

Artwork: Refraction

**Beliefs**

Phil Hansen

First Edition - First Printing

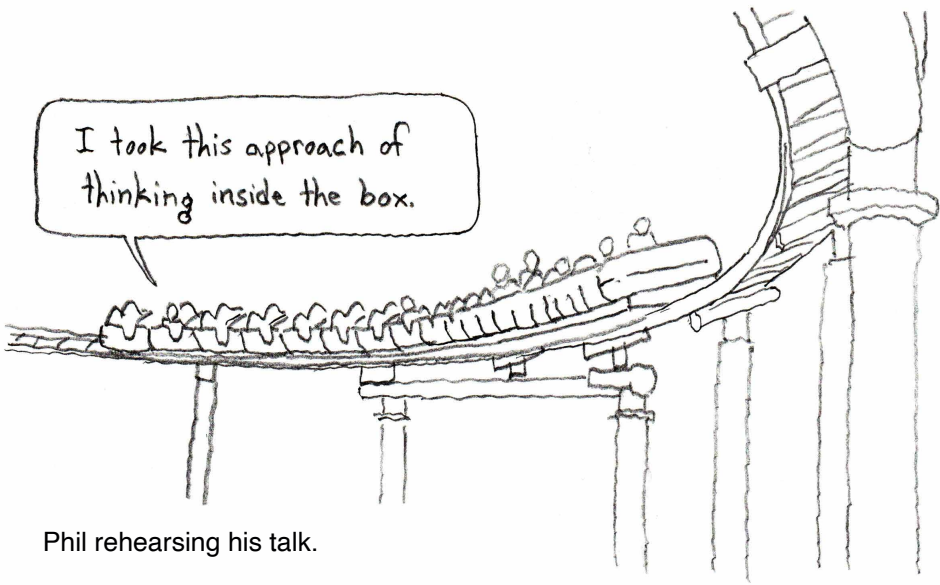
**I remember** so vividly the moment I walked off the TED stage. The unexpected standing ovation, the smiling faces, the relief, oh, the relief.

I had spent three months preparing for that moment. I'm not a natural storyteller, I'm shy, and being on stage scared the heck out of me. The prep started reasonably enough. I set up a projector and faced away from it while rehearsing to mimic the big screen behind me. Then I added spotlights. Next I taped out a section of floor matching the stage dimensions so I wouldn't wander. Then I printed 8x10 photos of famous people who'd be in the audience so I wouldn't gasp if I happened to spot Jim Carey mid-talk. I knew the prep had gone too far when I found myself on a rollercoaster at the Mall of America rehearsing my talk as it looped around shopping tourists. My logic: if I can do it on a rollercoaster, I can do it at TED. Maybe I overprepared a little. Ha. But what I hadn't prepared for was what happened after.

As I stepped into the theatre hallway, I saw an older man walking toward me with his arms outstretched, hands shaking intensely. He was about fifty feet away when he called out, "How can I do what you did? How can I embrace my shake?" We started talking and it turned

out he was an artist too. I was excited, offered ideas. He listened, then explained why each one wouldn't work. Eventually he patted me on the shoulder and said, "Well, thanks for trying," and walked away.

That moment was awkward and stayed with me because I felt like I had let him down. Months after the TED talk was posted (I'll share my story in a bit), I had many more conversations like it, each ending without resolution. I got more and more interested in the question: what does it actually take to overcome a challenge? Eventually I decided to create a large artwork on the topic. I posted my phone number online and asked people to call and share a story about a limitation they faced. I spoke with a thousand people over the course of a month and handwrote their stories into a large piece of art. What I discovered changed my life. But let's get there slowly. There's a story from the project I want to share first.



Phil rehearsing his talk.

# Sarah's Story

A diagnosis causes fear for some and relief for others. For Sarah, being diagnosed with trichotillomania was the latter. She finally had a name for what was happening, and with a name came the hope that something could be done. For years the disorder had caused her to uncontrollably pull out her hair, and by middle school the bald patches on her head were growing larger. After the diagnosis, the medical system kicked into gear and connected her with a nonprofit that helped kids in her situation. Sarah was given a wig, shown how to care for it, and off she went.

The intention was kindness and support. And in many ways it was. But quietly, gradually, the wig became something she organized her entire life around.

She didn't go to sleepovers. She never jumped in a pool. She skipped roller coasters. She didn't let her boyfriend touch her hair. She didn't even roll car windows down. Every one of those small decisions made sense on its own. But together they had built walls she couldn't see past.

What Sarah had absorbed, without ever choosing it, was a belief. Not just that a girl has hair, but that her hair should be "thick and luscious and lovely". The medical system

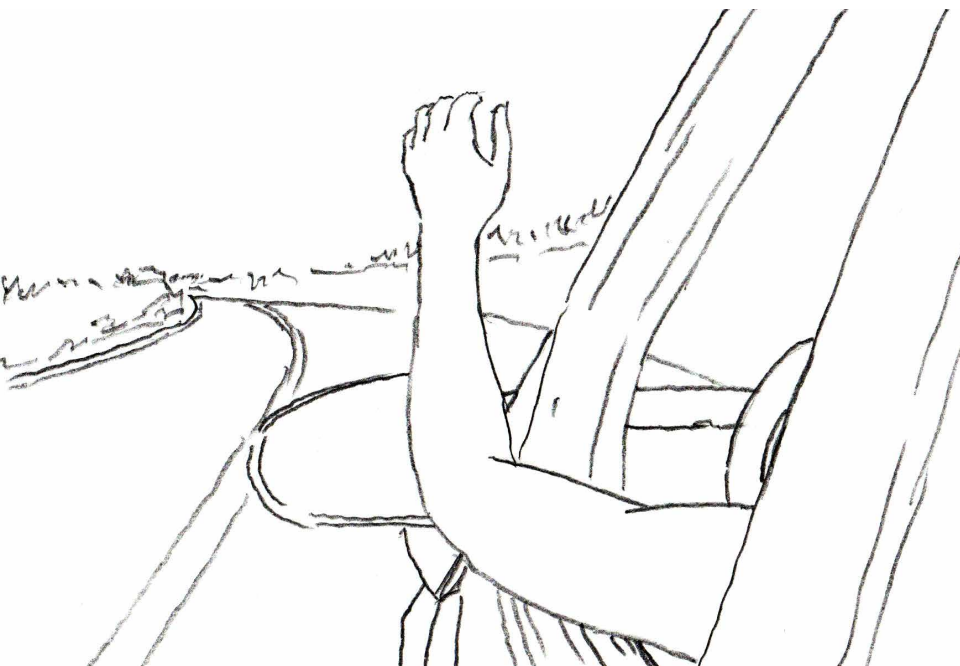
had reinforced this unspoken belief by rushing to make her look “normal”. Six years of wearing wigs had solidified it.

Then came graduation. It should have been a purely celebratory moment, but for Sarah it was weighed down with a deadline. The nonprofit would stop providing wigs after graduation. The ones she had would degrade within months, and her family couldn’t afford replacements. The wigs had quietly delayed a question she hadn’t fully faced.

As the moment was approaching she told me, with concern and conviction, that she had made up her mind. After the ceremony she would go straight to a salon, take off her wig, and ask them to shave the rest. Her voice contained everything at once, excitement, trepidation, fear. When I reached her again after graduation she was beaming. A handkerchief wrapped around her head, the wigs gone for good.

“The relief, excitement, and sadness was immediate,” she told me. “As I was driving away from the salon I rolled the window down. Which doesn’t sound like much, but I never drove with the windows down because I wore wigs. In that moment I saw so clearly how all of those things I was doing to protect myself were actually holding me back. All of those walls were falling down and there were doors opening up all around me. I feel like I can do whatever I want.”

She was tearing up about her past and smiling ear to ear for her future.



Sarah enjoying the wind on a drive.

# My Story

As a kid, making things was where you'd find me. Hammering wood together in the garage, whittling a stick behind the chicken coop, staging epic battles with the garden hose and army men in the dirt. When I got to school the opportunities to make things narrowed, except in art class. That's when I discovered drawing. I wasn't the best or the fastest, but it was a great way to connect with friends, make people laugh, and stay occupied during group work.

In high school I took my first real art class and got introduced to different movements. Pointillism caught my attention, making art with dots. Maybe you've seen the most famous example by Seurat in Ferris Bueller's Day Off, the painting they zoom into at the art museum. I started learning the technique and became obsessed. Evenings, weekends, dots became my world. But as the months passed I noticed a shake developing in my drawing hand.

We've all felt our hands shake at some point, too much caffeine, too little sleep. At first I figured it was something like that. I gripped the pen tighter and kept going. But the tremor didn't go away. It got worse. The tighter I gripped,

the more it seemed to fight back. Eventually the pain from clenching down on the pen became as much of a problem as the shaking itself, affecting my grip on everyday things too. My bag. The throttle on my scooter. One night I sat down and tried to think honestly about where I could see myself progressing with art, and I didn't have an answer. In the weeks that followed I dropped out of art school then quietly, sadly, moved home.

Three years went by.

My girlfriend at the time spotted my sketchbook on a shelf and asked, "You used to draw?" I told her what had happened. She said, "You should get that checked out." I remember feeling a little embarrassed. Why hadn't I gone to the doctor? Was I hiding from it? Did I think they'd just tell me nothing could be done? Eventually I made an appointment with a neurologist. It was a short visit. He ran some tests, then said simply, "It's permanent nerve damage."

I sat there in silence. It's a small room when you meet with a doctor, and it's a smaller room when the diagnosis changes your life. The silence stretched and got awkward. Then the doctor leaned back in his chair, stared at me for a moment and said, "Well, why don't you just embrace the shake." And I left in a frustrated daze.

A few weeks later, on the bus ride home from college, those words were still bouncing around in my head. Maybe he'd meant it as a metaphor, or just a light way to wrap up the appointment. But I started wondering, what if I took

him literally? What if I could scribble a picture? The idea made me laugh. But it didn't seem that far off from what I had previously done. Dots placed closer together look darker. Tight scribbles do the same thing. Within an hour of experimenting with a sheet of paper on the wall, I found I could create different shades and with some planning I drew a large portrait. The doctor's offhand comment stirred something I didn't expect.



As an artist I'm always looking for more ways to be creative and I began to wonder, if my tremor could drive creativity, could others? Questions started fluttering around in my mind.

What if I painted a picture but didn't use a brush? What if I spent less than a dollar on art materials? What if I painted on something other than a canvas? These simple questions pushed me to create in some really strange and unexpected ways. I began to see my constraints with curiosity and flexibility rather than frustration. Looking back with a new perspective, the shake that had caused me to drop out of art school was now the spark for something new.

# Something Hidden

After the large art project wrapped up (the artwork that wraps this zine and contains Sarah's story). I was diving through the stories people had shared, analyzing and reflecting. Then somewhere in the middle of it all I had a moment of clarity that seemed obvious in hindsight. I hadn't actually changed my limitation. What changed was how I thought about it.

For as long as I could remember I had believed that an artist can't have a shaky hand. When I traced that belief back I remembered my grandpa's friend Mr. E. He painted watercolors until he developed Parkinson's and couldn't anymore. I was just a kid, but somehow that became a permanent truth in my mind. So when my tremor began, the belief slipped into place, and the sense of possibility narrowed.

As I thought about my story and everyone else's I began to notice a pattern. Every challenge we face is made up of two things: a limitation and a self-limiting belief. The limitation is the fixed part. It doesn't change in hindsight

and anyone in the same situation would agree it's real. The belief is the malleable part. And more often than not, it's doing more damage than the limitation itself.

For years I had believed that an artist can't have a shaky hand. But when I loosened my grip on that idea I found I could rephrase this "fact" as a question. How can an artist have a shaky hand?

Small question. Big ripple.



A limitation is something that has been put in our way. It's outside of us. We can't control it. It's an obstacle but there are still paths around it.

A self-limiting belief is something that we have put in our own way. It blocks all paths and doesn't allow for possibilities.

# A Pills Story

A few years ago I was at a pharmaceutical conference when a manufacturing executive told me a story that had nothing to do with art and everything to do with belief.

His company produced a widely prescribed tablet. The active ingredient wasn't driving up costs, but the delivery system was. The pill used a licensed controlled-release matrix, that's the fancy name for the material in a pill that dissolves slowly so the medicine doesn't enter your system all at once. They paid a royalty to the developer of that material, a fee that cost dollars per pill. This license was industry standard and had been in place for many years. Nobody may have said the words "that's just how it's done" out loud, but that sentence was quietly running the show.

Then someone inside the company started asking questions. What if this isn't the only way? What if we don't need this license? What if we could design something ourselves? The team was open to looking for answers and they started digging.

Eventually, someone cracked it.

They developed their own controlled-release formulation that met regulatory standards. This meant they didn't need to buy a license from someone else. Gone were the dollars per pill, replaced by something that cost pennies.

The organization had treated the licensed system as an unavoidable cost of doing business. But they were never limited by science. They were limited by assumption. Sure, the work was hard and took longer than expected but they got there.

This is how self-limiting beliefs show up inside companies. They rarely announce themselves as beliefs. They arrive dressed as common sense, hiding inside phrases like "that's industry standard" or "that's just how we've always done it." The belief calcifies until it feels like fact, until someone questions it and sees possibility where everyone else saw a wall.

We tend to think innovation begins with a big idea. More often it begins with someone refusing to accept the way things have always been.

## How Beliefs Form

Maybe you're starting to wonder about the beliefs you carry. If there's one, like Sarah's, quietly shaping things. I catch myself doing this all the time asking, is this actually true or just something I've been telling myself?

A lot of us loved Psych101 in college and I remember an organizational psychologist named Chris Argyris that researched how beliefs form. A simple version of his thinking goes like this:

A. — You have a new experience.

B. — You make a judgement about it.

C. — You carry that judgement into the future.

Here are 3 quick scenarios so you can see how it plays out.

**The Stolen Car:** You park in a new neighborhood to grab dinner with a friend. You come back and the car is gone. Weeks later you get it back but something has shifted. You spend more time picking a well lit spot and even start to avoid certain parts of the city. A few years down the road a friend suggests a restaurant near downtown and you hear yourself say “that neighborhood isn’t safe.” One dinner became a geography of worry you’ve been carrying ever since. **Or**, you become the person who always knows where to park, which streets are fine, and how to read a neighborhood at a glance.

**The Camping Trip:** Growing up, your dad took you camping every summer. Real camping, which meant cold nights, wet boots, and a fire that never quite cooperated. By the time you had kids of your own and they started asking to go camping, you always found a reason to rent a cabin instead. You told yourself you just weren’t a camping

person. But maybe what you inherited wasn't a dislike of camping. It was your dad's version of it. **Or**, you become the person who shows up with the right gear for every situation, determined to give your kids the experience your dad never quite pulled off.

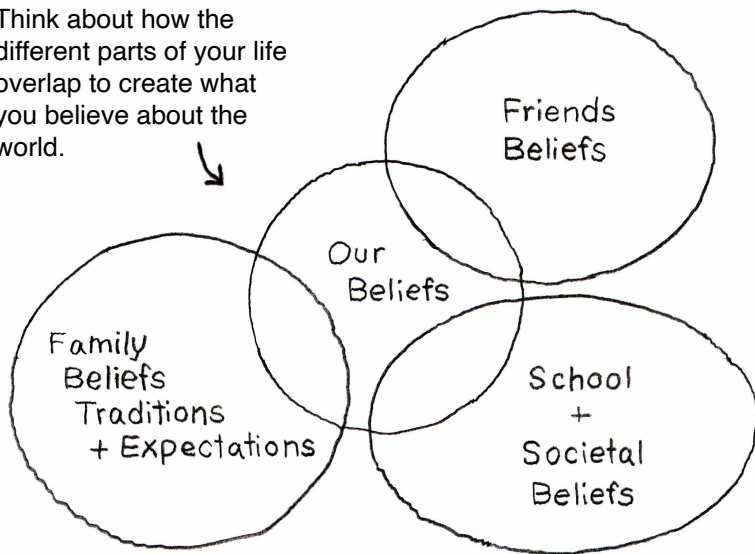
**The Potluck:** You bring a dish to a potluck and people go crazy for it. Someone asks for the recipe. From that point on you volunteer to cook for every gathering and cooking becomes part of how you see yourself. All of it traced back to one dish that happened to land on the right night. **Or**, you bring the same dish every time not wanting to mess with what works!

This happens in all aspects of life. Small past experiences harden into beliefs we treat as facts. There's probably some truth in them. But there's likely more fiction.

Most of the beliefs we form about the world happen quietly, without us noticing. The structure is neutral. What we're trying to do is get better at spotting the negative ones so we can start questioning them.

Beliefs can also come from family, friends, and society. The societal ones are often the hardest to see clearly and are the most sticky because they're everywhere, in the language we use, the stories we tell, the things nobody questions. But when we do manage to see them something shifts. We get more room to move. More room to ask what's actually true versus what we've simply always assumed.

Think about how the different parts of your life overlap to create what you believe about the world.



## The Himalayas

After I spoke to a group at Florida International University, a geology professor waited for me near the edge of the stage. His name was Neptune. Originally from India, he had earned his PhD in the United States before returning home to spend years studying the Himalayas, the landscape that had first captured his imagination.

Career opportunities eventually pulled him back to the U.S., and academic life took over. Publishing, advising, teaching, committees. The relentless pace slowly pulled

him away from fieldwork, and the Himalayas became a memory instead of a destination.

He still wanted to return. He still had hypotheses he had been developing for decades. But another voice had crept in.

You're too old for that now.

He had watched it happen to colleagues. Brilliant scientists who quietly stepped back from ambitious fieldwork once they crossed a certain age. He had seen it enough times that he began to believe it applied to him too.

Then after my talk he stopped me and said, "This moment will change my life." He explained that something clicked when I said that often no one tells us we can't do something, we tell ourselves. For example, being "too old" can become a self-imposed limitation long before it becomes a physical one.

Around that same time he had taken a university trip to Machu Picchu. To his surprise, he was the most physically fit person in the group. It was lower elevation than the Himalayas, sure, but it made him wonder. What if he could go higher? What if he could go back? The desire had never really left. What had changed was his belief about whether he could pursue it.

So he decided not to accept that belief at face value. The destination was a remote region of the Himalayas near a disputed border with China. Getting there meant four

years of navigating layers of bureaucracy across multiple government agencies. There were long stretches of bureaucratic silence, moments when the effort felt fruitless. But he kept going.

Eventually the Indian Geological Survey approved his proposal. His team spent weeks in the Himalayas, reaching Khardung La pass at 18,000 feet.

He wrote to me afterward. “I had been mulling these hypotheses for 40 years and had essentially given up hope. But I just kept thinking, why not me? After all, what did I have to lose?”

Attached to the email was a photograph. Neptune standing in the Himalayas, celebrating his 74th birthday, a field team behind him, snowcapped peaks in the distance, a wide grin on his face.



# Wrap Up

When I embraced the shake, it made me see art in a completely new way. But it also cracked open something much much bigger, this idea of self-limiting beliefs.

These days when someone says “I don’t know how you’re going to pull that off” I think, yeah, I don’t know either but maybe I can get there. When someone says “that seems like a waste of time” I think, well I’m already wasting time! Looking at beliefs as something I’ve inherited or unintentionally created, rather than something absolute, hasn’t made them disappear. But it has made them feel less final. It’s given me a bit more room to consider, to wonder, and to create without caring quite as much about how things are “supposed to be”.

Are there some limitations that seem too big to embrace? Absolutely. This isn’t about rose colored glasses or about smiling through pain. The core of this idea is about trying to find cracks in our challenges and find ourselves when overwhelmed.

Sarah couldn’t roll her windows down. Neptune had stopped imagining a return to the mountains. A company was paying dollars when pennies would do. In each case

nothing changed until someone paused and asked: what's really here? That question changes everything.

We all carry beliefs we didn't deliberately choose, shaped by family, friends, culture, and experience. Some beliefs support us. Others may quietly narrow what we see as possible. The invitation isn't to dismantle everything you believe, but to perhaps hold your beliefs a little more loosely than before.

And that, I think, is where the good stuff lives.

# Observe and Reflect

As you begin to notice your own beliefs, you may also start to see them in others

- ▶ Throughout your day, quietly observe the people around you - at work, in public, or in passing moments. Notice the beliefs they might carry about themselves. Pay attention to how people react in different situations. If someone seems to jump to a conclusion or responds strongly. Consider what might be shaping that reaction. Don't be judgmental, just sit with it for a while.
- ▶ Take a moment and think about a belief or two you're carrying right now. It doesn't have to be negative (self-limiting). Just sit with it for a second. Can you determine where it came from? How has it shown up? You don't need a neat answer. Just noticing is enough.
- ▶ Finally, ask yourself: Why do I believe this? Is it something I know to be true or something I've carried for a long time? Would I believe this about someone else in my position? And if there's even a little space to question it, what might that future look like?

# Phil Hansen

First Edition - First Printing





**Why do you destroy  
your art? Why not  
sell it?**

Phil: How long of an  
answer can I give?

**Short**

Phil: Ha. Okay.....

When I first destroyed an artwork it was for a series I did called Goodbye Art. This was years ago, and at the time no one was buying my art, so selling wasn't really an option.

I had been experimenting with the idea of intentional limitations, giving myself a constraint and working within it. I found it really pushed me creatively. One day I wondered what a really big constraint would be and quickly realized destroying my art would be huge. I love to hold onto and preserve my art, so the idea of destroying it felt counterintuitive. I set out to create art for a year and destroy all of it.

Since then I've come back to destruction for different reasons. From emotional processing, to storytelling, to simply freeing up space for a new work.



Normal matches.



Hand dipped in white-out.



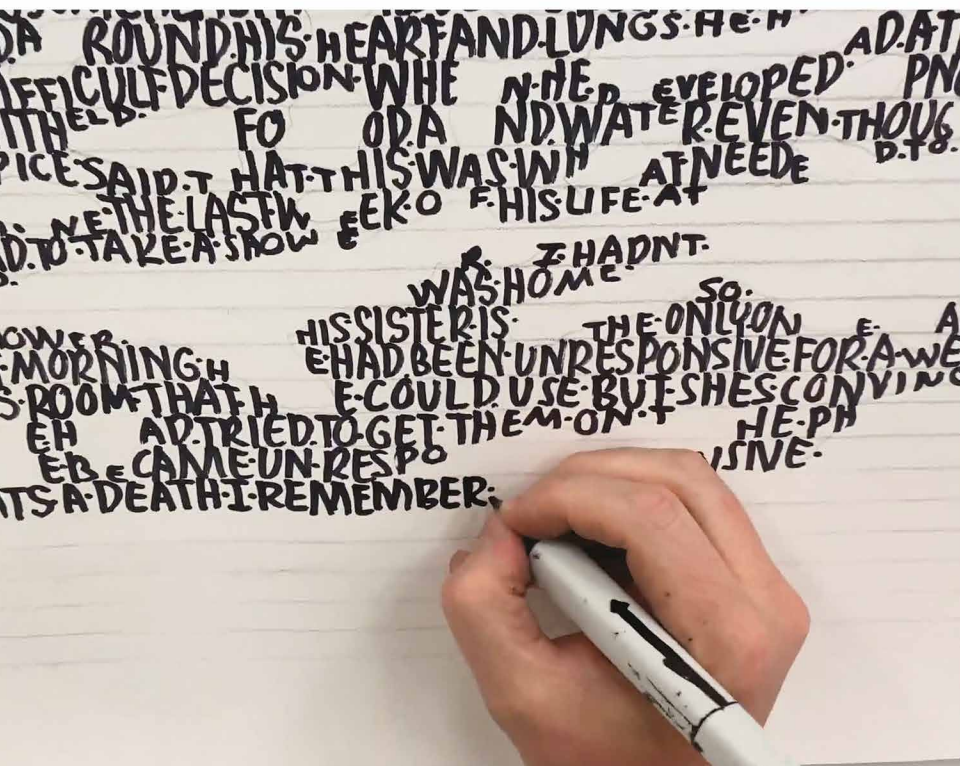
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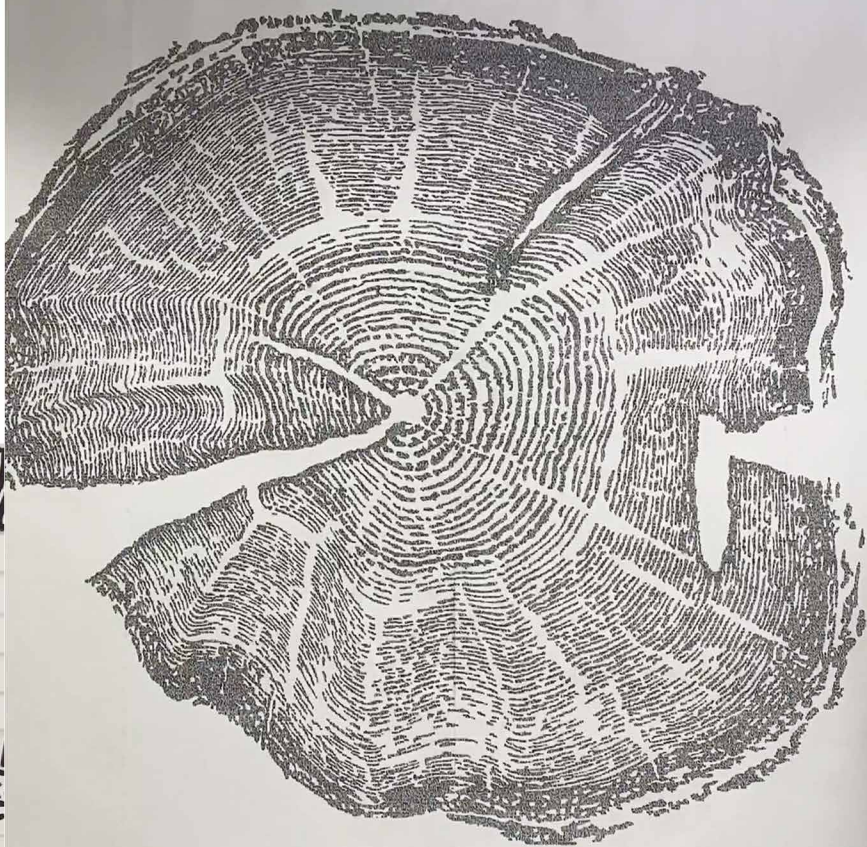


## Do you have a favorite artwork?

I tend to be obsessed with whatever artwork I'm currently working on. Most projects fade into the past really quickly for me. But I do have a favorite process which is handwriting stories that people have shared with me. I have a tremor in my hand and I find that working on a vertical surface helps reduce the shake and allow me to work for longer periods. And the artist's life can get rather lonely so connecting with people is nice.

I'm in the midst of a series right now where I'm writing stories about a death people remember. Memories of loss. The first in the series was a large wood cut. Wood grain represents so many things like growth, healing, and destruction. The series is on a bit of a hiatus but I hope to get back to it.







### What's the most unusual material you've used?

Worms. Seven thousand worms. Ha! I made a huge stencil, washed the worms, dropped them in the stencil, then removed the stencil to reveal a picture of Edgar Allan Poe. Weird right? You asked. Hahaha. And right now I have diamonds and shadows on my list of materials coming up.



Above: Phil gluing plastic to foam core to make stencil walls.

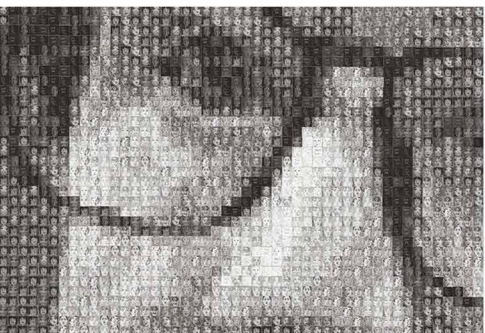
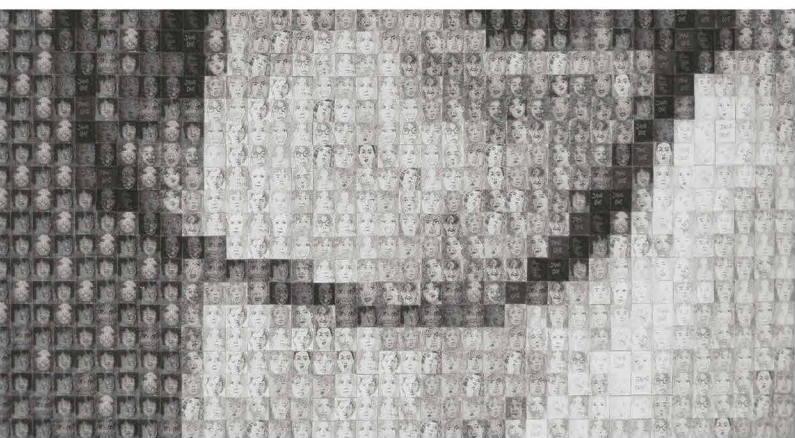
Wood supports on top of stencil which is full of worms.

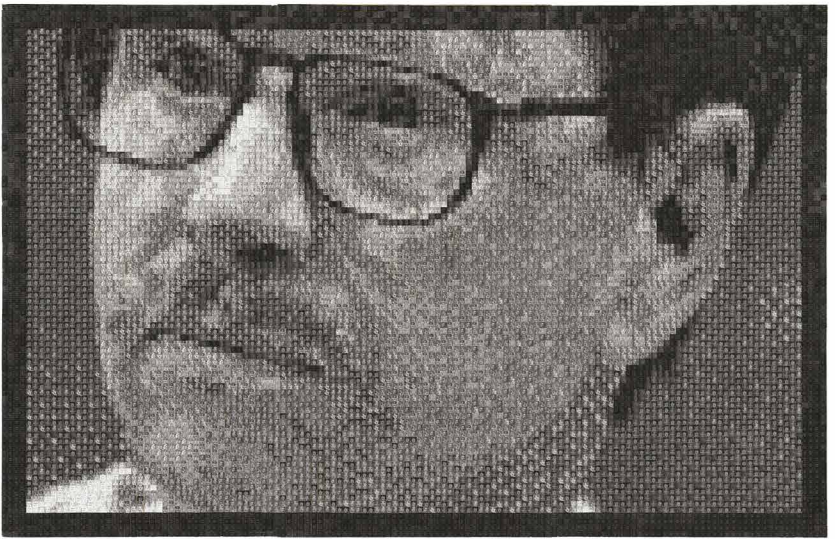


The final artwork right after the stencil was removed.

The worms crawling away. Phil released them behind the studio.







## **How did you get started making videos?**

The first website I made for my art was back in 2006 and I was struggling to show the detail of my large scale artworks. So I grabbed my video camera, hit record, then walked towards the artwork from across the room effectively zooming into the picture.

The artwork is a huge portrait of the Green River Killer created with little portraits of his victims. The thing I loved about the artwork was when you are in front of it, it's so big that you don't see Ridgeway, you just see the victims, which is the opposite of how we talk about serial killers.

I grew up in the Pacific Northwest and when Ridgeway was caught, the media's attention turned to him completely. Understandably so, but I didn't like how the victims were diminished. I thought making an artwork with a shifting focus seemed interesting. So after posting the video I noticed a lot more people watched it than landed on my site. I also enjoy making the art more than looking at the final picture so I thought that creating videos could be an interesting way to share the process.

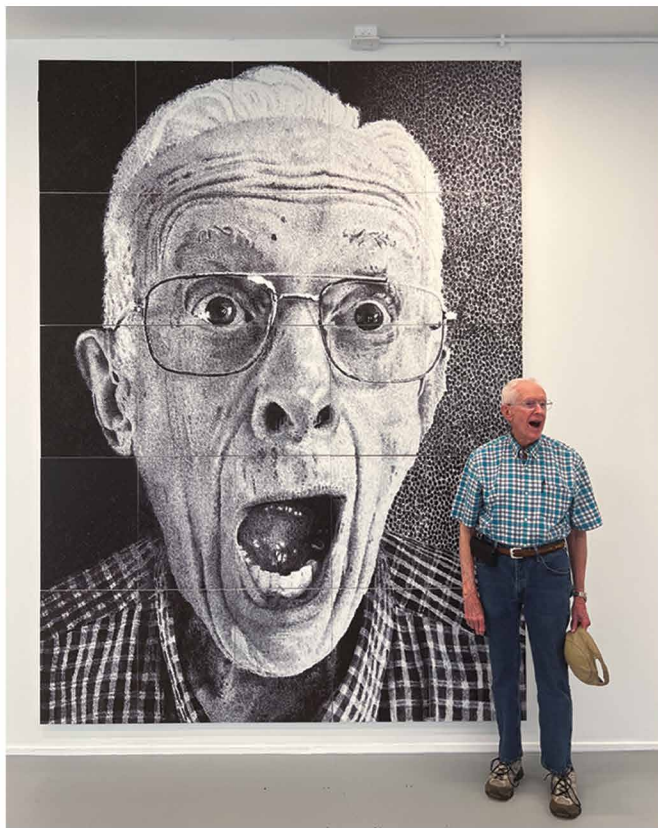
**I've read that you don't share everything you make. Why is that?**

It's funny. When you first start making art, no one sees it. Maybe a couple friends or family members. Then slowly more and more people see our art and it's possible for the artist to lose track of why they were making art in the first place because we are effectively making it for other people. That happened to me. So I decided to step back and make projects and not show them to people. I always intended to show them someday but not in real time. Like this work which was born from the random idea of making antisocial furniture. It's a chair that has an inflatable built into it and wraps the person a little bit of privacy.









### **Do you ever feel stuck?**

Well.... sorta. When I feel stuck it's very brief, I do a quick analysis, find a solution, and keep moving. I tend to think of myself first as someone who makes things, and secondly an artist. So if art isn't moving me I can always find something else that grabs my attention to work on. So do I sometimes feel stuck in art, yes, but I see it as a lull, not something to worry about too much. I just work on other things and occasionally remind myself to go back to art.



## Any advice for a young artist?

Well. It depends where someone is at in their art. If they are truly starting out, I say just keep going, keep it fun. Don't put a bunch of pressure on it. Your art and creativity can find a million possible expressions in your life.

But if someone is interested in pursuing art, then my advice is to analyze the art world and figure out where you want to be and why. Do you want to make small works, large works, extremely personal work, or work that appeals to the general public. Do you want to sell in galleries, or do you want to make art for yourself and those around you.

Then analyze and list out different ways of getting to the goal (and make a list of things that could prevent you from getting there). Then ask yourself again if that's what you really want? Then in 5 years, do this again and try not to beat yourself up if your desires have changed. We can only want things we don't have so it's natural for us to feel differently about those goals once we have them or understand them more deeply.

Oh and one final thought. Pay attention to what parts of the process you enjoy. Some people find selling things fun, others don't. Some people enjoy constantly pushing their skill set and others enjoy comfort. It's a wild range of experiences out there. Find what feels right and check in with that feeling periodically.

Left: Phil made the first drawing on the top left, then sent it to someone to copy, then he sent that to someone else to copy. On and on. Like the game of telephone but for art.

**How do you see what you create? Your work seems to come together magically but I assume there's a process to it?**

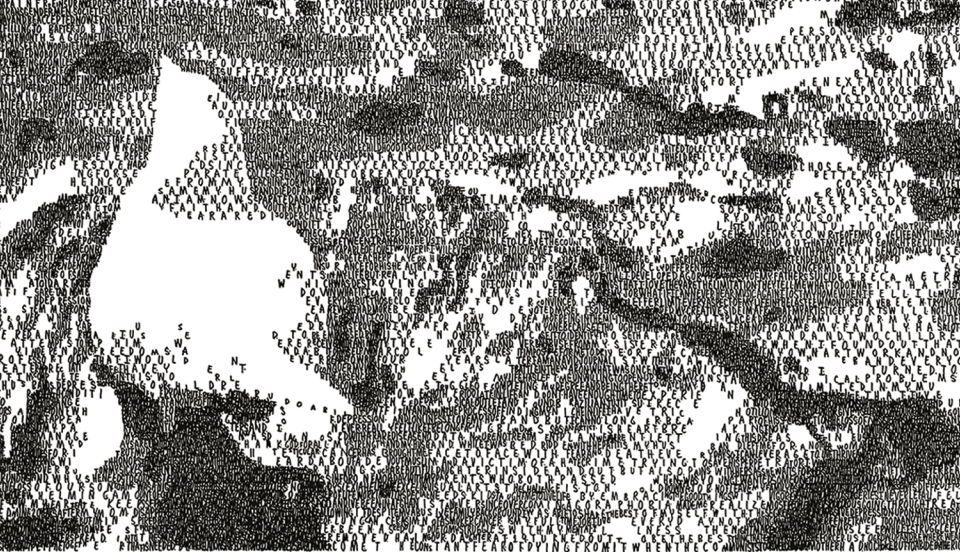
Some of my work comes together quickly without much planning. Like a piece I made of Bruce Lee using karate chops. I found a photo of him I liked, scaled my canvas accordingly, then was very careful with the first few paint hits, getting them right where I wanted, then the rest fell into place.

Other times I do tons of planning and testing that is never shown on camera or noticeable in the final product. On top of that the work is often so large, that in the video it's hard to see the marks on the paper that guide me, like in the handwriting pieces I make.

I think of making art as a spectrum that runs from spontaneous to fully planned. My work tends to be fully planned but run the gamut depending on what material I'm working with and what the end image is going to look like. Because I often use unconventional materials, there is usually a lot of testing before getting started. So by the time I get started there's not a lot of mystery for me.

Some artists work spontaneously but that is rarely the case for me. It's one of the myths out there, that artists never plan or sketch and just conjure images from nothing, I don't know a single artist that works that way. In my experience, most artists are planning, testing, using tech, and revising, even if the final work looks spontaneous.





**Who did you look up to growing up? What artists influenced you?**

The more work I make, the more clearly I see my influences and the more I realize how many different forms influence can take. The artists I connect to visually are just one aspect. Do you mind if I expand beyond a quick list(?) because influence also comes from why someone makes work in the first place. Are they influenced to answer a personal question? Push their technical limits? Communicate an idea? Or want to make something that can sell? Someone could be

influenced by a poet, an economics professor, a crazy uncle, or a famous artist.

Those starting points matter to me just as much as style or medium. When I talk with other artists, this is what I'm most interested in. The visual language is only one layer of the work. Underneath it is the artist's motivation and values, and that's often where the real influence lives.

A lot of my inspiration actually comes from music rather than visual art. I'm drawn to performers who make their values visible through their work. From their attitude, their honesty, their

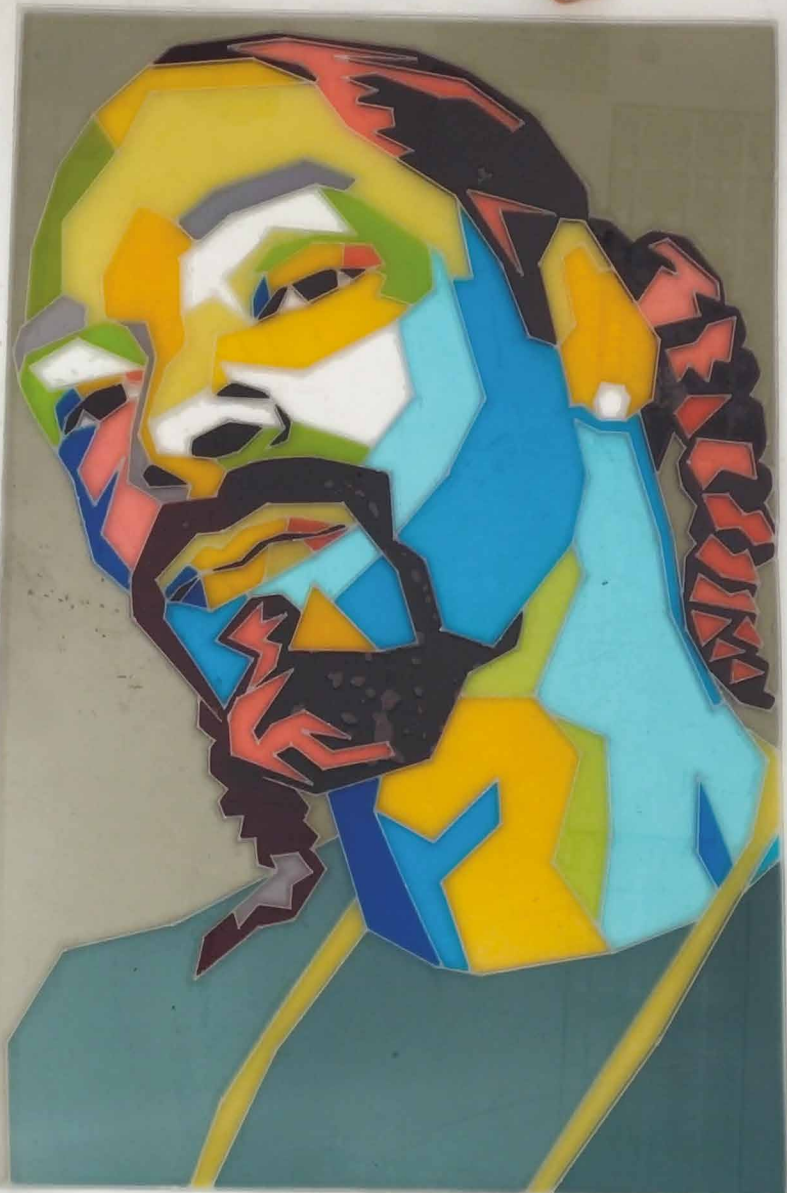


desire to stay independent, and their willingness to take risks.

People often notice in my work that I'm comfortable destroying something I spent a long time making, and that probably makes more sense when you know I grew up in the Pacific Northwest during the grunge era watching Cobain smash guitars, love punk music, and am very aware of how the goal of selling work can quietly shape what you create. At the same time, I'm deeply influenced by artists like Georges Seurat, whose patience, structure, and commitment to process would cause him to commit hundreds of hours to a single canvas.

When you put all of those influences together, the music, place, mindset, economics, and art history, it starts to explain not just how my work looks, but also why I am not too pained by its impermanent nature or destruction.

But if you're looking for a list of artists to see the visual influence in my work, they are Georges Seurat, Vik Muniz, Deborah Butterfield, Chuck Close, Frank Frazetta, Todd McFarlane, Andy Goldsworthy, and Diane Arbus.



## **What's next for you?**

The short version is more experimentation. As an artist it's very easy to get locked into a certain way of working and I really want to bring back that sense of "this might fail". So the plan is to pick a material or method of creating and push it from inception to extreme. Like, what could I create with one gummy bear, two hundred gummy bears, and ten thousand gummy bears. I don't think I'll specifically work with gummy bears but you get the idea.

I think it's a means of shifting the goal or conclusion from the final piece to the entire flow. Art is naturally about the final product but I find for me it isn't. And I want to find a way to capture that perspective. I think I've found it but the next year will answer that question.

