



FINLEY + MUSE:

ALL THAT HAS
EXISTED,

WILL EXIST,

HAS NEVER EXISTED,

AND WILL
NEVER EXIST

AN ESSAY
BY REBECCA ORA



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UPON FIRST VIEWING Finley+Muse's *Falsework*, I was struck by two intertwining elements: the motif of the dancing line and the structure of distractible wandering whereby the film follows multiple trajectories converging within a single site. I find this work difficult to package neatly in words:

A dancing line writhes down the center of the screen, at once playful and aggressive.

Hollow music merges into and emerges from the echoing sounds of metal against metal that reverberate against scaffolding we are told is built not-to-last.

A construction expert discusses the price of the temporary structure, built to protect a pet cemetery established by military families in San Francisco's Presidio from the erection of a more permanent viaduct.

Several military "brats" tell stories of their lives and travels, and of the variably fleeting and lasting importance of this site for them.

This film is not *about* any single element, and does not privilege any character over another, though the site, seemingly remaining constant, visibly changes throughout the film and within the spoken narratives and onscreen text.

Which elements are the primary building blocks of the film, and which are the structural elements erected to uphold, albeit temporarily, the content? Which characters and threads are the "false-work," and which are the "real-work?"

The undulating lines—metal straps called "tell-tales," positioned to track the settling and heaving of the elevated roadbed—dance throughout.

This project is a fertile starting point in that, like much of Finley+Muse's work, it can be framed variably as Cinema and Social Practice, both formally and discursively. This writing will begin to tease out the ways by which Finley+Muse create documentary works that self-consciously use narrative to forge complex relationships. These social relationships exist within the diegetic space, within the theater and the gallery—among characters and viewers and objects¹ alike. We will follow the dancing line that winds through these relationships, alongside the point and the plane, as a visual motif as well as a theoretical model. This line, in its meandering movement, its voracious tactility, its association with the Infinite and its connection to the nomadic will serve as a means by which to navigate this work—albeit erratically.² The notion of hapticity, or tactility, will return as well in our discussion of embodiment, experience and attention in the work of Finley+Muse.



In *Falsework*, as I have described above, the “plot” follows a dancing line. Finley+Muse’s dancing line is distractible, meandering and investigative, focusing on one compelling topic for a time, only to jump to another and then another. It constantly holds and then shifts its attention as a means of propelling us through the film. The line manifests in interstitial moments, when one component bleeds into the next—when the film shifts direction.

The physical presence of the line, which I describe as ‘dancing’ for its lively kineticism, serves both narrative and embodied functions. This line is comparable to Deleuze and Guattari’s “abstract line,” the emblem of “nomad art” that “delimits nothing, describes no contour...is always changing direction.” The abstract line is neither anthropomorphic nor symbolic, but is instead a means of expression free of concrete index in the lived world.³ For Deleuze and Guattari, the line is one of the ways by which the visible can unfold without a figurative image—it is a means of depicting the world in abstraction.⁴

This line is, in the words of Deleuze and Guattari, “A powerful nonorganic life that escapes the strata, cuts across assemblages, and draws an abstract line without contour, a line of nomad art and itinerant metallurgy.”⁵

The line at play:

A woman describes her experience returning to the cemetery where her pet was buried.

“To see the pet cemetery there being preserved and protected, it’s a little bit of...” As her voice trails off, text scrolls across the screen: *It’s a little bit of home*, as the musical score picks up where the sound of her voice has left off, giving way to a man’s voice speaking over an image of a swinging beam:

“I think the city of San Francisco and the different agencies who have cared for this place since have done a great job of maintaining its special status in the community, but nothing will ever really bring back...”

Onscreen text: *Nothing will ever bring back what the families felt and how the Army saw this place.* Almost immediately, a beam swings across the screen and obscures the animated text, as a motor, the sound of industrial work and the contemplative soundtrack drown out the man's voice.

Music, ambient noise, text, voice, image and movement hand off attention from one to the other in a project that not only takes the temporary as its subject matter, but that additionally performs ephemerality in its democratic distribution of attention among cinematic elements, participants, and narrative threads. This is an unstable narrative in which all of these components are equally compelling characters.

Maiza Hixson, in her essay "Temporary Structures," similarly focuses on the role of the fleeting in the work of Finley+Muse. Discussing *Fat Chance*, a film by Finley that was developed in collaboration with Mel Day, Hixson quotes the testimony of a man whose friend's son had drowned on a journey they had taken together, and who has recently viewed footage of his injured ship, washed ashore and filmed by Finley:

"There is one little bit of that film which I found very, very powerful. And that is when the boat begins to move, and the rudder inscribes a little squiggle in the sand. And it's, somehow, the boat coming to life again."

For Hixson, the squiggle is a trace: it is only there to be immediately swept away, a vanquished line existing only to memorialize the loss of the boat and its young passenger before it, too, is washed away. But the squiggle is more than that; like the dancing line, it is a directional force, a vector, the crooked structure of the film itself. The boat, a single point, when activated, forms a squiggled line, which, like the accounts of the characters in *Falsework*, is momentarily activated before succumbing to a different form of existence. The boat, too, is a temporary structure; it is defined and redefined according to Finley's (and our) variable understanding of it as an anomalous disturbance of calm waters, as a failed mobile shelter, as evidence of the mythic "rogue wave," as chance itself, and as an emblem of survival and redemption. As the tracing of the boat's story develops and changes, so does the boat itself. While the



visual language of this film is constant (the boat and the beach fill the screen throughout), as the piece moves forward, the meaning of these elements is not.

In Muse's accounting of *Fat Chance*, he describes the compulsion to find a witness to the tragedy on the boat, despite the possible meaninglessness of the event in question: to begin with the found ship and "*follow the thread through*, even if the center of the piece is empty." He says of several recent projects, "So what? It's a boat, it's a roadside memorial, it's a pet cemetery... These are inconsequential things that nonetheless have an obdurate monumentality. We can't help ourselves." The squiggle is not merely a trace, but a trail emanating from and leading back to the boat, an invited course of action. This compulsion, this directional pull that draws one from point(less) to point(less), yields a socially and narratively complex project.

Since 2011, Muse has maintained several neighborhood cairns. ⁶ He comments that, when building, he is always taken to be doing something notable simply because he is *doing something*. He, too, claims to be compelled, drawn into this project and the urge not to *not perform* this action.



He remarks: "The fact that it has become notable means you cannot stop. A thing inexplicably holds you, and you can't *not* follow it through, even if it's irresponsible or dumb."

These brief nodes, these moments, points, monuments and actions, in themselves, are arguably pointless. These subjects are all incomprehensible if viewed as individual events stripped of their momentum. ⁷ These acts in themselves are insignificant at best, nonexistent at worst. When drawn out through time and arranged in combination, and installed in a context where they might garner attention, however, these are monumental works. Only with duration, repetition, and attention does the point develop directionality; only when it exists in concert with other vectors will these gestures become art and achieve sociality.

One of the most compelling moments in the interactive web component of *Imperfect City/Imperfect State* (2013), which documents (and invites the documentation of) illegal roadside memorials in Delaware, is a mismatched interaction between Muse and a woman who has come upon him photographing a memorial.

The entry titled "Invitation Accepted and Visit Completed III":

When we were photographing this memorial, a woman stopped and asked if we needed assistance. John spoke to her, saying, "No, thanks though. I'm just taking a few photographs."

She then said, "Oh," pausing.

"I'm so sorry for your loss. Can I give you a hug?" John looked at her, briefly worried, and then just said, "Yes." ⁸

According to Muse, this moment posed "a writing problem." What John knew to be the woman's assumption (his personal relationship to the dead), was incorrect, and her offering (contact, comfort, a touch, a hug) was not intended for him. However, had he denied her offer, he would have undoubtedly taken something from her. The interaction becomes an allegory for the piece as a

whole, and the purpose of the performance, which is built (like falsework) alongside the execution of the project itself. In performing as the keepers of the roadside memorials, Finley, Muse, and the volunteers who took up the project's invitation have become the formerly-absent recipients of condolences for the losses marked by the mysterious monuments. In having "found" John, the hugging woman discovers that which he himself is seeking but is unable to find: the source of these memorials and a point of contact. To deny the hug would be to deprive her of this knowledge and the ability to engage with a person affected. This misdirected extension of emotion characterizes this encounter as a vector of discomfort. This project is, like *Fat Chance*, about following a thread, but here the fraying of its edges is more evident. The performance of responsibility for these memorials, the insistence upon their monumentality, and the "appropriateness" of their use as subject matter, are more tenuous, and the compulsion behind the documented encounters with these sites is harder to justify.

One asks: why are these memorials worthy of attention? Why are these sites to be explored? Who is an appropriate subject to execute this exploration?

These questions around selection of subject matter, an idea related to the aforementioned distractible movement, can be examined through the lens of Laura U. Marks' analyses of digital media in *Enfoldment and Infinity*. Marks builds upon Deleuze and Guattari's theory of the *nomad line* in describing art that arrives from a *plane of immanence*, defined as a vast surface composed of an infinite number of folds that house all that has existed, will exist, has never existed, and will never exist. 9 The work of art is created when the smallest units of the plane—the folds—are unfolded and investigated, thereby becoming actual. The socially engaged projects of Finley+Muse, likewise, exist as the combinations of unfolded units that, in concert, constitute the artistic product. The selection of which folds to unfold, then, is our subject of inquiry, as are their combinations and how the viewer travels among them.

In *Language Lessons* (2002) the myth of the fountain of youth unfolds alongside the notion of a universally understood language. Likewise, in



The Napoleon Room (2008), the paths of diverse characters cross, including Napoleon Bonaparte; Jerome Hill, American painter, filmmaker, and founder of the Camargo Foundation, who served in southern France during WWII; Cecily Finley, the artist's mother who was stationed on a Red Cross ship off the coast of Cassis during the Allied invasion of southern France; and Jeanne Finley, a Camargo Foundation resident.

It is of no surprise that the working mode of Finley+Muse, too, is characterized by constant recombination in order to yield different sets of experiences. Jeanne C. Finley and John Muse, while serving as the primary makers in this equation, work in collaboration with multiple co-authors (Pamela Z, Lynne Sachs, Gretchen Stoeltje, Doug Dubois, Finley's family, Mel Day, myriad subjects). Many of their works, too, are modular in that they reincorporate elements used in other projects (*Language Lessons* and *Loss Prevention* both employ identical underwater shooting conventions; *Language Lessons* shares materials with *Voci*; *Spring* and *Catapult* share imagery) and have had multiple life spans in different forms—installation, publication, screening. *Falsework* is a film, an installation, and a social practice project. Like the protagonist in *Manhole 452*, whose fixation upon probability propels him along his daily route, Finley+Muse's practice is one based upon possibility, probability, and chance.

Marks' tethering of the folds along the plane of immanence to different tenses ("all that has existed, will exist, has never existed, and will never exist") is also significant to Finley+Muse's collaborations.¹⁰ In *Falsework*, the action begins during the construction, and ends before it has finished (and before the temporary structure has been dismantled); this film captures not only what is at the moment of filming, but also the future perfect: what will have existed once the project will have been completed. In *Manhole 452* (2011), what was—the flooding of San Francisco and the explosion of a manhole cover—is unfolded alongside what might have been or will never be: the implausible, but not impossible, story of a man who fits prosthetic limbs and now rides the bus. These vectors along the plane are unfolded with equal weight, and converge to make new meanings. This imaginative fiction is treated as equally significant to the information provided by the film about public utilities and the chance occurrence that, though "true" and documented, is unlikely, beyond belief.

Narratives such as those in *Falsework* and *Manhole 452*, in this paradigm of election, are not the juxtapositions of incongruent stories that yield new meaning when experienced in association, which would be an additive process, but are rather the selection of several potential sources of information from a field of infinite possible points of access—a process of distillation of the



Infinite. According to Marks, when attention is turned toward a specific piece of information, all aspects of the Infinite that do not interest us are reduced to “noise”—information that, based on attention directed elsewhere, is deemed irrelevant and distracting (here, a pejorative). “Noise” as a concept, however, is ideological in that it presumes that some information is to be privileged, and that communication can and should be clear and unobstructed.¹¹ It is one of the strengths of Finley+Muse’s work that “noise” is veritably nonexistent, because all unfolded elements along the field are given weight, irrespective of their supposed hierarchies. Breaking down this very notion of the perfect transference of information is the subject of *Language Lessons* (2002), developed in collaboration with Pamela Z, and the implicit message of many of Finley+Muse’s other offerings. In *Language Lessons*, the soundtrack is a space shared by a female voice offering instructions on how to communicate across cultures, a male voice authoritatively telling the story of the search for the fountain of youth, a voice chanting the hiragana, a Japanese syllabary, an accented voice reciting questions from an INS form, and the sound of popping bubbles. Our attention weaves in and out of these elements in turn, often in accordance with the onscreen image; none is simply window-dressing for another.

This articulation of the “real world” through amplified unfoldings from the immensity of lived experience is integral to Finley+Muse’s work not only as art, but also as documentary. I invoke documentary here not simply due to generic parallels to the work of Finley+Muse, but also because documentary, a mode of filmmaking that often constructs narratives from historical events, facts, and artifacts, has a contentious relationship to history, which often masks its narrative tendencies.

On *The Training of a Fragile Memory* (1993), Finley and Mark Alice Durant write: “Narrative is humanity’s basic device for keeping chaos at bay, it is a compromise we make in the attempt to hold our individual and cultural psyches together. But it is the seamlessness of personal and historical narrative that continues to obscure the turbulence and chaos that is at the heart of many events and perhaps at the heart of ourselves.”^{12 13}

Indeed, the display of narrative “seams,” typically denied and smoothed-over in official narrative accounts and much mainstream filmmaking, is a radical intervention into the ways by which events from the past are recounted, preserved and packaged. In deploying the models of democratic unfolding and distractible movement, and in refusing the tools of erasure—including linear continuity, causality and character arcs—Finley+Muse highlight the seams so often rendered invisible, while also providing alternative practices of history.

Their narrative, like the line, is tensile, allowing its components to expand or contract only so long as attention, movement and duration allow. To follow Deleuze and Guattari’s train of thought on the nomadic, “showing the seams” serves not only as a critique of historical narratives’ dubious truth, but also provides an additional site in which one might dwell, albeit temporarily. Nomadic art exists, they claim, within these seams themselves—within the transitions from point to point, and within states of flux.¹⁴ The aim of this work is not the arrival at various points, but rather the travel among them.¹⁵

History thus demystified is not a series of events, but rather a series of intentional transferences of attention, each of which may be loaded with narrative and political agenda. Finley+Muse’s alternative depictions of “real” stories provide nomadic alternatives to official and accepted forms. Like the narrative of *Falsework*, history is not self-evident but is instead a series of unfoldings that often express specific ideological aims through their careful curation and display.

At the Museum: A Pilgrimage of Vanquished Objects (1989) makes the telling of history by the museum, too, transparent. The Oakland Museum’s displays serve as a backdrop against which the narrator leads the viewer through a mythical museum of live objects that announce their paradoxical roles as both artifacts and images. This project divulges the way a museum (and the nonfiction film) tells an always already fabricated and intentional cultural history.

This work, a site-specific tour through pre-existing museum environments, is also a prime example of the ways by which Finley+Muse critically deploy attentiveness as a medium by which to construct narrative, in contradistinction



THE SHIFT IN

ATTENTION,

THUS,



CREATES NEW

MONUMENTS

from histories that format narratives around “points” proven with ideological aims. Attention, as I have tried to show, is, the means by which the folds from the Infinite are realized. Merleau-Ponty theorizes that attention *actually brings an object into being* for perceptual consciousness:

“To pay attention is not merely further to elucidate pre-existing data, it is to bring about a new articulation of them by taking them as *figures*.

They are performed only as horizons, they constitute in reality new regions of the total world.”

Paying attention, then, is the intentional creation of new objects—those which were, until that moment, “presented as no more than an indeterminate horizon.”^{16 17}

In *Imperfect City/Imperfect State*, the roadside memorials, which in Delaware are simultaneously visible and invisible, are created anew and redefined as a social space through the multiple forms of interaction and iterations of the project. In a landscape of unregistered spaces, these are non-places that are perfectly visible, but also invisible because they are not places that have owners (Deleuze and Guattari’s free, undefined smooth space). Like the site of the pet cemetery in *Falsework*, these monuments become sites of convergence of the trajectories of unlikely characters; they are actually brought into existence in this site through our attention to it. As nonspecific places, they belong to no one and everyone; through the act of giving attention, those who participate in and encounter the work become de facto owners, and in their new contexts the monuments no longer behave as anonymous totems. The shift in attention, thus, creates new monuments. The space is defined, redefined, re-undefined. This weaving in and out of public and private, structured and unstructured use intersects with Deleuze and Guattari’s characterization of space as variably striated (prescribed, tempered, disciplined) and smooth (free, sensuous, disorganized).

The immersive installations of Finley+Muse evoke some of the sensuousness, or hapticity, described by Deleuze and Guattari. The gallery installation of *Imperfect City/Imperfect State* projects sound from *behind* the viewer, whose

body is thereby situated in a physically activated space. This was, according to those present, an extremely unsettling experience. Likewise, the wild line in *Falsework* moves in a manner that embodies violence, sadness, playfulness and progression at once. In its aggressive tactility and momentum, as well as its refusal to articulate any single concrete expression, this line immerses the body's attention (and the eye is a part of the body).¹⁸ This is an abstract line that also describes a haptic space.

Haptic space, like the abstract line,¹⁹ is characteristic of nomad art, a concept integral to understanding the slipperiness of Finley+Muse's work as both process and product. The recombinatory working modes and authors, the refusal to settle upon a single presentation or medium, and, within the films' diegeses as well as their installation, the engagement with diverging and converging stories and aesthetic elements, all serve as both artistic and political intervention. While, as I have shown, more recent works are politicized implicitly through their structures, *Involuntary Conversion* (1991) lays these political cards on the table, combining repeating tropes (kinetic onscreen text, disciplinary lessons in language, abstract footage, movement among subjects and cinematic elements), with overt critique of State control. In this film, language is once again at the center, in textual and spoken form, as the film pronounces, defines, and thereby redefines state-sanctioned euphemisms for violence, injustice, the banal and the inexplicable. Words and images slip in and out of authoritative definition, as the "official" term and casual meaning—"an airplane... was involuntarily converted by uncontrolled contact with the ground..." Onscreen text: *it crashed*—wend and wind through one another; the space of the film is one of constant and active deterritorialization.

The engagement with history as an intentional set of events and conclusions, the location of radical freedom hidden within narrative seams, the execution of unpaid useless and meaningless labor, the democratic investigation of the banal on equal terms with the monumental, the refusal of concrete packaging and compartmentalization—these are all components of radically nomadic art-forms evident in the work of Finley+Muse.

NOTES

1 *Flat Land* (2009), which explores the phenomenon of military families exchanging "Flat Daddies" and "Flat Stanleys" as surrogates for absent family members, is one instance of the insertion of objects as members of social networks. In *Loss Prevention* (2000), a woman's relationship to objects, through her kleptomania, competes with her relationship to her daughter and with social norms.

2 This paper, too, takes the dancing line as a model. It is conceived around different threads in this body of work that converge in this short analysis, though each could be followed for a longer time in another space. We will visit many thoughts and theories that meet—some uncannily—in this work, but will not overstay our welcome in insisting one single idea is the only possible mode of considering this collection of artworks. The reader is encouraged to branch off and consider these models in greater length and depth.

3 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 497-8.

4 Laura U. Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art* (MIT Press, 2010), 33.

5 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 507.

6 John Muse's Ardmore Cairn Facebook page, accessed December 11, 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/TheArdmoreCairn>.

7 According to Laura Marks, Wassily Kandinsky's articulation of a line as conceptually invisible in "Point and Line to Plane" is instructive here. The line exists only as "the trail left by the point in motion... it comes about through movement—indeed, by destroying the ultimately self-contained repose of the point." Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity*, 66.

8 John Muse, "Invitation Accepted and Visit Completed III," Finley+Muse, June 6, 2013, <http://www.finleymuse.com/2013/06/invitation-accepted-and-visit-completed-iii/>.

9 Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity*, 6.

10 Bill Nichols' writing on the effects of the "subjunctive" mood of many documentary films is relevant here. In "Historical Consciousness and the Viewer: Who Killed Vincent Chin?" Nichols discusses the ways by which this speculative and doubtful framing of material culled from history provokes in spectators the active experience of willfully "making sense" of the world. Audiovisual evidence is presented "not as fact but as something entertained... as contingent or possible or viewed emotionally," in perfect keeping with "historical fictions" whose effects prompt thoughts on "what might have happened" or "what should have happened" or "what may yet happen."

Bill Nichols, "Historical Consciousness and the Viewer: Who Killed Vincent Chin?" in *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television and the Modern Event*, ed. Vivian Sobchack (Routledge, 2014), 55-68.

11 Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity*, 10.

12 Mark Alice Durant and Jeanne Finley, "The Training of a Fragile Memory," Finley+Muse, 1993. <http://www.finleymuse.com/projects/the-training-of-a-fragile-memory>.

13 This avowal of history's narrative function is an engagement with the work of Hayden White, which takes as its premise the uneasy relationships historians have forged with narrative either through denying and disparaging narrative or attempting to redeem narrative from its non-scientific status, among other tactics.

Hayden White, "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," *History and Theory* 23, no. 1 (February 1984): 1-33.

14 "...although the points determine paths, they are strictly subordinated to the paths they determine, the reverse happens with the sedentary. The water point is reached only in order to be left behind; every point is a relay and exists only as a relay. A path is always between two points, but the in-between has taken on all the consistency and enjoys both an autonomy and a direction of its own. The life of the nomad is the intermezzo."

Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 378.

15 As mentioned, *Falsework*, like many of Finley+Muse's works, begins *in medias res* and ends still within the action of

construction; the classical structure of beginning-middle-end is replaced by depicting segments ambiguously between these points. That is, if one accepts that these points exist at all outside the effort, as quoted above, to "keep chaos at bay..."

16 What is a horizon, if not a line?

17 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 1945), 35.

18 It is, of course, relevant to mention Laura Marks' *Skin of the Film* here. This book uses theories of hapticity and embodiment to discuss the ways by which intercultural cinema appeals to the sensuous through the visual ("as though one were touching the film with one's eyes").

Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2000), xi.

19 Close-range vision, the third characteristic of nomad art, shows itself in the cinematic close-up employed often to the point of the unintelligibility of the image that persists in many Finley+Muse projects, including *Loss Prevention* and *Involuntary Conversion*, among many others. One might also argue for the location of close-range vision within the close contact of participants with the artists in *Imperfect State*, as well as the use of too-close intimacy with many diegetic subjects.

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JEANNE C. FINLEY and JOHN MUSE have worked collaboratively on numerous experimental documentaries and installations since 1988. These works have been exhibited nationally and internationally, at festivals and museums, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York, The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, The Guggenheim Museum, The Whitney Biennial, San Francisco International Film Festival, Berlin Video Festival, Toronto, and World Wide Video Festival. In 2001 they received a Rockefeller Media Arts Fellowship. Additional awards include a Creative Capital Foundation Grant and an Artists in Residence at the Xerox Palo Alto Research Center.

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The Patricia Sweetow Gallery in San Francisco represents their installation work, and the Video Data Bank distributes their films. www.finleymuse.com

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CALCULATING ODDS
AND THE POSSIBILITY
OF MIRACLES

FAT CHANCE (2014)

FALSEWORK (2013)

IMPERFECT CITY/
IMPERFECT STATE (2013)

MANHOLE 452 (2011)

FILMS BY
JEANNE C. FINLEY
AND JOHN MUSE

01.15.16