From the Museum to the Parking Lot: A Scrutiny of the Everyday

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Abstract:

My work is inspired by my investigations of overlooked places in the cities that I live, experiences that I seek to translate through drawing and printmaking. This paper follows the evolution of my BFA thesis work at Washington University in St. Louis, from my initial sketches in museums to my more recent, sustained investigations of parking lots and strip malls. Key issues raised are the history of knowledge, especially in relation to science and museums, and whether it is possible to know a place through firsthand observation. The paper focuses specifically on the subjectivity of drawing and ways that the drawing process itself can convey a fragmented sense of place.
From the Museum to the Parking Lot:

* A Scrutiny of the Everyday

**Introduction:**

For as long as I can remember, I’ve loved roaming through natural history exhibits and drawing from musty dioramas. Growing up, I voraciously read old National Geographics, especially the stories about explorers and field scientists who traveled to distant lands in search of rare artifacts and samples. As part of my BFA thesis work, I have been producing my own fieldwork through sustained investigation of a single space: the Washington University West Campus parking lot, near the corner of Forsyth and Forest Park Parkway.

I am specifically interested in using drawing as a tool to look more closely at my everyday surroundings. No matter what I draw, the essential elements of my practice stay the same: a few graphite pencils, a small space to draw in, and my focus and imagination. I am not a naturalist or explorer, but I am highly invested in examining the world around me. Through repeated investigation of the same site over a period of time, I attempt to find meaning in the everyday.

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In the first part of this paper, I will outline a brief overview of natural history and museums to give greater context to my own work. I will then discuss key concepts in an installation I completed last fall, *Exurbia Reexamined*, which shares a lot in common with pieces by well-known contemporary artist Mark Dion. In the second part of this paper, I will reflect on my recent project *Views from the Parking Lot* and expand into a broader discussion about two artists who use drawing as a means to navigate physical spaces, Ingrid Calame and Masao Okabe. By focusing on
artists who work directly from physical sites, I hope to stress the power of firsthand observation and fieldwork. At the same time, I also want to call attention to the subjectivity of these seemingly “authentic” artistic investigations. Throughout the paper, I will return to the issue of knowledge, and how it has traditionally been produced.

I have long been interested in museums and the Enlightenment ideas they are built upon: accuracy, objectivity, completeness. I don't think I will ever forget my visit to the Glass Flowers collection at the Harvard Peabody Museum. The entire room contains over 3,000 plant specimens modeled in glass by nineteenth century naturalists Leopold and Rudolph Blaschka (Rossi-Wilcox 11). Today, the Blaschkas' project seems painstaking, obsessive and archaic, but it was initially regarded as a legitimate scientific investigation and complete archive of the the natural world. As a twenty-first century visitor to the exhibit, I initially noticed all of the imperfections in Blaschkas' collection: labels with missing words, the dust that has gathered at the corners of the display cases, plant sculptures with chipped petals or leaves. These small details hint at the gaps in the archive: all of the information that the Blaschkas didn't know, couldn't record or failed to preserve.

To me, Glass Flowers is poignant because it depends on two traditional (but inherently flawed) systems to convey truth: direct observation and collecting. I have chosen to discuss Glass Flowers at the beginning of this paper because I am fascinated by the Blaschkas' attempt to record and categorize reality. I rely heavily on observational drawing and collecting in my own work, but I don't think either approach is completely suitable as a means to capture experience. Every time I
attempt to draw or record things around me, I become increasingly aware of my inability to grasp the whole. I am fascinated by encyclopedic collections like *Glass Flowers* because the Blaschkas and others like them attempted to do the impossible: contain the entire world in a small space.

*Museology, taxonomy and natural science originally developed from Renaissance intellectual culture in Europe* (Valdecasas 509). Botanic and zoologic illustration emerged alongside the invention of print technology in the late fifteenth century (Richards 70). Notable European scientists like Conrad Gessner (1516-1565), author of *Historia Animalium*, Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778), whose influential book *Systema Naturae* earned him the nickname "father of modern taxonomy," and Georges Buffon (1707-1788), author of *Histoire naturelle* are just some of the influential thinkers who helped found the field of natural history (Charmentier 366) (Kusukawa 304) (Loveland 457).

Left: Ferrante Imperato, *Wunderkammer*, from *Historia Naturale*, 1599 (Putnam 10)
Right: Display cases, *Glass Flowers* exhibit at the Harvard Peabody (Ragan 2010)

By the time the Blaschkas were building their *Glass Flowers* collection in the early 1900s, natural science was already long established, and relied heavily on very specific systems of investigation and classification (Rossi-Wilcox 11). Museums like the Harvard Peabody, American Museum of Natural History and Smithsonian
Institution were modeled after colonial museums in Europe, which helped finance the fieldwork of anthropologists, naturalists and other scholars traveling to unknown territories around the world (Bell 40-42) (Meisel 20). Nineteenth century museum directors like Adolf Bastian, head of the Ethnological Museum in Berlin, organized collecting expeditions to “primitive” societies on the verge of rapid cultural change. Bastian’s philosophical ideas — that cultures could be objectively studied, that races could be categorized, that the natural world could be ordered—helped shape the philosophy and practices of major museums in Europe and the United States in the late 1800s (Penny and Bunzl 101).

In my work, I intend to reference traditional museum practices, but with a sense of humor and a nod to contemporary issues. Last year, I altered my studio to resemble a nineteenth century naturalist’s office, which is lined floor to ceiling with boxes, jars and picture frames of the “specimens” I’ve found. For several months, I made regular trips to the outskirts of St. Louis, in order to sketch the industrial parks and strip malls that are now ubiquitous landmarks of the American landscape. On my excursions, I collected samples of detritus by the side of the road which I then brought back to my studio to draw and examine more closely. The piece, *Exurbia Reexamined*, is both a truthful reflection of my own idiosyncratic collecting practices and a slightly absurd reinterpretation of the traditional curio cabinet.

I see a lot of parallels between my own work and installations by contemporary artist Mark Dion. Over the past few decades, Dion has developed a body of work that both pays homage to and pokes fun at traditional collecting practices. For many of his installations, he assumes fictional roles within imaginary
institutions, and assembles mock-displays that are reminiscent of old-fashioned laboratories (Dion and Wittkop 13). In 1999, for instance, Dion organized a project called *Tate Thames Dig*, where he staged an unofficial archaeological dig and preserved thousands of artifacts excavated by the shore of the Thames River in London. Some objects—like ceramic shards—might actually have had monetary value; others, like broken cellphones and bottlecaps—would normally be regarded as trash (Putnam 40-41). All of the finds were cleaned, meticulously drawn and displayed by Dion in glass cases at the Tate Gallery.

*Top left:* Mark Dion and team staging a “dig” in Massachusetts (Dion, *New England Digs*, 003)
*Top right:* Closeup view of Tate Thames Dig drawers, with sketches inside (Dion, *Lab Book*, 65)
*Bottom:* Dion’s field notes from Tate Thames Dig, including sketches of cellphone, toy truck, bone and other buried objects (Dion, *Lab Book*, 27)

When assembling *Exurbia Reexamined*, I engaged in a similar three step process: first, exploring the outskirts of St. Louis and collecting objects; next,
categorizing my finds by color, texture and type; finally, displaying the artifacts on the walls and shelves of my imaginary studio. Like Dion, I collected almost everything, especially objects that wouldn’t normally be seen as important. Cigarette butts, paint flakes, Caution signs, hubcaps, wrappers and woodchips were all treated with care and reframed so that they seemed exotic. I deliberately obscured the original function of most objects so viewers would appreciate the items on a purely aesthetic level. I became fascinated with the fact that some of the objects—like a bent drainage pipe I found in an alley—looked unfamiliar when taken out of their original context. Nailed to the wall and positioned at an angle, the pipe looked like some ancient bone or strange ceramic vessel. When I thought about my project more deeply, I began to realize that the process of collecting and drawing trash was about defamiliarizing myself with the “normal.”

Left: Julie Cronan, Exurbia Reexamined installation, Washington University in St. Louis, 2012
Right: Unknowing, drawn on walls inside installation, 2012

The museum is a space where the public can go to examine objects from another time or place, and speculate about the original significance those objects might have had. Sometimes, museum exhibits contain surprisingly small amounts of artifacts from a civilization—just a few fragments of fossil or bone, which scholars
have scrutinized for clues about the past. Items that might have originally been regarded as trash (feces, rocks, scrap metal) become treasure for museum experts, especially if very little remains from an ancient society. In my cabinet of curiosities, the opposite is true. All of the artifacts I have collected come from a familiar, contemporary place: the American roadside. None of things I’ve collected are unique; in fact, most, like the White Castle wrappers and Caution signs, are mass-produced items, scattered in landfills or along curbs in every American city. I wanted there to be some irony and humor in the piece, and for me, the contrast between the museum-like set up and mass-produced, familiar objects is important. The room is designed to make viewers think that they are looking at displays of exotic items, when in reality, they are only looking at items from their own culture.

In my current parking lot investigations, I have continued to draw and collect fragments from the roadside. The main difference is that instead of going back and forth from studio to site, I now do most of my drawing from inside a makeshift studio: the empty attendant’s booth at the front of the lot. I think of the booth as an outpost, like a ranger’s station in a man-made landscape. The booth’s windows and walls separate me from passerby, and allow me to observe the lot from a more objective point of view. Like Mark Dion, I see myself as part researcher, part explorer, someone tasked with the responsibility of surveying a space so ordinary it typically gets overlooked.

My first attempt to document the lot was to literally draw every “artifact” I saw and compile my drawings in an encyclopedia format. From these sketches, I created larger scale drawings, which were first rendered intricately in pencil, oiled
and layered atop one another. To make these drawings, I dissected each of the objects and then carefully drew their insides. The disassembled parking meter parts and splayed traffic cone were then presented alongside the drawings, to make direct reference to anatomy and taxidermy. To me, the process of dissecting these objects is analogous to my larger investigation of the parking lot where they come from. The parking lot itself is an artifact, and I am interested in studying it so I can better understand why it exists.

The more I draw, the less I feel I know, and as mentioned earlier, I see the act of drawing as analogous to unraveling: shifting away from set norms or basic facts. For me, urban sprawl is one of the most fundamental “norms”—a reality I can’t escape, no matter what city I travel to. I don’t drive, so in order to get places, I have to walk or bike through areas that were designed for cars. I find the experience of walking through urban sprawl surreal: here I am, a small body, traipsing through large expanses of pavement and underneath monumental highway pylons. Most times I walk, I feel a strange sense of déjà vu, because the signage and built
structures constantly repeat. So the actual repetition in the landscape and the repetition that comes with close examination of objects influence my drawing practice. For me, drawing mirrors the process of walking, and knowing.

Two contemporary artists that incorporate site-specific fieldwork into their studio practice are Ingrid Calame and Masao Okabe. Okabe’s work *The Dark Face of the Light* was selected to represent Japan in the 52nd Venice Biennale in 2007 (Japan Foundation 2007). Over the course of about seven years, Okabe made thousands of rubbings of the floor of the Ujina train station in Hiroshima (Japan Foundation 2007). For the Biennale, he framed the rubbings in wooden shadowboxes that wrapped from floor to ceiling (Japan Foundation 2007). Interspersed between the rubbings were framed plant specimens, and a massive block of stone that had been exposed to radiation during the bombing stretched across the floor in the center of the room (Japan Foundation 2007).

*Left: Masao Okabe, The Platform of the Old Ujina Station, Hiroshima, 2002 (Okabe 2002)*
*Right: Masao Okabe, The Dark Face of the Light, 52nd Venice Biennale (Hokkaido Museum 2002)*

This display gave the entire installation the sense of an archive or museological exhibit. The commissioner of the piece, Chihiro Minato, described the
work as a memorial and reconstruction of history. Apparently, the rubbings stand in for an actual structure, since the station was demolished in the recent past (Japan Foundation 2007). In my own work, I am interested in using rubbing as a simple means to document and reconstruct the parking lot space. In my mind, the fact that the entire lot will be rebuilt in the near future adds a sense of urgency and purpose to my project. I am documenting a space that might not exist in the same form that I see it today. At the same time, all earlier history at this particular location was erased when it was paved to make room for the parking lot. My project of “knowing” the parking lot becomes strange when seen in this context, because I am essentially looking for history and meaning in a place without any visible traces of the past.

The second artist, Ingrid Calame, consciously uses tracing and rubbing as a means to document the invisible textures of everyday life (Carlozzi 29). Together with a team of assistants, Calame traces stains, cracks, skid marks and other textures that suggest the passage of time or human presence on transparent film (Pagel 2012). In an interview for the magazine Time Out Shanghai, Calame explained that “the whole surface of the world is a potential drawing” (Gaskin 2012). She went on to add that her repetitive tracing process is really about capturing fragments of reality, since it is impossible to ever fully document the whole world (Gaskin 2012). Even though Calame’s working process is site-specific and direct, her final pieces are devoid of context and filled with layers of colored paint or pencil (Carlozzi 29). I am more inspired by Calame’s process than her finished products, since my own art is about fragmentation and remnants. Like Calame, I also use transparent, fragile materials to trace and rub, so I can overlay multiple layers of texture. Calame
describes her pieces in cartographic terms; I also see my rubbings as part of a mapping process (Gaskin 2012).

Drawing is a means to an end, a tool to help me navigate and better understand the places I visit. Like Calame and Okabe, I continually turn to rubbing as the most direct and natural method of drawing. For the culmination of my parking lot project, I am collecting an archive of textures from the parking lot, which I will present in an informal, cumulative manner. I know I will never complete the task of archiving the lot, but I want to make an attempt to do so. I am more interested in conveying the impossibility and poetry of attempting such a task than I am in trying to finish it.

I also plan to conduct a series of short time-based performance pieces where I physically walk the perimeter of each parking space and record my footprints. To my mind, these kinesthetic exercises will allow me to “know” an already familiar space even more deeply. If the parking lot represents all suburbia and sprawl, then the process of charting a path within its boundaries takes on much larger implications.
Conclusion:

In her book *One Place After Another*, theorist Miwon Kwon reflects on the whether one can still retain a sense of place in an increasingly globalized, fragmented world. In the last chapter, she cites cultural writer Lucy Lippard’s definition of place as the “portion of a land/town/cityscape seen from the inside, the resonance of a specific location that is known and familiar.. the external world mediated through human experience” (Kwon 158). In other words, no land is inherently a “place;” land becomes places only when humans find meaning in it.

Parking lots are frequently described as “non-places,” never destinations in their own right. And yet parking lots are ubiquitous; they can be found almost anywhere. For me, this project has been about coming to terms with sprawl; trying to find meaning in the parking lot. I may never find it, but I think it’s worth the search.

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   Top right: Closeup view of *Tate Thames Dig* drawers, with sketches inside 
   Bottom: Dion’s field notes from *Tate Thames Dig*

   Right: *Unknowing*, drawn on walls inside installation, 2012

4. Left: Julie Cronan, *Dissection*, pencil drawings on oiled newsprint, March 2013 
   Right: Julie Cronan, *POM 108-100-076*, pencil drawings on oiled newsprint, March 2013

   Right: Masao Okabe, *The Dark Face of the Light*, 52nd Venice Biennale (Hokkaido Museum 2002)

6. Left: Ingrid Calame, #297 *Drawing (Tracings from Buffalo, NY)*, 2008 (James Cohan Gallery) 
   Right: Ingrid Calame, Photograph of artist tracing road textures in Seoul, Korea, 2005 (Laich 2005)
WORKS CITED

(Note: If a work below is not directly cited in the body of my paper, it has been included because the general ideas within it influenced me in the writing process.)


