

**In Lumpen Bits:
The Digital
Paradoxes of
William J. O'Brien**

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**What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.**

—T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*

Historically the kinds of practices William J. O'Brien engages in—ceramics, textiles, steel sculpture, pen-and-ink drawings—are associated with resistance, even fierce opposition, to technologies that diminish our relationship to tactile experience, such as the Internet. The unbreakable bond between manual skill and mental dexterity in artisanally based practices has been evocatively described by sociologist Richard Sennett as “the intelligent hand,” and there is no mistaking O'Brien's elegantly lumpen ceramics for anything but purposefully handmade.¹ Fully embracing a do-it-yourself vernacular and suggesting almost nothing of the virtual in outward appearance, his work *is* clearly digital in its original sense of pertaining to the fingers. Yet, like many artists today, his work also participates in the flood of unmoored material associations and cultural connections that are a hallmark of contemporary, digital culture.

Writing this essay in the cybernetic embrace of Google, it is instructive to recall that when Sol LeWitt published his “Paragraphs” in the June 1967 issue of *Artforum*, artists and scientists alike were only beginning to grapple with the potential of the information revolution. The term *image bank* had only recently been coined in William S. Burroughs's 1964 book *Nova Express*. Although the word *digit* has long been the connection between fingers and numbers (0–9), the computational derivation of digital that is in everyday use today is not even mentioned. In this context, LeWitt's articulation—that the key difference between the emerging practice of conceptual art and other forms of advanced art of the day was a strict separation between the *conceptual* and *perceptual* aspects of the work—was radical indeed. For him, physical production was a zone of subjectivity that lay between the work's conception and perception, and therefore in need of careful monitoring lest the artist's idea be diluted or obscured:

If the artist wishes to explore his idea thoroughly, then arbitrary or chance decisions would be kept to a minimum, while caprice, taste and other whimsies would be eliminated from the making of the art. The work does not necessarily have to be rejected if it does not look well. Sometimes what is initially thought to be awkward will eventually be visually pleasing.²

1
Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 147.

2
Sol LeWitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” *Artforum* 5, no. 10 (June 1967), 79. Reprinted in Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, eds., *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1996), 824.

Even as the distinction between conceptual and more embodied forms of production dramatically blurred over the last fifty years, LeWitt himself increasingly depended on people with intelligent hands to execute his plans faithfully. Working with teams of trained artists and artisans, his instructions relate to his wall drawings and sculpture in the same way that an architect's plan relates to the edifice constructed by the builder.

O'Brien's work is very much in and of his own hand: objects that he himself built, glazed, assembled, painted, and worked. But he is not an outlier. Interest in ceramics and textiles—media typically associated with craft disciplines—has grown in contemporary art discourse alongside and often bound up with the ongoing generative influence of conceptualist practices. Signs of the revival of artisanal consciousness are everywhere—from locavore food and small-batch whiskey to handmade clothing—even if we often access such products via the textureless, virtual realm of our computer screen.

Through the accumulation of materials, constellations of objects, and arrays of tried-and-tested formal possibilities, O'Brien's installations impart the sense of daily physical labor of making things (as seen in plate 18). Unlike a diverse range of artists from Richard Jackson (American, b. 1939) to Dieter Roth (Icelandic, b. Germany, 1930–1998) to Ann Hamilton (American, b. 1956), O'Brien does not fetishize the stains and scars of process. Instead, his work accrues power through acts of accumulation. Roughly hewn, scarified, textured, thickly glazed ceramics are arrayed on tiered plywood platforms. Pieces of steel that appear as if they were offcuts left behind by an unknown modernist sculptor are reconstructed into powder-coated sculptures in works such as *Windsor* (2012) (plate 17). There are many untitled drawings in which the paper surface is divided into haptic recursive geometries that have a range of resonances from Oceanic and African patterning to American abstraction, and automatic drawings from Paul Klee to Joseph Beuys (German, 1921–1986) and Mark Manders (Dutch, b. 1968).

O'Brien's labor is more artisanal than industrial, more *wabi sabi* than precision engineering. Three-dimensional printing technologies or injection molding are not his thing—the basic tools and technology required to produce ceramics and weld steel, to say nothing of pencil and ink, have been with us for a very long time. Clearly he is not one of those artists whom LeWitt described as confusing “new materials with new ideas.”³ O'Brien's work makes clear how new ideas can be expressed with old materials, so in spite of its low-tech appearance, it might be fruitful to consider the ways in which the Internet has dramatically reconfigured our connections to images and information.

3
Ibid., 825.



Plate 18
Cinaedus Table, MDCCLXXV, 2007

It has scrambled academic assumptions about cultural hierarchies such as the value of unique objects over reproducible ones, oil paintings over drawings, bronze sculptures over ceramic objects, and high art over popular culture. Cultural practices that are distant in time and space from our own seem to be brought closer and, for better or worse, made available for reimagining in new and unexpected idioms. While O'Brien's arrangements of objects resonate with modernist élan and anthropological wonder, they suggest less an alternative museology than an accumulation in which each variation of size, color, surface, mark, and shape functions as a unique integer in an ever-growing data set. His objects are arranged with studied neutrality—each forms part of a larger constellation in which patterns and connections emerge as the viewer walks around taking in the whole exhibition. Like cultural DNA, O'Brien's objects might be recombined in other arrays, in other rooms, and at other times. Each installation remains but one possibility among many.

4

See Michael Darling, *The Language of Less (Then and Now)* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2011).



Figure 1

Jason Dodge, *In Lübeck, Germany, Marlies Scholz wove a piece of cloth. She was asked to choose yarn the color of night and equaling the distance (12 km) from the earth to above the weather.* Collection Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, gift of Mary and Earle Ludgin by exchange, 2011.42.

5

Originally released by the British Council in September 1947 as a set of six 78 rpm records, Eliot's reading has been reissued as "T. S. Eliot Reading *The Waste Land, Four Quartets* and Other Poems," Harper Collins Audio Books, 2005. As of the date of writing, it is available on YouTube at [youtube.com/watch?v=Ga8tQrG4ZSw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ga8tQrG4ZSw). For the full text, see T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1971), 144.

A 2008 work by Jason Dodge (American, b. 1969), recently exhibited at MCA Chicago and now part of the permanent collection, also evocatively suggests this paradox of the handmade being encoded in digital culture: a handwoven purple-blue fabric, carefully folded and tied with string.⁴ Its title reads: *In Lübeck, Germany, Marlies Scholz wove a piece of cloth. She was asked to choose yarn the color of night and equaling the distance (12 km) from the earth to above the weather* (figure 1). Just as in classic conceptualism, Dodge's instruction to the weaver existed as a mental image in advance of its physical manifestation as a piece of cloth. Yet, while the instruction to use twelve kilometers of yarn was precise, Dodge's acknowledgment of the weaver's interpretive role moves beyond a typical exercise in conceptualist outsourcing. The quixotic task of interpreting what the color of night might look like depends entirely on the artisan's imagination and skill.

Linking scientific measurement to artisanal production, Dodge's poetic data visualization suggests ways in which artists today weave together disparate images, objects, and cultures into new webs of connection, much like the Internet does. What was once an almost clandestine, hard-won knowledge accessible only to initiates is now available to anybody with a few easy keystrokes. Almost any fragment of material culture that has moved me, no matter how obscure, can be found online. Apia nie bowls from Micronesia: check. Skylights in the Topkapi Palace: check. Mongolian Tus Kiis: check. Search for Cy Twombly's (American, 1928–2011) sculptures or Robert Rauschenberg's *Cardboards*—both of which I first encountered as rumors or rare books that artists had generously shared with me—and you will find images in profusion. Even T. S. Eliot's Anglo-American tenor can be heard incanting his *Four Quartets*:

**In my beginning is my end.
In succession
Houses rise and fall, crumble,
are extended,
Are removed, destroyed, restored,
or in their place
Is an open field, or a factory,
or a by-pass.
Old stone to new building,
old timber to new fires,
Old fires to ashes, and ashes
to the earth
Which is already flesh, fur and faeces, . . .**⁵

We have quickly become accustomed to this flood of information, but it is instructive to consider how much our relationship to images has changed since the Internet became commonplace. As an art history student, I remember hearing about a drawing by Klee, *Angelus Novus*, which was once in the collection of the literary theorist and philosopher Walter Benjamin. In Benjamin's final major essay, written not long before his suicide on the Spanish border in a failed flight from Nazism, he conjured Klee's image as the angel of history. He described the angel as "turned toward the past," unable to close his wings because the storm of progress has pinned them open. He is irresistibly propelled "into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward."⁶

⁶ Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 257–58.

Knowing it had conjured Benjamin's dramatic vision, I remember wondering what Klee's *Angelus Novus* looked like—at the time, it was easy to find reproductions of Klee's work but almost impossible to find this particular image. When I eventually did see it, I remember being shocked at how anodyne Klee's artwork appeared in contrast to Benjamin's powerful allegory. Measuring only 12 ½ by 9 ½ inches, Klee's "new angel" is sketched in diagrammatic geometric lines and whorls on a paper stained with a mottled brown wash. That wash deepens toward the edges of the page, and where the wings, skirt, legs, and hair of the angel appear. Did Klee lay the india ink down on a preexisting stain, or did he deepen the wash to give weight to wings, skirt, legs, and hair? Reproductions are no help for this kind of detail. Nonetheless, when I simply type "Angelus Novus" into Google today, my screen fills with Klee's angels, including two tattoos: one a copy of the drawing, the other Benjamin's quote indelibly printed on an anonymous forearm (figure 2).

Paul Valéry, the French poet and essayist who was the subject of a great deal of Eliot's critical attention, is cited by Benjamin in his renowned 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" for predicting how, in the future, images will be so close to hand that they might be conjured and dismissed at will:

Just as water, gas, and electricity are brought into our houses from far off to satisfy our needs in response to a minimal effort, so we shall be supplied with visual or auditory images, which will appear and disappear at a simple movement of the hand, hardly more than a sign.⁷

Today, images are far more likely to be encountered through the simple hand gestures (which Apple has tried to patent) of tapping, scrolling, pinching, and swiping than by engaging with traditional art

⁷ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *ibid.*, 219. Original quote from Paul Valéry, "The Conquest of Ubiquity," *The Collected Works of Paul Valéry, Aesthetics*, ed. Jackson Matthews, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964), 226.

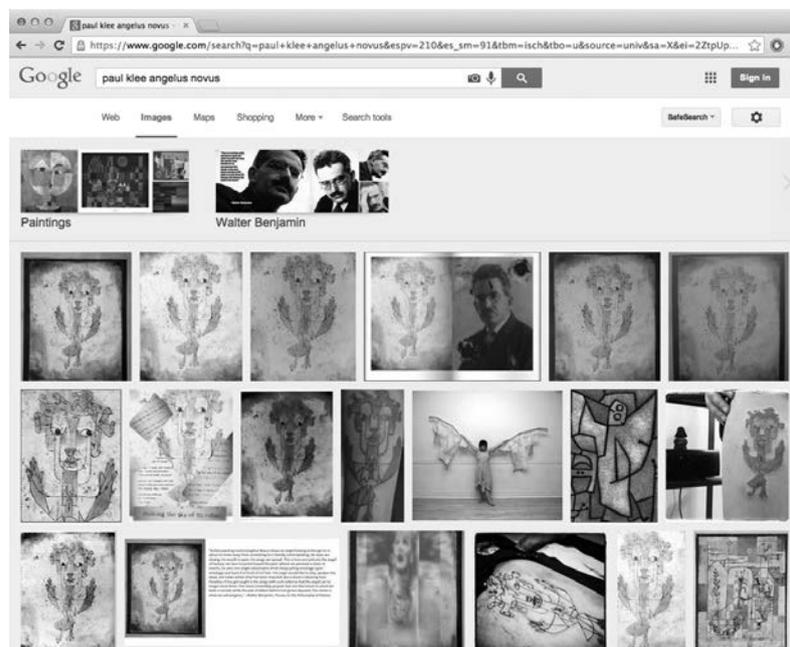


Figure 2
Screenshot of a Google search for "Paul Klee angelus novus," October 24, 2013.

8
Vilém Flusser, "The Non-Thing 1," in
The Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design
(London: Reaktion Books, 1999), 89.

practices. Philosopher Vilém Flusser has described how, in this culture driven by access to information, our intelligent hands have atrophied. They are reduced to the tips of our fingers, which are used "to tap on keys so as to play with symbols. The new human being is not a man of action anymore but a player: *homo ludens* as opposed to *homo faber*."⁸ For O'Brien and artists like him who are clearly invested in the labor-intensive process of making unique objects by hand, one wonders if digital culture is a storm of progress à la Benjamin, piling up image traces and information wreckage out of which they might construct their works. Or, to borrow from Eliot, is it a kind of binary compost in which their analog culture continues to renew itself in the present tense?

O'Brien gives the very kinds of materials that would normally wind up in the studio garbage presence and function as art. He assembles sculptures from pieces of plywood, string, plaster, tape, and cloth. He appliqués scraps of red felt onto canvas in homage to and/or parody of the great vernacular tradition of red and white quilts. And there is the visceral impression that O'Brien's practice sometimes emerges from the wreckage or byproducts of other kinds of manufacturing processes: the echoing circular shapes in his untitled red powder-coated steel totems that were exhibited at Marianne Boesky Gallery in 2013, for instance, appear to be built using discarded steel from a tool and die factory.

In this regard, O'Brien's work might be seen as a continuation of the ongoing revival of constructed sculpture, surveyed in the exhibition *Unmonumental* at New York's New Museum in 2007. His use of discarded materials, however, plays as much with the process-oriented legacies of deconstruction and ecology as it does with the surrealist and



Plate 19
Untitled, 2007

constructivist legacies of conjoining dissimilar images and materials to dramatic effect. Cultural practices are entirely lumpen on the web, but O'Brien's work takes these uprooted and vagabond forms and reconstructs them into new constellations of affect. Perhaps we might coin the term *reconstructivist* to describe this technique, where anthropomorphized forms jostle with abstract shapes, and thrift-store aesthetics play out against high art references. In ways that are materially antithetical but conceptually analogous to frictionless cyberspace, radically disparate reference points collide in the rough hand-built surfaces of his ceramics.

Faces appear in a great many works: some incised, others shaped, while still others only suggested abstractly. There are ovoid forms that suggest Dan masks, children's drawings, or Lucio Fontana's (Italian, b. Argentina, 1899–1968) paintings in their concrete and diagrammatic nature. We see a Giacometti (Swiss, 1901–1966) nose here, or a Paul McCarthy-esque (American, b. 1945) caricature there. *Blueberry Head* (2010) suggests a mash-up of an antebellum face jug with a lingam imagined by a Lobi potter. In the end, no specific reference seems more important than their accumulation, the fact that they can be combined and recombined at will. These arrays are a kind of analog search engine—a catalogue of possible gestures that opens the door to webs of diverse associations and cultural implications.

This logic of accrual—along with the recursive structures visible in his drawings and textiles—suggest that a certain *horror vacui* haunts O'Brien's work. Yet the opposite might be said to be true. The challenge that artists of O'Brien's generation face is not based on a fear of *empty* space but a need to *create space* out of oceanic digital accumulations. It is a struggle characterized precisely by the unfathomable range of options and information in digital culture relative to limited human agency. It is in this sense that his commitment to handmade production is so poignant, far more than a simple revival of craft practices or artisanal traditions. Even O'Brien's largest sculptures and objects are scaled to his intelligent hands. His installations do not offer spectacle but instantiate a demonstration of his own modest agency—a proposal for integrating the analog and the digital, machine data and personal experience. ■