

THESIS

THE SPACE BETWEEN: COGNITION, CONSTRUCTS, AND CONTEMPLATION

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## ABSTRACT

### THE SPACE BETWEEN: COGNITION, CONSTRUCTS, AND CONTEMPLATION

I frequently ponder the buzz that surrounds a person at any given moment in a day. Stopped at a traffic light, I gaze around at other people in their cars and think of all of the experiences that have brought this group of humans to the same point, waiting for the light to turn. These brief moments of simultaneity—these intersections of individual experiences, environments, and objects—are wonderful features of being alive; the ability to contemplate these brief moments is uniquely human.

As well as offering critical analysis of five separate sculptures, this paper delineates the conceptual framework, artistic influences, material considerations, and compositional choices as it relates to the creation of sculptural body of work titled *Cognition, Constructs, and Contemplation*. The forms presented in this body of work attempt to reconcile ideas of “cognition” in visual form by abstracting isolated units of complex neurological systems that govern the transmission of thoughts, memories, and emotions. These sculptures are composed into naturalistic constructs that draw inspiration from cyclical systems found in both the natural world as well as the manmade. My intention is to evoke contemplation on the unseen forces found in the space inside and between living entities, and in the objects and landscapes that surround them. The space between bodies contains an unknown energy that pulses with the cognitive output of all living creatures.

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## **Conceptual/ Theoretical Framework**

In order to truly understand a sculpture, one must explore the multiple layers of the object in question. The skin or exterior of the sculpture emphasizes the physical nature of what a viewer sees in real space. The interior of the object contains the unseen strata that make up the inner ethos of the work of art. Not only do the sculptural works from this series conceive a suspended moment of a cognitive system, works also elicit that the act of shaping material itself is an advanced cognitive system. Furthermore, the interrogation and manipulation of material with human hands is a ritual of advanced thinking. The series of works presented in the following pages emphasizes that the mind and body connection required for making sculpture is a supreme act of cognition; making is thinking.

To follow the conceptual nature of the pieces examined in this thesis, the memory functions that occur in the brain as well as some key theoretical terms must be delineated: cognition, existentialism, and the theory of the mind (ToM).

*Cognition* is the “act or process of knowing.” Cognition includes every mental process that may be described as an experience of knowing (including perceiving, recognizing, conceiving, and reasoning)<sup>1</sup>. Thinking about thinking and collecting data (knowledge) as people live out their lives are fundamental benefits of the human condition. This contemplation on the mysteries of human purpose is one of the cornerstones of Existentialist philosophy.

*Existentialism* is an area of philosophical study that emphasizes the uniqueness and isolation of the individual experience in a hostile or indifferent universe. This school of thought regards human existence as unexplainable, and stresses the freedom of choice and responsibility for the consequences of one's acts and choices.<sup>2</sup> Debated for centuries, the

cause and effect of human actions is the crux of existential discussion and upholds that ones choices spark a chain reaction of cause and affect that ultimately shapes a life (existence) as well as the lives of those around. The same is true for works of art; a series of ongoing choices carries a project from concept to completion. Ultimately, every choice along the way affects the final outcome of sculpture.

Existential philosophers have long been interested in the relationship between the knowing mind and external reality. This topic is often referred to as Philosophy of the Mind or Theory of Mind (ToM), and focuses on questions regarding the relationships between the mind, the body, and surrounding forces. The Theory of Mind declares that we know that we have a mind but cannot be sure that others have a mind. More specifically, ToM promotes the ability to attribute mental states to one's self (i.e. beliefs, intent, desire, imagination, and knowledge), and to understand that others may also carry a similar set of mental states that have lead to their own being. The presumption that others have a mind is termed a theory of mind because each human can only interpret the existence of their own mind through introspection, and no one has direct access to the mind of another. It is typically assumed that others have minds by analogy with one's own, and this assumption is based on the reciprocal nature of social interaction, as observed in shared attention, the functional use of language, and the understanding of others' emotions and actions. Having a theory of mind allows one to attribute thoughts, desires, and intentions to others, to predict or explain their actions, and to calculate one's intentions.<sup>3</sup> My body of thesis work attempts to compact the ideas of existentialism and theory of the mind by presenting singular units that might be part of a much bigger field of similar pieces. Works project a sense that they could be attached with other units to form a vast structure of similar components.

Neuroscience, psychology, philosophy, and art all contain themes that explore complex functions of memory and consciousness. These interdisciplinary discussions carefully weave notions of cognition into the fabric of human purpose and are central to the discourse of both cognition and existentialism. The memory system is crucial in allowing us to navigate our world by providing a means by which we can learn and modify our behavior. One major function of memory is to accurately encode, store, and retrieve different kinds of information. However, memory has broader functions, such as maintaining our sense of self, regulating emotion, motivating and directing future goals, as well as helping us to maintain relationships with others.<sup>4</sup> Memories are retrieved through a variety of access points triggered by a combination of any number of cognitive experiences and sensations. Furthermore, memory can often be contaminated and contain corrupted data influenced by external factors that heavily rely on societal or interpersonal interactions (ToM). This is often referred to as “collective memory” or “relational remembering”<sup>5</sup>

Our existence and individuality is molded from the piecing together of our experiences and environment. These individual memories (autobiographical experiences) overlap in the borderlands of the collective memory, and form an interstice of embodied memories. This vast network of individual memories develops and interacts with other entities that contain a set of their own memories. In other words, as humans, our internal framework is held together as well as separated from the rest of the world by our flesh. Our shells contain a closed matrix of experiences that make up our individuality. Our individual experiences, surrounding environments, and our interactions with each other have a tremendous affect on how we are made and how we interpret our being. Associations and



exchanges with others promote a give and take of data between living objects—what could be called “transmission.” This transmission is of great interest to me; it ultimately encompasses the conceptual framework for the sculptures presented in *Cognition, Constructs, and Contemplation*. Works embody this cognitive transmission, which is interpreted through interacting forms. By utilizing aspects of material memory as well as visual abstractions of how memories might connect, fabricated works present cognitive systems in sculptural compositions.

### *Analysis of Specific Works*

Ideas regarding cognition started materializing in the work titled *Perpetual Thought*. (figure 1) The forms of this abstracted torus shape is composed of varied segments of forged round tubing. The piece represents thoughts that are ever-present, rolling through a person's head. The forged metal pieces hint at the contemplative manipulation of material; through intense heat and repeated hammer blows, the metal piping solidifies the evidence of continual heavy-handed forces. Moreover, when normally rigid metal is brought to high temperatures it becomes malleable, through the vigorous influence of tool and muscle. As the metal cools, it retains the shape it was pushed into. Even though the process of hammering and forging is aggressive, the end result promotes moments of peace and resolution.



Figure 1. Antony Guntren *Perpetual Thought* 2014  
Forged Steel, 60" x 60" x 12"  
Photo by Antony Guntren

There is an indelible intersection between the making of the sculpture, and the conceptual nature the objects represent. *Strands of Memory* is an abstracted view on the systems associated with the recollection of memories. (Figures 2 and 3) The sculpture promotes the mental facility of collection, organization, and containment of memories that occupy the wetware of human brain.



Figure 2. *Strands of Memory* 2015  
Forged Steel, Found Object 36"x 36" 36"  
Photo by Anthony Guntren

Among the most important elements in the piece titled *Strands of Memory* are the contained cushion-like forms. (Figure 3) These containers emphasis conceptual considerations regarding the storage facet of memory as it pertains to cognition. This sculpture is a scaled-up component of what might be a field of millions of similar strands stored in the neo-cortex of the brain.



Figure 3. *Strands of Memory* – Detail of Containment Pods 2015  
Forged Steel, Found Object 36" x 36" 36"  
Photo by Anthony Guntren

Physically, the sculptural composition consists of twenty-eight large cushion forms, and forty-two smaller cushions strung onto a reclaimed vacuum hose and interlocked in loose infinity shapes. The vacuum hose represents a conduit of sustenance between the forms. The forged nature of the forms stranded together was fabricated by first cutting a circle within circle from a flat piece of sheet metal. Then, in temperatures exceeding 2000 degrees, the metal was heated and pounded repeatedly, heated again, and pounded until the form was pushed to half of the final shape. To include personal details, many of the steel surfaces were stamped with the names of specific places that are important in my individual existence. During the forging process and the application of paint, most of the text was lost. However, the small bits left could spark curiosity in a viewer.



Figure 4 *Yearning*- (gallery view) 2015  
Cast Aluminum, various sizes  
Photo by Anthony Guntren

The grouping of sculptures titled *Yearning* utilizes repetition in forms that suggest gestures of growth. (Figure 4) The objects are cast solid out of aluminum using the lost wax process. It is my intention to transform rigid construction materials to emphasize organic perceptions that might be found in the natural world.

In *Yearning*, the individual pieces are arranged in a manner that suggests an interaction and exchange among the components, promoting anthropomorphized conceptions. Forms suggest participants and witnesses, leaving a viewer to make references to the forms that seek the attention of one another. One might attach maternal connections to the forms as the smaller forms gesture and reach upward. One might also see a sexual tension in the sculptures; some objects are united and fit within each other's openings, while other members of the sculptural grouping appear to seek the attentions of other forms.





Figure 5. *Desire* 2015  
Bronze, Pewter. 12" x 30" x 12"  
Photo by Anthony Guntren

The sculpture *Desire* represents a singular thought of need, specifically a longing of a sexual nature. (Figure 5) The form embodies the fleeting feeling of a morning dream, that brief moment when a sleeper is pulled from the unconscious state into the conscious construct of real space. Offering hints of intimacy and the fantastical musings that fill the mind's eye, the sculpture features an aquatic blossom cast in bronze, which emerges from a pool of pewter. Much like the cubical construct in *Construct of Cognition*, the brushed bronze cup that tops the composition was directly cast from a woman's bra, preserving the memory and the previous life of the object before it was cast. The metallic pool that the sculpture surfaces from is suggestive of a primordial fluid where imagination flows freely.

The contained plate refers to an object of domesticity, similar to that of a potted plant tended to in a living space.

The work *Construct of Cognition* is an abstracted self-portrait with many layers. (Figure 6) The sculpture combines forging and casting applications. The sculpture encourages ideas of ones “self” and the many frames of mind that one might develop during the course of their life. This piece has a direct connection to both “Theory of the Mind” and the “Collective Unconscious,” which will be discussed in the conceptual framework section of this paper. The work is meant to convey one small section of a vast matrix of cognitive output. *Construct of Cognition* signifies the memory network propagated by experience. Much as an immense network of roots connects a field of blooming flora, the mind is packed with neural constructs of encoded memories.

Hidden in the inner ethos of the piece, the work contains impressions of personal nostalgia. The cubical structure of the form is a direct casting of the building-block toys of my childhood; an individual history captured in the age-old process of casting bronze. By using an object with personal significance, a little bit of my individual record permeates the bronze and subtly resonates from within the sculpture, completing the cycle of ideation, creation, and reflection by artist and viewer. This work emphasizes that experiential memory and a material memory of objects cultivates thoughts and ideas.



Figure 6. *Construct of Cognition* 2015  
Bronze, Forged Steel 20" x 36" x 16"  
Photo by Anthony Guntren



## *Artistic Influences*

The work of artist Antony Gormley explores a fresh position on human existence: his sculpture investigates the relationships between metaphysics, art, and human civilization. (Figure 7) Gormley creates works that examine the inner sanctity of human consciousness as a place where provocative existentialist ideas can mature into tangible sculptures. Gormley writes, "For me, sculpture is the art of the palpable that makes feeling intelligible...This is a blending of the mathematical with the poetical in material, a form of physical thinking."<sup>6</sup> This statement suggests that his work provides an opportunity to explore body/place relationships and to investigate human cognition and perception between the self and the surrounding world.



Figure 7. *Domain Field*, 2003  
Stainless steel bars, 4.76 mm x 4.76 mm, Various sizes: 287 elements, derived from molds of local inhabitants of Newcastle-Gateshead aged 2.5 - 84 years  
Photograph by Jerry Hardman-

An interesting conversation between art historian H.R. Gombrich and Gormley resonates with work produced for the *Constructs of Cognition* exhibition. Gormley discusses his views regarding the body and its relationship with its surroundings, Gormley discusses,

I have a subject which is life within my own body but in working with that I hope that it isn't just a standard body it is actually a particular one which becomes standardized by the process. What I am doing is realizing materializing perhaps for the first time the space within the body its certainly very difficult thing to communicate but has to do with meditation. I think I try to materialize the sensation of that inner space of the body and that's what I hope these large body forms are. They are in some way an attempt to realize embodiment without really worrying too much about mimesis, about representation in the traditional way. <sup>7</sup>

Gombrich goes on to refine what Gormley says by stating, "In a sense that is true of all internal sensations. The internal world has a different scale from the external world."<sup>8</sup> The dichotomy between our inner thoughts and surrounding exterior realms is in large part the core investigated by this body of work. Works for this series explore perceptions that abstract the cyclical systems buried deep in the human mind. These systems, or cognitive constructs, manage the thoughts, memories and emotions of human living. Gormley investigates the relationship of the human body to space, and his sculptures show the essence of human form and the relationship to the realm in which both humans and sculptures exist. Gormley and I each draw inspiration from existential philosophies that require meditation on our human existence. We both question where humanity stands in relation to nature, to each other and to the cosmos. (Figure 2).

Richard Deacon is prolific sculptor, who builds inventive forms from a variety of materials primarily salvaged from discarded industrial and building applications. (Figure 8) Deacon, who in his notebooks describes himself as a "fabricator," creates sculptural forms that "evoke the material world of everyday artifacts and the inner world of the body, as a site of sensuality memory and language".<sup>9</sup> Deacon's sculptures invite an interaction with the work of art that suggests a new life to materials that might have been previously discarded. Deacon's innovative use of industrial cast-off materials, problem solving, and his

provocative use of the negative space have significantly influenced my artistic development.

Deacon explains the importance of the relationship between negative and positive space:

Identity of the object as a work of art is first negotiated in the gap, which opens up between the two. The play between the 'inside' and "outside" so characteristic of Deacon's work in as far as it asks a fundamental question about the efficacy of language to deal with all aspects of our experiencing works of art. <sup>10</sup>



Figure 8 *Dead Leg*, 2007  
Oak and Stainless Steel 8 x 28 x 9 feet (2.4 x 8.5 x 2.7 m)  
© Richard Deacon,

Like Deacon's pieces, the artworks presented in the *Constructs of Cognition* series strive to cause a visceral reaction and curiosity in a viewer. The inspiration of Deacon is best seen in the work *Strands of Memory*, where the sculptural composition features an open design with interconnected components. The visible hosing element suggests a connective conduit passing through the hand-forged memory pods. There is a memory of form captured in the forging process, as well as the previous history of found objects that pervade the sculpture.

Another influential artist is Richard Serra. Serra is known for his use of steel on a very large scale. He manipulates space and material and often forces a viewer to walk

around or through his work in very high-traffic public places. He has had a successful career as a public-works sculptor, in what he considers to be a job of “ongoing problem solving.” He has completed numerous installation projects where extremely heavy pieces of steel plates lean or tilt against each other, forcing structures to hold up other structures. (Figure 9). Due to the weight and size of his works, Serra has to use the principles of building and engineering to erect his massive works.

You must rely on your experience in handling materials, knowing weight loads and leverage principles, having a competent engineer... It is a different concept of organizing space. The work has evolved to where I can't physically manipulate it, due to its mass. I need to employ technology. I have to deal with cranes and whatever processes will get the work into place: steel mills, shipyards, bridge companies, whatever. Nine-tenths of the work involves those extensions.<sup>11</sup>



Figure 9. Richard Serra *Cycle* (2011)  
Weatherproof steel. 62' x 56' x 14'  
© Richard Serra. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery. Photo by Lorenz Kienzle

Serra's work exposes the physical properties of industrial materials. I admire his dedication and commitment to materiality and the challenge of working on an architectural scale. His now-famous "Verb List" comprises more than one hundred processes that could

be done to or with any given material. Serra described the list as a series of “actions to relate to oneself, material, place, and process,” and employed it as a kind of guide for his subsequent practice in multiple media. Serra created a list of verbs that inspired him to manipulate material, primarily steel: “to roll, to crease, to fold, to curve, to lift....” I also created a list of action-based words that I hope filters through my sculpture.

**To transmit, to interact, to pass through**  
**To connect, to disconnect**  
**To pollinate, to seed, to grow, to cultivate**  
**To think, to contemplate, to discover**  
**To cast, to forge, to weld, to fabricate**

## **Materiality**

More than the actual handling of material, the *concept* of materiality is extremely important in my sculptural work. This section supports that the act of making is an important attribute when considering cognition: making is thinking. To complete a sculpture, artists utilize higher order thinking to imagine, set goals, and problem-solve as they manipulate the material at hand. The cognitive facility to carefully consider ideas, make objects, and contemplate our place in the world is sublime. Whether a man wages his boat against the enormity of the sea or the vast emptiness of space, he has long attempted to understand the vast unknown realm of the sublime. There have been many battles of history, tradition, and the inner working of the human psyche. Art is my battle of material and mind.

Building from prior knowledge, effective sculptors must develop an understanding of and a relationship with a variety of materials. Additionally, throughout the processes associated with making sculptures for this thesis, there were countless moments of contemplation and consideration regarding the causes and effects that might influence the outcome of particular pieces. Choices were made, reflected on, and repeated many times. There is a steady stream of conscious mind-to-body actions—more specifically, mind-to-hand actions.

“All the work of hand is rooted in thinking.” This sentence from *The Thinking Hand*, by Juhani Pallasmaa, begins with homage to the hand. In his book, Pallasmaa examines the relationship between man and machine, and explores how tools are an extension of the hand and of the human mind. Tools have evolved over centuries and have paved the way for humanity to reach an advanced civilization. Pallasmaa promotes that beauty and character is transferred through the perfect tool, the hand, while using other tools. He

states, "Given the indefinable complexity of the hand, its action and its relationship to the rest of the body as well as the brain, even simple hand tools are in essence body tools." <sup>12</sup>

There is a connection between man and his tools as he creates meaningful objects and structures. Furthermore, there is a marriage between individuals and their craft, exploited through craftsmanship and skill. Pallasmaa honors the relationships of people as they pursue projects that bridge the intellectual world with that of the real world made of "materiality and gravity." It gives us purpose to make things with our hands.

In his book *The Craftsman*, Richard Sennett views the satisfactions of physical making as a necessary part of being human. Sennett promotes that we need craftwork as a way to keep ourselves rooted in material reality, and that skills begin with bodily practices, but that technical understanding develops through the power of imagination. Sennett states, "... the craftsman explores these dimensions of skill, commitment and judgment in a particular way. It focuses on the intimate connection between the hand and head."<sup>13</sup> He goes on to say, "... every good craftsman conducts a dialogue between practices and thinking; this dialogue evolves into sustaining habits, and habits establish a rhythm between problem solving and problem finding."<sup>14</sup> In other words, a flexible relationship between thought, action, and material is needed to make an object and bring an idea to its final form. The continual exercise between the mind and tools cultivates creativity and innovation as humans carry out the tasks of building on any scale. We are humans with two hands, and as we interact with each other, we are able use our minds and hands to execute ideas to construct objects and buildings.

As we construct consequential structures, many choices influence the final outcome of sculpture. A deliberate choice (really, a full-fledged allegiance) is the use of metal in the

majority of my work. By utilizing metal as primary material, I have the ability manipulate, weld, and fabricate metals together. The characteristics of metal, especially that of mild steel, provide curious effects that provide visual reference to the passage of time.

Furthermore, alloy metals like bronze can develop distinctive qualities as they age, while simultaneously pushing the limits of historical longevity and preciousness. The body of work *Cognition, Constructs, and Contemplation* combine technical processes of casting, fabrication, and forging out of a variety of metals including: bronze, aluminum, mild steel, and the occasional found object.

The lost-wax casting technique was utilized in all the cast elements found in the pieces *Desire, Construct of Cognition, and Yearning*. Used for centuries, lost-wax casting employs the process of melting metal and filling heat-resistant molds that are built up one layer at a time around wax objects that are destined to be cast. The wax is “burned out” or evacuated and replaced by molten metal.

Metals offer the ability to make distinct choices on finish. Chemical and natural reactions, as well as layers of rust, oxidized paint, and reactionary patinas applied to the surface affect the final piece and offer a sculpture a component that signifies the passage of time. Sculptures in this series all share a worked-over aesthetic that is emphasized by normally rigid materiality of metal transformed by heat and impact. The processes associated with forging and casting metal provide a contemplative layer to sculptures I create. There is an energy and mindfulness that occurs in the making of objects that combine with the heavy-handed processes of casting, forging, and fabrication.



### *Compositional Considerations*

The space an individual occupies is similar to spaces that surround “in the round” sculpture: individuals exist in the same environment shared by other people going about their lives. Sculpture calls attention to the movement of the viewer and the stillness of the object. A viewer observes, passes by, and later reflects on their experience with a work of art. I create sculptures that emphasize interior/ exterior vantage points. By glimpsing the insides, as well the outside, a viewer is left to consider that the internal makeup is equal to or more important than outer surfaces. Recent works employ abstract forms that promote open spaces, cavities, and craters that briefly enclose unseen thoughts, giving them a place to swirl and rest. It is my intention that these isolated areas of containment peak a viewer’s interest by transmitting subtle conceptual considerations and by extending meditations on human purpose.

The intricate networks and systems found in the natural world inspire the sculptures I construct. Nature holds the keys to many unanswered questions about life, as biological systems are affected strictly by ecological cycles and preprogrammed primal instincts. Although humans are indeed part of nature, the natural world in which humans interact with is largely without options regarding free will. Humans have the cognitive facility to adapt to their environment, or adapt the surrounding environment; Nature on the other hand, is confined to the environmental cycle in which they have been cast into. In other words, the natural world is opportunistic towards environmental factors like nutrient-rich soil, water, and sunlight. A seed can only complete the entirety of its life cycle if granted the necessary elements of survival. If a seed is blown to a desolate arid landscape, it will not grow.

Circling back to Richard Serra's Verb list, the first few on my list were: to transmit, to interact, and to pass through. Along with the open spaces, sculptural compositions promote networks and pathways that give the allusion of something traveling within the forms. Nature has its own systems, a biological framework that enforces the life cycle. Our own human neuro-architecture provides an interconnected conduit with millions of exchanges: as electrical impulses navigate through the wetware of the brain, passages solidify, and provide direct access to our thoughts and memories. Forms allow the viewer to create a narrative that is personal to his or her own experiences; I would like to think a conceptual residue permeates the objects.

## ***Concluding Thoughts***

These works mark a point in an ongoing artistic investigation of human purpose, the collective unconscious, and explorations of cognition and memory. These topics have been of interest to me for the duration of my artistic development thus far, and will likely continue into the next phases of my creative evolution. This paper relies heavily on acts associated with thinking and cognition, emphasizing that our experiences form memories, which, in turn, cultivate relationships with other people. Those around us have varying constructs of experiences that frame their individual awareness. We interact with each other to reconcile questions and to attempt to understand our own existence. Interactions between the mind and memories of one another attach, detach, and reattach from each other in a vast matrix of collective cognition. This transmission between people also happens between humans and objects. Humans share space with objects. There is wisdom in objects, and this comes from a residue found deep within the materiality in which the object was made.

The sculptural work put forth in *Cognition, Constructs and Contemplation* promotes that making art is thinking. Moreover, advanced cognition occurs in executing an idea. By engaging with art-making process, one puts their mind to material and completes a cycle of cognitive choices that brings a sculpture from concept to completion. Uniquely human, and a cornerstone of freewill, making art is an exchange of thoughts and ideas. Through experience with one another, we contemplate our cognitive actions, and construct a living mesh of consciousness. I continuously question my place in this world; my intention is that my sculptures provoke others to do the same.

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