The Science of the Concrete: A 21st Century Bricoleur

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The Science of the Concrete: A 21st Century Bricoleur

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Abstract

The 1962 work of structural anthropology *The Savage Mind* by Clause Levi-Strauss argues the position of the bricoleur, a resourceful artisan who relies primarily on mystical thought and constructs using whatever materials are available. In this thesis I argue how my modes of making are parallel to those of the bricoleur, exploring the notion that science and mystical thought are equivalent approaches to understanding the world around us. By exploring aspects of nature, time and space, I invoke the ancient past through my references to indigenous cultures and insert my own experiences through the lens of my IPhone documented during daily rituals. I connect with my geographical home by sourcing local materials, and rely on intuition by tapping into my connection to nature and the cosmos. By blending ritual with a sculptural approach to making I curate both found and fabricated objects into carefully considered assemblages.
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Introduction

January 15, 2015

Rules for Being an artist:

1. Maintain an active meditative practice daily - yoga
2. Eat whole foods as much as possible
3. Make use of all materials used and found throughout the day
4. Give new life to dead objects
5. Find a connection in all things in the universe
6. Write in journal daily
7. Trust yourself

Claude Levi-Strauss develops ideas on mystical thought and introduces the term “Bricoleur” in his book *The Savage Mind*. He argues that both science and mystical thought should be compared as parallel modes of acquiring knowledge. He includes numerous field notes from his ethnological studies, noting the intuitive nature of primal beings from remote areas of the world who find medicinal and practical uses of the local plants and animals of their environment. He elaborates on the bricoleur, a resourceful artisan who uses available materials and tools rather than seeking out what is not accessible. He expands on the Siberian people’s use for medicinal purposes - plants and animals used to cure toothaches, fevers, dog bites, eye complaints. “The real question is not whether the touch of a woodpecker’s beak does in fact cure toothache. It’s rather
whether there is a point of view from which a woodpecker’s beak and a man’s tooth can be seen as ‘going together’, and whether some initial order can be introduced into the universe by means of these groupings.”¹

I can draw parallels between my work and the techniques of the bricoleur. A list of rules I made for myself over a year ago, before I came across The Savage Mind, led me to the idea of the bricoleur. Sourcing local materials, like geodes from the Mississippi River became a point of departure in my practice; and finding a “connection in all things in the universe” is exemplified in the assemblages I put together, juxtaposing unlike objects with one another. Levi-Strauss’ statement on the Siberian peoples’ practice relates to three main points of reference as I argue my relationship to the bricoleur: the local as a point of departure (woodpecker’s beak), redefining ways of understanding (the beak and tooth seen together), and intuition as a passage for making (accepting that these two objects go together), all of which have led me to accept the mediums and vehicles in which I use to make sculpture. To understand the ideas behind these concepts I first must explain my transition from painting to sculpture.

I. Transition from Painting to Sculpture: Using place as a point of departure

I have a background as a painter. As my practice began to mature, I felt an unavoidable urge to move into sculpture. The first symbolic action I performed involved removing a painting from its stretcher bars, submerging it in porcelain slip and firing it the kiln, transforming its physical state from canvas to porcelain. It felt liberating to transform this piece, which was bound, both literally and figuratively, by an edge, into something completely different. Without hesitation I delved into clay and papermaking, often blending the two together, finding both mediums to be congruent modes of making as I was making the switch from painting to sculpture. The material allowed for chance to come through, which I see as a conduit for intuition to take form in the medium; ceramics is harder to control than painting and I would frequently fail. I began to look for unconventional ways to display ceramic pieces- creating shelves, fusing fired clay into the paper and making odd floor arrangements, establishing a relationship with the floor and the wall. Like the bricoleur, I started collecting natural items from my environment.
surroundings. I would make paper out of willow branches, geodes, and foraged mushrooms, engaging the idea of chance and creating ritual within my practice. I was new to St. Louis, and collecting, caring for and observing my environment was my way of connecting to this new place that I was calling home.

Gathering is a key component to the development of my feminist language, which I will elaborate further on when describing moon circles in my home, and it remains fundamental in my practice. Mushrooms, an ancient species used for their culinary and spiritual uses for centuries, are inherently tied to the notion of gathering. A nocturnal plant, they appear overnight, miraculously forming “fairy rings” or sprouting on the sides of trees. Mushrooms have been used in every indigenous culture for their medicinal uses and to expand human consciousness into mystical and spiritual states. Reaching altered states through the consumption of certain species of mushrooms influences the creative process by ways of seeing and understanding the world around us. As such I began documenting, gathering and making mushroom forms in my own work. For example, an
untitled piece of paper from 2014 was made from recycled pulp and locally foraged mushrooms. Searching for and identifying mushrooms takes a highly skilled individual who is first and foremost keen on looking, an important action I would tie into my work later as I began to create installations.

*Chicken of the Woods*, a ceramic wall piece, is named after a fungus that grows on the sides of trees, and is frequently foraged for culinary purposes. The presence of the fungus marks a symbolic rite of passage because this fungus causes its host to rot, eventually causing the tree to collapse. Working with the natural form the clay shaped as I rolled it through a press, I made shelves that echo the “shelf-like” fungus that grows on trees. I liked the idea of having empty shelves on a wall, hanging in all different directions, some slanting or suspended sideways so that nothing can occupy them. At this point I was still
very interested in exploring my space around me but had started to think about display and composing objects.

The first three-dimensional piece I made not dependent on the wall was an untitled large piece of handmade paper made from local plants and broken ceramic pieces, that I suspended from a welded steel frame. At the same time that I was thinking of unconventional ways of displaying my ceramic objects, I was also thinking of unconventional ways of displaying two-dimensional pieces. Display and the way in which the pieces operate in space had been on my mind since my transition into sculpture.
II. Questioning the Conventions of Display and Redefining Our Way of Seeing

As my work extended off the wall, my main concern was expanding my vocabulary for sculpture. Questioning established attitudes about art, knowledge and culture, I started thinking first about display, and understanding and challenging traditional notions of institutional display became a priority. Museums provide for us a way of seeing, and in most cases what we are expected to understand about the past is through chronological order. We understand objects as “craft” or “artifacts”, and items put on display are given a heightened status and are automatically deemed more important than others.

I became invested in demonstrating the effectiveness of display and started utilizing distinctive installation strategies, playing with how this could generate fundamentally different ways of apprehending. I sliced geodes open to expose the interior crystal formation that would otherwise be left hidden. Foam and packing material, which is typically never
exposed but rather operates as a hidden layer, became an object worthy of display. Like ancient Greek or Roman sculpture, found broken marble slabs are left jagged, their broken corners playing a significant role in the composition, recalling historical and artistic value and ideas of conservation practices. A rug, which is always put to work when it is on the floor as we step all over it, is hung and put to rest. I photographed insects that mimic, like a praying mantis, butterfly and stick bugs. Insects that mimic indicate display while at the same time imply notions of entropy, questioning what is separating one thing from the next. Creating dualities in the work became a strategy as I was orienting the objects. I would place the photos with geodes and packing foam; not because they necessarily have a direct relationship with one another, but because I see them as going together.

*Hand Catching Lead*, the photo that I took of the logs taken outside my own home, is titled after Richard Serra’s 1968 film regarding repetition as a way of composing. Serra’s *Hand Catching Lead* explores the nature of sculpture as a process based on repetitive movements. Order is simply
order; it is one thing after another but it also models time. It is a strategy to escape relational composition, a strategy I borrow from the minimalists. In Judd’s words, it’s a way in which to find what the world is like. When we find out what something is, we give it shape.²

Robert Morris surmises, “The past had to become an object in order that the future might be controlled.”³ We propose a model for an image and then it becomes abstract. Everything in art is a stand-in for something else. Sculpture resembling something else is simply a masquerade. One thing after another is real, it is concrete. Art becomes more accessible and democratic this way. Repetition helps us remember what we saw and experienced, and it takes shape throughout my work as I will explain.

It was during the investigation of space that I began to think about creating beaded curtains. I wanted to create something suspending from the ceiling that engages the viewer so they literally have to walk through it. We typically think of sculpture as

² In her 1977 book Passages in Modern Sculpture, Krauss explains "repition as a way of composing", using Serra’s film Hand Catching Lead as an example. She quotes Judd from his 1964 essay Specific Objects when he says, "the order is not rationalistic and underlying, but it simply order, like that of continuity, one thing after another." Rosalind E. Krauss, Passages in Modern Sculpture (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1981)p244, 251-253.

³ In Lippard’s 1983 book Overlay, she discusses the beginning of written language. She quotes Claude Levi-Strauss as he describes how writing has deprived humanity of the fundamental “archaic capacity for explaining the world around us by establishing analogies between nature and human life.” She then goes on to quote Robert Morris, noting that history has merely become sequence- “just one damn thing after another.” Lucy R. Lippard, Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory, repr (New York: The New Press, 2010)p 84.
grounded; I am interested in challenging that notion and expanding it outward into space. We have assumptions for sculpture, volume, mass and density, and viewers make their initial judgments about what an object might be and where it is situated. What would volume without mass look like? Brancusi investigated space through sculpture. His works had a fluid motion and would jut into space, literally slicing through the air as in his Bird in Flight. A rejection of form began, which in a way is a feminist movement because men have carved the world which we live in.\textsuperscript{4} Hanging the beads from the ceiling rather than making a piece which stands on the ground is a way to create volume without mass; thousands of tiny beads, one after another, melting away conventional ideas of sculpture. The curtains recall the era of the hippie culture, when there was a real moment of time when individuals were reaching back to their primal beings, seeking a simpler time. These beads are linking the 60s to the present and back to prehistory. I decided to use a mirror glaze, in order to make the thousands of tiny beads reflective; the surface structure existing simultaneously in a suspended condition. It is through this thought that I began to understand the immateriality of material that I am working with.

III. Defining Material by Following Intuition

One of my strongest feminist impulses in my work is my relationship to nature. Our (female) bodies are immensely bonded with nature. Our menstrual cycles, which are predetermined with the lunar cycle, align with the magnetic tides of the ocean. In many indigenous cultures a large part of making is done when the women would “retreat” during menstruation, oftentimes to a specific destination that was situated away from the rest of the members of the community. This was a time when women were given their space to work and socialize with one another. Based on research I had been conducting on the local ancient Indigenous culture of Cahokia as well as early civilizations throughout the Southwest, I started thinking about hosting a circle in my home to help manufacture the ceramic beads. I read about Wallace Berman and the circles he had in his home. I was attracted to how Berman’s practice stands outside the traditional art-historical narrative, reacting on my feminist impulse to challenge the conventions of art discourse. Thinking about my body and my menstrual cycle in relation to the moon, I developed a moon circle in my own home and on every full or new moon I would invite guests to my house. We would eat, drink and socialize, and I invited the guests to help make clay beads for the installation I had in mind.
I like using clay as a medium because it allows for working with our hands in a very cathartic way. Pottery has served to maintain an independent status for women in indigenous cultures for many years and it is said that one of the functions of pottery manufacture was the occupation of women’s time. In a memoir titled *Papago Women* written by anthropologist Ruth Underhill, (I will note the Papago is a dated term and is no longer used to describe Tohono O’odham people) Underhill described how clay bowls were used to hold the water that purified a person. Once the bowl collected too much power it had to be thrown away and she (the maker) had to have a new one ready.\(^5\) This ritualistic way of making inspired a piece of stacked terra cotta pots. The craft is learned through a “process of imitation and repetition.” The designs on my own pieces were borrowed from the designs of the Tohono O’odham pottery, which

\(^5\)Ruth Underhill, an early American ethnologist spent time with Chona, a Tohono O’odham woman, and documented her stories to write the Autobiography of Chona. Here, Chona is describing a cleansing ritual taking place for her father after he has killed an Apache. The bowls are used for cleansing, and must be thrown away every 4 days because of the power that they hold, and a new one must be ready to take it’s place. She describes Leaf Buds as a good potter, she was chosen by Chona’s father because of her quick ability to make bowls. Ruth Murray Underhill, *Papago Woman*, Case Studies (Prospect Heights, Ill: Waveland Press, 1985)p 45-47.
express culture ideas about time and nature. When the Tohono O’odham women are asked about where the ideas for the designs derive from, it was not an unusual answer that they were simply made up. Many of the women present during the circles in my home expressed the desire to be working specifically with their hands. I saw this as a response not only to the individual desire to make and hold something but a counter to the contemporary crisis of distraction with virtual feeds and digital devices.

For me, the moon circles came out of a desire to incorporate personal ritual in my work. My original intention for creating the circles was so I could produce a large number of ceramic beads that I could not have fabricated on my own. But that got lost somewhere along the way and the circles started to become something entirely different. These gatherings were very private and invitation was by word of mouth only; in a time when I am constantly being bombarded by invitations to events via Facebook, I wanted to make this something more intimate, more real. These circles became an important part of the work, and the time and labor are indexical to the piece. I now started to have a grasp on the possibilities of sculpture in new terms; it wasn’t merely about the specific object anymore. I began documenting the moon circles. I would visit the homes and studios of the women who were participating in the moon circles and would document their workspaces. I started to document my own daily rituals, like a walk in Forest Park with my dog, Lulu. I began taking video footage of my dog and me as we were bonding and

playing. This is when I realized that the material exists in these experiences and I was manifesting these occurrences through my camera.

Walking as a medium in my work opens up freedom from my own daily space. Creating space to work was not only achieved through the circles I developed in my home but also during my daily routines. I have made a conscious effort to not neglect what is important in my life due to whatever nature of work and obligations I may have; spending time outdoors is very important to me and is the field work to my practice. Every day my dog and I walk three miles into Forest Park. Documentation during these walks is key. By documenting my walks, I simply state what exists in the world and that I was there at that moment to see it. My encounter with turtles, insects, countless fungi and majestic trees have all been documented.

I recall a recent trip to the park, which moved me to write about it. This particular morning I was acutely present. And what I experienced was a series of events, one
occurring after another, which made me realize both the present and memory simultaneously.

_I have spent so much time in the park since I’ve moved to this foreign city. I like to get there in the morning, early. Before many people are up and out. The few people who are there are the ones who enjoy it as I do. During the harsh winter weather I have been deprived of my daily ritual with Lulu. I fight through winter wanting to hibernate like the rest of the animals, and my art practice suffers. Finally spring starts to emerge, and I visit the part of the park that Lulu and I would go to last year. Memories of my first visiting the park last summer start to emerge, reminding me of my feelings and thoughts when I first arrived to this city. We take an old walk, one that we haven’t done in several months. Lulu remembers and she is excited. Snow still hasn’t melted in shady spots by the trees. I can hear the geese mating call and I recall the recording I made of them last summer. An elder couple passes me. They are talking. I reach the stairs of the Worlds Fair Pavilion and I climb to the top where I find a small group of people working out. A trainer, woman, is leading them. I imagine myself with them. She instructs them to run down the stairs. I start to descend the stairs on the other side of the pavilion and they are coming towards me, back up. The trainer is calling out to them, pushing them. She grabs on to a girl who is lagging just behind her. And holds on to her arm as they run past me, up to the top of the stairs together. That could be me. The rest of the group passes me and I can see in all of their faces the struggle as they make their way to the top of the stairs. Now they are
behind me and I can hear the trainer telling them they can stop to catch their breath. In the cold spring air I know their lungs hurt. I take a few more steps and a fallen pine branch is in my path. Pine needles are everywhere and the air is filled with the fresh scent of pine, reminding me of the gin I had the night before.

My walks can be compared to the works of Richard Long, who literally walked back and forth across the grass to make a line and documented it with his camera, Robert Smithson, who would also use nature, voyages and documentation as a part of his practice to bring the non-site into the gallery, and Ed Ruscha, who used a road trip from Oklahoma City to LA as a means to make art. But I feel that I most identify with the works of Ana Mendieta. Similar to the ways Mendieta found her ties with the universe as a way to confront her feelings of displacement, my connection to the land and nature is my personal way to reestablish the bonds with nature and home.7

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IV. Placing Myself with My Contemporaries

The physical scale of my work is nothing monumental. In fact, most of the work is small and only becomes large though repetition. It is my hope that the work fills the room phenomenologically more than physically. The size and shape of the work refers to everyday furnishings. After all, furniture is made to accommodate our physical form, and we become aware of our presence when we encounter an object that manifests our form.

Dualities of the real and the abstract, harmony and chaos, truth and fiction, all manifest through my work. I involve extreme contrasts, creating a continuity between the inside and outside (site vs. non-site), the immediate present and the most remote geological past (terra cotta bowls with pre-Columbian designs stacked with foam, geodes with photos), or between the enormity of the earth itself and the significance that can be contained by a small section of it (image of desktop universe with image of dewy spiderweb floating on top). A piece of foam on the wall is a consideration of the role of touch and surface and action in painting. The sun, causing the material to darken when exposed to UV rays, burned an image of a circle into the surface of it. The foam is entropic and ephemeral, as it is constantly changing even throughout the exhibition. A slab of marble that is a part of...
an installation is placed near a window in a gallery, where the same marble can be seen across the street on the façade of a building, recalling the non-site inside the gallery. The sculptures operate as interchangeable, and are assembled on site and intuitively, responding directly to the space in which they occupy. By creating works that change the conventions of an interior space, I am adding new meaning to preconceived notions of specific objects, creating a duality between theatre and everyday life, fiction and reality. The works themselves assume a kind of double identity.

Along with the artists I have already mentioned, I have found influence in the practices of many more contemporary artists of today, whose art is tied together in ways of seeing and understanding the human relationship to our material world in some form or another.

Carol Bove, born in Geneva in 1971 and raised in the San Francisco Bay area, is known for her arrangements of both found and made objects. Her minimal yet thoughtful sculptures are curated with careful consideration to one another in a space. Her first installations beginning in 2003 made reference to objects calling up the culture of the 1960s. Her introduction to sculpture of late modernist and minimalists did not surface until around the time of her contribution to the Whitney Biennial in 2008. Her
methodical use of materials like peacock feathers, driftwood and seashells, which are individually loaded with historical, mythological and cultural reference, can be seen apart from these associations and become very “real” in her installations. Her arrangement and placement of materials and objects create a new meaning for these objects, which are individually loaded with historical and cultural references, a tactic that can be seen in my assemblages as well.

Carol Bove’s strategies of borrowing and installing other artists’ work alongside her own and her ways of building interchangeability into assemblages are similar to my own. This interchangeability allows for works to be altered, re-written and to remain contemporariness. Due to the nature of this interchangeability, Bove makes illustrated manuals, which can be used as a guide to her sculptures. They document each step of the process, starting from when the objects are “disaggregated.” For Bove, “They don’t have to be sculpture all the time. The ones that are put together, that are performing…knowing that they are out there take some kind of energy out of me, psychic energy.”

8 Carol Bove and Janine Lariviere, Carol Bove (with Janine Lariviere): Below Your Mind: Kunstverein in Hamburg, Kunsthalle Zürich (Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, 2004). p 173
comparable to my striving to bridge the gap between ancient and pre-historic cultures to now. When asked how she would like visitors to understand her work she comments, “I would like for people to feel their bodies in the space, in relation to the architecture and in relation to the objects. I want people to think about where they are.”

Another artist who is admired for her feminist approach to making is German artist Rosemarie Trockel. Her pioneering role in the development of a feminist language in the 70’s and 80’s by means of incorporating craft into the dialog of contemporary art is an obvious connection one could make between Trockel and myself. Notorious for her resistance to conform to any stylistic signature, Trockel’s divergent practice draws from multiple themes including female identity and feminism all the while keeping an ambiguity as a part of her oeuvre. Aspects of the unknown, the humorous and the surprising are brought forth by her displacement of materials from their original contexts, like my own installations. Her recent traveling retrospective Rosemarie Trockel: A Cosmos was more of a traveling museum of her own imagination, a laborious selection of a cabinet of curiosities, if you will. Like Bove, Trockel carefully curates found objects and artworks of other artists along with her own; both artists are considered prolific in the art of gathering and placement. Trockel’s placement of works of lesser known or forgotten artists like Judith Scott, born deaf and with Down’s Syndrome, whose wool wrapped objects powerfully project a fierce inner struggle, next to her own arguably most well known works of wool paintings establishes herself in a balanced relationship with

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forgotten discourses and also diminishes line between art and craft. Further, this strategy is commenting on the illegitimacy of the discourse of art history, which is predominately comprised of men.

*Copy Me* is a life-sized steel cast sculpture of two sofas facing one another. The sofas, which appear to be worn, as if they have been used but are also unique to their own markings, are exact replicas of each other, only in reverse; they are mirror images of one another. Trockel has used the idea of copying in effort to challenge the predetermined conceptions of representation consistently in her practice. Yet unlike the minimalists whom brought forth the idea of mass production in artworks, these facing sofas are far from barren of the artist’s hand. Her use of clay as material to create the cast for the sofa comments on the role of clay in reproduction and replication, a material which is well suited for copying. As I have pointed out, clay has been an important material in my own work. In many cases, I have made “mushroom-like” or “rock-like” pieces from clay, which requires a close looking on the viewer’s part to distinguish the material of the piece.

The two mirroring sofas are covered in a plastic sheet, referencing a neurotic generation who kept their sofas covered in clear plastic, which still allowed the design of the fabric to show through while protecting it from dirt and dust, a purely utilitarian move. The design of the sofa embodies the modern aesthetic of the time when clear plastic covers were as common in households as television sets were. Again, like Bove

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and myself, Trockel is tying in the cultural past with the present, but also evoking a personal narrative. Like Copy Me and other furniture like objects in her installations, Trockel’s work refers to her partly home-based practice, where she would use her sofa as an easel, this idea is congruent to my own home-based practice and brings to mind the bead circles.¹²

Conclusion

Within my work I perform the same action over and over again, as in the bead making, the terra cotta bowls, or walking; actions that become metaphorical to the sculptural process, and it is through my assemblages and documented photos that I am mapping the world through diagrams of my own making. Everything is connected by conceptual threads, like the interconnected constellations; it is just a matter of finding a way to see these connections. The work is intended to engage and reveal, even if it cannot contain the whole of nature and distant extremes of time. Throughout the installations there is an emphasis falling on the mode of looking. I operate like the bricoleur, who orders objects to whatever form she feels the classification must take.

“The elements which the bricoleur collects and uses are ‘pre-constrained’ like the constitutive units of myth, the possible combinations of which are restricted by the fact that they are drawn from the language where they already possess a sense which sets a limit on their freedom of maneuver. And the decision as to what to put in each place also depends on the possibility of putting a different element there instead, so that each choice is made will involve a complete reorganization of the structure, which will never be the same as one vaguely imagined nor as some other which might have been preferred to it.”13

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I quote Levi-Strauss as some length at the conclusion so to sum up the ideas of the bricoleur. It is not with any specific reason which I can define my choosing of objects nor the placement of them within space, other than it makes sense to me, and I emphasize that these are not fixed placements and that adjustments may or may not need to be made over time. Although the bricoleur is limited to her surroundings, she has the freedom from the constraints of history. By making due with whatever is at hand and allowing to be guided by intuition, my work is a contingent result of the actions manifested, and ultimately generates a new way of seeing.
Bibliography


