

**UTOPIAN
FOR
BEGINNERS**

A Senior Thesis Show by Lily Healey

23 April to 27 April 2013

Reception: Thursday, 25 April from 18:00 to 20:00

The Lucas Gallery
185 Nassau St
Princeton, NJ 08544

Open weekdays, 10:00 to 16:30
Free and open to the public

UTOPIAN FOR BEGINNERS

For David Reinfurt, the provider of unfailing advice

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Interview

In the fall of my senior year, I, along with the twelve other students in the Visual Arts program, took a seminar designed to help us think about and develop our artistic practices. One of the assignments for the class was an interview. We were each randomly assigned to interview one of our peers. In November of 2012, Eliot Gee, a photographer, interviewed me. This chapter is the transcript of that interview, with a few after-the-fact additions.

(Lily's studio: sparse, despite the stacks of books on photography, birds, etc. Lily sits in front of her computer.)

LH: I met with [redacted] on Thursday and she hated, like, everything I've been doing. She thought it was way too clean.

EG: *What do you think of that?*

I think, what's wrong with being clean?

That's the best you can offer?

How about her? What's that supposed to mean? What's wrong with being clean?

What do you think she meant by that?

I don't know, maybe it's too much like the Bechers or—too straight—too neat. (Exasperated) She said maybe if it's more messy then it'll be therapeutic. But I'm not so sure.

Do you think your work is too neat or clean?

I think it's neat and clean; I don't think it's too neat and clean. There's no problem with being neat and clean.

That's interesting that, based on what was just said, you'd have to be messy for it to be therapeutic. Is that the implication?

Yeah, well, that's what she said.

And you clearly disagree. Do you think your work is therapeutic?

I think parts of it are therapeutic. I just sort of relax, like, when I get into the groove, I relax. I don't know if it's like therapy in the normal sense when you get over issues or anything.

I've always thought it's strange when people say their art is therapeutic because then it implies they're really messed up.

(Laughs) Artists are messed up. People are messed up.

Really?

Yes. I'm rather cynical.

Is that why there are no people in your photos?

Uh. Probably, yeah. I'm kind of a misanthrope. I mean, I don't like, (pauses) outwardly hate people. I just avoid them. Sometimes.

That reminds me. A question I have about your work is related to 'not having people because people are messy'. But you're in your work as the creator, and you're a person. And it's curious nowadays because your work is operating on these algorithms and you talk about making it chaotic... I'm not sure about how you set up things and your personal control over them. You've talked about this before, but how much control do you think you have and how much do you want to have?

In the studio [photos], I have a lot less control which is weird. It's not like the [found signage] letterforms that I'm playing with, it's more like I take pictures when I feel like taking pictures of my studio. The control I'm talking about is like controlling the final formal aspects, but I don't feel like I have a lot of control when I'm taking them.

(*ad*: I guess when I'm taking them, they just sort of happen. The decisions about form and framing are not so conscious; it's a very fluid process. I decided at a point to shoot a roll, and yes, I'll clean off my computer desktop a bit, and maybe straighten out my actual desktop, maybe not, but then when I have the camera in my hands, the shots come very naturally, very quickly. It seems like I'm giving up some control to the process of making photos.)

You're still working on these?

Yeah, Sarah thinks I should. I'll probably end up doing them digitally, which is sad, but I'm still shooting them in film.

Why'd you say it's sad?

I really like printing and darkroom printing, and I know it's not how things are done anymore, but I still like it. I think it's worth it, and I think it does look better. I like the final product. But I get why people don't print in a darkroom anymore; it takes so much time and energy.

But you put in so much time with your algorithms, right?

Yeah.

Doesn't that balance out? I mean, your stuff with the computer is almost distancing; you're removing yourself from some control, and then in the darkroom you're handling everything and it's hands-on. What do you think?

Maybe—I don't think that's why I'm doing it. Having a final darkroom print is all. I don't actually think I'm a very good darkroom printer, which is sad. I like that the final printers weren't passed through a computer. I sort of have this weird thing between digitisation and the analogue. I'm very invested in computers and all the Internet and I see the value, but I'm also hesitant, you know about how Facebook is ruining our lives.

I'm curious, when do you first get into computers, writing code or—

I took my first computer science class in junior year of high school, I liked it and my mind just works like that. A computer does what you tell it to do; you can always predict the outcome. It's a problem solving, structured nature to computing. It's very mathematical, predictable, and (pauses) clean.

When did you get involved in photography?

Well, I never took art classes in high school; my first photo class was during freshman spring, and I just really liked it.

I feel like your work is so linked to computers. Do you ever feel like you got involved with computers and now your work is helping you look back on what you've gotten in to?

(slowly) I don't know. I don't feel that way. Possibly. Well... maybe. I like computers, but I'm hesitant about how we use them... maybe, yeah.

Photos are a way to hold on to the past... no, that's not right.

You said you thought my work is computer-based, but algorithms are necessarily computer-based.

But the way you're using them is, and now you're using Photoshop.

(silence) Hm. I can see that.

Even your interest in fonts seems computer-based to me, not typesetting. Not that you aren't interested in that, just the way you work with it, and your colour chart.

Yeah. That really makes sense. I don't analyse my work enough to see it that way.

Really?

No, I do. Yeah. I do.

I mean, I'm really struck by the coherent feeling in your work, how it feels like you're progressing in a direction that's very much what interests you.

Hm. I feel like all my stuff, maybe because of David's guidance, it's all connected. The signs I've been doing forever, and the manipulation.

I feel like there's a lot of converging. Before it was like, this is Lily who obsesses over poles and letters, but then when you put the two together... wait, is it bad to call you obsessive?

No, it's fine. I'm totally obsessive. But I don't know if I agree that I need therapy.

I just don't like messy art. (*ad*: I mean, I prefer to look at things that are ordered, things that are organised. It's unsettling for me to look at something where disarray has taken over. That is not to say that I cannot appreciate work that is more fluid or unbalanced or 'messy', but I just prefer to make things that are neat. And surround myself with things that are neat.)

Why is that bag on your wall?

That bag is on my wall because I brought it here and didn't want to throw it away. But I might.

It looks messy.

Yeah, it does. I'll probably throw it out.

No American Beauty?

(laughs) No. I get it, but no.

Going back a second, how do you think David has influenced you?

It's mainly a mode of working, just continually working and not always worrying about the end goal, but just working and eventually it'll get there. And have work lead into other work. So I took colours from my grid and the letters from the signs and used those in other pieces. That's been useful.

How do you go about working on a project?

Initially, it's pretty organic. Then I try to tie it down to some form and completeness. Like with the signs and letters, that was pretty straightforward. I like how these look and people always see the signs but not the letters so I'll rearrange them so they can't read them and that was it. With the desktops, I thought computer desktops are interesting, so what do I want to do with that? I just go with what's interesting.

I like your tea mug that says 'coffee' on it.

Thanks.

It's very you, except that you're using a coffee mug for tea.

Yeah. I just don't like coffee, but I wanted to buy it. So why would I let the whole coffee thing hinder me?

Not playing by the rules. Is that your style?

Yeah. Hey, I break rules occasionally! Sometimes. Maybe.

I speed. I'm a bad driver.

