

The Institute of Habits and Weirdness

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The Institute of Habits and Weirdness

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## **Habits, Rituals and Weirdness**

I draw inspiration from mundane activities such as shaving, shredding documents, waking up to an alarm clock and clipping fingernails. I use these activities as a springboard to explore the meaning behind habits. Are habits a human need? Do we place such importance on our daily repetitive activities that they become rituals? Do mundane activities help us to ignore the meaningless of existence, or give purpose to our existence? These are questions I actively attempt to answer with my art works.

I exaggerate and invent habits, which I then depict with images and objects. These images I create may include shaving with a 17-inch hunting knife, placing a hand in a mousetrap over and over again, and repeatedly making faces into a mirror. By creating an involved lithograph or placing objects in a vitrine, I give reverence to the habits I have invented. This reverence functions to show how I believe habits can evolve into personal rituals. This evolution of habit to ritual is the idea I propose to a viewer.

## **The Specifics of My Current Work**

I have been working towards a cohesive body of work, which as a whole establishes a strange and, I hope, intriguing world. I have created a character that engages in weird ritualistic behavior. I have also displayed artifacts from fictitious rituals as well as book objects that further describe the rituals. The main vehicle for this journey is a series of lithographs. The prints depict someone systematically and progressively covering his face with strips of tape or repeatedly placing his hand in a mousetrap while a subsequent shriek of pain is depicted. Each image illustrates an

object as well as a number (see fig. 1). The object directly relates to the ritual in some way, whether it is showing an object used to perform the ritual or an object that acts as an artifact of that ritual. This object functions in order to provide a referential landmark, placing the ritual in a relatable framework of signified objects.

The number also corresponds to each series of prints. The tape ritual is number 17 and the mouse trap ritual is number 23. The number for each ritual is significant. By numbering each ritual I create a sense of obsessiveness portrayed by the person who participates in each ritual. The rituals are documented, and numbered, much like a scientist would catalogue and number specimens in a lab. The numbers and objects are coupled with each individual print, so a print can be seen as a single image or as a series, but either way the textual information is still an integral part of the imagery.

The numbering system inspired me to create the next large piece realized in my body of work. I have produced a large hand made book, which houses descriptions and images of 25 separate rituals, listed in the book in numerical order (see fig. 2). The book is displayed in conjunction with the visually depicted rituals. This functions as a way for the viewer to experience a vast number of rituals, even if the ritual is not visually displayed outside of the book. The book also functions as another manifestation of the obsessiveness and reverence placed upon the rituals described, and also functions to expand the strange world I create with my work. The book relates aesthetically to a ledger, in both content and physical construction, further perpetuating the feeling of obsessive documentation and cataloging of these rituals and behaviors.

By nature, a book functions as a container for information. By utilizing the book form I am referencing the social expectations of what a book holds. In the case of my work, the book form becomes a point on which a viewer can begin to place narrative to my work, even if I am not visually referencing any narrative timeline. Narrative structure is ubiquitous when interpreting the function of a book. By using a book as part of my work, the viewer is subsequently allowed into the world I have created by identifying with the comfort of structured narrative. Furthermore, the ritual book solidifies the reverence and importance of the rituals.

I have also created shadow boxes and vitrines that house found objects that seem ordinary or at the least, not all that strange, such as used bandages, a hammer, an axe and a knife. By placing the objects in traditional style vitrines or wall-mounted frames, I elevate the objects and place them in a context of reverence. The objects I used relate to particular rituals seen in both the Book of Rituals and various lithographs (see fig. 3 and 4). I also feel there is an interesting contrast between the mundane nature of the objects and the strangeness of the context in which they are placed. This contrast speaks to my interest in investigating the question of why everyday habits are so strange if they are so common. Perhaps the answer is in the reverence we place on the everyday task. This is where the strangeness starts to develop.

### **The Thesis Exhibition**

For my thesis exhibition I have created *The Institute of Habits and Weirdness*. This fictitious institute serves to enhance the idea of a strange world where the habits and rituals can exist. The idea is that *The Institute of Habits and Weirdness*

has set forth the 25 rituals housed in the book of rituals I previously mentioned. The institute acts as steward for all the images and objects pertaining to the rituals. The institute has members and subcommittees who actively investigate habits and how they evolve into ritual. I created a book called, *A Catalogue of Images and Objects Pertaining to Rituals Set Forth by The Institute of Habits and Weirdness*. This book serves as a catalogue and reference to all the images and objects found in the exhibition. A viewer can reference the book at any point to learn information about each image in the show. This functions to create a narrative and depth concerning the research done by the institute. As a whole, the installation references a museum exhibit. I am fascinated by the exhibits found in natural history museums such as The Field Museum in Chicago. I created an exhibit that I intend to be seen as a separate space from the whole of the gallery. When a viewer walks into the space I want the sense of a strange exhibit facilitated by an outside entity (Fig. 6, 7, and 8).

I have found that *The Institute of Habits and Weirdness* serves as a metaphor for my own artistic inquiry. The fantasy surrounding the research done by the institute is analogous to my own research involving human habits and the need to create rituals. There is text throughout the installation that poetically describes philosophies and ideas concerning *The Institute of Habits and Weirdness* (see fig. 5). This text serves as my own artist statement in a way, but in the context of the show it expresses the ideas with authority, creating the illusion that these theories and philosophies are well established and accepted.

## **Drawing and the Importance of Lithography**

An enticing characteristic of lithography is the allure of drawing. Other printmaking processes such as intaglio and relief are reductive by nature, whereas lithography has a very additive nature. Lithography is a return to drawing on a level I do not receive from other processes. I am compelled by the directness of drawing, and lithography satisfies this. I have always been interested in the expressive power of drawn information. I feel I can explore this expressiveness adequately with lithography.

My interest in the expressive nature of drawing led to and still influences my interest in portraiture. I began to work with portraits while working on my BA degree in Washington, and this interest still carries through in my work currently. I find I can take certain liberties while rendering a figure or a face. I make choices about what areas to focus on and render more highly, or make more expressive and abstract. I can decide to render the eyes of a face very tightly and make the rest of the face more fluid and loose. I found, and still find, this to be a conceptual tool for my drawing. I have the ability to express much more than just a portrait by utilizing different expressive mark making.

I find that lithography has an inherent absurdity. The process is ridiculous, especially to someone who is not completely familiar with lithography. So many steps are required just to arrive at an image. A stone must first be grained, using 4 to 5 different abrasives to bring the surface of the stone down. Then a drawing can be made. In order to print, the stone must be etched using chemicals multiple times.

Printing is then a very involved process in of itself. All of this process begins to feel

absurd and ridiculous. I have found this process to be a metaphor for the ideas I work with. When I produce a lithograph, the time involved becomes a ritual for me. I have very particular steps and procedures that I must do in order to arrive at the end result. The absurdity comes from the fact that all I really end up with is a drawing, which can be done by other, less time-consuming techniques. I have a deep-seated need to practice lithography that, in some ways becomes habitual. This habitual need has evolved into the realm of ritualistic behavior. The end result is not as important as the process, or even logical. This idea of habit evolving into rituals with no sensible outcome is at the crux of my ideas.

### **The Self Portrait and Psychology**

I began to use myself as the subject as early as my undergraduate work in Washington. Utilizing the self-portrait has become much more pronounced in my current body of work. Using myself as the visual vehicle for my work evolved from my interests in human psychology. I wasn't sure initially how this manifested conceptually, though I did know I wanted to talk about the human condition and make it clear I was drawing from my own experiences and beliefs. I felt that, by using myself, I was informing the viewer that I was not making assumptions about the nature of humans. I began to talk about ideas of self-reflection, self-questioning and existential quandaries with my work.

My earliest work dealing with these concepts stemmed from my own personal journeys through life. I began to ponder the meaning of my experiences, such as living in Chicago. I became interested in how human nature has an effect on our lives, and what aspects of our personalities and inner psyches influence, control



and change the course of the lives we lead. I explored ideas of fear, anger and anxiety and how these emotions controlled my life and how I controlled my emotions. This early imagery focused too directly on pure feeling, depicting emotions and falling short of beginning a deeper conversation.

I was successful in starting a line of inquiry. I began to question the meaning of our most base emotions as people. I drew from my own experiences to create imagery (as self portraits) that portrayed in an abstract way my own struggle with emotional states. This work, however, only seemed to conceptually scratch the surface of greater human ideas concerning our own psychology.

I began to investigate ideas of existentialism and psychoanalysis. My most current work explores these ideas much more thoroughly than my older work. I am actively investigating the seemingly generic question. "What does it all mean". If I were to simply explore this question, my work would quickly end. Instead I delve deeper into the inner workings of the human psyche, exploring ideas of the ego and the struggle to find meaning and purpose in our daily lives. Are we constantly searching for wholeness or the land of plenitude? Do people engage in daily habits and rituals in order to give their lives meaning and purpose? Why do we fall into habits, and how do habits feed the need for purpose? These are just a few of the questions I investigate with my work.

### **Existentialism**

I delved further into why I was interested in existential ideas. The main concept I am investigating is how humans search for meaning in the mundane passage of time.

I actively question, is there only meaning placed on significant events? Does it take extreme trauma or an emotional collapse to cause one to begin to question the meaning and purpose of existence? Or are we constantly on the search for meaning and purpose through our everyday actions and interactions. As Jean-Paul Sartre writes, "There is no reality except action...Man is nothing else than his plan; he exists only to the extent that he fulfills himself; he is therefore nothing else than the ensemble of his acts, nothing else than his life" (Sartre, 32). This raised the idea, if someone is defined by his or her actions, then that person cannot be defined by only significant action. The everyday actions of one's life must contribute to the quest for fulfillment, and are much more frequent and constant than a large traumatic event. So are we always searching to give our everyday mundane actions meaning? These ideas have manifested in my work with portraits and specifically self-portraiture. I focus on creating images that speak to a passage of time and ambiguous narrative, and depict a character engaging in repetitive and strange habits and rituals. These fictional rituals speak to the ideas that humans engage in daily habits and rituals that may seem mundane, repetitive, and have no clear outcome or purpose, but these daily habits are part of the constant struggle to give the day meaning.

### **Weirdness and Absurdity**

As I continue to explore human habitual and ritualistic behavior, I ponder my fascination with what I usually call the "weirdness" of people. I observe that we are constantly engaging in weird behavior as part of my own Western societal context. We engage in repetitive actions on a daily basis. We are glued to phones, TVs and ads. I find everyday acts, which I too engage in, strange and weird. Shaving ones

face is an odd and strange daily occurrence for some. These daily procedural tasks are not odd at first glance, but I begin to observe the inherent weirdness of these daily activities.

It is important at this point to explain and define what I mean when I use the word “weirdness” to describe the daily ritualistic behavior my artistic practice explores. The first part of this definition relates to my own fascination. I am fascinated with the eccentricity of people. This would suggest that the weird is some quality projected by the groups of people I observe. People are engaging in ritualistic and habitual behavior with no clear objective or outcome. This would suggest a level of absurdity within this ritualistic behavior, absurdity loosely meaning something that doesn’t make sense or is rooted in, or evolved from something as equally nonsensical. Perhaps this weirdness I speak of comes from the absurdity of engaging in repetitive behavior multiple times per day, expecting this behavior to either produce a different result each time, or give meaning to one’s seemingly mundane and uneventful existence.

The habits and rituals I depict visually with my work create a situation where there is no clear and greater purpose to the behavior the character is conveying. He is engaging in an absurd repetitive action, unaware of the pointlessness of the act, and seemingly unaware how strange this action is. This definition of absurdity seems to be at the crux of my definition of the weirdness of my fellow humans. The images I create are void of a contextual base in which the character is acting. This lack of context amplifies the sheer weirdness of the act by removing social blinders

of the mundane world that screen the absurdity of habits and rituals from being realized.

The weirdness I speak of also comes from a type of transformation. This transformation takes place while the character I depict is engaged in these habitual rituals where an altering of the face takes place. This alteration is either directly applied to the face by means of tape or clothes pins, or produced more indirectly, by putting a hand in a mouse trap, thus altering the face by means of facial contortions as a byproduct of the understandable shriek of pain. The moment of alteration creates a focus on the malleability of the facial features, creating a sense of plasticity of the body. In turn the ritual becomes a means for the body to escape from the confines of the self, or the structured societal construct placed on the individual.

In the case of my work, the ritual becomes a starting point where this transformation into weirdness occurs. Through pain, struggle, anxiety, physical tension, and repetitiveness, the body is allowed to move beyond constructed persona. Without persona and structured meaning, what is a human, French philosopher Gilles Deleuze would say, just meat. As he states, *“The man who suffers is a beast, the beast that suffers is a man. This is the reality of becoming. What revolutionary person in art, politics, religion, or elsewhere, has not felt that extreme moment when he was nothing but a beast”*, (Deleuze, 22). The weirdness I observe in the everyday mundane habit and ritual begins to accentuate the transformation of the persona into something beyond the perceived idea of a person acting in society. We are transformed into something else, something much stranger than a person.

## **Ritual and Habit**

This idea brings me further into what I explore with my work. I explore the absurdity of human behavior, and specifically the absurdity of repetitive, habitual and ritualistic behavior. Ritual tends to be a loaded word and have very particular religious connotations for some people reading my work. I do not intend to speak of religious rituals when I speak of ritualistic behavior. I do not choose to focus on religious rituals because of the simple fact they do not fit my definition of absurdity. A religious ritual tends to serve a higher purpose and is a means to an end. The overall goals of most Western religious rituals are to save one's soul, bless an object or person before a journey, or to absolve one of their sins.

The habits and rituals I depict tend to be rooted in reference to the everyday and mundane activities. These daily habits can evolve into ritual that hold the same reverence for someone as a religious ritual, however the ritualistic habit still serves no greater predefined purpose. This is the quandary I address with my work. Do we engage in absurd habitual activities to the point the habits become ritual? Do we place a greater meaning and purpose on our daily habits in order to give our lives meaning?

## **Successes and the Future**

I have been successful in beginning a line of inquiry concerning the strangeness of human nature. We create habits to fulfill some sort of void within the everyday existence of life. These habits tend to evolve into personal rituals. I have asked questions with my art that confronts the importance and validity of these rituals, and attempts to get at the root of the need to create habit. The landscape of

the human psyche I explore still has many avenues. I will continue to tread the waters of what it means to be a human, and search to understand the struggle of existence.

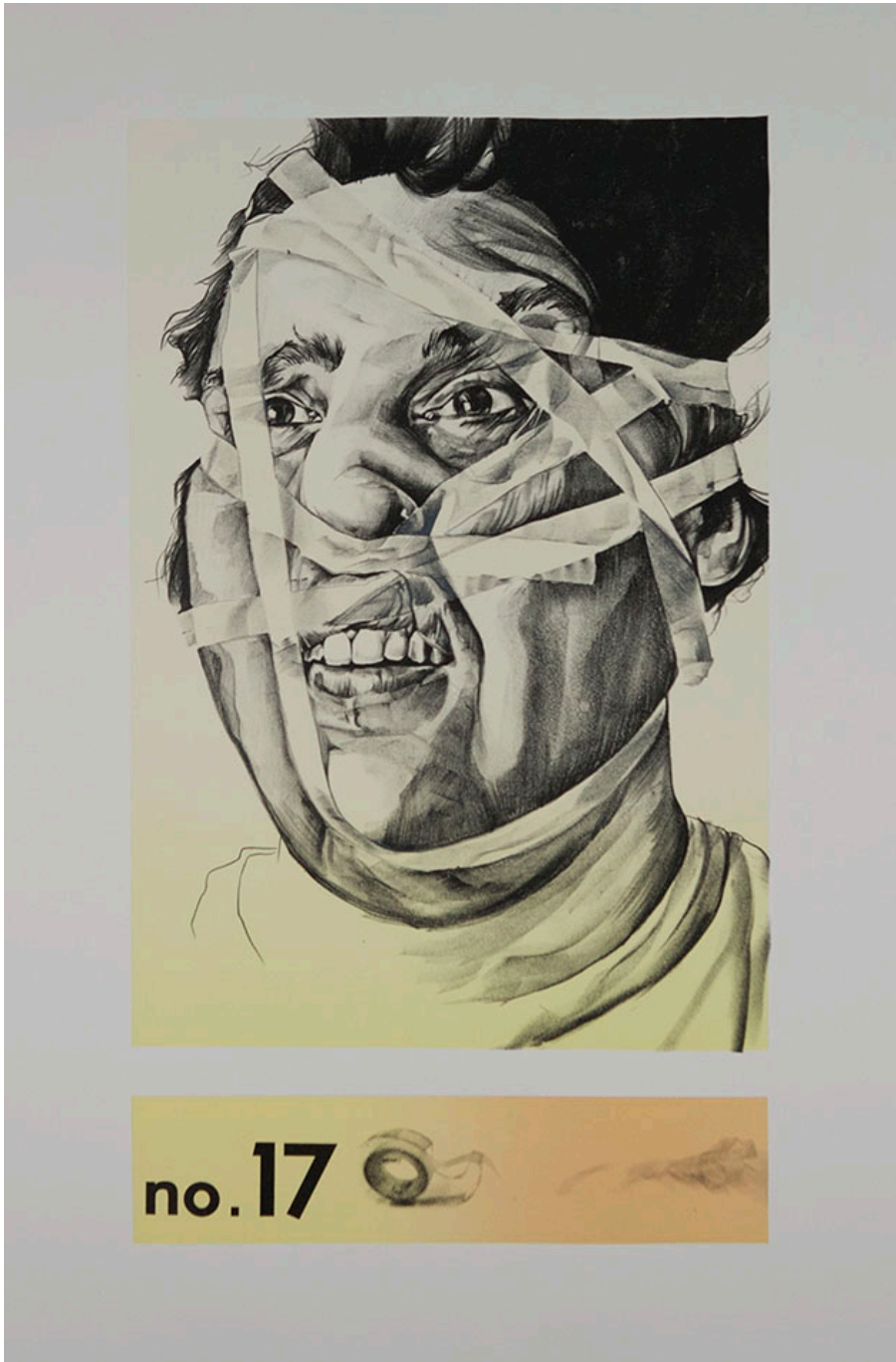


Fig 1.  
No.17: Two, Lithograph, 30"x22", 2012

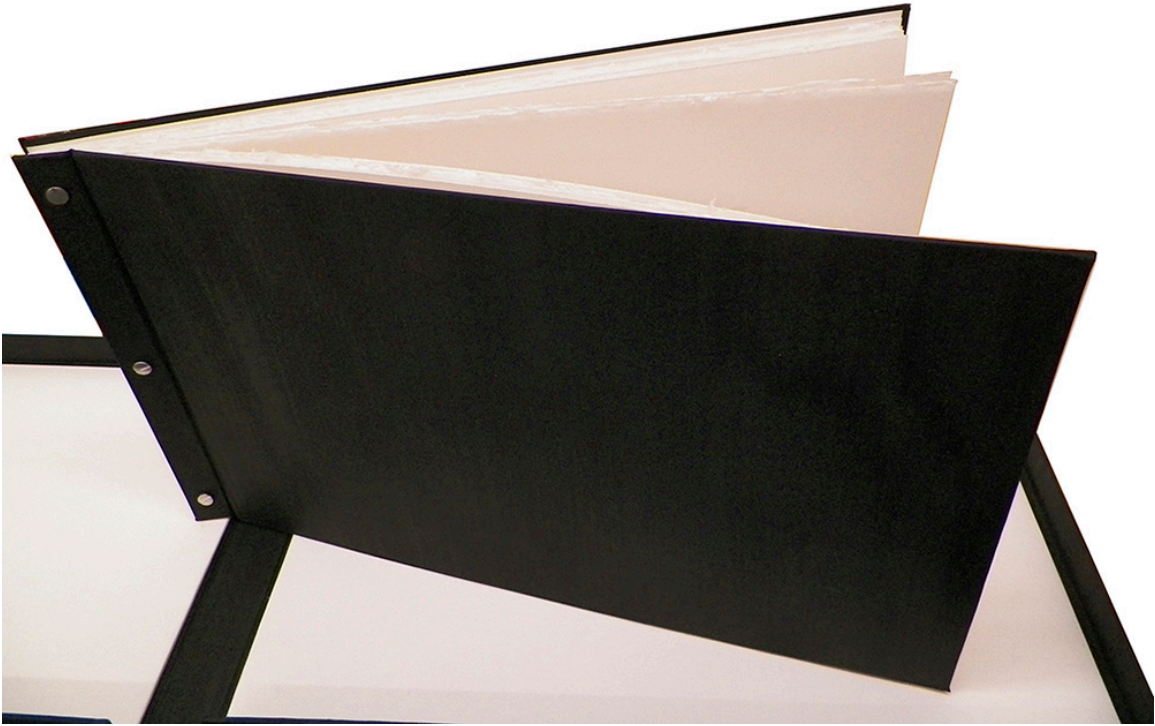


Fig. 2  
The Book of Rituals, Letterpress on BFK, Album Binding, 11" x 22", 2012





Fig. 3  
16-982/37, Found Object and Wood, 45" x 12" x 3", 2013



Fig. 4  
A Collection of Objects Pertaining to Rituals, Wood, paper and found objects,  
4"x 18" x 2 1/2", 2013

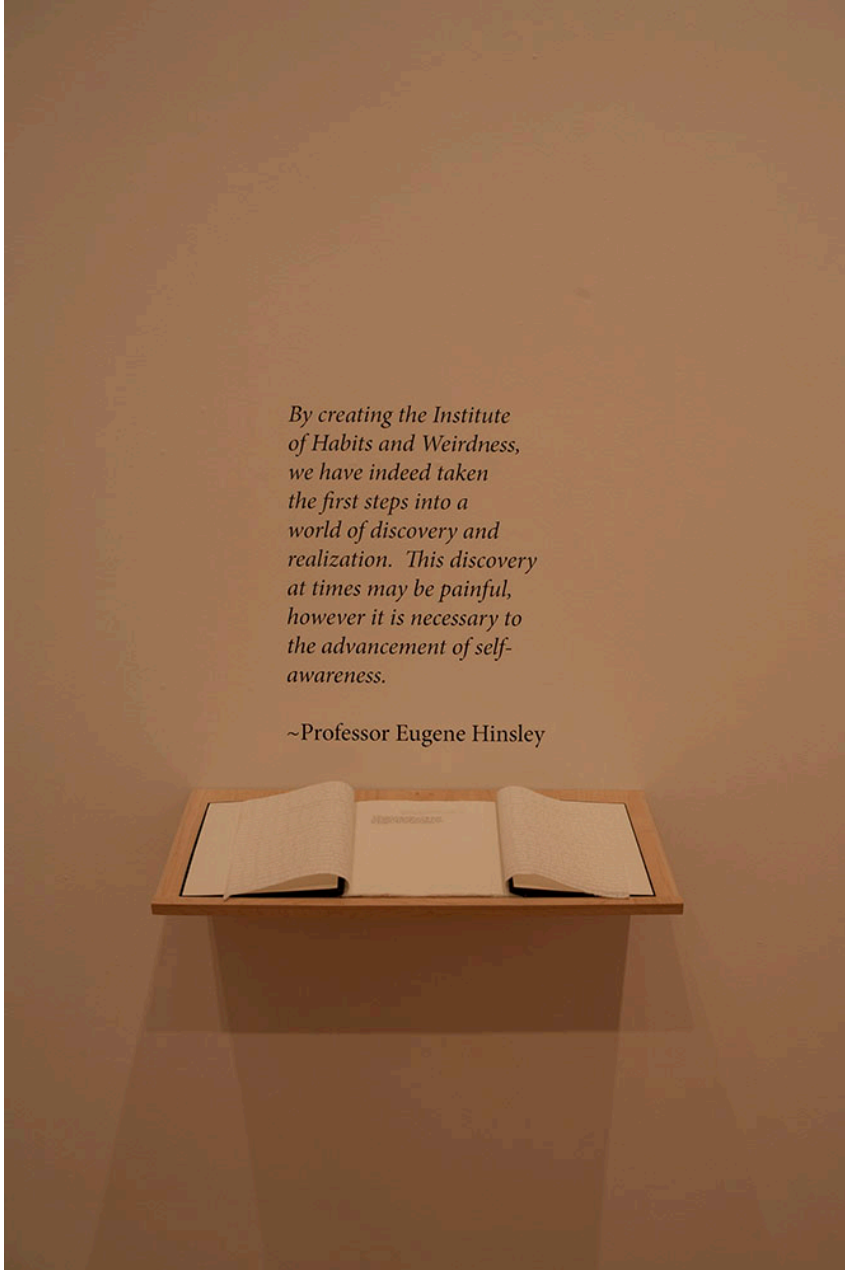


Fig. 5  
Installation Image

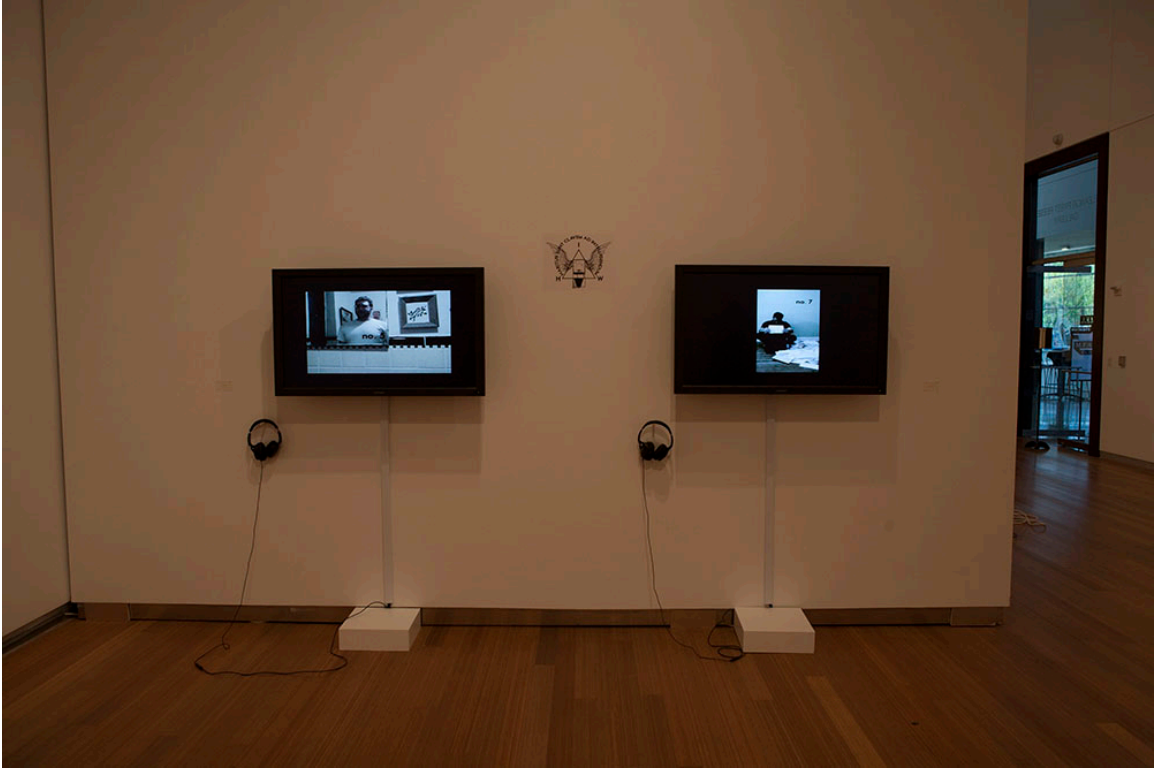


Fig 6.  
Installation Image



Fig 7.  
Installation Image



Fig 8.  
Installation Image

### **Works Cited**

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