

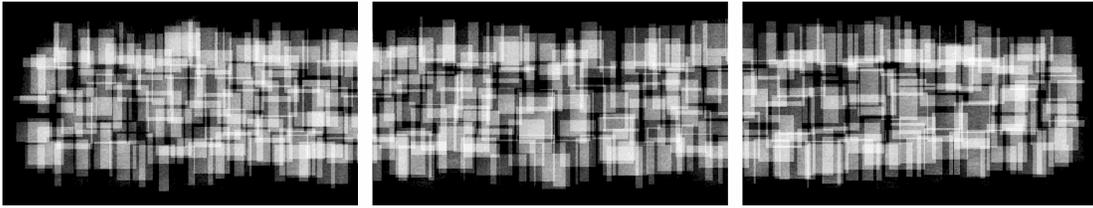
Art as Paper as Potential: Giving/Receiving

Toward the end of 2008 I attended a lecture by Joseph Kosuth at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. He sat behind a small table with a desk lamp reading his way through page after page of a paper on his work. Toward the end of his talk, the last few pages caught my attention, as he held them close to the lamp in the darkened auditorium. It initially struck me as funny, because he appeared to be holding a handful of blank white sheets of paper; perhaps he wasn't reading after all, I thought. However, on a purely aesthetic level, what I witnessed from my vantage point was quite beautiful—a handful of white pages appeared to be glowing and floating within the darkness, an idea brought to light, an illuminated manuscript of another kind. This observation served as the inspiration for *Art as Paper as Potential: Giving/Receiving*—a project that takes 365 sheets of ordinary, blank paper as its source material, one for each day of the year.

Kosuth's talk also led me to reconsider Conceptual Art's devaluing of art objects, or at least, artists' questioning the need to make the kinds of objects that generally come to mind when one thinks about Art with a capital "A." Artists have accomplished this by giving prominence to the written word, focusing on performative acts and ephemeral works, as well as employing other strategies. As I thought more about how the written word functions as visual art, I wondered what would happen if the words were erased. What would remain? Piles of blank, meaningless sheets of paper, merely the foundations upon which the words, the works, used to be grounded? Perhaps not; after all, an erased de Kooning drawing is not simply a blank sheet of paper—it is certainly something less than it once was, but it is also something more.

In addition to linking *Art as Paper as Potential: Giving/Receiving* to approaches taken by an earlier generation of conceptual artists, it may also be viewed relative to many anonymous others—past, present, and future—who were, are, and will be faced with the prospect of filling the equivalent of blank sheets of paper day after day. For some artists, this stark emptiness is terrifying and stifling, but I have come to view these blank sheets of paper as sites of potential—the potential for words, images, musical notes, mathematical equations, and other forms of notation, abstraction, and representation. In this respect, these blank slates may not be empty after all; they may be misleading, in the same way that an exposed, yet undeveloped sheet of photographic paper can seem empty when viewed under a safelight, when it in fact contains a latent image, or in the way that an erased chalk board may appear as if nothing has ever been written upon it. It was not my intention to directly reference the nature of photographic materials or the classroom, nor did I set out to confront the history of monochrome and abstract painting or minimalist sculpture. However, sometimes what begins as a simple, straightforward idea—white pages glowing in the dark—begins to encompass much more.

When viewing the work in *Art as Paper as Potential: Giving/Receiving* one cannot escape making comparisons to Kazimir Malevich, Ad Reinhardt, a multitude of conceptual artists, and Minimalist sculpture. In addition, this project should be viewed within the context of a number of contemporary artists' works, such as: Ann Hamilton's *at hand*, in which sheets of thin paper float down from the ceiling and over time accumulate into mounds on the floor; Jeff Wall's *A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)*, which depicts a stack of paper being blown out of a person's hands and up into the sky; Tom Friedman's *One thousand hours of staring*, which is literally a sheet of white paper that he stared at for that length of time; an Abe Morrell photograph, *Kleenex*, which shows a backlit tissue partially pulled from a box; Hiroshi Sugimoto's movie theaters with their stark white screens, the result of long exposures made throughout the entire length of a film; Wolfgang Tillmans' *Paper Drop* series, pictures that address the physicality of photographic paper as it curls to reveal both sides and becomes a sculptural object; and Felix Gonzalez-Torres' stacks of paper—especially the piece entitled, *Untitled (The End)*, a white rectangle within a black border—that may be taken by visitors and are replenished by the institution that exhibits the work; among others.

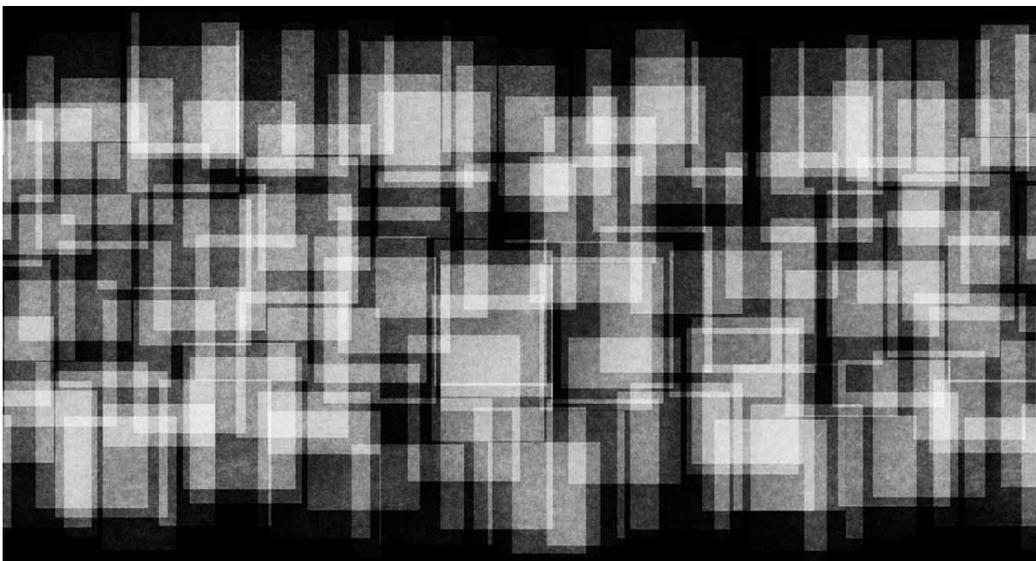


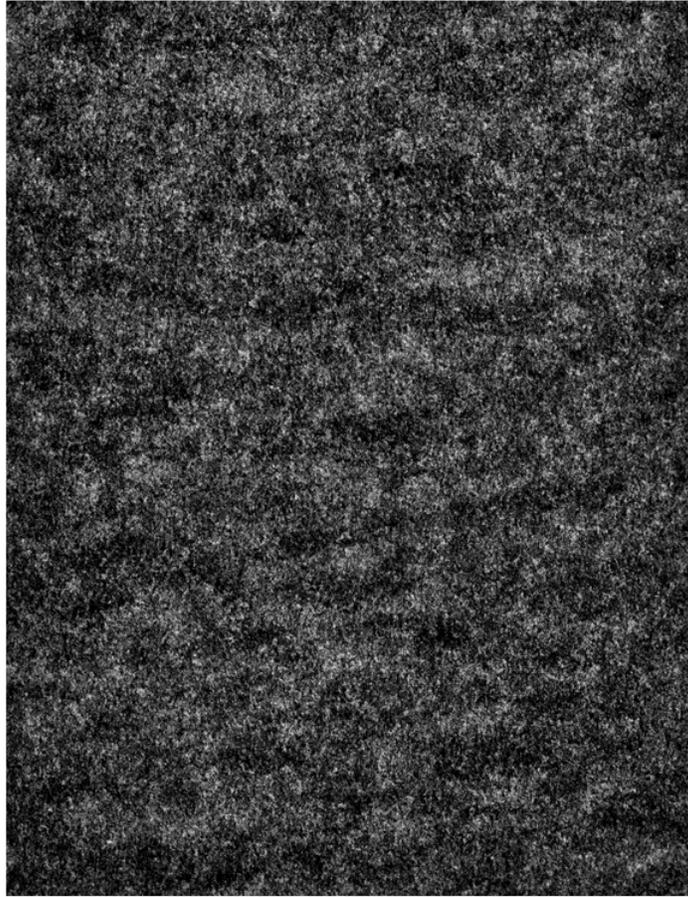
Intersecting Data: Light/Dark

This piece is composed of individual scans of 365 sheets of paper. All 365 sheets are included in the composition and are reproduced at a 1:1 ratio; actually, the digital scans of each sheet of paper are represented, translucent and overlapping to various degrees. The final piece is a backlit duratrans, a triptych measuring 4 by 21 feet, so it too will glow in the dark.

Intersecting Data: Light/Dark bears a striking resemblance to a silver gelatin photograph, but it is a composite that has been constructed entirely within a digital environment. The predominant motive for working digitally on this piece grew out of my interest in translating these tactile sheets of paper into purely digital information, which, after being filtered through the virtual realm, is output, once again, into material form. In this respect, this entire project is a reflection of our present condition, one in which more and more information is disseminated digitally for speed and conservation of natural resources. But the truth of the matter is that much of this data still finds its way back onto the printed page; the paperless office is still an ideal, yet to be realized on a scale that will significantly reduce our society's waste of natural resources.

Lastly, the structure of this piece is meant to resemble a digitally encrypted graph, perhaps these blank pages are full of facts, or merely fiction. In this respect, this piece addresses the relationships between abstraction and representation, compression and expansion, fragmentation and creation. Viewers may try to decipher the information, break the code, or simply accept the image on its own terms, a massive abstraction composed of 365 unique digital impressions, a new entity that is greater than the sum of its parts.



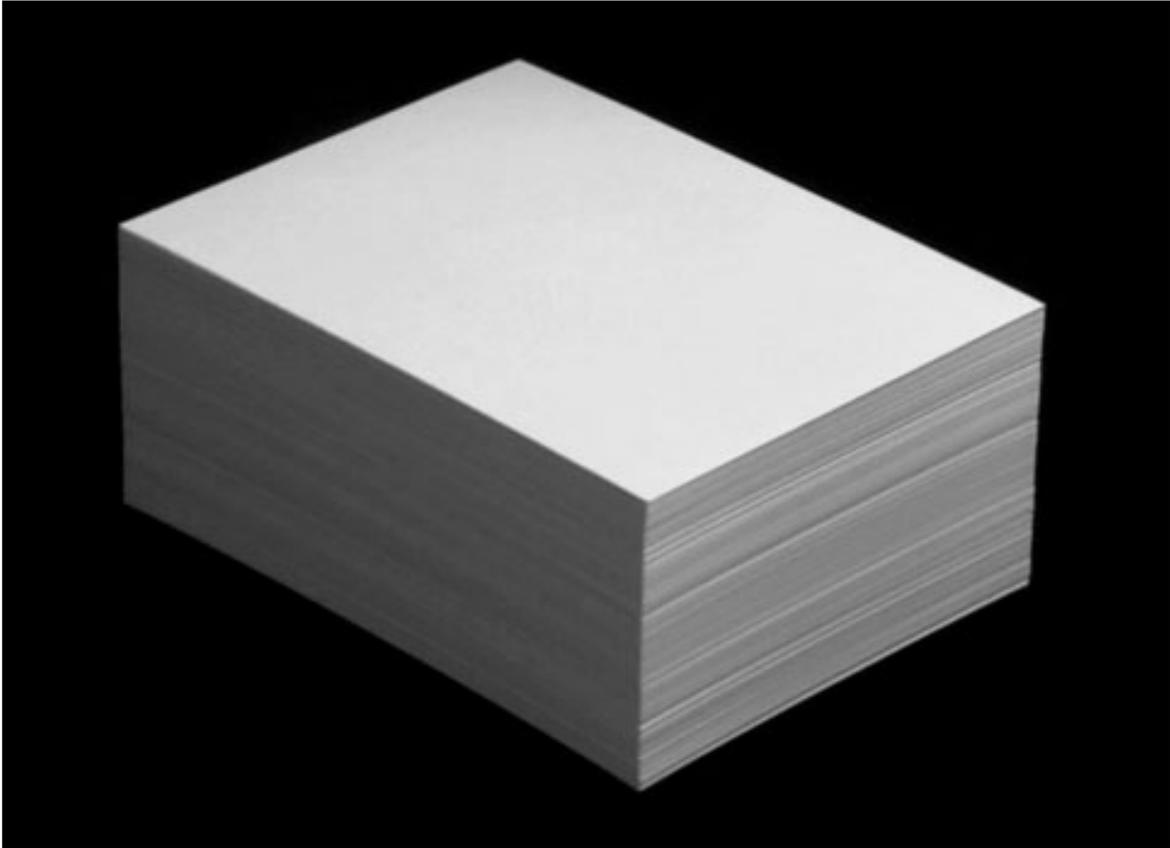


Reversing Negatives: Inside/Outside

The arrangement and display of the individual prints in this piece depends on the length of time, or to be more precise, the actual dates in which the work is on view. The prints are hung on the wall(s) in a grid-like pattern. Each print is subtitled with a specific day of the year and is placed according to its position on the pages of a calendar. Therefore, the number of prints on the wall(s) represents the length of the exhibition in calendar form; the remaining prints are placed in a single stack on the floor of the gallery.

Each sheet of 11" x 8.5" paper has been scanned and printed full size onto a 13" x 10.5" sheet of white paper as an archival pigment print. However, the resulting images in *Reversing Negatives: Inside/Outside* are much darker than the actual sheets of paper. This shift in tonal range—from white, blank sheets of paper to dark, nearly opaque rectangles contained within a white border—is meant to reference the positive/negative properties of traditional photographic reproduction and the binary system inherent in digital imaging. In this regard, these prints function as negative images of white pieces of paper; the empty, light-toned spaces become densely filled fields.

Just as no two days are exactly the same, no two prints in *Reversing Negatives: Inside/Outside* are identical. Although they may appear to be duplicates, a close examination reveals the individual qualities of each sheet and its unique fiber structure. Interestingly, these mass produced objects still retain distinct characteristics, which is in contrast to the fact that within the digital realm exact replicas, in fact, indistinguishable clones may be endlessly reproduced. Individuality reigns in this piece, as each sheet appears to contain an infinite amount of detail, an expansive universe is contained within each, infinitesimally thin sheet of paper.



Shifting Dimensions: Begin/End

In this video piece a carefully arranged, although not quite perfectly stacked pile of 365 sheets of paper spins on a hidden turntable. Each time the pile makes one full rotation a single sheet of paper is invisibly removed causing the pile to slowly diminish one sheet at a time. When the pile is reduced to one remaining sheet of paper the process is reversed. Although the pile continues to spin in the same direction, moving forward in time, the pile now grows. The video plays on a continuous loop in which the pile forever rises and falls sheet-by-sheet, day-by-day. The accumulation and subtraction of sheets/days is visible in the striations along the edge of the pile. This banding, unlike the rings of a tree, records the past as well as the future.

These thin, almost two-dimensional objects are stacked to create a larger and more substantial geometric form, thus shifting dimensions. Furthermore, the video image may appear to be a computer-generated, virtual object, when in fact this is not the case. In this respect, *Shifting Dimensions: Begin/End* is a reflection upon the similarities and differences between analogue and digital systems and the inherent qualities of each.

Like the other two components of this project, there is a debt owed to the history of Modern and Conceptual Art, yet *Shifting Dimensions: Begin/End* may be the most obvious reference to Minimalism's reductive aspects and Minimalist sculpture's objectness. This piece also speaks to an object's relationship to the space in which it resides and the viewer's position relative to it. However, in this case, the virtual space of a video projection, or of an image emanating from a monitor, limits our ability to move around it. Instead, the pile and/or sheet of paper moves for us as we become absorbed in its self-contained theatricality.

Lastly, this piece, as well as the other two components of this project, is about the daily practice of making art, an act of giving and receiving.



IMAGE #4 – installation photograph

This is an installation shot from the exhibition of this body of work at Conner Contemporary Art from March 20th to May 8th, 2010.

Dean Kessmann