

Spirit over matter

by Cole Thompson

Where I once lived but now reside, a shift in the prevailing wind sends the unmistakeable odour of sulfur from the pulp mill just east of town. As gaseous offshoots of production descend upon the community we inhale invisible particulates, breathe in the *paper spirit*, and carry on with our day. The chemicals remind us of paper in its infancy. Not historically, but procedurally: aspen chipped and fractured, bleached and degraded, strained and compressed. Grifted, even.

In the unending presence of digital screens, we readily welcome the nostalgic tactility of paper. But, in truth, the production of paper pulp is not so different from poorly scanned PDFs circulated on budget USB hard drives: fractured and bleached, compressed and disseminated. Since its inception some 5,000 years ago, the material composition of paper has never remained constant – from papyrus to vellum, tree bark to cotton – so to mourn its replacement by the pixel is somewhat premature. For it was never a question of material, but one of spirit, where the vehicle has long been mistaken for the essence. Not the sulfur in the air, but its sordid immanence; not the tissue left in the pocket during a load of laundry, but the unlawful dispersion that ruptures and clings to each and every article of clothing.

We quickly blame the digital age for displacing our intimacy with paper. We become sentimental in the presence of handwritten letters lovingly sealed in manilla envelopes or cheaply-bound paperback novels adorned with errant coffee stains and folded dog ears from trips in overloaded backpacks. We locate this sentiment in paper’s tactility and point fingers at spam emails, iMessages, and eBooks for attacking paper spirit. But when, I would ask, was the last time you marvelled at the perforated edge of a utility bill, or longed for the tactility of a credit card statement arriving in the mail? While clinging to the idea of paper as a strictly material category, we may have been ignoring the parallel rise of paper spirit’s true adversary: *paperwork*.

Since the 1970s, the deregulation of markets globally and the rise of neoliberal economics that promised prosperity for hardworking go-getters (*I need not critique this myth here*) ironically brought about new modes of bureaucratic regulation whose key functionary was the paper

form.¹ And, as governments continue to increase their reliance on market forces, these *deregulations* are met with increasing amounts of regulatory administrative measures in their stead.² Given this inverse relationship, paperwork’s end is nowhere in sight. For example, a student entering into a market relationship with a credentializing institution will supply no shortage of transcripts, waivers, agreements, identification certificates, tax forms, and health records, not to mention assignments, essays, and examination booklets over the course of four or so odd years to ensure that their free-market transaction is in accordance with the institution’s regulatory functions. In these spaces, paper announces its love affair with bureaucratic tedium and professional designation. (All of this, no less, in pursuit of the most intellectually-credentializing paper-printed doctrine of all.)

In this vein, a university collection of artworks on paper provides peculiar footing for teasing out a worthwhile question: *how do we get to the spirit through all this bureaucracy?* Even the most explicit annunciations of paperiness are made possible – in this space – through administrative channels. Behind each and every work on display lurks a supporting cast of accession files, condition reports, acquisition agreements, transfer of ownership documents, financial appraisals, conservation reports, and cultural property statements. If there exists a genuine paper spirit not tied to specific material categories, it must inevitably live beyond that which seeks to work it away. Here, I find insightful parallel with Moten and Harney’s critique of public administration programs: “Any attempt at passion . . . must be suppressed by this professionalization. This is not merely a matter of administering the world, but of administering away the world (and with it prophecy). Any other disposition is not only unprofessional but incompetent, unethical, and irresponsible, bordering on the criminal.”³ Paper spirit is an *other disposition* in the face of professionalized modes that seize upon its material while pointing fingers at digital technologies for the death of ink and pad. Paper spirit evades the world’s administration by bordering on the criminal, moving as a grifter from town to town.

It swindles through and within the official order of the day. It is recognizable by the authorities, but its small-scale criminality

often stays beneath the threshold of concern, rarely causing any need for alarm or response. It is a pestering presence that can only be policed here and there but mostly goes ignored. It is the insignificant note passed in class or the cheat sheet stashed in a bathroom stall for later use; a receipt used as a bookmark or a napkin with a phone number on it. In extreme cases – perhaps a counterfeit bill or a fake passport – excess spirit is deemed punishable, but for the most part it escapes the filters of authority all together. It is neither for nor against these things but operating outside of their given rubrics. For them, paper spirit is an annoyance at worst and a uselessness at best.

In a work of art, paper spirit might softly announce itself in a torn edge or a subtle crease at the corners from hurried handling. It can be found in a little foxing or buckling from moments of humidity or in a faint yellowing effect from exposure to natural light. These sullying marks catalogue the work’s being in the world despite the imposition to eradicate impurities and administer them away. Adorno reminds us that under repressive orders which serve to uphold ideals of purity and cleanliness that “spirit must pass a competency test to assure that it will not overstep the official culture or cross its officially sanctioned borders.”⁴ Here, paper spirit will always fail.

Despite the examples above, the material of paper has little to do with the spirit despite often being its vehicle of choice. Since the closure of national borders, a friend and I have met for informal Zoom chats to discuss writing, thinking, making and all things in between. On one such occasion, it was recommended that I parse through Ariella Azoulay’s *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*. Knowing the closeness of my friend’s work with that of Azoulay’s, I asked if they might have a PDF copy to send me through email since I had neither access to a library nor the ambition to pay at the time. Under normal circumstances, we likely would have exchanged the physical copy, but the situation at-hand made this an impossibility.

Although expecting an email with a previously scanned PDF file attached, I instead received something much more endearing: a series of 57 JPEG images taken with my friend’s iPhone – one for each page of the book’s first chapter. Through each image I could sense their accumulating engagement with the text through words circled and phrases underlined in alternating colours and energetic marginalia at moments of provocation. Here and there the images showed a

thumb holding the book open or a slant of light from the window casting shadows across the page. I compiled the images in a PDF file to read later on and sent a few other documents from my PDF library in return. These images embody time and care devoted to sharing sources and engaging in ideas across space. They sidestep national borders and quietly hide from the commercialization of mutual learning. We create an economy of gift – take a little here, bootleg a little there – that cannot be recognized by *the* market, and we exchange ideas through a relationship untethered from bureaucratic forces – universities or otherwise. The images are more paper than paper.

In a Frank Pimentel image from the series *American Dream*, a couple stands half-embraced facing the camera. Over the man’s left shoulder is an empty advertising board with “FOR LEASE CALL SAVE REALTY 474-2435” written in marker on the blank plywood backing. Here, the space of commerce is void, awaiting the paper poster that will lease it in the future. In contrast, the woman in the image clutches a gently folded piece of lined paper, concealing its contents from the viewer. Whether a shopping list or handwritten directions, it is shielded from both the commercial space behind them and the capturing tool of the image in front of them. It is a subtle gesture of paper spirit that escapes the knowing mechanisms of bureaucracy and production. Like sulfur from a mill.

notes

- 1 David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2016), 9.
- 2 Ibid., 9.
- 3 Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, “The University and the Undercommons: Seven Theses,” *Social Text* 79, vol. 22, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 109.
- 4 Theodor W. Adorno, “The Essay as Form,” *New German Critique*, no. 32 (Spring-Summer 1984): 156.

Frank Pimentel, *10* from series *American Dream*, 1991, silver gelatin on paper, 27.5 x 28.0 cm., Collection of the University of Saskatchewan, Gift of David Reid Jackson, 1995.



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PROLIFERATE

works on paper

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Exhibition: September 13 - December 18, 2021

curator, Leah Taylor

curatorial assistance, Caitlin Campbell

exhibition essay, Cole Thompson

University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, SK



