

Preserving The Past In The Present Time Travel Fortune Teller

Shane Huffman interviewed by LeRoy Stevens and students from the Spatial Analogies class.

*The following interview took place at the Estonian Academy of Arts on November 22, 2011 through a live video feed projected in the classroom.

Kärt: What is the camera doing? Is it filming us?

LS: The camera is filming across the room to record our voices as well as the image of Shane projected onto the screen.

Kärt: How old is he?

LS: I think he's 33.

LS: Hi Shane. We can't see you. Can you see us?

SH: Hey, do you want me to hang up and try again?

LS: Yeah, lets try again.

SH: Can you see me?

LS: No, I can't see you.

SH: I can see the class. Hello.

Class: Hi. Hello.

LS: I wonder if because I'm plugged into the projector it disrupts the video function...

SH: Can you see me?

LS: No we can't.

Norm: Maybe it's because it's so early in Chicago. It's still dark.

LS: Maybe try one more time.

SH: Can you see me?

LS: What do you think. Should we just start? We can't see you, but we can hear you and you can see us –so maybe that's ok.



LS: We've looked at images of your work in class and discussed concepts brought up in Jonathan Miller's text, *A Stroke of Moonlight*. Everyone is relatively familiar with your work and they have some questions for you. But first, I thought I would start by asking: how do you define photography? A lot of your photographs are made without a camera. There is obviously a precedent in this way of working, but it's kind of different from how most think about photography.

SH: I went to school for photography and graduate school for photography. While in school I started questioning what the hell it was about photography that I was even interested in, and what the medium even was. I came to the realization that my understanding of photography's medium is light, space-time and movement. That's what photography and the photograph as a surface can record. You don't need a camera to record light, space-time or movement because light is inherent to what photography records and if you use silver gelatin photo paper or film, that has a direct relationship to the actual light. Not that it's better, but there is a difference between that and the way chips in the camera record and interpret light. That's how I define and approach photography.

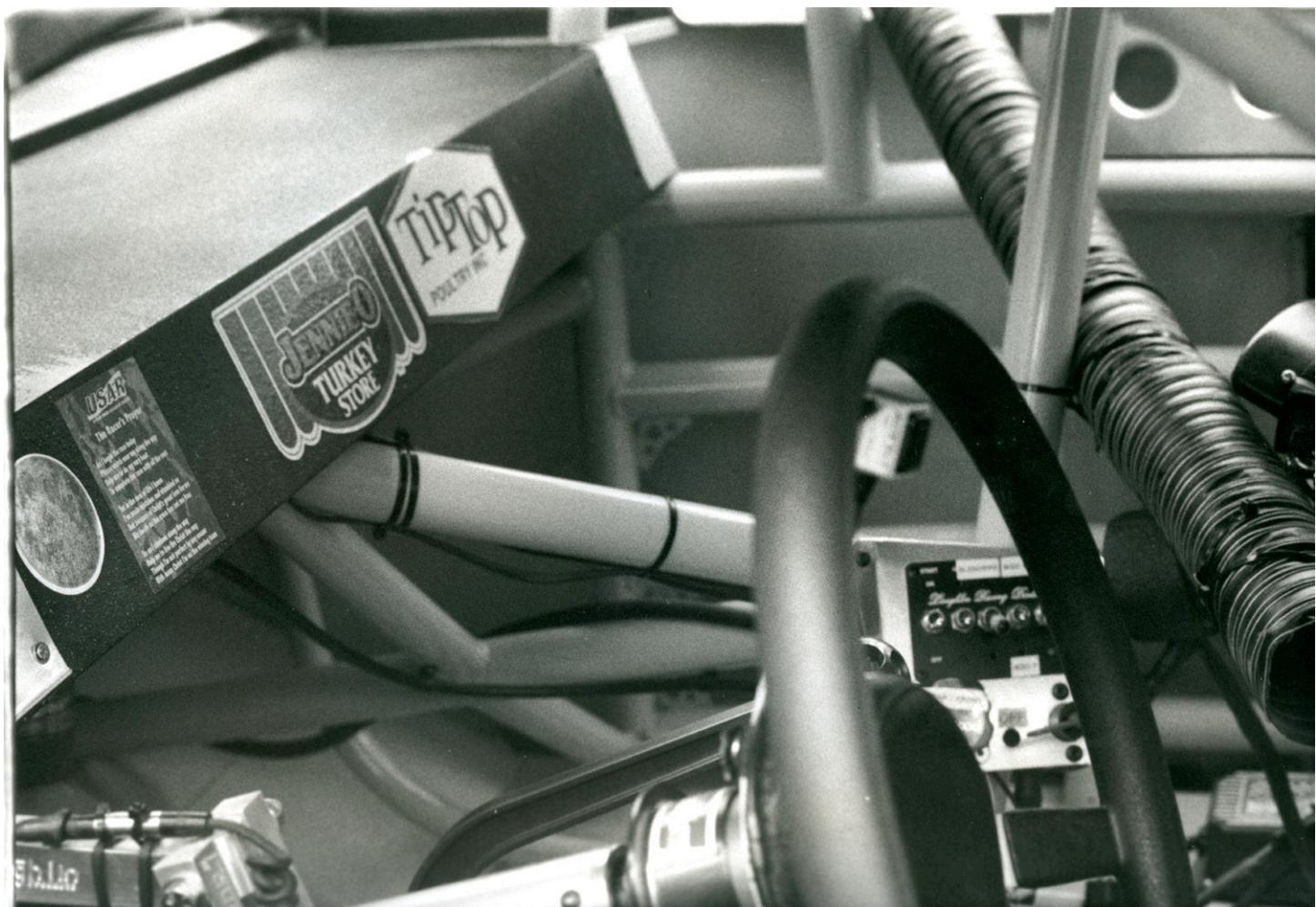
LS: Through your definition of photography, do you find you're able to translate concepts into different forms that are not photographic?

SH: Light, space-time, and movement can be loosely translated into a lot of different mediums. You make use of light when painting. When you look at Monet's haystacks - the impressionists were all about light. You can think about James Turrell and his use of light. Lots of other artists use space-time. Space-time is an event. Performance. People that use video or movement. You need space-time understanding to register an event.

LS: Recently you have used motor oil and menstrual blood in your work, materials that embody time and cycles. Your Nascar project too, where a moon decal was attached to the side of a car during a race. The driver also happened to have the same name as you. You seem to be transferring ideas from photography and finding meaningful forms in other things.

SH: I think it incumbent upon the artist to have an idea - or a process in their head - or an image they're thinking of. You try to find the right or most efficient way to create that. You may rely on the significance of whatever material you're using. If you're using motor oil, if you're using menstrual blood, or using a sticker to stick on a Nascar. What is the significance that goes along with these materials that we're using? What are their specific historic or cultural understandings?

I always felt bad about the project with the Nascar guy. His engine blew during the race. We didn't talk afterwards and I felt like maybe the moon had fucked up the car.



LS: You've recently collaborated with scientists at the University of Chicago. I showed the class images of your microwave photographs. With this work you're recording electromagnetic waves in the paper by cooking them in a microwave oven. What goes on in the machine is somehow translated into the paper. It's a nice surprise - it looks color - black and white paper that has these colored circular forms. If I remember right, you're doing a similar project at the University now with a specialist.

SH: The gentleman who runs the electron microscopy laboratory at the University of Chicago has a microwave that can pinpoint where you want the microwaves to interact on the paper. He's helping me image some works with his electron microscope from testicles, ovaries and seeds from a Moonflower.

LS: So you have an existing image that is then translated through the machine, into the waves and onto the paper?

SH: No, he's going to be taking an actual scraping from testicles, from an ovary and then from the seed of a Moonflower, and will be producing microscopic images at 2 to 3000 times magnification. I know your class is about spatial analogies, whatever the unit of measurement is... it doesn't matter, it's just zooming in.

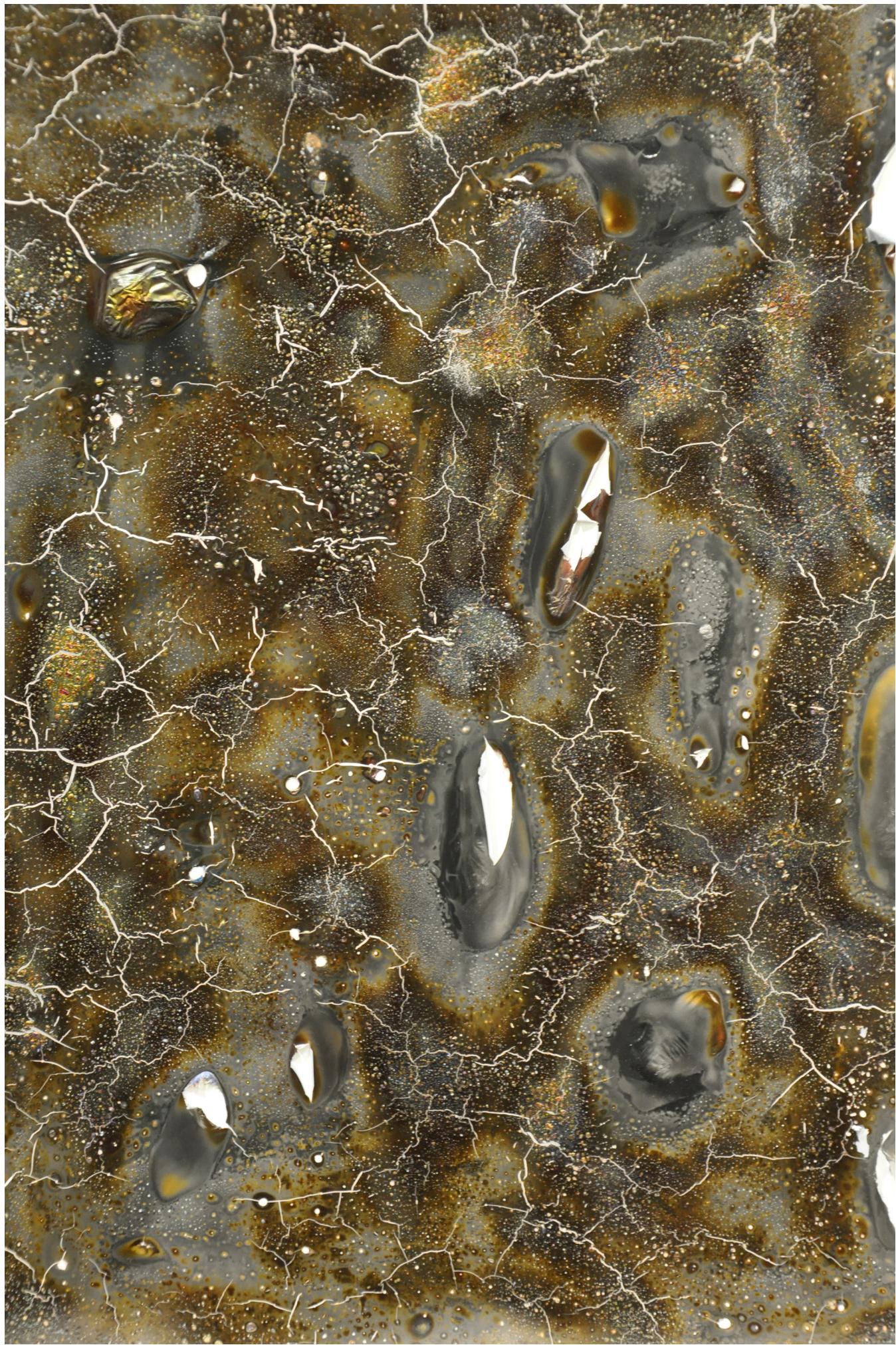
Science is interesting for me to look at and I've always had an interest in it. I'm a big skeptic - about everything. I think I love science because that's where imagination is right now. There's incredible imagination to come up with such theories and ideas for what these theoretical physicists are postulating. When I was in graduate school, what struck me and stayed with me for a long time was in 1989 there was a woman working at UC Berkley, in California. She was looking at photographs of Neptune and from the photographs of the planet she could see that the planet was blue. She came up with this idea: why was Neptune, which is the furthest planet in our solar system, this violent, gaseous planet. How does it have the most ferocious wind speeds of 1,200 km/p/s? She thought, wait a minute - if the planet is blue there's methane there. If there's methane there, then under extreme pressure the methane will break up and carbon will clump together. Under very, very extreme pressure, i.e. the surface winds that are there, the carbon will clump together to form giant diamonds and these giant diamonds will then rain to the center of the planet. Along their decent they will fall and rub, causing great friction and heat that would generate surface winds and heat the whole planet. The text is titled Neptune is the Planet that Rains Diamonds. I think for me that was really poetic and really beautiful, but founded in what she understood and how she understood it. There's an incredible imagination to come up with ways of understanding the world.

I'm reading a book now that's talking about Einstein when he was developing his general theory of relativity. He was really clunky with his geometry and clunky with his mathematics but he had the ideas. Someone asked him, "How did you work through this?" He made his way through the theory while talking about it but said, "You need imagination more than you need knowledge." As an artist, that was nice to read.

LS: We were talking once about the value in misunderstanding a text. It's not that you have to completely understand someone else's theories, but from it you take what you need. I suppose that's linked to imagination, too?

SH: I don't think it's really important all the time to understand what your author is trying to tell you. It depends on how you're using or approaching it. I think it's far better to misunderstand what someone is trying to say.

LS: Because ultimately you're making it up yourself?



SH: Absolutely, because that's where imagination happens and that's where you're starting to think for yourself and you're not just eating what someone has told you. When you go out into the world you regurgitate someone else's philosophy. You've ingested it somewhat. It's entered into your body and then when you go out - you throw up, you know, speak. There has been a transmutational process where things have entered your body, you've changed it, and then you've made something part of your own. It's the same with food. ...and then you shit it out.

LS: Is that the art-making process? The shitting out?

SH: Yeah. But you know, we're asked to read a lot of things, and sometimes you think they're actually bullshit. You think they're way too boring, theoretical or whatever. But you do glean something from these texts. It may be just one phrase where you're like, holy shit, he just said in this text that was talking about unicorns over the bridge on the River Kwai, and you say, wow I never thought of that. Maybe you put it together and come up with some reason to use that as an image when they were thinking of it completely metaphorically, but you're not. You take something from them and use it how you want to. You can bastardize it and that's ok too. Because if all we were doing is reading other people's science, philosophy and cultural theory, and in the end we added nothing to it, then we don't have any ideas for ourselves and we're not doing any thinking. And that would be a pretty bad thing.

Joonas: I wanted to ask about your webpage. The work is presented without any description. You just have the measurements of the work, the title and the year. Basically, you're just giving the end result, and not the process of making or any description of how it got made. Are you deliberately doing that?

SH: Do you think that's a bad thing?

Joonas: I'm just asking because I think it's interesting.

SH: The use of the website is actually just a way for me - when I talk to people, they say I'd love to see some work and I may be across the country and I don't have anything on me I can say, take a look at this site and I can show you the work this way. There's no description; they just become visual references to someone I've talked to. The process is important in a lot of the works. Maybe I should reconsider and add some descriptions to the site...

Ultimately when you go to a gallery or to a museum, you don't really have a description of the work. The weird thing about contemporary art is that you end up finding out these stories or information if you want to. Meaning if you go to the gallery and you don't know someone was interested in Goethe's color theory, and you're looking at this work that is just these color fields, you read it one way. Maybe as you're leaving, or the next day, someone tells you that so-and-so was really into Goethe's color theory. And you're like, I don't know what the fuck Goethe's color theory was. So then you look it up. And when you go back you might see the work completely differently, but you have an immediate response with just the presence of the work first. No matter how much you understand going into it, or how much you understand when you leave, you have your immediate reaction - your response to the work. When it's on the website it's just a virtual image; you don't have a direct relationship with it. But I don't know... maybe that's a long answer to why I don't have any descriptions of the processes.

Do you think I should?

Joonas: It's just that the only way to find out about the works was to Google. Then it's almost like

detective work where you find clues and then look at the works. Like you said, it's different after you know the process behind it.

SH: That's a really good question. I'll consider adding some supportive text.

LS: Who else has a question? Shane, how are you doing with time by the way?

SH: I have a few minutes yet.

Ben: With your project *Swimming to give myself a heart attack to stop the moon's recession (piece/project)*, did you tie the two together instantly [swimming and the moon] or did you have other ideas for stopping the moon from going away?

SH: I never thought of anything other than swimming to give myself a heart attack to stop the moon's recession. When I began to work on those, it was very personal and emotional from a relationship and then it spurred into what the project was.

On January 9, 1999, I began swimming to the moon. I completed one version in 30 days by allowing yards to equal miles, which was a nod to *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift, where he allowed yards to equal miles.

The moon is slipping away at the rate of 3" a year - so we actually add leap seconds to our years. It's very slowly getting out of orbit and it's leaving us... The moon became an object for something that I desire and we always keep the things that we desire out of reach. Once we own it, once we possess it, we no longer want it. I'm still continuing to swim and I'll never get there.

I was also really obsessed with the idea of people dying while swimming. I looked at all these people that had died from heart attacks while swimming or survived from heart attacks. I thought of swimming to the moon. I thought if I die, then the moon would stop receding from here. If I could give myself a heart attack, then I can somehow stop it.

Kärt: How far did you come to an actual heart attack?

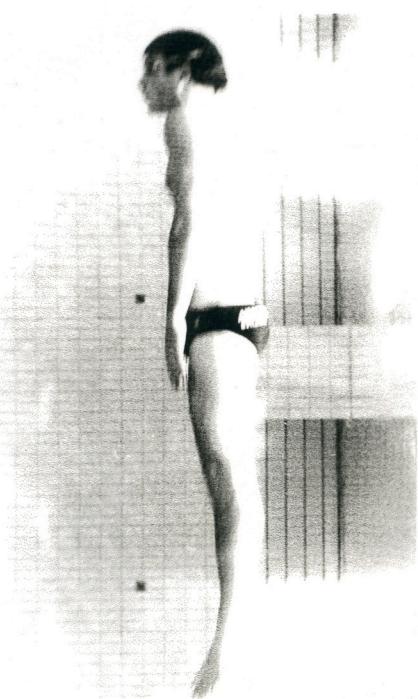
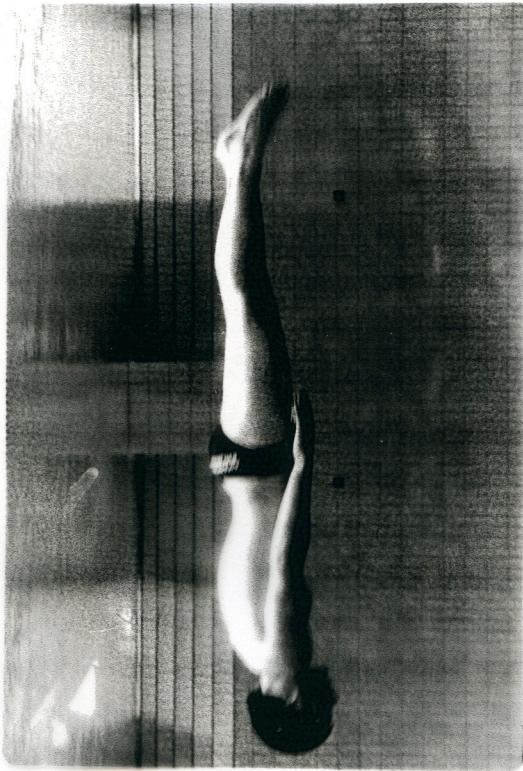
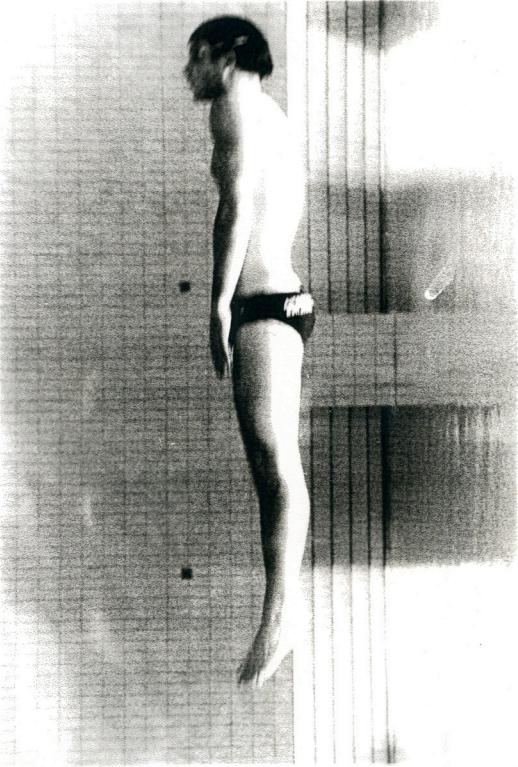
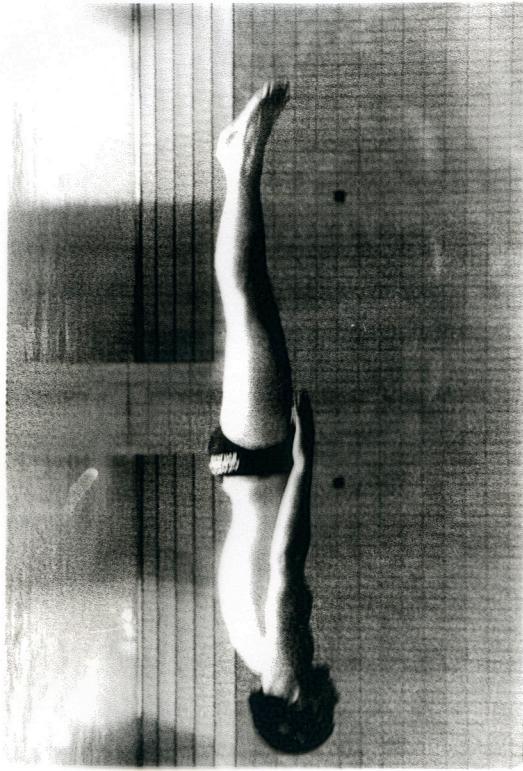
SH: I don't know how close I got.

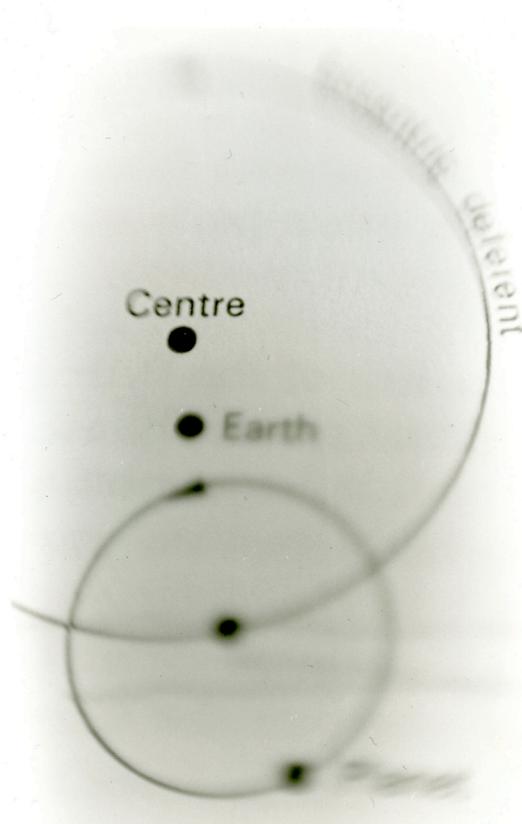
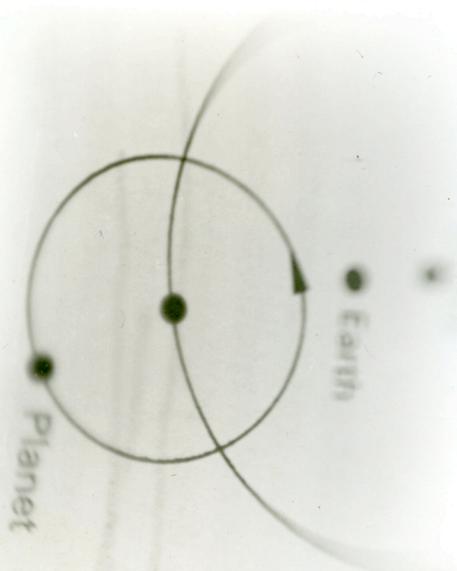
LS: Did you keep track of your heart rate?

SH: No, I just swam my balls off and held my breath for as long as possible - to really get uncomfortable, as much as I could take. I didn't know if I could actually have a heart attack. I was in pretty good shape. Anyway, by that point it became more about the conceptual idea and I'm very grateful that I didn't have a heart attack and die.

LS: I never thought about this project in terms of relationships - the heart representing your love for someone or something.

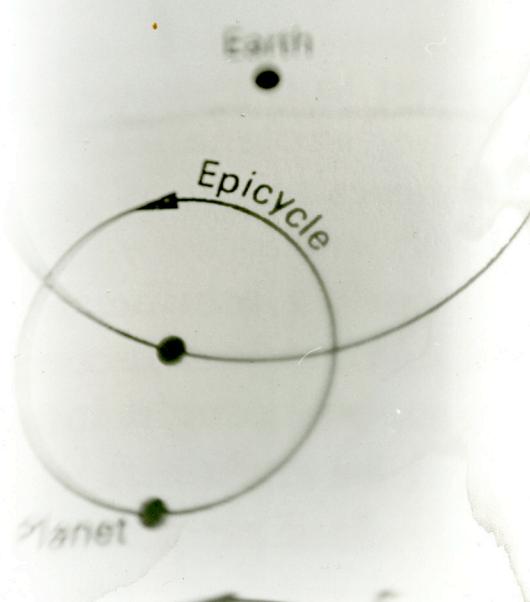
SH: I think there's a distinct difference between the heart inside your body and your heart - the real heart, whatever your real heart is. During that time period I really made a distinction between the heart inside the body and my real heart as two different things.





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Swimming to the moon, again and again



Ben: You said that in stopping your heart from beating, you could stop the moon from going away. But by doing physical activity your heartbeat would increase; in which case, after beating more, the movement of the moon would in a sense accelerate.

SH: I didn't equate the number of heartbeats to how far that's pushing away the moon. But you're right. It definitely sped up.

The longing in your heart for something can actually keep something elusive in a way - keep it at an arm's distance from you. So if I stop my heartbeat, then the moon would also stop being just out of reach. Therefore, attaining what you want.

LS: You often use athletics in your work, but rather than tapping into the visual aesthetics of sports, team colors for example, your work seems to focus on the mental-state of the athlete. Does this sound accurate?

SH: 100%. A lot of times artists grow up and they're like, fuck jocks, fuck sports. I always tell students that I think they should watch sports. Sports are great because if you're an artist, you want to perform at your top level when you're asked to, but you need to have practice, over and over again in your studio. You have to be self-disciplined, self-motivated and ultimately you want to be in the All-Star game or in the Hall of Fame, which the art analogy for that is you want to be in the museums. You want to make good work that is recognized. To me, there is a sports analogy. In regard to competitive spirit, the art-world is very fucking competitive.

LS: You have said before that an artist should approach projects with highest possibility of failure. Is that right?

SH: Those are the last two laws of my 22 Top Laws of Swimming.

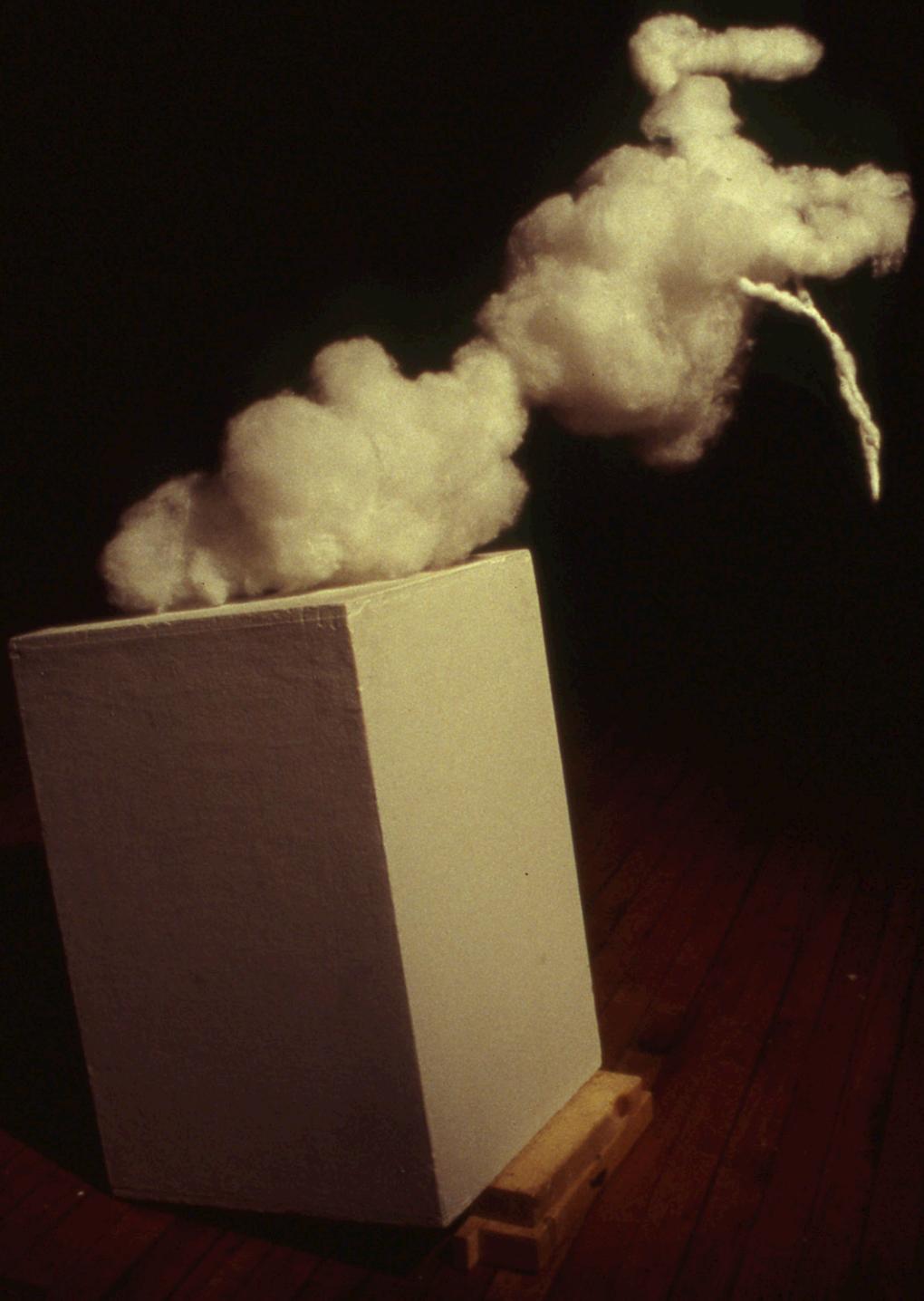
LS: Can you describe the 22 Tops Laws?

SH: It's this text piece where I came up with 22 top laws of swimming. They have everything to do and nothing to do with swimming. The first law is hard work beats talent if talent doesn't work hard. Other laws include make stream line your middle name and the fastest you'll ever go is off the block or pushing off the wall. The ones about failure are you should set your goals with the highest potential for failure - and then visualize yourself attaining your goal. That one for me, to always set your goals with the highest potential for failure, that's the whole reason I became an artist. Being an artist has a great possibility of failure. Hey, it's working right now.

Carl Sandberg said, "You gotta dream big, you gotta fail big. If you're not willing to fail big, then you're not willing to win big." My uncle gambles a lot and says, "Shane, you're not gonna win a lot of money if you don't bet a lot of money." If you keep betting \$5, \$10, \$20, then you're only going to win \$5, \$10, \$20. If you're going to gamble, gamble.

Kärt: Where did your obsession with the moon come from?

SH: I was born under a full moon and became a competitive swimmer at the age of five. There wasn't much competition at five, I pretty much got smoked. But at an early age, I connected the two. Being born under a full moon was something my mother told me and I became fascinated with the moon. Especially when she told me the story about how I was born. She had felt no pain during the pregnancy and



when she went into the hospital because I was late the Dr. said, "You haven't felt pain, but now you're going to feel pain," and he broke her water. It was really intense hearing my mother tell me that story. The flow of the water and knowing I was born under a full moon and all of the other connections that the moon has with mythology, with women, with cycles, life and death. I don't want to say I'm obsessed, but I'm very intrigued.

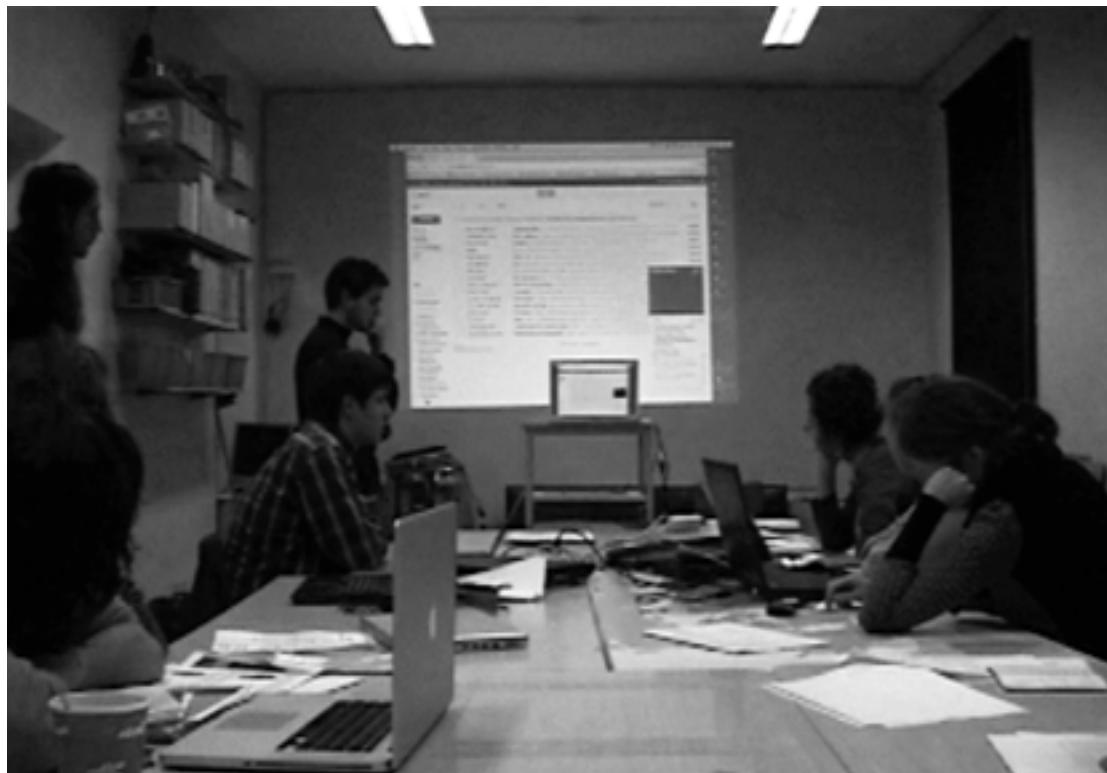
Kärt: Can you talk about your Challenger sculptures and why you remake them every five years?

SH: I remake them because each sculpture is destroyed. None of the sculptures remain after they're made. Each one, for me, stands as a memorial of this space-time event (the 1986 Challenger disaster) that happened and it's not around anymore. I think it's too heavy to actually keep it in a solid form.

LS: That's really a nice way to think about a monument, which is typically fixed, but could be something temporary.

SH: That moment was so fleeting. Sometimes art seems like the wrong way to memorialize anything. Therefore, maybe it should be quick and not set in stone. Right now, I can't think of the Challenger explosion sculpture becoming something fixed. I'm not opposed to it, but I like that the sculptures go away and just exist as photographs.

I want to produce an opera that's based on the Challenger explosion, where the libretto will be written from the transcripts from the black box that recorded the astronaut's ascent and descent.



Images:

Iron Man, 2010, digital print, 36 x 40 in.

Wanna be part of the human race, 2003, silver gelatin prints, 11 x 14 in.

I'm not an Alchemist but I do work in metals, 2011, silver gelatin print, 24 x 48 in.

Swimming to give myself a heart attack to stop the moon's recession (piece/project), 1999, silver gelatin print, 8 x 10 in.

Swimming to give myself a heart attack to stop the moon's recession (piece/project), 1999, silver gelatin print, 8 x 10 in.

Again and Again, 2007, fiberglass, bondo, stretchwrap, 110 x 6 x 7 in.

Challenger, 2002, pillow-stuffing, 56 x 17 x 24 in.

Video still from interview, 2011.

Thanks to Shane Huffman and the Spatial Analogies class at the Estonian Academy of Arts, 2011.