Take A Number

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Abstract

My MFA thesis work: a performance in which I recited ten thousand digits of the number π by carving a block of marble. Link: **https://take-a-number.evandaniel.com/**; video: **https://vimeo.com/222285517**.

This project had an origin in my initial interest in memorizing π. The very first time that I sat down to memorize digits of π, I didn't want to "just" sit down and stare at the numbers, so I tried sculpting in clay while memorizing the digits. To this day, the first digits of π most remind me of this experience.

But while the two activities might connect experientially, there is no direct connection between them. This might be thought of as analogous to the arbitrariness of the symbolic representation of the numbers; 7 has nothing to do with $\cdots\cdots$.

This project takes the latter approach. I used a circuit to count the number of times I struck the chisel with the hammer. This would trigger a number of responses: one program would record every event and save it, while another would take my picture, and another would render those pictures to video screens behind me. Finally, when I pushed a button to my left, a program would check whether the count had reached the next digit of π, and displayed feedback through an LED.

I found this experience — which, as my MFA thesis project, was performed in public — to be edifying in the understanding of numbers. Knowing that the next digit of π is 7 is one thing; proving that you know it by striking a chisel into a hard marble 7 times transcends that experience; and knowing that there are seven ducks in a pond is another. In a sense, this performance — spanning more than 10,000 trials of this action (including errors) — was a meditation on that distinction.

The performance itself was viewed by hundreds of visitors to the thesis show. Each segment of 1,000 digits took roughly six hours to carve. The design of the work was meant to be as clear as possible; in general, the audience was able to deduce what was happening without further explanation. The pieces of marble that came off the block were funneled out the front of the enclosure I was in, and the audience was instructed to take them. Literally, they were taking a number. While this has a trivial connection to an English phrase, there is a

Figure 1: As I was carving into the block of marble, I counted the number of times I was striking the chisel to correspond to the next digit of π.

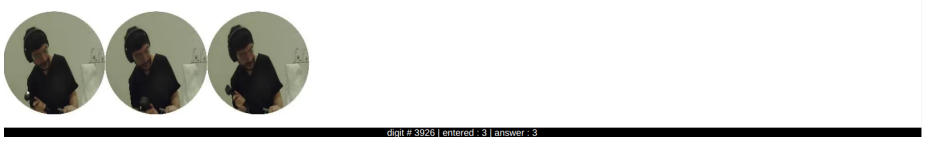

Figure 2: Photographic record of digit 3926.

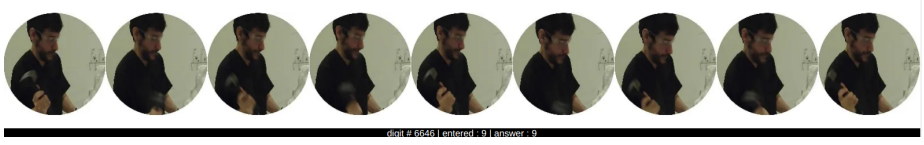

Figure 3: Photographic record of digit 6646.

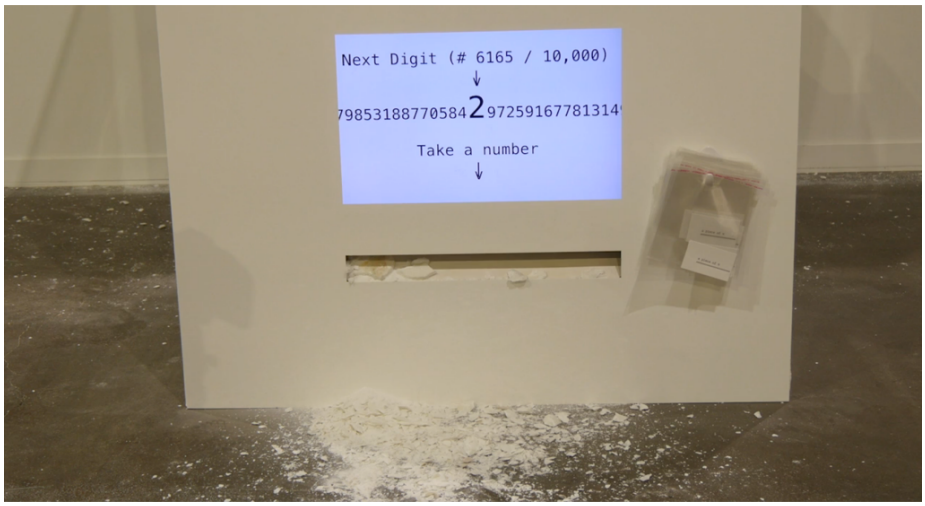

Figure 4: A screen indicated which digit I was up to, while visitors were invited to take away a piece of marble (arguably connected to numeric data).

deeper philosophical meaning here: the pieces of marble that chipped off are indeed the subject of reification.

Take a Number was an important moment in my practice. It was preceded by large body of work that addressed the reification of numbers from memory; see Teaching π to Robots and Encoding π, among other projects. It differed from those projects in that it addressed the process of reification. In the short-term, it spawned a project that took a similar approach; Reciting π in Networks. In the long-term, this project has marked a shift from projects that reify numbers from memory to projects about memory and numeric cognition.