THE WAY OF WILL
AN AUTOGRAPHIC BIOGRAPHY

By
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A PROJECT IN LIEU OF THESIS
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1
DEDICATION

William Wordsworth wrote:

My heart leaps up when I behold
A Rainbow in the sky:

So was it when my life began;
So is it now I am a (wo) man;
So be it when I shall grow old,
Or let me die!

The Child is parent of the (wo) man;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.

If our own childhood shapes our adult lives as Wordsworth suggests, so too do the lives of our children shape us. To my daughters, Analise Margaret and Abigail Constance, and to my son, Jonathan Matthias, I dedicate the shape of my life’s work.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank my supervisory committee chair, Robert Mueller for his invaluable time and input, which were critical in the development of this body of work. I also want to thank committee member, Julia Morrisroe, for her insight into my work and her uncanny ability to speak the truth.
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THE WAY OF WILL

By

Susan Irene Johnson

December 2010

Chair: Robert Mueller
Major: Art

The Way of Will, a series of laser printed collages, was inspired by and based on the communication between my sister, Kathryn, and her autistic son, Will. Will is non-verbal, has an auditory processing delay and is sensory defensive. For Will, communication both receptive and expressive must be sensory simple, concrete and to the point.

I conceptually and visually identify with the need and desire to be understood as it relates to my life as a visual artist; the struggles, the challenges and the rewards that visual expression extends to the world when effectively communicated, all are similar. For this body of work I have appropriated Will’s numerous writings, transforming them into multiple layers of a cursive network of lines. I have extended and expanded these writings into a language expressing a purely visual experience, ironically rendering them illegible.

My studio practice involves collecting handwritten materials, then selecting and re-arranging the words by hand into new compositional drawings. The drawings are then archived in a computer. Through the process of collecting, drawing, scanning and
outputting using a laser cutter, I make multiple copies of Will’s writing. This then becomes a foundation for cutting, layering and reassembling the laser-cut papers in an image that represents my own abstract interpretations of various forms of communication. Some of these forms reference conversation in the form of monologue, dialogue, small talk, and awkward silence. The final artwork can resemble complicated layers of web-like, pierced surfaces, which one can peer into, thus giving them depth. The final artwork may also be reduced to simplified shapes formed by many layers stacked one on top of another, conveying the sheer number of my repeated attempts to convey my thoughts, and words.

Though most of my artwork has been made through traditional forms of printmaking (relief, etching, serigraphy, etc.) this project compelled me to investigate unfamiliar and nontraditional means of production and reproduction of the multiple to accomplish the desired result. These investigations, I came to discover, paralleled my own conventional and unconventional means of communicating. This process profoundly altered the relationship I had with my own art-making expression.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The artwork for my project exhibited in the Focus Gallery was inspired and based on the communication between my sister, Kathryn, with her son, Will. Will was diagnosed with autism at age two-and-a-half, is non-verbal and has an auditory processing delay (Roberts 2008)\(^1\), and is sensory defensive (Reynolds and Dombeck, 2006)\(^2\). Auditory processing delay is a difficulty and inability to recognize and interpret sounds, especially the sounds composing speech. Sensory defensive is an issue in which there is difficulty filtering sensory input, meaning the nervous system does not know what to block out and what to amplify and therefore there is no sensory integration. Thus the strongest form of communication for Will is simple, to the point and concrete and best accomplished with handwritten notes to describe his daily wants and needs.

When Kathryn speaks to Will, she reinforces what she says in writing and uses pictures to enhance her words. Will started reading at age three (he is now twenty), and he gradually learned to write. Every day Will chooses a white or yellow legal pad and a new pen with which to write. In addition to his practical use of writing to communicate, the physical act of writing brings him great pleasure. He often chooses writing as his leisure activity. Because Will's writing is often repetitive, he can fill pages with single words such as \textit{library}, \textit{want}, or \textit{mom} and interestingly places the single words approximately at the same place on each piece of paper in an entire writing pad.

\(^1\) Roberts, 2008, Autism and Auditory Processing Delay, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KHwUBkm3VYA

\(^2\) Reynolds, Tammi, and Dombeck, Mark, 2006, Sensory Integration and Autism www.mentalhelp.net/poc/view_doc.php?type
Much of Will’s communication is receptive—that is, he receives messages and information from others. However, with writing, Will is able to use language expressively. This expression is shown by the words he chooses and the way he presents them on the page. Emphasis is often expressed by writing words smaller; yes, less is more. Words may be written large, piling up in the right margin as if there is not enough space to contain all he is feeling. He may begin a page with mom or dad, followed by swim or library, emphatically written smaller or with greater pressure of his pen. If he feels strongly, his pen may pierce the paper. What I have witnessed in these written exchanges between my sister, Kathryn, and her son, Will, is communication in many forms. They share information, affection, humor, disappointment, recipes, jokes, daily plans and much more in words written back and forth.

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CHAPTER 2
THE DISCOVERY

When I discovered Will’s writings I was immediately attracted to the beauty of his marks on paper. I was intrigued with his ability to write from a small collection of words, the same name, the same place, or the same request over and over again. I gradually identified not only visually but conceptually with the strong desire to understand others and to be understood. This was a form of communication that I recognized, people writing notes to one another. I have always been challenged and have difficulty communicating my ideas verbally and in writing. To a certain extent I was amazed at how beautiful Will’s autographic marks were and how clear the message was. The marks reminded me of handwritten notes I have made throughout my life. Notes that I neatly folded to disguise and passed discreetly across the room during school. Lists that I have written to remind myself of items to pick up at the grocery store or of tasks I wished to accomplish in a certain period of time. Doodles that I created of random images to keep myself awake and attentive during lectures in college. Writing letters, notes, and lists represent many things to me, including a manner in which to ensure memory, correspond and as a tangible archive of communication.
CHAPTER 3
PRIOR WORK

The source of my prior work was based on abstraction and memory of people places and things. I explored silkscreen printing, intaglio, clay monoprinting and drawing using color, shapes, lines, and textures, along with collages.

*She’s Come Undone*, a series of clay mono prints, best represents this period of my life.

*By a Thread*, is a collection of kneaded eraser drawings exploring fabric, weavings from my four-harness loom, which had “come undone”, the ends frayed and unraveling.

I also moved into my sub-conscious and the voices within, and devised a series of simple line drawings in pen personifying this committee or community of conflicting judgmental inner voices that spoke from my past. One day Will accidentally spilled a glass of tea on one of them. I decided to work with this simple accident and began to incorporate tea into a series of pen and ink drawings I refer to as the “The Girls” I relate this incident because gradually over time my attitude and perception of self and art making changed its direction of creative energy from moving solely inwards to moving outwards for its sources of inspiration. I had by then depleted my own wellspring; I had outlived the story of my past and began looking outward to the present. If I had not opened my eyes and directed my gaze outwards I may never have noticed the potential for my art making in Wills handwriting. I may never have listened to my community of artists who supported and encouraged an investigation of word as image.

I began to explore how text had been used by other artists throughout history to inform their art making. I related to the early works of Wenda Gu, a contemporary artist from China, in his pursuit to simplify his native language, and to encourage his people to
embrace new attitudes towards their old language. He used his traditional training in calligraphy to make works that questioned the Chinese philosophy of language. Through Gu’s work I saw that I could adopt and simplify Will’s written language as a means of communicating through my artwork using abstracted text as image.

I studied the works of American conceptual artist, Mel Bochner. I became interested in how Bochner incorporated the written word onto his visual field. He treated words almost as objects stretching the wordplay to its ultimate conclusion - communication breakdown. Bochner, like Will, often gets his message across in his work by the use of one word repeated over and over again. Bochner has an ongoing series of paintings, which are entitled Blah, Blah, Blah. My exploration of this series became a catalyst for my repeated use of one word in several of my own works of art.

Annie Vought is a contemporary paper artist. I investigated in her technique of working with personal hand written lists and letters. She enlarges the image and cuts each word out of colored paper. She then pins the words to a wall, leaving an inch of space as a buffer. Effective lighting is used so that the words cast shadows. I explored the manner in which I could incorporate the use of lighting and shadows to enhance my work in the gallery setting. Here is what Vought says about her work:

“Handwritten records are fragments of individual histories. In the penmanship, word choice, and spelling the author is often revealed in spite of him/herself. A letter is physical confirmation of who we were at the moment it was written, or all we have left of a person or a time. I have been working with cut out correspondence for the past four years. I meticulously recreate notes and letters that I have found, written, or received by enlarging the documents onto a new piece of paper and intricately dissecting the negative spaces with an Exact-o knife. The handwriting and the lines support the structure of the cut paper, keeping it strong and sculptural, despite its apparent fragility. In these paper cutouts, I focus on the text, structure, and emotion of the letter in an elaborate investigation into the properties of writing and expression. Penmanship, word choice, and
spelling all contribute to possible narratives about who that person is and what they are like. My recreating the letters is an extended concentration on peoples’ inner lives and the ways they express their thoughts through writing.™

These artists opened a path for me, a new way of experiencing, exploring and expression that I had thought beyond myself and out of reach.

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CHAPTER 4
PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

I was attracted to the loose and uncontrived marks that Will made and was enchanted with the variety and qualities inherent in the collected pages of his writing pads. I experienced beauty in the patterns of repetition and a sense of pleasure in the shapes and textures found in Will’s writings. I sought to replicate the autographic process of extending Will’s words written on paper to another source, my art making.

This exploration began to define certain principles of design and aesthetics that were primarily possible with the expressive use of line. I began to conceptualize what my personal artistic interpretation of these marks might be. I asked myself how I could arrange these marks to create art. I took the marks I saw on these pages and began to utilize them to create my visual interpretation of various forms of communication. Through the use of variety, depth, repetition, and size variation of lines I was sought to create a sense of unity, balance and harmony in my work. Will’s writing tells something about him as my visual art tells something about me. It is my intent to communicate the ongoing connection between writer and reader, between artist and audience, between the giver and receiver in various modes of communication.

My project-in-lieu of thesis challenged me to be loyal to this idea and to pursue whatever ends necessary to accomplish it. It is my most concerted effort to date of a rigorous experimentation with materials and collaboration with others with a commitment to listen to and contemplate their suggestions. In order to achieve my sought after results I opened myself up to mishap, chance and failure. Profound play in the studio had to be faced with a no fear approach of exploring new technologies and non-traditional manipulations of the material world.
I began my project by collecting Will’s yellow legal pads and writing pens and making an archive both as hardcopy and in the computer. Together by re-writing/tracing and manipulating his work in the computer I could abstract and disguise, recompose and create patterns that appeared to have symbolic meaning. I wanted to see what would happen during a transposition to drawings and printmaking. I experimented with a variety of drawing and printmaking processes. I created an alphabet, similar to hieroglyphics, and assigned a meaning for Will’s most repetitive words: books, library, mom, dad, Katie, swimming, swim, basketball, bed; these were the dominate words. I created serigraphy prints filled with repeated symbols to represent the hundreds of times Will would write one individual word. Experiments were made with lithographs, frottage, and relief prints, yet I was unable to satisfactorily “touch” a visual interpretation of the beauty I witnessed in Will’s communication with my sister. I carried my struggle to communicate effectively into my studio practice where I felt great frustration with my inability to say something, anything, clearly and with some level of intrigue and allure.

I was influenced directly by the arrival of University of Florida visiting artist John Himmelfarb. Himmelfarb is an established artist whose lush, calligraphic drawings and paintings have always been driven by an unceasing devotion to line. Consistently blurring the boundaries between drawing and painting, Himmelfarb revels line’s evocative potential to create a synthesis of graphic sign, text and elusive images that challenges one’s ability to interpret visual language. During his residency at the School of Art and Art History Himmelfarb worked on a series of collagraph and intaglio printing
plates. His studio practice was highly disciplined and productive. Himmelfarb worked in collaboration with a small group of printmakers to produce his prints. It was that kind of influence, determination and studio practice that inspired me. It was John’s ability to orchestrate images that had a calligraphic sensibility and reference to text that intrigued me.  

I felt my work was lacking a sense of presence, an identity, and a dimension; in order to achieve this I had to reinvent and change my past thinking and the way I worked. I made a definitive commitment to “making my art” in anticipation of constructing my visual language. With this in mind I resolved to impose my creative will in a fearless manner…even if it meant using other tools and mediums to make the work. I had to expand my thinking, rethink my materials and explore new methods to accomplish my tasks and objectives. How could I further transform, manipulate, dissect, re-arrange, layer, enlarge, and displace words to invent a purely visual language?

It was at this time I discovered the Art and Architecture Fabrication Lab (A² Fab Lab). My work took form on paper using a combination of the A² Fab Lab Laser Cutter and collage construction. I reproduce numerous layers of my marks which are stacked one upon the other, symbolizing the depth and sheer number of my repeated attempts to convey my thoughts, my words, my “speak.” My work represents the complexities of communication and the many layers of meaning. I too needed to reduce my “words” in order to simplify, to be direct and ultimately to express the concrete and simple pleasures of my imperfect exchanges of information in a visual form.
I experimented in the A² Fab Lab with the size and format of materials, use of color paper verses white or black paper, and with mat board to create depth in the pieces or layers of pages. I reproduced numerous layers of my marks which are stacked one upon the other, symbolizing the depth and sheer number of my repeated attempts to convey my thoughts, my words, my “speak.”

It took many failed attempts and experiments to develop the most appropriate materials and methodology. For example, I manually set the laser cutter to a certain speed in order to lightly scorch the paper as it is being cut. The actual process must be closely monitored because if the computer becomes idle, the entire process may be stopped and things that can go wrong including the possibility of igniting the paper. The height and strength of the laser must be correct for the depth and layers of paper being used; these settings are unique for each work. There is also the element of chance; if I watch the paper being cut, will I discover a more satisfying image before the cutter completes my original image? If so, I can stop the process midstream and change the direction of my work.

Once I have completed the laser cutting process this then becomes my foundation for layering and reassembling images that represents my own abstract interpretations of various forms of communication. I explored many possibilities for assemblages. Working with my committee members and their suggestions and comments I decided to dispense with color paper completely and to allow the laser cut paper to exhibit the burned and haloed marks. I was also encouraged to explore the many forms these intricate sheets of paper could demonstrate; from simple stacking to an intense and packed relief surface; and even three-dimensional results. I extended and expanded the
art of writing into a visual language expressing my personal frustrations with communication and the wooly nature of conversations.

*Internal Monologue*, a series of four shadow boxes and two scrolls of script, represents the semi-constant internal monologue one has with oneself at a conscious or semi-conscious level. The work reflects the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of voices that have semi-permanent residence in my head, representing a collection of my inner most thoughts. Each of the shadow boxes is filled with tailings: these are the fallouts from the paper after I have completed a laser cutting. These particles are confined in a compressed space, much like my head in which these multiple voices are contained with seemingly no way of escape. Two scrolls of text are strategically placed in the middle of two shadow boxes. Each scroll represents my public persona in the midst of this internal monologue. When I am in conversation with others I engage in what is being said while at the same time hearing self-generated speech simultaneously.

You’re Aging Well, a song written by Dar Williams, became my lyrical internal monologue during the compilation of this work. Some of the words to the song are as follows:\(^6\)

Well I know a woman with a collection of sticks
She could fight back the hundreds of voices she heard
And she could poke at the greed; she could fend off her need
And with anger she found she could pound every word

But one voice got through, caught her up by surprise
It said, "Don't hold us back we're the story you tell"
And no sooner than spoken, a spell had been broken
And the voices before her were trumpets and tympani
Violins, basses and woodwinds and cellos…….

*Call and Response*, is a form of “spontaneous verbal and non-verbal interaction” between speaker and listener in which all of the statements ('calls') are punctuated by

\(^6\) http://www.songmeanings.net/songs/view/40064/1/DESC/
expressions ('responses') from the listener.⁷ The triptychs representation of non-verbal interaction is based on therapeutic listening programs some of which include the music of Mozart and his contemporaries. Symmetry is an essential element to Mozart’s style. His music is rhythmically balanced and often has a “conversational” nature. There is a call and a response in the composition; one instrument plays the melody and another echoes it back with a slight variation. This communication is a repetition of a similar sound, of repeated music, of a conversation.⁸

I felt a sense of calling when I began to explore Will’s writings and this work is my response. When creating the upper components of Call and Response I focused on one small portion of my image and broke it down into the lowest pixilation possible until I obtained what I saw as a dynamic composition. This process takes place while using editing software on the computer. I would alter the composition slightly for each additional work and then produce an edition of nine prints for each image. While the individual layer papers may not be readily apparent to the viewer they subtly signify the layers of meaning found in conversations. Some components of the work contain dramatically increased line thickness, this dimensional shift was used to represent the volume of the conversation, and similar to the way Will increased the pressure of his writing when he feels strongly about something.

Awkward Silence is a literary and theatrical form consisting of a written or spoken

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conversational exchange between two or more people. It is an uncomfortable pause in a conversation.\textsuperscript{9} The unpleasant nature of such silences is associated with feelings of anxiety as the participants feel pressure to speak but are unsure what to say next. It is commonly preceded by an ill-considered remark or an imbalance in which one of the participants makes minimal responses.\textsuperscript{10} The grouping of nine layered pieces in \textit{Awkward Silence} represents the silence in a conversation when all other parties feel that someone should be talking; yet no one does. Each of the nine pieces are constructed with thirty layers of paper. I chose the word bed from Will’s list and used it for the entire composition suggesting numerous ways individuals contribute to one topic of conversation. Going to bed represents a routine exercise that everyone is familiar with and would have some common ground in discussing as a topic of conversation. The interlacing of text is layered and stacked awkwardly, much like the way people attempt to fill in the void in a discussion. The collective piece is displayed in a grid of nine tiles, three tiles across and three tiles down. I often display work with multiple components into a grid formation demonstrating my need for a sense of order and balance. The center work is constructed without text, emphasizing the empty space, epitomizing my reaction to awkward silences. I feel it is pointless to try and fill this vacant space and often, though feeling uncomfortable, will simply remain quiet. Working on this piece reminded me of a scene in the film \textit{Pulp Fiction}, where the characters Mia and Vincent discuss awkward silences after a pause in their conversation.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{9} She’s worried about awkward silence, Boston Globe, February 16, 1993

\textsuperscript{10} Eveline D. Schulman (1982), Intervention in human services, p. 271, ISBN 9780801643712

\textsuperscript{11} Stefan H. Krieger (Spring, 2001), "A Time to Keep Silent and a Time to Speak", \textit{Oregon Law}
Don’t you hate that?

Hate what?

Uncomfortable silences. Why do we feel it’s necessary to yak about bullshit?

In order to be comfortable?

I don’t know. That’s a good question.

That’s when you know you found somebody really special, when you can just shut the fuck up for a minute. Comfortably share silence.¹²

Dialogue, a series of six laser cut collages, represents a verbal exchange of opinions between two people.¹³ The work was created by additive and subtractive interludes during the cutting of the paper in the laser cutter. The Fab Lab is quiet and isolated but when the computer, the air compressor, and vent fans are all turned on there is a constant noise. While cutting through four layers of paper the process required my full attention. I would watch as the incisions into the paper began, and the smell of the paper burned by the laser would grow as my eyes focused on the unfolding of the image as the paper was being cut. For the duration of sixty minutes or so I would watch the paper being cut. When I felt the composition was engaging I would interrupt the process by pausing the machine and remove the top two of the layers of paper and place two new sheets of paper in their place. The noise, temporarily abated during the pause, would resume as the cutter proceeded. The process of adding and subtracting paper, pausing and resuming the machine and its’ sound led to an intuitive dialogue between my visual decision-making and the machines work. Looking closely at the pairs


¹³ See entry on “dialogue (n)” in the Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed.
in this series one may see the mirrored balance of the cut paper with the uncut paper. Looking closer the slight discoloration of the under layers subtly showing through suggest what one may be thinking to themselves when they in fact they are occupied in listening during a conversation.

*Bohm Dialogue* is a collection of eighteen small-layered prints grouped together as a free flowing group conversation. This mode of conversation is best described in the words of Quantum Physicist and author David Bohm. Bohm argues in a dialogue,\(^\text{14}\)

“When one person says something, the other person does not, in general, respond with exactly the same meaning as that seen by the first person. Rather, the meanings are only similar and not identical. Thus, when the 2nd person replies, the 1st person sees a difference between what he meant to say and what the other person understood. On considering this difference, he may then be able to see something new, which is relevant both to his own views and to those of the other person. And so it can go back and forth, with the continual emergence of a new content that is common to both participants. Thus, in a dialogue, each person does not attempt to make common certain ideas or items of information that are already known to him. Rather, it may be said that two people are making something in common, i.e., creating something new together.”\(^\text{15}\)

The construction of this piece was created from discarded papers that I have collected. I took all of these papers and cut them into square-shaped frames, remixing and reconfiguring all the images and shapes. This visually manifests my desire to seek common ground through partnership and cooperation while engaging in communication with others.

*Aizuchi* (相槌 or あいづち) is a Japanese term that refers to frequent interjections during a conversation. The Japanese continuously use verbal as well as non-verbal signals to indicate they are following what is being said in a conversation. Aizuchi can


\(^{15}\) David-Bohm.net features various papers written by Bohm and his colleagues.
be compared to the counterpoint in music, which keeps the rhythm going. These interjections in conversation are considered reassuring to the speaker indicating that the listener is active and involved in the conversation.¹⁶ *Keep the Rhythm Going*, a collection of eight laser cut collages, is based on this form of conversation. I created these collages by breaking down my drawing into CMYK layers using a photo-editing program. I then interjected written text between two identical layers, one representing the speaker and one representing the listener embedding non-verbal reassurances into a visual composition.

CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION

*The Way of Will* points to my personal struggle to find a way with words. This project began with the creation of the hand written word on paper and evolved into producing the art on a laser cutter machine. I ask myself what did I loose and what did I gain by working with this technology?

The use of technology, A² Fab Lab Laser Cutter, was not only advantageous to my work and mandatory for its production; it also removed physical touch from the work. This process was both time consuming and labor intensive. Use of the A² Fab Lab is limited which presented challenges for the production of my work. Use of this technology allowed me to expand and push the process of multiples/printing forward. It allowed me to move my studio practice and experimentation into new directions. I introduced my hand, the tactile sense of touch and physicality back into my work as I reconstructed the laser cut paper prints into collaged images. This allowed for me to give the work a sense of presence and identity that would have been lacking otherwise. This method of working brought me to a new understanding about abstraction in my work. It enabled me to transform my work from merely producing “pictures” through my studio practice, to creating images of fine art. My current work now takes on a visual complexity, and a depth, that engages the viewer for a longer period of time inviting them to contemplate their personal relationship with communication.

It is my desire to expand on my visual interpretation of communication and possibly create collaborative environments with interactive gallery installations. This would afford me the opportunity to give back to my community through both my artwork and through education.
My work is a focused investigation of the transformation of the written word through man made machines into a visual image representing a most human desire to communicate.
Figure 3-1. Will Cameron

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LIST OF REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Susan Irene Johnson was born in Sagamahari Japan. She spent her childhood traveling around the world with her family. Susan completed her BA in Visual Arts Education at University of Central Florida. She completed her MFA at University of Florida.