

Fall 12-17-2015

# A Statement

Cein Watson  
*CUNY Hunter College*

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://academicworks.cuny.edu/hc\\_sas\\_etds](http://academicworks.cuny.edu/hc_sas_etds)

 Part of the [Art Practice Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Watson, Cein, "A Statement" (2015). *CUNY Academic Works*.  
[http://academicworks.cuny.edu/hc\\_sas\\_etds/24](http://academicworks.cuny.edu/hc_sas_etds/24)

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Hunter College at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Arts & Sciences Theses by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact [AcademicWorks@cuny.edu](mailto:AcademicWorks@cuny.edu).

A Statement

by

Cein Watson

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts, Hunter College  
The City University of New York

2015

Thesis Sponsor:

12/15/2015

Date

Susan Crile

First Reader

12/15/2015

Date

Tom Weaver

Second Reader

**Table of Contents:**

Title Page: page 1  
Table of Contents: page 2  
A Statement: pages 3-15  
Image List: pages 16-17  
Images: pages 18-21  
References: page 22

Art has the flavor of first order logic: it is a syntactical tool used to investigate the relationships between propositions, thoughts, and other sets of abstract entities in order to establish their value. Like formal logic, art has helped me see rules that govern structures and the systems they participate in.

In a language, there is grammar and there is vocabulary. Syntax is grammar and semantics are vocabulary. I think about my work as an aesthetic grammar that manifests in nearly any form of making. As the basis of my studio practice I follow a set of chosen rules that can be applied to multiple platforms. To me, the rules that govern an art making process are syntactical/grammatical while the medium acts as a vocabulary. In the end, an art object is the result of an invented studio language. A work of art is a combination of rules an artist chooses with the implementation of a chosen medium to execute them. One of the fundamental conceptual elements I work with in my art is the problem of agency. Agency has always been a problem in the history of philosophy. What are the conditions that need to exist for us to be free? There are four conditions that need to be met for agency to exist:

- 1) An event is brought about by a person and that person is responsible for it.
- 2) The action has to be in the power of that person to perform or not perform.<sup>1</sup>
- 3) We can't say any act included in the action was caused by some other event.
- 4) Nor can we say that the action was uncaused.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Echoes issues in freedom of choice from Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*.

<sup>2</sup> Lecture notes from Bryan Benham's *Mind Language and Reality*.

At the most fundamental level, an action is either caused or uncaused. The issue at the core of agency is that it is not a result of a cause and effect but is (and/or at some point the result of) an uncaused cause. For agency to exist the agent must be an uncaused cause. In other words, from nothing comes something. The bulk of my work has been spent grappling with the issue of the uncaused cause. My drawings and paintings traditionally diagram different theories of agency in the history of philosophy in hope of better understanding them through a visual lens. This interest in agency has evolved to act as a matrix for accountability and authorship. My building projects in the forest represent this expanded understanding of agency. These structures represent an abiding interest in self-reliance, self-legislation<sup>3</sup>, and labor as an inter-entailing symptom of agency.

Imagine the content of my work as a body. If theories of agency are the skeletal system, then emergent properties are the muscular system. An emergent property is a phenomenon in which a whole is greater than the sum of its parts. For example Cell -> Tissue -> Organ -> Organ System -> Living Animal. Another example is the mind as an emergent property of the physical body. The characteristics of emergent properties often come from the relationship between parts and not the parts themselves.

Emergent properties are used to explain a myriad of phenomena in biology, environmental science, neuroscience, semiotics, cognitive science and any number of complex systems. The theory of emergent properties holds gravity in my work because it is an explanatory tool to understand pieces in relation to a whole. If I am

---

<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche's self help for breaking the dialectic of mediocrity.

making work across multiple platforms as a constellation of an aesthetic grammar then to see the work as a whole would be to see it more as an emergent property than as separate pieces. The library made of artists' books built for the show is an example of this approach. Each image in a book acts as a cell, each page acts as a tissue, each book acts as an organ and all the organs together create the body of the work.

The library titled "The Triple Lindy" comes out of a context of artists, authors and philosophers whose work grounds my practice. The role of these thinkers in is to explain where my perspective is seated in relation to a larger academic landscape, and by extension to give the viewer a context in which to read and experience my work.

Matthew Crawford's book *Shop Class as Soulcraft* makes an argument for a relationship between labor and agency. It is a book written in the tradition of Hellenistic philosophy. It is an investigative guide to how to live the good life. The role of tradework/craftsmanship is deconstructed to reveal a kind of eudaimonia in labor. The trades are an example of occupations that require a knowing of material culture and the techniques or methods for their transformation. In the trades the craftsman's tie to materiality and an objective standard of success creates an accountability for work. No amount of rhetoric from an electrician can explain away why the lights do not work. A piece of wood for a carpenter is level or it is not. This kind of accountability gives rise to a particular lense on the material world. And that view of the world is one of agency toward a telological process of making. Each trade has a mastery because the ends are understood through experience of the

craft. In the pursuit of this mastery of craft, a person can find happiness through purposeful action, (eudaimonia) in themselves and their community.<sup>4</sup>

*Shop Class as Soulcraft* articulates the rewards of trades that often carry stigmas in our culture. Unlike Emerson's essay *Self-Reliance*, *Shop Class as Soulcraft* argues for a kind of self that is not autonomous, but is rather self-reliant, a self who also contributes and participates actively in the world and in a local community.

The agent in *Shop Class as Soulcraft* is one bound by the limitations of a material world. Craftsmanship is first and foremost a practice in material. The material governs the self-directed process of a responsible agent. Since there is an objective standard, the materiality of trade work forces accountability on the agent. Craftsmanship demands accountability and accountability demands an agent.

Kelly Baum's catalogue essay for the show *Nobody's Property: Art, Land, Space 2000-2010* is an exercise in defining an ever expanding field of land art practice. The essay by Kelly Baum is a case study in methodologies of contemporary earthwork artists. She frames the essay with a quote from Judith Butler, "I am my relation to you." The relational approach of identity is the tool Baum uses to define the term "commons" and further on to unify the typologies of different art practices. The commons is one of the four defining materials of contemporary land art. The commons is a site or material that emphasizes accessibility, openness and community. It is a space for no one and everyone. The other three categories are land, space and territory. Land is both the dirt/mass/stuff of the earth,

---

<sup>4</sup> Matthew B. Crawford, "Shop Class as Soulcraft," in *Shop Class as Soulcraft* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2009).

but it is also imbued with social conditions and histories of its own. Space is an active void that she explains as “an unfinished cultural artifact.” Space can be a social one. Space cannot exist without a participant and vice versa. Space is prohibitive and prescriptive. And finally, territories are the boundaries set out by nation states onto a geography.

Commons, land, space and territories mark out the conceptual parameters of the essay. Within these parameters are typologies of artistic practices. These are investigatory, parafiction, interrogative, and interruptive. Investigatory artists primarily research. Parafictional artists combine research, fiction and reality. Parafiction, for example, is a good way to address blurred issues like truth under torture/war, utopias, dreamscapes and revisionist histories. Interrogative artists explain and probe questions without answers. And interruptive artists use symbolic interruptions of power through traditional land art methods.

Baum has set out a task of creating a “discursive vector” to organize and name these contemporary art practices. Baum addressed the site in two manifestations. By overlaying two diagrams a work of land art can be plotted on a discursive map as a vector. The land art is both a site and a kind of art practice. By overlaying the two you get a discursive vector. A discursive vector could include a discrete location, a field of knowledge, social issue or political debate. If one is going to address a site in the context of art it seems appropriate to address it on its many levels. The discursive vector gives a term to a specific space with multiple valence levels.<sup>5</sup>

The discursive vector is an example of an emergent property used in the interest of land art theory. My own practice is a combination of parafiction and the interrogative. On the one hand my work’s parafiction because I am working toward a hand made

---

<sup>5</sup> Baum, Kelly. “Nobody’s Property.” in *Nobody’s Property. Art, Land, Space 2000-2010*. 11-44. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010



utopia in the forest. And at the same time my diagrams of agency and my labor act as an investigation into a question without answer (How to understand agency?) and therefore an interrogative practice in a space.

In an art world, permeated by impoverished and self-serving ideas, I have found solace in Rousseau and Nietzsche. In *The Discourses and other Political Writings*, Jean Jacques Rousseau questions the merits of Western culture. In it he says Letters, Sciences, and the Arts have been used to mask the chains of society. They not only mask oppression but are actively used as a tool of oppressive mediocrity. The Arts create morals that are the opposite of what they appear. Rousseau believes civilization has oppressed our innocence and good nature. People have been softened by the vices of the Arts and Sciences. Sparta only escaped this plight by expelling the Arts and Sciences and focusing on hardening its citizens for war. Rousseau resented the artists of Athens for their arrogance. The threat of this cultural arrogance is voiced again in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by José Ortega y Gasset in *The Revolt of the Masses*.

He goes on to explain that the combination of idleness and vanity has created luxury. And luxury has made society weak. As the Arts and luxury spread, courage shrinks and the military suffers. Politicians seek luxury and confuse wealth with virtue. Rousseau says “with money one has everything but morals and citizens.”

Rousseau believes artists are to blame for the cycle of mediocrity. Artists want applause. If the culture is below their level of artistic practice they lower their standards. They lower themselves or they die in poverty. In addition to

artists lowering themselves, he believes specialization is to blame for the ignorant spirit of citizenry. Rousseau thinks the philosophers do not help either, regardless of their arguments or rhetoric. In the face of rhetoric one should remember that it is better to act well than to speak well.<sup>6</sup>

In a contemporary culture of sophists, corporate greed, and ineffectual politics, I cannot help but entertain some of Rousseau's theories. Years before school I led a monastic life filled with labor, reflection and simple purpose. The idea that true self-knowledge comes only through the rejection of our civilization has always had some appeal.

Rousseau's use of the Arts and Sciences as an oppressive network is picked up later by Nietzsche in *The Genealogy of Morals*. The Arts and Sciences act as an oppressive device of mediocrity and weakness that is used to soften citizens and mask the vices of a culture. This is mirrored later in Nietzsche's idea that a weak priestly cast has used religion to oppress the noble. They each claim that an oppressive mediocrity keeps down the good in humanity. The Arts and Sciences do it for Rousseau and the Christian priests for Nietzsche. Rousseau believes a return to our most primitive self is the solution while Nietzsche wants to break the dialectic of mediocrity and embrace self-legislation. In fact, they both make an argument for self-legislation.

Rousseau's thought acts as punctuation in my work because he changes the conversation from what the cultural production is to why it is produced.

---

<sup>6</sup> Jean Jacques Rousseau, "The Discourses and other political writings," in *Cambridge texts in the history of political thought: Rousseau*, ed. Victor Gourevitch, trans. Victor Gourevitch, 3-30 (Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge).

Rousseau wants us to return to innocence. I do not believe there is a good old day to get back to because, let's face it, *Et in Arcadia Ego*. But I do believe there is some virtue in a simple life where the value of a person is judged by their actions and not their material wealth. I also believe in the importance of Nietzsche's concept of self-legislation. The value of values for Nietzsche is that people can create their own. This Perspectivist approach to morality mirrors my own theory of how art practices play out in a studio environment. Faced with infinite choices, an artist creates a set of rules to work by based on values she chooses to emphasize. Self-legislation exemplifies both accountability and agency. In my own practice I have created a series of structures to facilitate a world-view that favors self-reliance, labor and simplicity. I have built a lens and through it see a world I want to see made.

Saint-Simon gives a privileged voice to the artist in a society he wants to see made. He sees the role of the artist in the context of a social avant-garde. As part of what makes up the functioning section of society these, "men of imagination" are the leading edge of revolution. His essay emphasizes the usefulness of the scientist (savant), the artist, and the industrialist. (You can hear the tone that Marx took from Saint-Simon in regards to workers uniting against a single enemy). The uselessness of the ruling class is repeated over and over. Certainly the wealthy would struggle to bring anything to the table just as the gentry struggled to survive when they came to Jamestown (Virginia).

I think the Romantic's conception of society as an organism echoes the reality of the lived world. Unlike the Enlightenment thinkers who gave preference to the

logic of the machine, the Romantics see the importance of the living element in a human society. This is why the role of the artist is so important to Saint-Simon.

Artists are the exemplars and creators of the lived world. They are the canaries in the coal mine and the first to take the leap.<sup>7</sup> If artists are the manifestation of the lived world, then it's important to look at Edmund Husserl to better understand *lebenswelt*. Husserl is invested in the relationship between you and the world. You are in the world, part of it, experiencing it and thinking about that experience. Depending on your gaze you get different things from the world. You know how the world exists in relation to you but how do we relate to one another? Husserl takes a page out of Kant's universalism and adds a smidge of perspective. What is good for me is good for everyone. We may have different points of view and different memories, but we all agree on an objective spatio-temporal fact-world. Before we begin to theorize or participate in a scientific method, we first exist from this natural standpoint. This assertion means that before we engage in a scientific method we already exist in a lived world saturated with meaning, value and purpose. Husserl acknowledges that there is a distinction between the first person and the third person perspective. The first person perspective brings intentionality to the world. A hammer's purpose is not fixed until we bring purpose to it. At the turn of the century, Husserl wants to make it clear that science like the hammer is a tool and only has meaning, value, and purpose when we bring morality

---

<sup>7</sup> Comte de St. Simon Henri, "The Artist Savant and the Industrialist," in *Art in Theory 1815-1900: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Paul Wood, Jason Gaiger, Charles Harrison, 37 (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998).

to it. Science is a tool in the service of morality. Before WWI he warned the world what would happen if we conflate the two.

In Husserl's phenomenology there is a world, we are in it, and we perceive it, and perceive ourselves perceiving it. Husserl is interested in creating and explaining a process that we can use to interpret the world of space and time but also meaning, value and purpose.<sup>8</sup>

I think of phenomenology as a show and tell of a show and tell. A stone exists outside of me with no meaning until I bring intention to it to create a wall, a foundation, a knife or stairs. This is an important perspective to understand as I work in a natural environment. Like the craftsman in *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, I'm an agent governed by a material world. Whether it's the forest or the pen in my hand, Husserl helps me understand how I interact with the world. Phenomenology helps me to understand that the world first exists, then we bring meaning, value and purpose to it. In my opinion, the lived world is a kind of everyday agency. By bringing intentionality to the world we act as agents within it, something I experience every time I build.

A building/a total work of art is the ultimate goal within the Bauhaus. In the past, architecture and the arts functioned together, one supporting the other. If you engage with one, then by necessity you engage with the other. In my work I openly embrace the relation between the two. The Bauhaus acknowledges that art cannot be taught, but a trade/craft can be. It is in the work shop that education resides. The

---

<sup>8</sup> Edmund Husserl, "Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology Introduction," in *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1931).

Bauhaus created a classless school based around the guild/workshop. The aim of the school was the unity of the arts under a new architecture. Architecture, painting and sculpture were taught together to reinforce one another. Just like traditional guilds, the division of instruction was made of apprentices, journeymen and junior masters. Any person of good repute regardless of age or sex was welcome to apply.<sup>9</sup> Like the author of *Soul Craft as Shop Class*, the Bauhaus understood the importance of collaboration between the guild system and the community.

The objective standards that the craftsman works towards in *Shop Class as Soulcraft* is made clear in the Bauhaus practice. Acknowledging that an artist's creative process cannot be taught, the Bauhaus hopes to arm their students with measurable skills. People with poor work hide behind theory/rhetoric to find their place in a world of the emperor's new robes.

The importance of craftsmanship within an art practice could not be made clearer than in the De Stijl movement. A hard line dogmatic approach to methods of making painted the early 20<sup>th</sup> century De Stijl artists and architects into a corner (pun intended). After all the rhetoric, the only building they had to show for their theory was the Schröder House built by a cabinetmaker. The strict theories of De Sijl castrated its dreams of a total work of art. It was only a craftsman that could make an orthodox approach a reality.

Goethe said, "Architecture is frozen music." If you look closely at the codes required by building inspectors, it is clear that construction is a rhythm of stuff. If

---

<sup>9</sup> Walter Gropius, "Programme of the Staatliches Bauhaus in Weimar," in *Programs and Manifestos on 20th Century Architecture*, ed. Ulrich Conrads (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971).

you understand the rhythms of materiality then you can make music in space. You can not play with building without an intimate understanding of its materiality. Walter Gropius understood this and I believe this is why the Bauhaus had an abiding effect on the world.

Wols has been an abiding influence of my work. The early 20<sup>th</sup> century German artist, Wols, wrote *Aphorisms*, a collection of psalms, that altogether reads as a mystic cosmology. *Aphorisms* has the flavor of the pre-Socratics, tempered with Taoism and topped off with a garnish of animism. Praised as the token of existentialism by Sartre, I see his practice instead as a post war naturalism. Wols sees a world outside of people. Like Wols, I think about an art based in an earth view and not a man made world view. Of course they are not mutually exclusive, but my work is more a way of seeing than it is narrative. I am less telling a story, than using art as a means of understanding the world around me. Based on a series of rules I create a lens for my work. In doing so I allow myself to move between different mediums. Wols' works ties me to both a conversation of being and naturalism.

Wols does not consider himself outside the world, and therefore he and the natural world are part of a larger whole. The universe is not centered around people. The world exists outside of people and will continue to do so after we are gone. When one spends enough time outside it becomes clear that the world exists because it can and not because it should...and we are no different.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Wols, "Aphorisms," in *Wols: Watercolors, Drawings, Writings*, ed. Werner Haftmann (NY: Harry N. Abrams, 1965).

The organicist work of Wols exemplifies an approach to the world that locates our relation to nature as an emergent property in itself. His art is an embodiment of a being becoming. I am invested in a practice based on growth. My understanding of growth is tied to theories of emergent properties, and theories of emergent properties inform my understanding of material. I see my work as more of a true naturalism than I do as an existential practice.

The intention of this statement was to lay out the tools of my practice. It is a culmination of artists, philosophers and writers that ground me in an approach to my work. This statement is not a logical set of premises that culminate in a valid/sound conclusion on what my work is and why it exists. It is, instead, meant to be a map to what guides my practice. As a general approach I think of art as an analytic problem, which is why I use logic as a primary filter. In my own practice, agency and its value has become a centerpiece for my relation to material and labor. The value of labor is made clear in my love of craft and its accountability. I see agency in the act of building and building as an example of *lebenswelt* philosophy. The importance of material grounds me in the natural world and in turn helps me better understand emergent properties. The more I learn about the systems that surround me the more I can empower myself to become a self legislator and an agent in the world.



Image list:

Title  
medium  
size  
date

## 1) "The Triple Lindy" (exterior view)

Canvas, wood, tarp, sheetrock, latex paint, screws, staples, paper, ink, glue  
twine, and linen.

Dimensions Variable

2015

2) "The Triple Lindy" (interior view, 1<sup>st</sup> level)

Canvas, wood, tarp, sheetrock, latex paint, screws, staples, glue, twine, paper,  
ink and linen.

Dimensions Variable

2015

3) "The Triple Lindy" (interior view, 2<sup>nd</sup> level)

Canvas, wood, tarp, sheetrock, latex paint, screws, staples, glue, paper, ink,  
twine, and linen.

Dimensions Variable

2015

4) "The Triple Lindy" (interior view, 3<sup>rd</sup> level)

Canvas, wood, tarp, sheetrock, latex paint, screws, staples, glue, paper,  
ink, twine, and linen.

Dimensions Variable

2015



#1



#2



#3



#4

## References:

Baum, Kelly, and Yates McKee. "Nobody's Property." *Nobody's Property: Art, Land, Space, 2000-2010*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton U Art Museum, 2010. 11-44. Print.

Beauvoir, Simone De. *The Second Sex*. New York: Knopf, 1953. Print.

Crawford, Matthew B. *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work*. New York: Penguin, 2009. Print.

Gropius, Walter. "Programme of the Staatliches Bauhaus in Weimar." *20th Century Architecture*. Ed. Ulrich Conrad. Cambridge: MIT, 1971. N. pag. Print.

Husserl, Edmund, and William Ralph Boyce Gibson. *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*. London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1931. Print.

Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm, Walter Arnold. Kaufmann, R. J. Hollingdale, and Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche. *On the Genealogy of Morals*. New York: Vintage, 1989. Print.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, and Victor Gourevitch. "The Discourses and Other Political Writings." *The Discourses and Other Political Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997. N. pag. Print.

Simon Henri, Comte De. "The Artist Savant and the Industrialist." *Art in Theory 1815-1900: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Ed. Paul Wood, Jason Gaiger, and Charles Wood. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998. N. pag. Print

Wols, and Werner Haftmann. *Wols: Watercolors, Drawings, Writings*. New York: H.N. Abrams, 1965. Print.