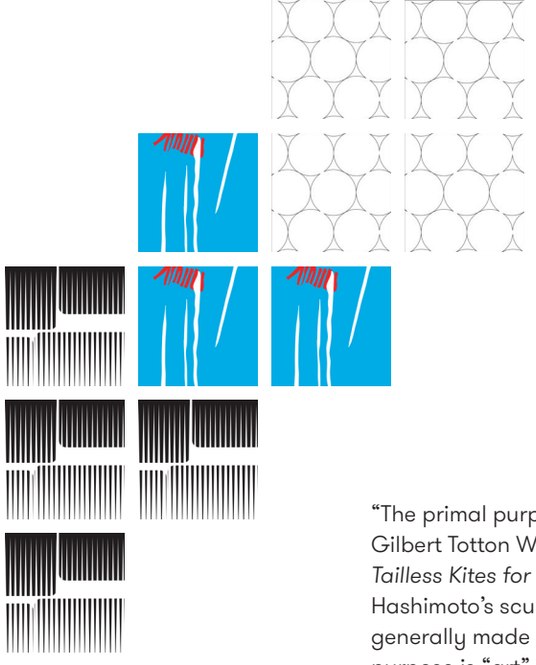
Jacob Hashimoto

When Nothing Ends, Nothing Remains

Maps of the Unknown

Jacob Hashimoto at Whitman College

Essay by Associate Professor of Art History and Visual Culture Studies Matthew Reynolds



KITE

"The primal purpose of the kite, if for other than amusement, is unknown."[1] So wrote Gilbert Totton Woglom in his book *Parakites: A Treatise on the Making and Flying of Tailless Kites for Scientific Purposes and for Recreation*, published in 1896. Jacob Hashimoto's sculptural installations, like the one now installed in Penrose Library, are generally made up of hundreds, sometimes thousands of such tailless kites. Their purpose is "art" (although art's purpose is still unknown).[2] Jacob's kites don't fly, so as kites, they are a kind of failure. As art however, the combined effect of these floating assemblages suspended in the air is stunning.

Paper, bamboo, resin, pigment print, Spectra, aluminum, and steel. These are the basic materials that compose the kites and the armature that supports them. The shapes vary in the Penrose piece, titled *When Nothing Ends, Nothing Remains*, but consist primarily of 6" x 4" ellipses, and 4" x 4" and 5" x 5" squares. The patterns are a combination of freehand and vector (computer generated) drawings, the product of nearly two decades of drafting or appropriating shapes and figures. At first, Jacob made these drawings himself (some of which are on display in the accompanying exhibition in the Sheehan Gallery). Later, as he became more successful, he hired and trained assistants to make their own drawings in dialogue with his previous work. The kites that make up *When Nothing Ends, Nothing Remains* contain red polka dots, orange checkerboards, rigid geometrical designs, abstract biomorphic shapes, blasts of translucent blue, monochromatic fields of black or white, targets, flowers, grass, stars, and clouds.

FIBER

Art historian Elissa Auther describes the use of materials and media associated with craft as one of the most important trends in artistic production since the early 1970s. She uses the broad label "fiber art" to define this movement. "Such objects include, but are not limited to, woven wall hangings or tapestries, objects sewn, quilted, embroidered, or beaded; hand-dyed fabrics; basketry; and a wide array of three-dimensional objects produced in off-loom, or non-woven, techniques such as braiding, coiling, knotting, netting, linking, looping, twining, and wrapping."[3] The term "craft" was long a pejorative description in Modernist histories of art. It was associated with folk art, hobbies, the home, everyday use, and the labor of women. But feminist artists active in the 1970s reclaimed craft-based media as a mode of political expression. While Hashimoto downplays the political dimension of his own work, this history is nevertheless important to understanding how he self-consciously plays in the margins between "highbrow" fine arts practices and the "lowbrow" culture of sci-fi, video games, hobbyists, and craft.

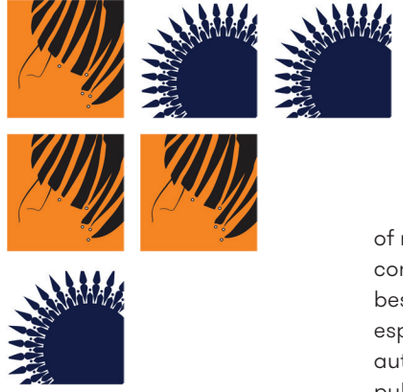
Oxford English Dictionary lists a number of definitions for the term "fiber." Originally used to describe a lobe of the liver, fiber can also mean "the thread-like filaments of organic structure which form a textile or other material substance," a "subdivision of a root," and a reference to Johannes Kepler's "system of celestial physics" as outlined in *Epitome astronomiae Copernicanae* (Epitome of Copernican Astronomy, 1615).

Jacob Hashimoto's roots are here. He is a product of Walla Walla. He was made by Whitman College. Well, that's an exaggeration. But growing up here, in this place, with a father and mother who were both affiliated with the college had a significant impact. His Dad is Irv "Hash" Hashimoto who was professor of English, taught courses on literature, and ran the writing center for decades.[4] His Mom is Marianne Donahue Hashimoto who worked in the registrar's office before going back to get her Master's in Social Work (MSW) at Walla Walla University. She recently retired after a successful career as a respected therapist here in town. Jacob went to Green Park Elementary, Pioneer Junior High School, and graduated from Walla Walla High School (WaHi). As a kid, he was surrounded by the shelves and stacks and piles

[1] Gilbert Totton Woglom, *Parakites. A Treatise on the Making and Flying of Tailless Kites for Scientific Purposes and for Recreation* (New York. G.P. Putnam and Sons, 1896), 1.

[2] I'm being facetious, but only slightly. Art is a way of creatively engaging with the world. It is a form of communication. It brings light and color and beauty into our surroundings. It can challenge us to think about questions both large (who are we as individuals, tribes, cultures, nations.), and small (what color will go best with my kitchen cabinets.). Art is also a commodity as anyone familiar with the contemporary market can tell you. But the question about art's purpose continues to be asked and answered in contradictory ways. Just last year, *The Art Newspaper* queried world-renowned museum directors, curators, and artists in an article, asking "What is Art For? We Ask, Leading Cultural Figures Answer" (January 10, 2015, theartnewspaper.com/comment/what-is-art-for, accessed Sept. 3, 2016). One of the most provocative responses came from Bernard Blistene, the Director of the Pompidou Center in Paris, who quoted filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard. "What is art. Nothing. What does it want. Everything. What can it do. Something."

[3] Elissa Auther, *String, Felt, Thread. The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art* (Minneapolis. University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 7.



of reading material his Dad brought home or left lying around his campus office: comics, novels, popular magazines, unpopular scholarly journals, poetry, and those best-selling, doom-and-gloom tomes like Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock*. He was drawn especially to writers like Robert Coover and Thomas Pynchon as a young adult—authors who straddled the boundaries between fiction, sci-fi, and mystery, elevating pulp genres with mind-bending prose. And he played lots of videogames, often accompanying Hash to the arcade where legend has it the old man could play Galaga for hours on one quarter. When I asked him about his early life here, he replied that it was "good to grow up in such a boring place. If you want to do something, you have to create it yourself." His reference was to the limited culinary options (since improved) in town that prompted him to learn how to cook exotic foods—a skill he's very aware continues to influence his artistic practice.

His secondary education might best be described as restless. He dropped out of Carleton, enrolled at Reed where he encountered significant problems with the administration, had trouble transferring credits and almost immediately felt out of place and ostracized. He quickly left and registered at Whitman but stayed only for a semester here before returning to Carleton. Then he dropped out again. Throughout this time, Walla Walla remained a consistently stable place to regroup. The summer after his first year at Carleton College, he started working for Keiko Hara, a printmaker, painter, and sculptor and herself a longtime professor in the Art Department at Whitman for more than twenty years. During breaks from school, he would assist her in her studio in the old east wing of Olin Hall from 5 a.m. to noon, then take the rest of the afternoon to work on his own art. During one of his hiatuses, he sat in on more art and religion courses and worked closely with Professor Jon Walters. He was attracted to Eastern cosmologies, the weirdly powerful ways we humans construct histories and genealogies of the universe. If you want to do something, you have to create it yourself. After another year or so, he found a match at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, working with people like Amy Sillman. She once gave him the friendly advice that, as an artist, "it doesn't matter how good you are; all that matters is how long you can stick around."

MAP

Works like *Gas Giant Fragments and Silence* and *When Nothing Ends, Nothing Remains* have a topographical quality, like maps in three dimensions. Jacob's exhibition history includes shows at major galleries and institutions around the globe: the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Patricia Faure Gallery in Los Angeles, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MOCA), the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), Studio la Città in Verona, Rhona Hoffmann Gallery in Chicago, and his current home, Mary Boone Gallery in New York.

Art history, too, is a kind of map that connects the dots between those artists with whom Jacob's practice exists in proximity. There are precedents in the mobiles of Alexander Calder, or the seriality ("one thing after another") of Minimalist artists like Eva Hesse. Others have noted likenesses to the work of contemporaries like Sara Sze and Phoebe Washburn who build sprawling, visually dense installations out of everyday materials. The work of sculptors Ruth Asawa and Kenzi Shiokava also comes to mind. Asawa constructed looped and tied wire sculptures that are suspended from ceilings, casting intricate shadows on gallery walls. They rely equally on negative space and material presence to complete the composition. Shiokava shapes eerie totems from found materials, including cardboard, yarn, bamboo, and wood. Asawa and Shiokava, with whom Hashimoto shares an ethnic heritage, can be seen as practicing a variation of *mono no aware*, a Japanese philosophy that embraces the "pathos of things." In their impermanence, things and objects have a life of their own, a finite existence that is at once sad but transcendently beautiful. This fascination with temporality and transience is evidenced in Jacob's view that "the most poetic aspect of my work is spending months and months putting it together and then I have to cut it down." *When Nothing Ends, Nothing Remains* is a permanent installation but who can deny that it, too, will ultimately pass away?

Maps and labels can be useful ways of orienting oneself in space and time. They're also "useful fictions" as many cartographers and historians have noted. They only tell a partial story. They create artificial boundaries, they parcel, divide, delimit. They are always incomplete, a form of shorthand. Jorge Luis Borges once wrote a story, barely more than 150 words, about an ancient map of a long forgotten Empire "whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it… The following Generations, who were not so fond of the study of cartography as their forebears had been, saw that that vast map was useless."[5]

[4] Full disclosure, Hash was my mentor when I first arrived at Whitman College in 2008.

[5] Jorge Luis Borges, "Museum. On Exactitude in Science," The Aleph (Including the Prose Fictions from "The Maker") (New York. Penguin Classics, 2004).

GAS

Gas Giant was the title of the piece Jacob assembled for the MOCA in 2014. *Gas Giant Fragments and Silence* is composed of parts from the earlier exhibition. Before that, these kites were on display at the Fondazione Querini Stampalia in Venice, Italy and the Museum of Contemporary Art Rome (MACRO) where they were part of a work titled *Silence Still Governs Our Consciousness*. From Whitman College, they will be taken down and re-installed at the Wäinö Aaltonen Museum of Art, Finland in 2017 and, later, The State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia.

Based on these titles, the motif of gas is worth considering in greater depth. Gas is elemental; there is no universe or big bang or stars or planets without it. Gas is also the unseen force our architectural infrastructures are designed to contain and distribute on demand. "A vaporous substance, gas appears in architecture in factories, as fuel for artificial illumination, and from the emanations of people aggregated in cities. While we tend to associate the engineering of water systems with the modernization of cities, the provision for and negotiation of gas also played a role in urban industrialization," writes architectural historian David Gissen. I grew up in Los Angeles, so when I think of gas, I think of cars, filling stations, and smog. But living now in the era of climate change, I can't help but think about carbon emissions, fracking, pipelines, and pumps. How can the same word mean fuel, but also waste? This contradictory tension is, to me, one of the most compelling aspects of Jacob's work. The way a small block of colored kites will disrupt a larger field of white or black, or the way bursts of vibrantly designed hues will pop out when you shift your view can create startling transformations in the viewer's visual field. Gissen adds: "Images of the mapping, capture, and release of various gases move through some of the most exhilarating and horrifying technological concepts and experiments. Gas might be used to illuminate cities or to create landscapes of death."[6] Something so fundamentally useful is bound to have ominous, unforeseen repercussions. Gas is at the center of some of humanity's most horrific tragedies: the 1984 leak of methyl isocyanate in Bhopal, India that killed anywhere from 8,000-16,000 people; the genocidal poisoning of Jews, gays and the disabled during the Holocaust; and, of course, the increasing amounts of CO_2 we keep pumping into the atmosphere which threatens not just our own species but the entire planet. A work like *Gas Fragments and Silence* foregrounds the "simultaneously utopian and disturbing aspects of gas [that] are harnessed in dialectical form in contemporary architectural projects,"[7] by directing our attention to those underutilized and overlooked spaces—ceilings, corners, alcoves, atria—in the buildings we occupy.

[6] David Gissen, *Subnature: Architecture's Other Environments* (New York. Princeton Architectural Press, 2009), 58.

[7] Gissen, 58.

[8] Tung-Hui Hu, *A Prehistory of the Cloud* (Cambridge, MA. MIT Press, 2015), 15-16.

[9] Hu, 124.

CLOUD

One of my favorite things about Walla Walla is the westward view over the Valley around dusk, especially when the horizon is populated with altocumulus or cirrocumulus clouds. These formations sometimes have a sheet-like, interconnected appearance. Their tessellations can give the groupings a honeycomb shape. When the light at sunset hits them at just the right moment, the lower half of these clouds turn bubblegum pink while the bulbous upper portion can remain a steely, blackish blue.

In contrast to his wall hangings, Jacob's installations at Whitman might be experienced as a cloud. Although composed of individual units, the sculpture itself can be seen as a floating mass. It is the strategic repetition of small groups of white ovals within the larger network of vibrantly colored squares in *When Nothing Ends, Nothing Remains* that makes the cloud metaphor so potent.

Over the last decade, the Cloud has become a synonym for that network of databases that store the minutiae of our collective lives online. The digital cloud is an exercise in branding, providing individuals with the illusion that our texts, social media posts, photos, videos, music, and emails will forever be preserved and instantaneously accessible. That little icon of the Cloud visible on most computer screens is also a heuristic device for allowing users to conceptualize the vast network of wires, cables, and servers that make up the material infrastructure of the Internet. Tung-Hui Hu writes that networks are by design "very nebulous." They resist centralization and linear, hierarchical organization. Hu notes that the term "nebulous" itself derives from the Latin "nebule," or cloud.[8] The cloud icon represents what can never be seen in its totality, and yet "in today's computer and mobile operating systems, this cloud icon now represents a reserve of seemingly unlimited computer power, or storage space; it has become, simply, a representation of the unknown."[9]

Paradoxically, the Cloud, although unknowable, is locatable. It dwells in our very own backyard, in Google's server farms and Microsoft's data bunkers which spring up along the banks of the Columbia River. The controlled flow of this once mighty waterway is used to cool the servers that circulate and store our unquenchable thirst for data.

LANDSCAPE

Reviews of Jacob's exhibitions often describe his installations as a kind of landscape. The term "landscape" as it applies to a genre associated with painting is a relatively recent one, and in some ways it's an odd way to describe a piece like *When Nothing Ends, Nothing Remains*. But we should remember that common usage of the word originated in Dutch and came into wider use with the great expansion of trade and commerce in Northern European cultures in the 17th and 18th centuries. Wealthy patrons paid painters to depict their possessions. But the concept is obviously much older. Are the cave paintings of Lascaux not a form of landscape? Agriculture and architecture are likewise ways of shaping and containing an environment. "Within a preliterate, animistic worldview, for instance, the earth could not be expressed as a 'landscape,' because it was conceived as a volatile realm of supernatural immanence, dynamically interactive with human behavior, and thus incompletely representable." So says scholar Christopher Fitter. Landscape, he argues, is "the definition of nature that organizes material features of the land into a composite whole set into defined spatial relations."[10]

Each kite has a life of its own but collectively the kites add up to something much greater. The best view of *When Nothing Ends, Nothing Remains* is on the second floor where the colors and variations of the kites mirror the colors and variations of the book spines stacked by the hundreds, even thousands, on the shelves behind the piece. Collectively the library is a landscape of learning but where and how each journey will take flight is ultimately unknown.

[10] Christopher Fitter, entry on "Landscape from the Ancients to the Seventeenth Century," *Oxford Art Online*, oxfordartonline.com, accessed on Sept. 1, 2016.

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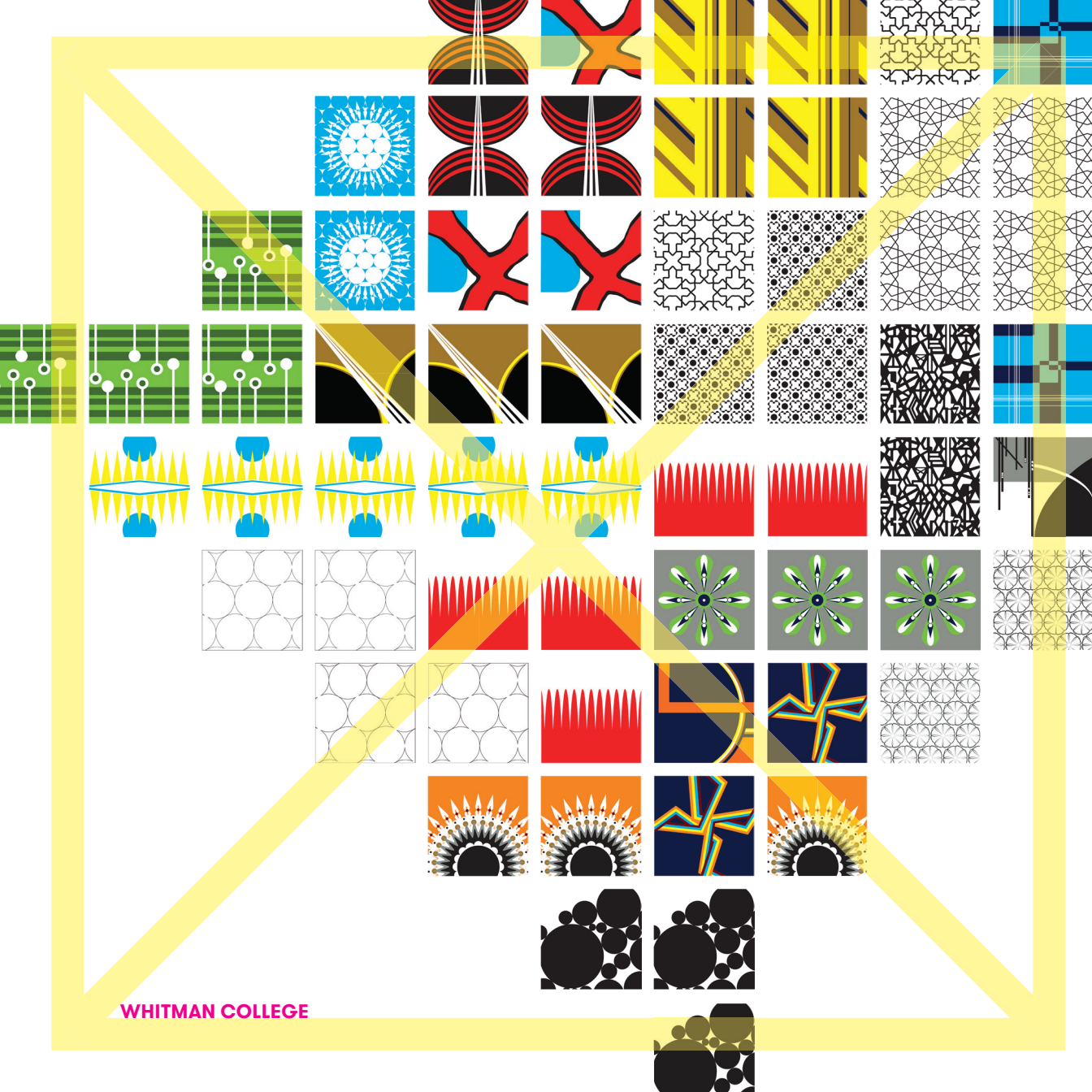

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