reveal the framework of the imagery that surrounds much of contemporary life. Themes in this work include memory, decay, authenticity, reification, loss, chaos and control. These themes are inherent in the nature and process of developing glitch art. Breakdown or overload of memory can cause digital glitches, in a manner similar to problems caused by humans faulty memory in the physical human world. These fundamental themes, the resulting ghost-like traces and experimental nature of the medium contribute to making a venture into glitch-related art practice a compelling area of artistic research.
“The data hidden in our perceptual ‘blind spot’ contains worlds waiting to be explored, if we choose to shift our focus there. Today’s digital technology enables artists to explore new territories for content by capturing and examining the area beyond the boundary of “normal” functions” (Cascone 13).

Glitched images cross lines– the spaces between design and art, intention and accident, machine and magic. A glitched image is the visual result of a sudden equipment malfunction, most often a failure of a computer program. It can be caused by a machine’s lack of memory, processing power, ability to translate digital language, or other factors. Glitches can be at once annoying and intriguing, corrupt and beautiful, compelling and repulsive. They are evidence of our lack of control over the technology which we humans have invented.

And what does the term “digital image” mean? To put it simply, a digital image is Data; information in the form of a code that can be interpreted by computers to form an image that humans can see. Sometimes we can instruct the machine to read that code in new ways. A physical image becomes digital by a process of translation from a physical entity to a code readable by a computer. Digital cameras and scanners are the most common means of capturing a digital image. Other digital images are born in the digital space, starting out as code without initially existing in the physical realm.

There are a myriad of advantages to the digital world. Information can be easily copied, organized, transferred, stored and manipulated while retaining the original. Every aspect of contemporary life is touched by digital imagery to some extent. Commerce, finance, entertainment, transportation, education and healthcare all use digital imagery. Screens are a presence for many of us from the time we wake up in the morning, through the workday, until we go to sleep. Digital images invade our public spaces, without asking if they can take up space in our minds. The visual glitch is an abrupt awakening amid the tranquilizing imitations of reality shown through our screens every day. It is an instance in which the viewer is shown, maybe for just a fraction of a second that what they are perceiving as reality is
just glowing squares that occasionally lose their proper order.

The glitch offers a flash of truth in the pixels forming so much of what we see daily. The momentary failure of a screen, printer or other device reminds us that what we are so entranced with is illusory, or as critical theorist Guy Debord so accurately termed it: a Spectacle. (Debord, Society of the Spectacle 13.) Digital glitches serve as reminders to the viewer that images of recognizable subjects are really composed of pixels—small rectangles lit by the glow of a screen. More and more, and at increasingly younger ages, all types of interactions are mediated through screens. Life onscreen can seem more real than actual reality until, momentarily, we see evidence of failure— the glitch— and we are reminded that what appears authentic is a high-tech facade.

Artist and glitch researcher Evan Meaney’s analysis of the profundity of the digital relates the commonalities between digital and human memory. A thorough exploration of the processes taken for granted by most people who use computers daily is developed as

everything on our hard drives is slowly forgetting itself. Information is lost through compression and manipulation, but also through a file’s own forgetfulness. In this form of digital Alzheimer’s, a zero will forget that it is supposed to be one, and after a time the entire file structure will become untranslatable. While glitching represents an acute and purposeful manipulation of a file’s code, it could be argued that the file would have evolved in a similar way over time.

(Meaney, On Glitching 2)

Nothing is permanently recorded; it is the nature of both media (paper, records, etc.) and digital files to break down. Humanity must be in a continual state of catch-up if we intend to preserve the knowledge amassed over the millennia. The faster we save information to digital media, the faster that media becomes obsolete and we must repeat the process. So, rather than race to keep ahead of the ravages of time and entropy, perhaps the most reasonable response is to salvage the most important information and embrace the nature of decay as it consumes the rest.
Glitch art is rooted in actual malfunction of a device or machine. Most often in today’s usage this is a computer, but analog devices such as film cameras can produce glitched imagery as well. The telltale visual styles of computer glitch are fairly simple to replicate through the use of Photoshop, Instagram or other filter-based applications. An image whose glitchy appearance is the result of stylistic tools is not true glitch, or necessarily art. Authentic glitch art must involve actual breakdown as part of its process of creation, rather than only the appearance of the expected indicators of glitch.

To be “glitch art,” a piece must involve the artist on some level. If the glitch is “naturally occurring” in the wild, it must first be seen by an artist who is quick enough to capture a record of its existence. Then something must be done with that representation, whether or not it is manipulated further. To be art (as opposed to an accident) a glitch must be chosen, curated, and a medium and method of sharing chosen. If an artist sets up a chain of events with the intent to cause an image glitch, the end result is still a corrupted file — the communication breakdown occurs, and whether it was caused intentionally or accidentally is immaterial.
Figure 1: TV Glitch: The Simpsons, 2018

Fig. 2: Photoshop Glitch: Brain, 2017
CHAPTER 3

PROBLEMS OF THE DIGITAL SPACE

Is the prevalence of digital imagery a problem at all for contemporary American society? Every technological media development has had naysayers foretelling the downfall of civilization because of the newfangled printed books, radio or moving pictures. Isn’t the advent of the digital revolution and internet just another link in the chain of media evolution? There are many negative effects of the ubiquitousness of the digital- increasing anxiety and declining health are among the most obvious. According to the American Marketing Association, the average consumer may be exposed to 10,000 messages daily, many of which are digital images. (Saxon, Joshua.) Human skills which require manual dexterity, interpersonal communication and wayfinding for example, are declining as digital skills increase. This leads to problems related to physical experience and coordination as well as critical thinking skills. The digital world, particularly the internet, is a key factor in the lack of empathy displayed by people’s online activities. Examples of this would include cases of online bullying, the incel movement and the casual cruelty of news article commentary. Our memories have also adapted accordingly— we no longer store information in our heads. We adapted quickly to depending on technology and lost abilities such as handwriting or directional skills. Many people unfortunately give credence to the authority of an image, or “news” article without realizing the landscape has changed. Older generations were raised to believe that most photography was an accurate representation of reality and that news sources could be counted on to attempt to convey unbiased reports. Younger people who have grown up with digital media surrounding them adapt to the digital world in myriad ways; many are accustomed to both consume and produce content. Knowing the best angles for selfies and shared knowledge of six second video clips are childhood memories for many of today’s teens. Much digital imagery seen today is produced with the ultimate goal of selling, whether directly or indirectly, and data gathering.

In the 2018 documentary film Rams, famed industrial designer Dieter Rams remarked:

I think that all this digitization is becoming more and more part of our life. I think it diminishes
our ability to experience things. There are pictures that disappear, one after the other without leaving traces up here. This goes insanely fast. … **The world that can be perceived through the senses exudes an aura that I believe cannot be digitized.** We have to be careful now, that we rule over the digital world, and are not ruled by it. (Hustwit, 2018; emphasis added)

This battle may already be lost by today’s inhabitants of post-digital society, many of whom were unaware of a conflict.

Jessica Helfand touches on the problems of the digital revolution in the graphic design and communication professional sphere in her 2001 essay “Dematerialization of Screen Space.”

[t]he computer is our connection to the world. It is an information source, an entertainment device, a communications portal, a production tool. We design on it, and for it, and are its most loyal subjects, its most agreeable audience. But we are also its prisoners: trapped in a medium in which visual expression must filter through a protocol of uncompromising programming scripts, “design” must submit to a series of commands and regulations as rigorous as those that once defined Swiss typography. Aesthetic innovation, if it exists at all, occurs within ridiculously pre-ordained parameters: a new plug-in, a modified code, the capacity to make words and pictures “flash” with a mouse in a nonsensical little dance. …. This in itself is conflicting (not to mention corrupting), but more importantly, what are we making? (Helfand 119-120)

Helfand was writing in 2001, and she accurately portrayed the design and media landscape at the time, which has increased on all fronts exponentially. She was writing prior to the advent of smartphones and tablets, which increased the amount of work required of designers while simultaneously limited design freedom. Designs post-iPhone must function in print, in various browsers as well as in a 2x3 inch rectangle that can be viewed horizontally or vertically. The designer and user’s slavery to the screen she identified in 2001 has been accepted as status quo, and embraced by the younger generations who know no other way to consume media, or indeed, no option besides being consumers of content.
CHAPTER 4

THE SPECTACLE

Digging deeper into the social problems exacerbated by excesses of digital imagery, we are helped by Guy Debord. He had an eerily accurate take on modern industrial society in 1967 when he wrote “The Society of the Spectacle”. It would not be exaggerating to call his writing prophetic.

The Spectacle is not “the media,” or consumer culture, or failing and corrupt capitalism. All of these contribute to the Spectacle. The Spectacle is ever-changing, and difficult to define, but very real. The Spectacle evolves with the times and technology. A hundred years ago people would not have accepted the ways in which the Spectacle affects society, but as it has grown incrementally; it’s easier to embrace the amusing parts while ignoring the bad, until it’s too late. “The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people mediated by images” (Debord, Society of the Spectacle 5). Mass media is a powerful tool of the Spectacle. The ease with which digital imagery is produced, manipulated and distributed serves the Spectacle very well. The illusion of reality is easy to manufacture. “The spectacle’s function is the concrete manufacture of alienation” (Debord, SS 32, page 10).

Alienation feeds the machine of the Spectacle—people who feel isolated from everything will attempt to solve the problem in ways that grow the Spectacle. We have a bad habit of treating the symptoms rather than addressing the root cause of any problem. It is an easier matter to solve superficial problems rather than address the underlying cause. Alienation is regarded by Debord as “an antagonism between humanity and forces humanity has itself created but have now entered into opposition to in the guise of independent beings” (Jappe and Smith 103). A conundrum, for sure. We got ourselves into this mess, and now we are unhappy, with no one to blame but ourselves. A prime example of alienation as defined by Debord is that our daily life is mediated by the machines which we brought into being. How does alienation relate to the Spectacle? It is what nourishes it. It simultaneously causes and consumes alienation. Alienated people will gravitate to superficial balms rather than address the cause of the
problem, therefore encouraging the growth of the Spectacle.

The Spectacle is the “natural outcome of a technical development perceived as natural” (Debord, SS 24). People accept, after minor discomfort, the advancement of technology as a natural occurrence on par with the passage of time itself. This discomfort manifests as frustration with learning new ways of accomplishing tasks, or anger at perceived problems caused by the new technology, but in essence it comes down to our innate resistance to new, and therefore unfamiliar, ways of doing things. However, after a short period of adjustment, the new ways become familiar and the old ways are forgotten.

This technological advancement is seen as a force larger than humanity, even though it is put in motion by human thought and action. The Spectacle: pushed along by ever-developing technological advances, becomes as Debord illustrates, a natural force on par with the tides or the weather. People accept the changes to the tools they buy and use as inevitable, just as they accept the price that must be paid to keep up with them. Acceptance of the Spectacle as truth, and of the constant stream of “upgrades” as natural and necessary is problematic for numerous reasons, not least because of the discouragement of independent thought. Excessive acceptance of the endless cycles of “news,” slideshows, trends and other Spectacular concepts opens a door to acceptance of increasingly authoritarian regimes. When people have short memories and shorter attention spans they cannot think objectively or critically. The Spectacle encourages and rewards excessive dependence on technology. Using technology is in itself not harmful, and indeed improves life in a myriad of ways. It is dependence on technology at the expense of basic skills and knowledge that is, and will continue to be, detrimental to humanity.

There is a profound difference in experience mediated through imagery and the reality. Fine art’s role is to create against the Spectacle by creating moments of the real. It is not to take people away from reality, but to give people a glimpse of reality (“Arthur Schopenhauer”, Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy). To combat the Spectacle through art— make something real and well-crafted, to use authenticity and tangibility as weapons against the Spectacle. True aesthetic experiences instigated by art cannot be bought or sold, and the unmarketable are weapons against the harmful effects of the spectacle.
Art does not play well with the Spectacle. Therein lies the difference between digital imagery and Art: Art is an experience in and of itself, while digital images are representations of experience. The digitization of humanity’s information, while making it available to the masses, also means the truthful experience of it is viewed through a lens of ones and zeros. Human experience has been translated into data. (Transition21) When examining the digital information, we use our eyes and ears, but our senses of touch, smell and taste are idle. “Touch, as the resonant interval or frontier of change and process, is indispensable to the study of structure” (Transition21).
CHAPTER 5

PROCESS, MATERIALS AND METHODS

My venture into using glitched images as the basis for visual art began with my own image collection glitching. While my habit of opening many files at once surely plays a part in causing the image glitches, it has always been my profound lack of comprehension of the inner technical workings of computers that makes the occasional glitch seem to be evidence of otherworldly forces at work. Even though computers are machines that do as instructed, their tendency to abruptly stop working in visually arresting ways seems to indicate illogical causes. The fascinating visual results of these ephemeral breakdowns are easily recorded through screen capture. The most compelling sections of the broken image can be salvaged and used as the basis for a new design. This new image could then be printed, manipulated by hand using traditional art materials and then captured as a new digital image. The cycle could repeat indefinitely.

There are other ways to induce image glitching beyond just hoping for machine failure. Opening and making changes to files with a program intended for other file types is one such means. An example of this is manipulating the image files in an audio program called Audacity and doing audio manipulations to the visual file. Files can also be opened in text programs such as TextEdit, and changes made to the resulting text. Simply opening up many files in Photoshop or Finder on an older Mac and screen capturing the results is another method of inducing and recording visual glitches. The visual results of each technique eventually become familiar and somewhat predictable, although not controllable. To create a physical art object using elements of the resulting visual glitches, the best glitched images are printed to the desired size, using either a Xerox laser printer, or an Epson inkjet 7900. They can then be transferred to a substrate via glue or image transfer techniques such as Mod Podge. Rather than digitally reworking the glitched elements, for some of the resulting images I used physical collage methods to emphasize and edit. Pigments, solvents and various other materials can then be added to create a next stage of the piece. In many instances, I find small sections of the print/paint collage compelling and will
take a photo of that section, and start the process over again.

Fig. 3: “IMG_4227 and Her Children,” mixed media on plexiglass
Fig. 4: Glass X-Rays on lightbox at VA Medical Museum

Fig. 5: Glass X-Ray: Straight Pin in the Eye
Figs. 6, 7: Straight Pin in the Eye; Glitches generated through Audacity
CHAPTER 6

M0MENTARY LAPSES

For the purposes of this thesis exhibition, I limited the visual source material to a collection of antique glass x-rays found in the Mountain Home, Veterans Administration Museum, Johnson City, Tennessee. Glass x-rays were in use in medicine until the early 1920s, prior to the development of x-ray film. The existing glass x-rays at the VA Medical Museum are small, about 2 x 3 inch displayed in rows on a lightbox. Their visual character is highly compelling; they carry their history on their surface. The typography of their time, handwritten notes, changes in color over time, cracks and general decay are evident. The subjects they represent are the deterioration and breakage inherent in our human body, whether caused by accident, disease, or flaws in our genetic code. They are images of horrors such as smallpox, syphilis, broken bones, infections, genetic anomalies or a straight pin in the eye. They are images of the decay of the human body, in addition to being tangible decaying objects in their own right. One may wonder about the connection between digital image glitches and antiquated medical imaging. Both image glitches and X-rays reveal previously unseen inner structures. Particularly, inner structures in which things have gone wrong, sometimes fatally so. Both offer views of the formerly unknown, as well as opportunity for analysis and new knowledge. There is also joy, for me at least, in seeing both the beauty inherent in digital image glitches and the signs of physical deterioration in these historic mementos. The body and the Digital are worlds which we are intimately connected to, so much so that we take them for granted— until, they fail us, often in unexpected and dramatic ways.

The title of this body of work, M0MENTARY LAPSES, references a number of thematic elements of the work. These include digital glitches as a type of transitory malfunction of machines, human physical breakdown, and my own faulty memory as well as the familiar phrases “momentary lapse of memory” and “momentary lapse of reason.”
Triplets

In the winter of 2017/18 I began using plexiglass as a support on which to build art pieces. The clear plastic surface is reminiscent of a computer or device screen, and can be backlit and normally lit for display. The rectangular shape reflects the shape of pixels, which are the building blocks of digital imagery. Plexiglass is suited for display on walls, hanging from ceilings or mounted as floor display. Pieces can be viewed from both sides, in contrast to traditional prints or paintings. The translucency adds a layer of visual interest unattainable with opaque materials. Plexiglass based works also interact with their surroundings in a much more dynamic way than traditional paintings. (see Figure 3) Pigment on plexiglass appears to change with changing lighting conditions in a far more dramatic manner than pigment on opaque surfaces. The layers of pigment on both sides of the plexiglass interact with one another to form a dynamic whole, in which the development of a piece can be followed, like a visual memory. Shadows and reflections on the surrounding areas such as walls or floors are an exciting element of working on transparent substrates; the entire space a translucent piece occupies is incorporated into the artwork, sometimes in unexpected ways.

Triplets is a series of five 32x32 inch plexiglass squares, each containing imagery of originating from singular glitched X-ray of a triplet pregnancy. Image transfer, oil paints, inks, rust and solvents were used to create each panel. The installation consists of several panels mounted two inches away from the wall and others hanging from the ceiling in front of the wall-mounted pieces. This creates a dynamic interaction of the imagery, both with the visual layering of the plexiglass panels, but also the layers of shadows cast onto subsequent pieces and the walls. The shadows add considerable space to the original composition; the piece itself consists of the seven plexiglass pieces, as well as the shadows they cast.
Fig. 8: “Triplets” source image

The source X-ray “Triplets” is framed in a black asymmetrical, off-kilter frame. It has a pale turquoise row of vertical, handwritten numbers going up the right side, as well as an angled, official-looking stamp or form at the lower right. We can decipher the word “Bristol” and number “860” in reverse on the stamp. One would assume that the patient was at a hospital in Bristol to get her X-ray. The word “Triplets” is handwritten, in reverse text along the top, over where the ribs of the body should be. The image of the body is extremely soft-focused, we can make out the spine and hips clearly, the rest fades into oblivion. There are three reversed arrows pointing to where the babies must be, but they are very difficult to see. The impression of this image is that we are seeing it from very far away in space and time, which, in a sense we are- we are viewing a record of a pivotal moment in four people’s lives.

How did the patient feel when she found she was having triplets? A typical pregnancy is dangerous, even now; to have triplets in decades past must have been even more traumatic. Bristol is
local; are those triplets alive and well in East Tennessee? The unknowable futures awaiting the mother and babies in this image, connections and breakdowns, joys and pains common to humanity are underlying thoughts as I respond to the processes of building and rebuilding the elements of this installation.

Fig. 9: “Triplets,” mixed media on plexiglass
The Center Cannot Hold

During the experimentation process, I found inkjet printing directly on various transparent substrates, that are manufactured for that purpose. I tested printing the glitches on Epson Crystal Clear Inkjet Film, Pictorico Inkjet Film and laser printing on Amberlith. Epson Crystal Clear Inkjet Film is exactly as advertised—crystal clear. As small, square, pixels are the building blocks of digital imagery, I was interested in developing a physical piece composed of many smaller square images.

Fig. 10: Paget’s Disease Source X-Ray

I chose the glitches gleaned from the Paget’s Disease X-Ray as the starting point for this piece. The source X-ray, “Paget’s Disease” is a side view of the skull, ending abruptly before the neck starts, facing left. It is in shades of warm black with the brain area transitioning softly to warm coffee browns. It is labelled directly on the slide, underneath the image in all capital, black, closely spaced letters. The typeface is a narrow sans serif, with rounded edges, that is not readily identifiable to me. The image overall is off balance, as shown by a heavy angled wedge at the left side, and a much smaller horizontal
black triangle at the top right. The number “131” is reversed out of a black horizontal rectangle connecting to the large black wedge at the left top of the image. It is a bold sans serif, reminiscent of Constructivist graphic design. The skull is entirely contained within the image area, not bleeding off anywhere. We see small black and white spots and circles lightly covering the image, perhaps remains of dust or other imperfections.

Paget’s Disease is a bone disease in which the bone grows too fast and in odd shapes (“Paget's Disease of Bone: Symptoms, Diagnosis, Treatment.” WebMD). It is thought to come from a combination of a virus and genetics. Affecting men more often than women, frequently asymptomatic at first; more advanced cases involve bone pain, deformity and impaired movement depending on the affected bones. It is likely that there was nothing the victim could do to prevent the disease occurring, and treatment options are limited. A glitch in the body’s code goes awry and pain and deformity result.

The piece is a wall installation, consisting of hundreds of five by five inch square prints on Epson transparency film, Pictorico film and laser prints on paper. They are attached to the wall using t-pins, as they invoke a scientific or medical sense that complements the medical nature of the starting imagery. The arrangement of the squares on the wall evolved over time, starting from a large rectangular grid with roughly equal spacing between each square, to a densely packed center mass with overlapping pieces and individuals and small groups expanding into the outer spaces, eventually evolving to a tightly packed orderly grid on the side, seemingly emerging from the wall quickly separating and falling into chaos. While the organized grid composition does reflect the way in which digital image files are built, the swift descent into disorder speaks to deeper truths. In addition to the conglomeration of squares bringing to mind pixels, the seemingly random arrangement evokes information organization (or disorganization), maps, the struggle between chaos and order, and the group versus the individual. As with Triplets, a key element of The Center Cannot Hold is the shadows of the square glitches cast onto the wall behind the installation. The many colored shadows add layers of interest as well as indications of the transitory nature of humans and our digital creations.
The title *The Center Cannot Hold* references W.B. Yeats well-known poem *The Second Coming*. Written in 1919, it’s lines are now so frequently referenced in popular culture that while the original poem may not be familiar to people, its phrases likely are. The sentiment conveyed in the phrase *The Center Cannot Hold* is analogous to the breakdown of both human memory and digital images. For both memories and digital images, every time we open them up, and resave them, they are ever so slightly changed, and a little more of them is lost. Eventually, it becomes difficult to recognize if a memory is an accurate representation of reality or if we only remember a faulty copy.

*Fig. 11: “The Center Cannot Hold,” mixed media, digital prints*
Fig. 12-13: Details of “The Center Cannot Hold,” mixed media, digital prints
This hanging installation explores the expansion of digital imagery into our headspaces in a literal way. Our public and private spaces are continually interrupted with digital images meant to sell or entertain. Gallery visitors can view this suspended installation from three sides as well as walk through the pieces if desired. Visually, the imagery is the result of experiments with physically merging various glitches from the *Straight Pin in the Eye* x-ray. Glitches are printed onto Epson transparency paper, and then “sandwiched” together, using various adhesives and pigments. The interaction of the viscous materials with the printing inks cause unexpected changes and interruptions to the images, some immediate and other over the course of the materials drying time. In a sense, these images are glitched first in the digital space and turned into new imagery via analog glitching in the physical realm. The resulting patterns and changes, melding and fragmenting are visually fascinating. Some of them demonstrate the process of physical deterioration over the course of the installation, as gravity slowly moves the pigments downwards.

The source X-ray used to create *Straight Pin in the Eye* (see Figure 5) is a horizontal image of a close-up front view of the skull with the eye sockets just below the horizontal center of the image as the identifier. The tones and shapes are soft and subtle, and the image is cropped so tightly that without the recognizable eye sockets, we may not know it was a skull. It is sharply divided into sections by vertical black and warm mottled brown vertical bars, the brown are probably aged tape. There is a vertical row of blue-grey numbers running up the left side, bleeding off the image, ending with a blurry blue rectangle that is probably a reflection. This image has many small similar black dots as the previous image. Near the top of the brown stripe on the right, there is a small, black capital letter “A” that appears to have been haphazardly dropped into place. I cannot tell if it has any reason for being there or if it’s a mistake. This image in particular is a combination of soft, delicate value transitions and hard lines, with visual evidence of imperfections and aging. The heavy vertical brown and black stripes make the image reminiscent of a
stage with the curtains either opening or closing. Rather than defined bone shapes, it appears to be built of soft layered webbing.

I chose this particular X-ray as the basis for this piece for several reasons; because of the shocking and painful nature of the medical condition, the mysterious beauty of the image, and the questions raised by the image. Specifically, how did someone get a pin in their eye? The pin is not discernable in the original x-ray, but it must have been a terrible experience for the unfortunate victim. Similarly, the overbearing presence of digital imagery throughout contemporary life is a constant contributor to the stress and discomfort felt by many people, yet has become so ubiquitous as to be almost invisible. It is a difficult problem to recognize, because so many are surrounded by it every day, an encumbrance so close we often miss seeing it.

Fig. 14: “Straight Pin in the Eye,” mixed media, digital prints
The Yupos: Ars Modem

The series of Yupo paper prints differs from the other installations in that they are individual prints of glitches of different x-rays, as opposed to being a large group with its basis in one source image. Like the Straight Pin in the Eye installation, they are glitched using the computer, and then they undergo a process of glitching in order to enter to physical world. Yupo is a plastic paper, not intended for use with inkjet printers. The ink rests on the surface rather than soaking in as normal paper accepts ink. The viscous inks stay on the surface, dripping and melding with each other to form images considerably different than the file provided to the printer. The human hand’s only role in this work is as curator and instigator. Each print is a unique individual, stemming from differing sources, and the interaction of the printing inks would never be the same twice. The process of each x-ray transitioning to a digital file, through being broken and re-entering the physical realm as a new entity could be considered analogous to the changes contemporary society has undergone as the digital revolution unfolded.

Fig. 15: “WWI Gun Shot Wound,” inkjet print on Yupo paper
I Have Seen My Death

I was initially uninterested in venturing into video as part of this investigation. It is inherently removed from the human touch—mediated by the digital, and dependent on a machine’s interpretation for humans to experience it. The human touch is integral to the rest of the work, it is paradoxical to include video. Additionally, the ubiquitousness of online video removed any novelty it may have once possessed. The prevalence of video contributes to its lessening importance and seriousness. In the fine art world, video was once cutting edge, much of it now is easily overlooked.

However, the nature of my glitching process results in a large number of images that can provide the basis of video work, as well as audio files. The flow of one glitch into another is a means to share the process and evolution of the image breakdown, as well as the sheer variety of possible glitches resulting from any single source image. The sounds used are the audio programs’ translations of the glitched images: we hear the noise of the image. The audio tracks produced by glitching the images in audio editing software provide a vital layer of intensity. The audio results of the computer interpretation of the image data is particularly unnerving. It calls to mind body sounds, like heartbeats, whooshing sounds heard through a stethoscope or the insectile buzz of a rattlesnake. Other noises are of a more industrial nature, repeated clicks, whirs and deep grinding sounds. The visceral response to the video and audio stimulus reinforce the sense of entering a world in which humans are not in control. The viewing of the video can be a very unsettling experience, as glitches and being witness to decay often are.

The title of the piece is I Have Seen My Death, which references one of the X-rays used as source material for glitching, Roentgen’s Wife’s Hand. The discoverer of X-ray technology, Wilhelm Roentgen recorded an image of his wife Anna’s hand. “When Anna Bertha Ludwig saw the bones of her hand exposed beneath her skin, her wedding wing hovering above the skeletal knuckles, she reportedly exclaimed, ‘I have seen my death’” (Meier). She was understandably taken aback by the revealing of her own inner structures, which may have been much like seeing her own ghost. The X-rays used throughout this project as source images all reveal the inner truths of what would otherwise stay, at least partially,
hidden.

Fig. 16: “Roentgen’s Wife’s Hand” x-ray image
Fig. 17: “I Have Seen My Death” video still

Fig. 18: “I Have Seen My Death” video still
Kurt Schwitters, Gerhard Richter and Robert Rauschenberg were all masters of combining media. Photography, screen printing, painting, collage, straw and even taxidermy goats meld and mesh, clash and collide throughout the works of these artists. Their works are rich feasts for the senses. All, in different words in different situations, claim to be experimenters, responders to, or collaborators with their materials rather than being in total control of a piece from idea to finished product. I find that to be the place I prefer to be in when I am working on a piece. It is also interesting that it is the visual combinations of textures and materials that attracted me to these artists, before I began researching their writings.

Rauschenberg worked instinctually, responding to existing visual stimulus.

Moreover, he makes it plain the nothing he has ever done has ever started with an idea…I’m [Rauschenberg] opposed to the whole idea of conception-execution—of getting an idea for a picture and carrying it out. I’ve always felt as though, whatever I’ve used and whatever I’ve done, the method was always closer to a collaboration with the materials than a conscious manipulation and control. (Tompkins 203-204)

Rauschenberg’s use of layering, textures and unexpected materials, as well as his non-narrative, lateral approach appeal to me.

In 1966, Richter, in a similar spirit, stated that he prefers to remain uncategorizable and work instinctively. “I pursue no objectives, no system, no tendency… I steer clear of definitions. I don’t know what I want. … I like the indefinite, the boundless” (Richter, The Daily Practice of Painting 58). Richter is well-known for, among many other accomplishments, the sheer variety of his body of work. His abstract paintings and overpainted photographs are the works towards which I feel the most affinity, as they embrace chance, accidents and the beauty inherent in deterioration. He makes a conscious choice to allow both chance and destruction to play a large role in his process, “I don’t have a specific picture in my
mind’s eye. I want to end up with a picture that I haven’t planned. This method of arbitrary choice, chance, inspiration and destruction may produce a specific type of picture, but it never produces a predetermined picture (Richter, Richter858 52).

The spirit of my work follows in the footsteps of Kurt Schwitters. He was associated with the Dada movement of the first World War and following years, but was not really an accepted member of the group. He supported himself through graphic design, but is remembered for his collages of detritus, or Merz. Merz was the term he developed to describe his artistic method, which was saving abandoned scraps and making new art from them. His intent was a literal healing of the broken world left by the Great War.

The Great War is over, the world is in ruins anyhow, so I collect the pieces and construct a new Reality. Art is primordial, remote like God, unexplainable as Life, undefinable and without purpose. A work of art results from the interaction of its elements. I only know how to create, I know the material with which I create, I don’t know for which purpose. The material is as unimportant as I myself. Important is only the creation. (Kurt Schwitters, The Ararat 1920)

Rather than representations of the world, or forms that transcend the world as seen by most people, Schwitters’ collages were literally pieces of his world: refuse reconstructed as art. He was not out to change the world-- he was accepting that the world was the way it was; the good, the bad, and the ugly. The beauty of the collage works exemplify Schwitters visceral understanding of art. “The unity of art is not something planned by an external authority, this beauty we find in a rock, in a cloud-formation, in a landscape, or a human face, is not a measured beauty: it is arbitrary ... and become fixed only when an emotional integrity is achieved” (Luke 174).
Decay

Artists cannot begin in antiseptic abstraction, like philosophers with their notepads, or theoretical physicists at their blackboards. They have to begin in medias res, literally in the middle of things: THE MOULDY MATERIA PRIMA oil, canvas, squalor. So it is the artist’s task to discern somehow what is worth saving, and what can be transformed, and finally to crawl out of the morass. (Elkins 82)

Decay is both an ending and the fodder for new growth. Where do features of ancient art materials such as oils or charcoal and contemporary digital technology coincide? James Elkins’ *What Painting Is* provides much insight in contemplating that question. In essence, the premise of his book is that painting is alchemy. As painters, we don’t need to understand what it is we are working with nor do we truly know what our final results will be. We probably don’t know the chemical structure of our pigments, where they come from or how they were made. We know how to use them, manipulate them to achieve a desired result, but ultimately we are experimenting with mysterious elements the understanding of which is ultimately irrelevant to our desired outcomes.

To go even further with our comparison, artists and alchemists are both fascinated with decay:

The clean substance has to degenerate into brackish mould before it produces anything worth examining. (Elkins 79)

The alchemists’ interest in putrefactio is shared by contemporary artists, many of whom see something beautiful in natural decay. The rotting fruit, blooming at the back of the refrigerator, is also outlandishly beautiful with its crown of bluish hair spreading over a glowing orange skull. So is the throat ravaged with bronchitis, blossoming in smooth white flowers. And the bloated deer half-swamped in the lakeshore is also beautiful, with its gorgeous smooth hide stretched into alucent bubble. There are hundreds of examples in fine art, each more nauseating and compelling than the last. The installation artist Ann Hamilton soaked a hundred thousand pennies in honey, and then let them gather a film of dust; Andres Serrano made stagnant infusions of piss, semen,
and milk; Frances Whitehead works with fabrics soaked in water, mud, oils, resins, and perfumes. … If anything, contemporary artists are more inventive than their alchemical forbears in the search for the conjunction of the repulsive and the compelling. (Elkins 80)

With both natural and digital decay, artists embrace the repulsive yet fascinating colors, textures and changes caused by the processes of decay. Artists have accepted and used the flawed natures of their various mediums as essential elements in their practices. Filmmakers use the natural grain and scratches; charcoal drawers use the dry dust of charcoal; painters accept canvas texture and thick globs of paint. These features that are indicative of the mediums used are also signs of decay.

One cannot actually capture a glitch, but it is possible to record a visual representation of the effects of the glitch process. It’s conceivable to record evidence of the failure, but not the failure itself. “This change renders glitch ambivalent because once it is visible as glitch, it is no longer only an autonomous process, it is also the result, the trace left by the process, linking the glitch to conceptions of photography as record” (Betancourt 53). It is the failures that can lead to the most fascinating visual solutions. To return to What Painting Is, artists find the most worth in that which is disintegrating: it is the unexpected that is the most memorable. Similarly, the breakdown of the human body, whether through natural aging, disease or accident are outward symptoms of internal failures. The visual representations of human bodily breakdown are shown through medical imaging, such as the glass x-rays used in my practice.
Layers

To what artistic end are the physical and conceptual layering of imagery and artifacts of digital decay, human decay and actual deterioration? While the visual elements of decay are exacerbated by the emphasis of colors and textures in my work, when integrated as a whole entity, there is as much a sense of growth as there is decay. As Schwitters observes, art is made up of the sum of its parts. (cite) Layers are integral to my work at every stage of the process. Layers of meaning are imbued through the various instances of decay, including human, digital via glitch, and literal through the damage and manipulation of the printed materials. In the digital space, many layers make up a Photoshop image— as a designer, I have a dubious reputation as someone whose files are made up of an excessive number of layers. In Photoshop, layers are used to adjust contrast, colors, hue, and each part of an image can be separated into its own individual layer. Files of twenty or more layers are not uncommon. The layers interact with each other in various ways, and the order of the layers affects the appearance of the final image. Each layer contributes to the unity and richness of the whole.

In the physical realm, many variations may be printed, and cut or torn and then physically layered together. Other materials such as paint, wax, solvents and objects are layered throughout the building of a piece. It is the layering that provides depth, and interest to a piece. Various elements work together to form meaningful structures despite the chaos of the individual components.
High Touch Mystery

“Postdigital art is emerging from a vital dialogue between high tech and high touch experiences. It invites the rediscovery of ten fingers by adding the human touch to digital technologies” (Alexenberg, M. L. 35).

Melvin Alexenburg’s *The Future of Art in a Postdigital Age: From Hellenistic to Hebraic Consciousness* provides insight into why we are interested in putting the human stamp on digitally produced images. He posits that digitally created imagery needs at least the representation of the human touch in order for it to be accepted by human brains.

Typical images produced with 3D computer graphics still appear unnaturally clean, sharp, and geometric looking. Their limitations especially stand out when juxtaposed with a normal photograph. Thus one of the landmark achievements of Jurassic Park was the seamless integration of film footage of real scenes with computer-simulated objects. To achieve this integration, computer-generated images had to be degraded; their perfection had to be diluted to match the imperfection of film’s graininess. (Alexenberg 35)

Therefore, for images digitally created for the purposes of entertainment (and sales and communication) to be accepted by our human brains, we need for them to have the appearance of imperfection—to have flaws added by people. If commercial imagery demands the corruption of the human touch to gain acceptance, mightn’t fine art as well? Alexenberg touches on the power of human hand as well:

Only high touch Torah scrolls flawlessly copied by hand retain ritual power. Printed copies, widely disseminated throughout the community, are valued for Torah study, but not for public reading in synagogues. The essence of biblical study is to smash the text to bits and put it back together in multiple alternative ways. This postmodern-like deconstruction leads to reconstruction with its fresh insights and new perspectives gleaned from the Torah, a process called hiddushei Torah. (Alexenberg 72)
This connection between the human touch, magic and art is not provable by scientific means, but the reverence which we retain for work created by hand is evidence of this association.
CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

While I have learned and grown in innumerable ways throughout the past three years of graduate school, this research into the intersections between digital and somatic decay led to more questions and few, if any, answers. Many of the questions arising through the process of developing this work seem inherently unanswerable, such as uncertainties regarding the nature of reality, authenticity and human perception. If any suspected knowledge has been validated by the process of developing this work, it is connection; in this case, the connections between the Digital realm, our bodies and the body of society. The layers of meaning are hopelessly intertwined within and among each part of this body of work, pieces of a greater whole, in constant danger of mysterious and sudden failure. Most of the time, we want to believe we are in control. The glitch’s random beauty abruptly cautions us that sometimes we are not. It reminds us that there is much outside the periphery of our daily vision that remains enigmatic.
GLOSSARY

**Analog** - Not involving or relating to the use of computer technology, as a contrast to a digital counterpart. ([https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/analogue](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/analogue))

**Digital Image** - Digitization is the process of transforming images, text, or sound from analog media (generally formats or objects that we can see or hear) into electronic data that we can save, organize, retrieve, and restore through electronic devices into perceptible surrogates of the original works. Of the vast number of digital assets that are being created, still images, texts, motion pictures, and sound recordings predominate. A digital image, then, is one that has been created through the process of digitization. ([https://www.bowdoin.edu/dam/digimage/index.shtml](https://www.bowdoin.edu/dam/digimage/index.shtml))

**Pixel** - the smallest individual element of a raster format digital image. Like the individual dots in offset printing, pointillist painting or one stitch in a cross-stitch piece.

**Raster** - A digital image made up of individual pixels, such as a photograph or scanned image

**Vector** - Digital image made up of points and paths, created in programs such as Adobe Illustrator. Used for creation of typefaces and logos, vector art can be produced at any size without loss of quality.


**Visual Glitch** - the visual result of the breakdown of a digital image through accidental or intentional equipment failure Glitch Art - the practice of using digital or analog errors for aesthetic purposes by either corrupting digital data or physically manipulating electronic devices ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glitch_art](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glitch_art))

**Digital** - the translation of information into positive and negatives- a system of ones and zeros. Digital information is easier to manipulate and transfer than analog information.

**Post-digital** - our current time, in which the prevalence of digital media (such as computers, cell phones, social media are taken for granted “The simplest definition of post-digital describes a media aesthetics
which opposes such digital high-tech and high-fidelity cleanness (Cramer, “What is Post-digital” 41).

**New Aesthetic** - a term, coined by James Bridle, used to refer to the increasing appearance of the visual language of digital technology and the Internet in the physical world, and the blending of virtual and physical. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Aesthetic)
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2015-2016 Creative Energy, Art Director/Studio Director
2000-2015 Creative Energy, Art Director
1999-2000 Target Marketing and Creative Services, Graphic Designer

Exhibitions:  
2019 Kill Your Darlings, Slocumb Galleries
2019 M0MENTARY LAPSES, solo thesis exhibit, Tipton Gallery
2019 Recent Acquisitions Show, Reece Museum
2018 The Face of Danger, Tipton Gallery
2018 Thresholds, Two-Woman Show with Kehren Barbour, Tipton Gallery
2018 It’s Complicated, Pop-Up Show, East Tennessee State University
2018 Find the Pattern & Break It, Reece Museum
2017 SIDEbySIDE: Warhol and the Body, Tipton Gallery
2017 Collage & Digital Madness, Las Laguna Gallery, Laguna Beach, CA
2017 Our Appalachia, Slocumb and Tipton Galleries
2017 Encaustic Pop-Up Show, Dos Gatos Coffee Bar
2017 The Map is Not the Territory, Reese Museum
2017 CATTYWAMPUS! Print Exchange and show, ArtCurious Gallery
2016 Adjunked: The Part-Timer’s Print Exchange

Service:  
Artful Aging, Johnson City Public Library program
Tree Streets Community Intersection Street Art design, committee member
What’s the Buzz! Pollinator Advocacy design work, board member
2016 Model Mill Selfie Poster in support of saving historic mill
2011 Stream of Unconscious- Design for cassette tape experimental art series
   by Bryan Lewis Saunders; Shown at MOMA PS1

2004-present Girl Scouts active volunteer

2002-2010 Appalachian Regional Coalition for Homelessness design,
   board member

Curatorial: 2017 She: Female Figurines from Ancient Syria and Western Mexico,
           1,500-1,800 B.C. ~ 300 B.C.-400 A.D.
           Exhibit of artifacts from the Cedric Marks Collection at the
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Awards: 2016-2019 Graduate Assistantship, East Tennessee State University

1999-2018 Numerous Gold & Silver ADDY awards
2016 ADDY Best of Show Print: Red Gold, K-12 Tomatoes Magazine Ad
2016 ADDY Best of Show Photography: Red Gold Sauces
2012 ADDY Best of Show Web: Red Gold, Irresistible Ketchup Web Videos
2010 ADDY Judges Choice: American Italian Pasta Company,
   The Art of Pasta Brochure
2008 ADDY Best of Show Radio: Andy’s Restaurants, Chicken Attack
2004 ADDY Regional Silver: Tammy Blevins, Food Stylist Business Card

2012 Telly Award: Red Gold Irresistible Ketchup Web Videos
2012 Pixie Award: Red Gold Irresistible Ketchup Web Videos
2002 Telly Award: Appalachian Regional Coalition on Homelessness TV

Presentations: 2019 UCDA (University & College Designers Association)
                Design Education Summit: Collaborate
                Intersection Art — A Collaborative Art Event
                in Johnson City’s Oldest Neighborhood
                with Vanessa Mayoraz
                (forthcoming)

Memberships: Phi Kappa Phi Honor Society
              Slocumb Gallery Student Society
              Graduate Fine Art Association