MAKING ~~NO~~ BONES ABOUT IT

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What is the connection between the body, mind, and information? Can information be physical or, to turn it around, can the body and mind be 'just' information? Where is the meaning of that information? Moreover, crucially, are we losing the connection to our physical selves by incessantly processing life through information?

BONE
"A work of art is not just about something, it is something." Susan Sontag (2012)

My practice spans the expanded field of printmaking; print, photography, drawing, and sculpture create the components for my installations. I am on a concerted search for the structure of things, deconstructing existing and creating new discernible patterns.
Recognising patterns is crucial to humans, helping them understand and predict what is coming. The skeleton is the basic structure through which I examine our relationship to our surroundings, our temporal human existence, and our impact on and synergy with the planet we currently inhabit.

Bones are essential in reconstructing who we are and where we come from. We record our history through them. "So, the song of the skeleton may go unheard. And yet this is the most durable component of our bodies... keeping its memories safe for a long time after the story told by the soft tissues has been lost." (Sue Black 2020)

We all exist with the reality of our physical human body in this progressively digital information-based world. There is an unmistakable tangibility in the human skeleton; this fundamental frame holds us up, supports us, protects our vital organs, and gives us our structural shape. Bones act as a physical reference point in time and space: literally, a touchstone.
David Abraham states in his Ecology of Perception/emergence podcast (2020), "Human language is speech. Speech is shaped breath. We only speak when breathing out. By inhaling this invisible medium, air, we shape it with our tongue and lips and let it vibrate in our throats ... divesting ourselves of our physical bodies and taking on a more subtle virtual existence. But, however much time we spend we do have a physical body first." ...and the problem with having a body is that it always needs to be somewhere.

TOUCH
".... I like that feeling when you are making art that you are taking the energy out of your body and putting it into a physical object. I like things that are labour intensive" (Kiki Smith 2005)

Etching on a big scale is a very physical activity; the metal plates are heavy and making them requires an intense commitment and workmanship. It

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure Titles and information

Figure 1: Greater Knapweed
Figure 2: How Much Distance

involves an immersion into the physical aspects of making a print, experiencing the limits of the materials and pushing the boundaries of the process. That sense of physical engagement is palpable in the resulting works.

In 'The Living Mountain', Nan Shepherd (2014) describes how she walks in the nearby Cairngorms mountains every day, looks at that landscape, sees it fresh every time, and becomes part of that landscape. Shepherd connected with the people who had not lived anywhere else and said that they were, "bred of the bone of the mountain and that they are the bone of the mountain". She put that deep connection, those layers of seeing and perceiving beautifully into words, "Place and Mind may interpenetrate until the nature of both is altered." On making a fire and getting water during a break on a walk up in the Cairngorms, she writes, "There is a deep pervasive satisfaction in these simple acts. Whether you give it conscious thought or not, you are touching life and something within you knows it."

Shepherd believes in bodily thinking as Robert McFarlane (2014) writes in his foreword, "We have come increasingly to forget that our minds are shaped by the bodily experience of being in the world.... We are literally losing touch." Also, Jeanette Winterson (2014) talks about the physicality in the book, "Powerfully argued is the need to be physical, to be in the body and to let the senses and the soul work in harmony with the mind."

MIND
"The skull... is the part of a person with which we most commonly interact and it is the repository for our conscience, our intelligence and, therefore, our humanity and self." (Sue Black 2020)

THE MIND HAS MOUNTAINS is an immersive installation that was shown at Brantwood Museum, Ruskin's former home. The visitor entering the space is surrounded by a room-filling vista made up of large unframed etchings extending from the floor to the ceiling. These are images of structures from inside the human skull, evoking a mountainous, alpine landscape. John Ruskin (1859) famously said, "Mountains are the bones of the earth" and utilised the skeleton metaphor recurrently in his works, using it to invoke the very essence of a thing.

Built specially for this exhibition, the oval form of the room refers to the shape of the human head and creates a cave-like space. The installation consists of 14 images, each presented as a triptych. Printed on heavy cotton paper, showing the original deckled edges, the etchings have a direct physical impact on the viewer. I have combined different techniques, such as photo etching combined with drawing, and working on the steel plates with a range of tools, including more industrial ones such as an electrical sander and disc polish grinder. To achieve the intensity of the blacks and the range of structures within these etchings, I have applied carborundum mixed with earth from Brantwood Gardens, alpine earth from the mountains of Switzerland

Figure 3

Figure 4

Figure 5

Figure 3: The Mind has Mountains
Figure 4: Signs
Figure 5: Seven Pillars of Wisdom

and Liechtenstein, and sand from the Thames River in Woolwich, East London, where my studio is situated. The Blue Gallery used to be Ruskin's library; the images, being structures from the inside of the human skull, shift the space into a place where consciousness resides; a space to think and reflect, like the library it used to be.

INFORMATION
"Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?" (T. S. Eliot 1934)

Plato was not a fan of writing; not only did it separate the speaker from the listener, by distance and/or time, but he also thought that it took knowledge away from the writer, putting it into storage. It was not part of the body anymore until you read it again. However, before writing, words existed only in spoken form and were, therefore, ephemeral. 'In the beginning was the word' (John 1:1). A spoken word disappears immediately except in the minds of the listener. To make it last, it needs to be physically present, a written symbol representing that word. Scripture was not truly lasting. Only through print did the written word become more stable and permanent because there were so many copies.

Nevertheless, how do you devise a marker system that will communicate over 100,000 years for sites that store nuclear waste? McFarlane, in Underland (2019), wrote about the options of clear signage for a nuclear waste storage facility, "Create an architectural hostile environment? Carve faces like Munch's scream as pictograms? Create off-putting sound through a durable Aeolian instrument? Maybe a sign is futile in this situation as we do not know how it will be understood. Maybe it has to be an active communication system like an atomic priesthood creating over time a folk epic about the dangers below, constantly renewing the message in an oral tradition."

"The power lies not just in the knowledge, preserved and passed forward, valuable as it is, but in the methodology: encoded visual indication, the act of transference, substituting signs for things. And then, later, signs for signs." (James Gleick on the evolution from the spoken to the written word and the new 'architectures of information' it creates. 2012)

The installation 'Signs' consists of over 1200 paper cubes, each printed with an etching of a human bone and then stacked on top of each other to create a shape that can be entered or viewed from the outside. 'Signs' is an attempt to visually abstract human bones, to remove their mystique as human remains, transforming them into information. Depending on the angle of the viewer, only parts of the bones can be seen, reducing them to simple shapes, such as lines and dots, and so revealing a fluid rather than a fixed system of signs to be deciphered, and interpreted.

We know now that every single cell of an organism has in itself a complete double set of the code script: the information to recreate that

exact organism. We have decoded our body into data; put it into bits, a measure of information.

However, to quote James Gleick (2012), "The quavers and crotchets inked on paper are not the music, Music is not a series of pressure waves sounding through the air... music is the information. Likewise, the base pairs of DNA are not genes. They encode genes, which themselves are made of bits."

If everything can exist in code and is decodable, whom do we trust?

It seems that we more and more exist just as digital versions of ourselves and there is a growing gap between reality and the projected image. With digital means and bit storage becoming more sophisticated, the physical reality recedes. Replacing physical experiences with digital ones makes it difficult to be sure where your body ends.

'The Seven Pillars of Wisdom' is an installation consisting of seven large unframed scrolls, combining intaglio and relief printmaking techniques on thin Japanese paper. They are hung from the ceiling to form a heptagon-shaped pillar touching the floor. The script deconstructs the very concrete order of bones into lines of information–a basis of new writing to chronicle human interaction. "Writing is one of humanity's greatest achievements" (Ewan Clayton 2019). It allows us to communicate and remember across space and time far beyond an individual's life span. Bones have a long history in writing; oracle bones are the oldest known form of writing in China, dating from 2000 BC and used to predict the quality of the upcoming harvest, the gender of a baby, and so on.

Making the bone script was inspired by the Rosetta Stone, which made it possible to translate the hieroglyphs of the Ancient Egyptians who, of course, were among the earliest to invent writing. It also was inspired by Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges' book 'The Library of Babel'. This tells the story of an infinite library, a universe that is filled with books containing all the variations of an alphabet of 25 letters. Despite, or, indeed, because of, this infinite glut of information, all the books are useless to the reader because all knowledge is there alongside all falsehood, which includes an infinite capacity for fake news. This seems like a prediction of the internet; we produce endless amounts of information and are on a quest for ever more knowledge but the more we think we know, the less we seem to understand.

"I am like Adam and I need to name things." Jeanette Winterson (2014)

Most of us have immediate access to endless information. 'Total noise' is the phrase coined by David Foster Wallace for the current media and information environment, the tsunami of available facts, contexts, and perspectives. Total noise sounds random and randomness, of course, happens by chance. "Chance is only the measure of our ignorance", Henri Poincaré. Ignorance is subjective; it is a quality of the observer.

"Presumably, randomness, if it exists at all, should be a quality of the thing itself. Physicists had found randomness inside the atom, the kind of randomness Einstein deplored by complaining about God and dice." (James Gleick 2012)

"The more energy the faster the bits flip. Earth, air, fire, and water, in the end, are all made of energy, but the different forms they take are determined by information. To do anything requires energy. To specify what is done requires information." (Seth Lloyd quoted by James Gleick in Information 2012)

Information is ordered knowledge and facts. Humans are always looking for patterns; even when we are focusing hard on not to, we unconsciously relate to and choose a familiar pattern. In fact, by trying purposefully to choose the opposite, we are creating a pattern. No one can be consciously truly random; randomness is part of life. A tendency towards randomness is called entropy.

We seem to be creating our information entropy. It has been happening for a while; In the 12th century, the Dominican monk Vincent of Beauvais tried to set down his version of everything that was known in 'Speculum Maius' (The Great Mirror) in manuscripts organised into 80 books, because "the multitude of books, the shortness of time and the slipperiness of memory do not allow all things which are written to be equally retained in the mind". His solution to too many books was to write 80 more. Are we caught in a kind of City of Thekla, Calvino's city that is constantly under construction "so that its destruction cannot begin"?

When one asks if stopping the construction will cause the city to fall to pieces, the reply is "not only the city" (Calvino 1979).

Elisabeth Eisenstein (1980) says in 'The Printing Press as an Agent of Change', "It is not the onset of amnesia that accounts for present difficulties but a more complete recall than any prior generation has ever experienced. Steady recovery, not obliteration, accumulating, rather than loss, have led to the present impasse."

The opposite of knowing is ignorance or, more positively, innocence, and the opposite of remembering is forgetting; forgetting is seen as negative, a failure of the mind, a possible illness. Maybe it is just as important as remembering. We manage information by filtering, leaving out, and simply forgetting. Gilles Deleuze (1997) noted when we are "riddled with pointless talk, insane quantities of words and images", the challenge is to search for "little gaps of solitude and silence in which [to] find ... the rare, and even rarer thing that might be worth saying". Knowing deeper rather than wider creates meaning. However, meaning is hard to pin down; the mathematician and father of information theory, Claude Shannon, declared meaning irrelevant to the engineering problem of information technology, and Borges (2000) questions it in his 'Library of Babel' too, "I know an uncouth region, whose librarians repudiate the vain and superstitious custom of finding a meaning in books."

"He that desires to print a book should much more desire to be a book" (John Donne 1621- 31). Is it about the embodiment of information to ensure meaning and, therefore, comprehension and engagement? Maybe I am trying to connect bones and bits so that the bones become a physical nudge to our existence, reconnecting us to our bodies, encountering and understanding the world not just filtered through bits, but also in a more directly bodily experience.

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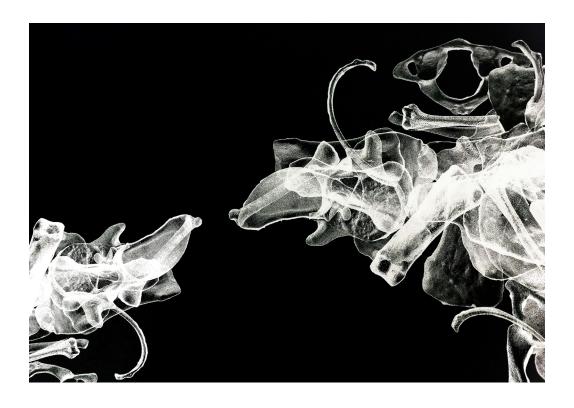
IMAGE GALLERY

Figure 1: Greater Knapweed
Figure 2: How Much Distance

Figure 3: The Mind has Mountains
Figure 4: Signs

Figure 5: Seven Pillars of Wisdom