

## The Utility of Cultivated Futility: Jeff Chelf's *To Cut a Lake in Half*

To set out to fail and to at least partially succeed. To not know an outcome, but to reasonably assume an outcome. There is utility we spectators gain from witnessing cultivated failure<sup>1</sup> – in performance and in documentation.

Many of us have sensed the quiet allure of the lakes in and around Madison, WI. A basic material of life, a place to contemplate, a notable node of unknowable seeing, thick and deep like some truth.

I've been mulling around, looking at Jeff's ideas, images, and words, particularly *To Cut a Lake in Half* (2020), a collaboration between Jeff Chelf and Derek Kiesling. I don't know Jeff. Literally. At all. One phone call and a few emails are the extent to which I know him. But this matter might matter less here. I have a feeling for and about the work by looking at it. One could say that I should understand it because my thinking and artwork are cut from a similar cloth; except that I don't understand it. I do, though, understand something about the work's desire. Like little waves and channels the artist has tuned and tweaked, however briefly, for a quick jaunt in material time and space.

The world is not conceptual. I mean, it is, but what matters is matter in motion, the materially expressive interwoven world that contains fits, starts, and sparks, in and around us, spotlighting our quotidian experiences. Concepts are dependent on materiality; and while the opposite is not true, we still find a way to make it so.

Jeff's images are illustrations of the title-instructions. This is conceptual art for the camera – using the body as another material. How else would one activate the title? If you are used to working with your hands (Jeff was a boatbuilder for many years before graduate school) you might have the instinct to continue in this mode. *To Cut a Lake in Half* is a laborious collaborative drawing – the ice is the paper and the ice saws are the drawing implements. It reminds me of Sol Le Witt instructions – but about photographing the process as much as the performance.

The first thing that strikes me in the image is the horizon – the ombre contrast on the trees (and their clothing) from Crop-Circle Khaki to Icicle Cyan created from the receding sun. The edge, where the lake meets the land, is as sharp as a ruler's edge from this angle. The sky and the lake, a visually delicious anagram – and 2/3s up from the bottom edge, the two humans begin the verticality that meets and pushes into the trees effortlessly, almost blending in their insistent upright trajectory and land-loving pantones. I begin to wonder how much photoshop was used to “clean up” the blue sky and frozen lake – not that it matters. However, the critical eye and focus on the documentary photography's aesthetic outcomes deviates from typical performance documentation and leans heavily on photography itself – not just as documentation of a performance but as the performance itself. It was completed only with photography in mind; it

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<sup>1</sup> J. Andrew Salyer, “White Men Falling: Masculinity, Whiteness, and Failure in Contemporary Performance for the Camera,” PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2019.

doesn't exist outside of the lens. It was seen as an image in the artist's mind. Seeing the clear line bisecting a shape: simple math placed in nature and activated by the labor of two people. Why two men? Two men working together to create a line. Two men carving up the world in the only way they still can – with invisible ink.

Here they are. Distant but not too distant from one another; like a couple of male best friends. Just far enough to have to shout. And with sticks; thin sticks with a nice Pantone 20-0162 TPM on the lower  $\frac{1}{3}$  in the first photograph and every bit as long as their winter-gear'd bodies. The references to northern ice-living abound: are they playing ice hockey? Drilling holes to go ice fishing? Cross-country skiing across the lake? Are they preparing for the annual frozen lake event which those of us who have spent any serious time in Wisconsin came to know as the LBC (Lake-Beer-Cheese) Festival? It's also about a vision carried out by more than one person – Chelf's collaborator Keisling, and the two photographers documenting the ice drawing.

To find meaning at all is to inherently attempt the impossible. It's not an impossible task to find meaning because of some lack of knowledge, in fact, one might even go so far as to say, knowledge – bound up, stacked end-to-end like spray-painted freight cars with landscapes of dust balls and lines of textures you'd like to run your hands across – is a territory. Like moths, we're dusty, too. Maybe the dust mite emperor's council, certainly without any apparent clothing, created us so they could be reunited with their old world on Mars. Wisdom, however, that greasy bowling ball made of falcon feathers, is always someone or somewhere else. Like trying to empty a lake, bucket by bucket; like cutting a frozen lake in half; like there is some utility in futility.

It's that... once a meaning is produced it becomes insatiable. To produce is to reduce possibilities. Always famished, its many rows of teeth-lined mouths eat away, not at the core, but the periphery, the adjacent; sucking all the air out of the lungs, making it a struggle to breathe. There's no room in meaning, no exit. Its doors clank shut to the outside world. We're trapped. Trapped in meaning. It governs over its domain, like a noun's sticky preposition.

I've always felt a sense of sadness while making artwork; a profound melancholy that almost cuts me in half – at least when I know I'm onto something worthwhile. A slight tightening of my stomach and a dry sensation in my eyes and gums; and a semi-controlled fall that seems as much about any goal as it does the experience.

I don't want to think of cutting up the lake, conceptually or otherwise. The gesture is bound like meat cut thick and tightly wrapped with light-brown twine; the wet red and white flesh rising to new heights with the pressure but carrying the marks forward.

Two people; two men; two white men; two white men on a frozen lake; two white men on a frozen lake with ice saws. *Two white men on a frozen lake with ice saws.*

Regardless, though, the gesture cuts through. It could have simply been a drawing or a text work, but Jeff wanted to feel the idea, physically. To do the labor, to take a risk, to be in the

elements. This is a drive that moves it towards the instinct of being in the body as the work. Using the body as an instrument and then the body as an instrument uses extensions and instruments and implements in order to be the cause of a planned effect.

Although different in many ways, I'm still reminded of Bas Jan Ader's poetic and melancholic gestures of failure for the camera, and Bruce Nauman's studio performances – the latter, if he had transported them beyond the artist's experimental corporeal cube and into the post-studio collaborative environment. If a young Nauman had seen the outside instead of the inside as where creative magic might happen. Except there is no magic here... it is what it is. Maybe.

We never see a full photo of the line going entirely across the lake. Does this matter? We as viewers might be completing the effort and Jeff might be giving us just enough information that completing it in actuality doesn't matter in the end. This is part of the utility of futility here. We fill in the missing information because of the title (i.e. the instructions – are the instructions for the reader-viewer or the artist?). [What is it called when you can read something even with half the words missing –

J. Andrew Salyer, 2021