Flatline: 2D and The New Depthiness

(alternate title, Flatline: 2D, Post-Truth and the New Depthiness)

Vermeulen, Timotheus, "The New Depthiness." e-Flux 62
http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-new-depthiness/

Atwood, Margaret. "Backdrop Addresses Cowboy." 1976.
http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/177290

THE FRAMEWORK

In *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson noted our interdisciplinary, late 20th century obsession with surface; a condition he coined, "the new depthlessness," which emphasized an "exhilaration of surfaces"; the giftwrapping was more important than the present. This visual and cultural "depthlessness" downplayed the necessity of webbed meaning in favor of simulacra—a reaction to earlier modes of representation that favored the real and the referential.

Timotheus Vermeulen suggests the 21st century is characterized by its own culturally permeating approach to depth, a paradigm he dubs "the new depthiness."

The Oxford word of the year for 2016 was "post-truth." In 2005, Stephen Colbert's "truthiness" articulated a similar sense of the fact-not-fact that dominates our socio-political atmosphere; the gut-feeling riding rough-shod over the empirical. The 21st century and its appropriative, fluid, customizable nature is characterized by this kind of relative and convenient "truthiness"; a sliding, fuzzy and mutative idea of the real.

This in-between state is neither a depthless simulacrum, nor a referential, poke-through iceberg. It's not contingent on meanings and referents, or stuck in a love affair with simulation and radiating surfaces. It's capable of engaging both sides, embracing neither—a space bearing a dash of willful avoidance, a certain filter-bubble ignorance, and a well-informed sense of position on an unmarked map.

Vermeulen argues this *depthiness* (post-postmodern and beyond) follows *depthlessness* (pop, postmodernism), which in turn follows *depth* (Modernism and earlier). It can be (roughly) outlined as:

- **Depth (the diver)** – focus is on meaning; deep investigation of the underneath, the behind, webs and roots, referents and originals, analysis and slow-down purposefulness. Territory vs. trajectory. Looking for meaning in reading, research, pools of knowledge, lineages. Focused on specificity, a particular point. Depth is excavated, discovered. The referent is necessary and important. The diver can recognize and fully investigate a submerged shipwreck.
- **Depthlessness (the surfer)** – focus is on surface and surface patterns or process; surface for the sake of surface, surface as both content and anti-content, the evasive, the purposefully lacking. An elevation of the simulacrum, the simulation and the simulated hyperreal. Trajectory vs. territory. Focus on scanning the surface, movement, momentum, what lies ahead rather than beneath. The surfer may not know a shipwreck is beneath the surface at all; the shipwreck is unimportant.

- **Depthiness (the snorkeler)** – focus suspended between depth and surface; an echo, assimilation, and incorporation of "iness" (depthiness, truthiness, "ish"); the snorkeler cannot dive as deeply or completely as a diver, but investigates more than the surface-skimming surfer; depthiness is tied to surface (for "air"), but deep immersion and total avoidance are impossible. Depth is intuited even if not seen—imagined, but possibly not experienced. Depth is applied, delivered, theorized. Social media is a form of depthiness, as it presents a fleeting surface with the potential for slightly deeper interaction; a projected kind of depth is accessible. *Pokémon Go* is another useful metaphor—a game which overlays non-reality on reality, and engages both the real and the intuited. Depthiness does not present a finite real, or a pure simulation. The snorkeler can see and recognize the shipwreck and can imagine or ask questions about it, but cannot (or intentionally does not) fully reach it.

RELATED CONTEMPORARY WORK

The CMCA Biennial included a wing of "alternative facts," where artists addressed "the new depthiness" and its correlatives in post-truth and truthiness, making use of both depth and simulacrum to achieve a middle-ground margin:

> "Alternative facts" are very prophetically confronted… with works that test the boundaries of actuality and the complexities therein. A lawn chair—a simple, suburban staple—is facsimile in Carly Glovinski's "Organizing Behavior," constructed in paper and correction fluid with a block of wood, painted as a book, in its seat. Glovinski demonstrates that reality is only as what we perceive through inverting abstraction and material. In "The Grand Canyon," Glovinski presents one of the United States' most iconic sites as a puzzle with its central pieces missing. With the margins fully complete, we are left to come to our own conclusions as to what jigsaws together to create the center. Nearby, four works from Gail Skudera's "Big & Little Women" series similarly recontextualize fact and fiction by highlighting the margin. Black and white photographs depicting mid-century scenes of so-called quintessential America are cut into strips and woven back together, bound by thread. Stitching, a usually invisible, marginal facet of clothing here becomes central to the picture through its obfuscation. **If fact and fiction are to be rewoven into truths of convenience—post-truths—then reality is secondary to its presentation.**
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> Kathy Weinberg's twenty-six *trompe l'oeil* tile paintings… subtly deal with the complication of observation and perception into post-truth. All are vignettes of figures looking or seeing, enlarged or reduced, each tucked closely together as a piece of the larger whole. Executed in a wispy stroke, these aren't complicated pictorially. But t**hey concoct an assessment of our fractured present, when seeing isn't believing, belief is what you see**." - http://bigredandshiny.org/30719/pictures-politics-and-post-truths-the-center-for-maine-contemporary-art-biennial/

THE CHALLENGE

As artists, how do we position ourselves in fuzzy, in-between space? Do we embrace "post-truth"? Do we destroy it? How does a flat, 2D surface enable us to raise questions about literal and conceptual depth? In an increasingly digital society, where do collisions of the physical flat and digital depth occur? What is the "truthiness" of implied depth? What does it mean to make works on paper in a "post-truth" era?

How relevant are 2D works on paper? Why still create works on paper at all? What kind of vitality does it bring to the conversation? Does 2D become more (or less) relevant when our concept of depth changes? What are the work of art's responsibilities, if any? In particular, how does creating work on a 2D surface remain relevant, poignant and effective in the 21st century? How can a 2D surface address "the new depthiness," and the convenient and fluid veracity of post-truth?

- Each artist is invited to submit one work on paper for the exhibition.
- If your individual piece is composed of several parts, talk to me.
- Work must essentially be a flat surface for this exhibition. The challenge here is to grapple with the notion of "depthiness" on a surface that's constrained by its own physicality and (museum-body) expectations.
- Read, interpret and engage the topic via the literal and implied flatness of a flat surface.
- You can choose to respond to Vermeulen's article, Atwood's poem, both documents, or related aspects of post-truth, truthiness, and depthiness.
- This exhibition asks artists to consider how they function in a superstructure that embraces "depthiness" as a mode of investigation and articulation.