

**A Record:**

**An Exploration in the Visual Translation of the Act of Thinking**

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## Introduction

Recently, I found myself cautiously sipping on an unidentifiable neon green liquid while sitting on a plastic chair in the guest room of a man who regularly gets possessed by the divine. He is telling us about his experience as a young person participating in a dangerous ritual, part of which included him walking out to the middle of a violent river and staying there all night, to see if he was fit to become the village's newest shaman. At least once a week, he starts shaking in an incense filled room, eventually losing all sense of consciousness, and begins speaking as a goddess.

Shamanism is a very traditional and exclusive way of experiencing an altered state of consciousness; however, there are many other practices and situations that can alter one's state of being, including art making. What intrigues me is how these states of consciousness are typically so internal that someone looking on may have no idea that anything is different from the norm. How might I visualize what goes on under the surface of the mind and bring it into the physical world? How can inner thoughts and invisible processes manifest themselves within a visual field?

The study of altered states of consciousness is a field historically filled with uncertainty, illegal substances, and avant-garde perspectives in the world of academia, yet these facts are of no importance to my pursuit. Instead, what drives me to investigate this idea of altered states of consciousness is its universality as an experience and its ability to bring people to a greater understanding of themselves. This paper will explore how states of consciousness might be visualized within the context of a contemporary art practice.

Through fibers, painting, and printmaking, I will explore how the contents of the mind might manifest themselves within visual space. To translate thought into the visual field, I will use text,

image, and my process of free visualization. These interpretations of thought will culminate in a series of prints on fabric created using screen printing, monotype, drawing, collage, and painting. These final works will encourage the dissection of symbols and text that stand as visual records of consciousness and the process of thinking.

## **Contextual Discussion**

### ***Approaches to Altered States of Consciousness***

Our minds are capable of experiencing many different states of consciousness from waking state to dream state, substance to thought induced states, and there are countless ways to approach studying these. However, there are three approaches to thinking about and understanding these altered states that are relevant to this project and its development.

I first entered the study of consciousness through the observation of shamanism, a ritualistic, religious practice. Through the spiritual approach, it is believed that one can experience heightened states of being through things like prayer, meditation, or allowing the gods to possess you.

In the psychoanalytic approach, one can find a greater state of being through understanding the mind and its processes. The unconscious mind is defined as “the complex of mental activities within an individual that proceed without his awareness,” and this is what drives psychoanalytic study<sup>1</sup>. In psychoanalysis, it is believed that uncovering the unconscious mind is the way to truly understand the psyche. In order to tap into this abstract mental space, Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, communicated with a patient’s unconscious

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<sup>1</sup> The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. “Unconscious.” Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., December 27, 2017. <https://www.britannica.com/science/unconscious>.

through free association. During this psychological practice, he prompted patients to, without thinking, speak whatever came to mind as it came.<sup>2</sup>

One more approach to understanding consciousness is through art making. Intuitive practices like mark-making have the ability to record feeling, thought, and action. From paint strokes to scribbling, making without thinking is a way to connect with both unconscious and conscious mental processes.

### ***An Introduction to Free Visualization***

Built from the theories of psychoanalysis, including Freud's free association, and from the practice of intuitive art making, free visualization is defined as unconscious visual communication. Christopher Bollas, a contemporary psychoanalyst, describes in his book, *The Evocative Object World*, an expansion and redefinition of Freud's free association which he calls "free talking." He describes this as a type of verbal unconscious communication between the analyst and a patient. Within these sessions, the analyst must let go of their conscious mind in order to "catch the drift" of the other person's unconscious, aiming for a state of "evenly suspended attention" in order to avoid analyzing during this unconscious understanding.<sup>3</sup>

Upon reading this book, I began to use Bollas' and Freud's ideas to theorize ways in which intuitive art making could be used as a system to record psychoanalytic processes like free talking. Free visualization is now a tool in which I can take the abstract content of a mind and put it into visual space through the physicality of mark-making and the altering of consciousness.

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<sup>2</sup> VandenBos, Gary R., ed. *APA Dictionary of Psychology*. Washington: American Psychological Association, 2015. Accessed April 20, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>3</sup> Bollas, Christopher. *The Evocative Object World*. London; New York: Routledge, 2009.

*Visual records of consciousness, through daily life and art*

In addition to the structure of free visualization practice, a process that bridges art making and patient and analyst free talking sessions, there are many less structured ways that we record consciousness on a daily basis. Many people record their thoughts simply through a quickly written note or an addition to a grocery list. In a similar fashion, the painter Basquiat used his notebooks to record trains of thought and jot down quick notes, like lists of tasks, times, and lists of people's names.<sup>4</sup> In Figure 1, Basquiat seems to have ripped out a page of his notebook which has been covered in seemingly unrelated words and arrows which give the impression of moving from one idea to the next as the eye moves around the page.

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<sup>4</sup> Basquiat, Jean-Michel, Larry Warsh, and Demosthenes Davvetas. Jean-Michel Basquiat: The Notebooks. 1st ed. New York: Art + Knowledge, 1993.

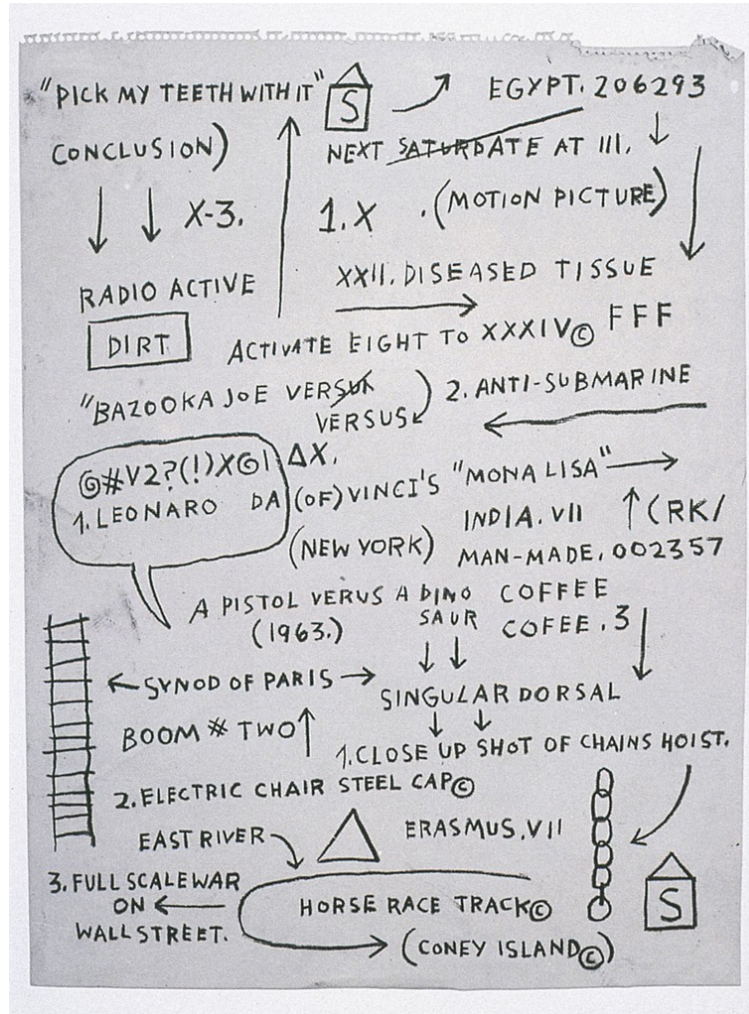


Figure 1: Basquiat, Jean Michel. 1983. Untitled (Coney Island). [https://library-artstor-org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/asset/ARTSTOR\\_103\\_41822003762109](https://library-artstor-org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/asset/ARTSTOR_103_41822003762109).

As Basquiat shows, we also have the ability to record not just thoughts, but the thinking process itself. Basquiat's notebooks included a lot of the act of thinking, as seen in his strange combinations of words, reminiscent of free association, and his crossed-out mess-ups. In Figure 1, the arrows scattered about the page give the impression of moving from one idea to the next as the eye moves across the page. Often, his mark making, specifically the lines on the right side of Figure 2 show a disconnect from the act of art making in their nonsensical, intuitive placement,

instead revealing a focus on recording the mind's contents. His notebooks contain a mix of everyday records of conscious thinking, unconscious doodling and writing, and free writing exercises, all of which not only visually record thought, but the process that is thinking.

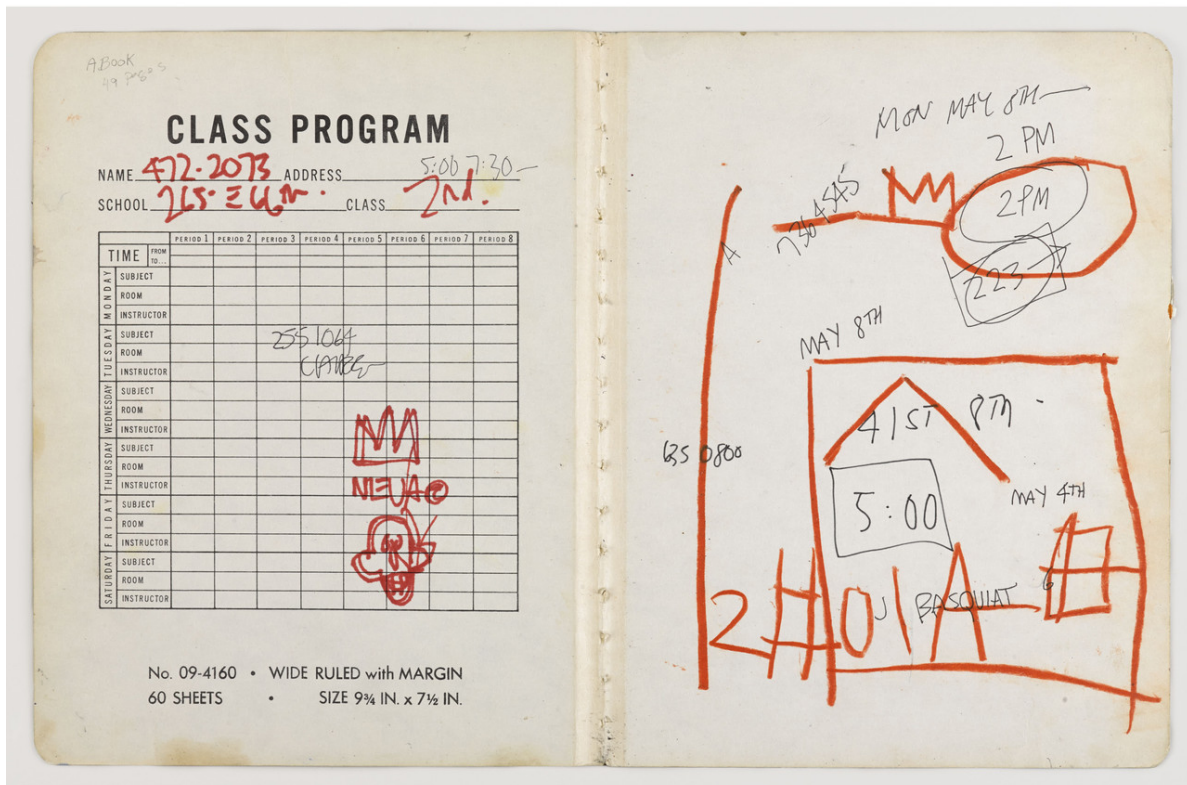


Figure 2: Basquiat, Jean-Michel, Larry Warsh, and Demosthenes Davvetas. Jean-Michel Basquiat: The Notebooks. 1st ed. New York: Art + Knowledge, 1993.

What is even more interesting is recording not only thoughts or the act of thinking, but humanness that coexists with thinking. An example of this humanness is visible in actions like the hand's ability to hold a tool to record the action that an arm takes as the mind gets startled. This idea is very visible in works by abstract expressionist painters where the artist uses their tools to record feeling, thought, and the body as it experiences this state of consciousness. For

example, Joan Mitchell's paintings, such as the one pictured in Figure 3, show a connection between her mind, her body, and her tools. As the viewer, we can feel our way through the emotion of the work and the physical, intuitive response that the body had to that emotion during its moment of creation. Choices of color, areas of contrast, and places of overpowering marks reflect Mitchell's state of being in that moment, all with the ability to carry the feeling and immediacy in which they were made under.



Figure 3: Joan Mitchell. 1992. Untitled. Paintings. [https://library-artstor-org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/asset/LARRY\\_QUALLS\\_10311783618](https://library-artstor-org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/asset/LARRY_QUALLS_10311783618).

In addition to recording the mind and body, we tend to record things that cause us to react with our minds or bodies. What we see on a daily basis has direct effects on the contents of our mind and consciousness. Media like movies, books, or the internet hold a strong place within our



mental space alongside the places we occupy and the objects we use and see. There are many artists that work with popular culture imagery, but what I am really interested in is where the input of stimuli and the trace of the effects on state of consciousness are recorded together. In Figures 4 and 5, the painter Cy Twombly not only records thought, thinking, and the body, but he also engraves lines of famous poets and statistical graphs into his canvases. He records both the stimuli and the reaction. How might I go about recording both the stimuli and the effects that they have on my thoughts, process of thinking, and my state of being? How can I use all of these types of visual records to create a true impression of the mind in its states of being?



Figure 4: Tate. "Quattro Stagioni: Estate', Cy Twombly, 1993–5." Tate. Accessed April 20, 2020. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/twombly-quattro-stagioni-estate-t07888>.



Figure 5: Cy Twombly. 1969. Untitled (Bolsena). Paintings. [https://library-artstor-org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/asset/LARRY QUALLS 1039905536](https://library-artstor-org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/asset/LARRY_QUALLS_1039905536).

## Methodology

Free visualization began as the driving force for the development of this project and I think it holds some answers to visual translation in its ability to record reaction in response to very specific stimuli. Monotype prints, using the simple tools of paper and ink, became my way of recording my free visualization exercises. Using this method to visually record, I am able to draw blindly with a variety of non-marking tools on the back of paper, so that I am not tempted to immediately look at or analyze my marks. After marking using intuitive gestures, recording

quick thoughts, or thinking through an idea, I am able to lift up the paper and reveal a visual record of thoughts, the act of thinking, and the act of the body in its state of being. When wanting to record both the thought and the stimuli, I start the marking of paper while ruminating on a specific idea, image, or thought. In Figure 6, for example, I made this work while thinking about how big of an undertaking this project is, which came through in my depictions of mountains reaching tall toward circles like tasks ready to be checked off. Through free visualization with and without specific stimuli, I found common themes, ideas, interesting contradictions, words, and repeated imagery within the works that I created as seen in Figure 6. This process of recording my thoughts allowed me to create a new visual language taken directly from internal processes which I was able to use in my final work to more clearly and accurately depict states of consciousness.



Figure 6: still from GIF of an untitled work: digital translation of a work consisting of monotype, transfers of photoshop files and monotypes, screen print on paper and plastic sheeting.

Later on during this project, I began the process of gathering records of thought. Not only did I gather all of the free visualization monotypes that I had created, but I also gathered pieces of my freewriting, the notes on my cell phone, some of my older artwork, the books I was reading, my emails, the photos I saved to the cloud, and the post-it notes I make to remind myself of tasks. I gathered all of these records of thought, thinking, and being in order to pull from a wider range of conscious states and stimuli. It was through doing this that I realized that structured recording exercises like free visualization and free writing were just as important to understanding states of consciousness as the small records we leave behind on a daily basis and the seemingly unimportant stimuli that affect us from all angles of our lives. This gathering of information played an important part in the visual effects of my final work, as seen in these visual remnants of an email in Figure 7.

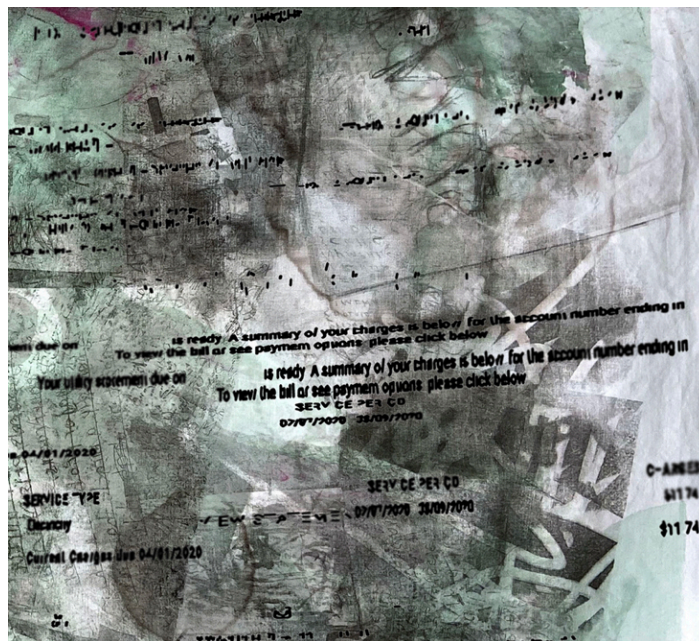


Figure 7: detail of an untitled work: screen print; monotype; transfers of monotypes, drawings, photographs, paintings, and Google Image results; digital collage; and screenshots on bedsheet.

Lastly, iterating and revising took an important role toward the end of the development of this project. Within the constraints of the international effects on both daily life and the art world caused by the Covid-19 pandemic happening towards the end of the development of this project, the works needed to be shifted to output in the digital sphere rather than the physical one. This necessary shift creates an interesting conversation between means of recording and experiencing consciousness within our current navigation of the online world. The biggest challenge of this project was translation. How do I translate complex internal processes caused by external stimuli into a single visual, physical experience? Then, through iteration, the question changed to how can I translate these complexities that now exist in the physical world into a two-dimensional, screen based, online platform? What was originally a problem that dealt strongly with the physical world, eventually evolved to become a question of physicality within a digital one.

## Creative Work



Figure 8: untitled: screen print; monotype; transfers of monotypes, drawings, photographs, paintings, and Google Image results; digital collage; and screenshots on bedsheet.

Bombarded by mark and image, the viewer sees a singular moment of consciousness illuminated on their screen. A second later, another pops up. Still images can be viewed in addition to these moving ones, giving a slower more intimate experience of reading words, noticing images, and trying to peak through layers and layers of information, as in Figure 8.



Figure 9: still from GIF of an untitled work: screen print; monotype; transfers of monotypes, drawings, photographs, paintings, and Google Image results; digital collage; and screenshots on bedsheet.

Some moving images sweep closely over the surface of a single work, acting as a sort of moving detail shot, as seen in Figure 9. Each work is tied together through a common language in materials, color, and visual markings, with each image on the webpage acting as a separate translation of consciousness from mind to the physical-visual field and lastly to the digital on screen. Throughout these translations, the works have maintained a feeling of chaos, calmed only by larger planes of rest and moments of slow movement.

GIFs act as a way to simulate the constant movement of thought and the processes of the mind. It reenacts the viewing experience of looking, being able to really focus on only a small area at once. Just as the images shift, the mind keeps moving and consciousness changes. In this way, a GIF is similar to psychoanalytic ways of understanding consciousness, like the constant mental shifting that occurs within free association or the way that the mind is able to catch the drift of the moving image as it moves from idea to idea.

Through materiality and language, these visual snapshots of thought are connected. Repeated words, symbols, colors, and silk screen prints act as connectors between the ever-changing rush. Layers upon layers of recorded thought, thinking, being, and stimuli fight to be seen. Some succeed and push to the forefront, while some fade behind. However, all is there. All of these things exist within this one plane at this single time.

## **Conclusion**

When attempting to record a moment of thought, I cannot help but think about how much of the mindscape I am missing. Within the visual field, the mind does not accurately translate. However, I have felt that it does give the mind a forum to leave its trace and to record what it needs to say before it moves on. The more pressing things come to realization as marks on a page, not necessarily those ideas or feelings that are the most important or insightful, but rather those that are felt the strongest at the time, whether that be something as intense as anger or something more akin to boredom.

As I began to record my mind in all of its traces, I found patterns in symbols and thought. But what I think is most remarkable here is that my mind found its own visual language, which it constructed as I recorded more and more. In a way, my mind's creation of a visual language



seems related to the personalities of the gods and goddesses that come to embody shamans regularly, since both are set modes of communication. The way in which the works presented in this paper are layered, written, colored, and marked have become characteristic of my mind's way of understanding itself. The additional translation from the physical onto the digital screen offered a new way of both recording thought and stimuli along with finding the closest method thus far for representing the intense movement and bombardment that is internal thought.

Perhaps, there is another approach to altered states of consciousness to consider. Being so similar to a computer in its processes and movements, the mind may be better studied through the lens of technology rather than spirituality, psychoanalysis, or intuitive art making, although these processes still have their importance. As I continue to explore the visualization of internal thoughts and processes, I think my next artistic method of translation will be one of purely technology-based visual output.

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