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Trauma and Human Objecthood

by

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Fourteen months ago I lost my brother to suicide. I was midway through graduate school and studying in Glasgow for the semester. The shock has not yet worn off. This event both obliterated and intersected with what I was studying and creating. I have spent the months since finding out what still matters and who I will now be going forward. One of the most surprising and reassuring things I experienced was that within a week of his death, and while still in his hometown of Tucson tending to the awful details that follow a suicide death, I began to mentally create artwork. Everything I have done since that time has been a direct response to him, our relationship, and his sudden, violent death. Everything I was working on prior to that moment, far from becoming invalidated, was actually fortified by a new emotional urgency. My themes had revolved around such things as shelter, social alienation, dehumanization resulting from bureaucratic systems, and an interest in the human as an animal or object.

I contemplate feelings of alienation and affinity with my species and the myriad ways we try to find happiness and instill meaning in the long unspooling of the seemingly infinite moments of a lifespan. I stand back and attempt to view our species as though from the perspective of an extraterrestrial life form, reducing our habits to something curious and mundane, rather than transcendent and affirming. In these reflections, I displace the usual notion of human personhood with the concept of humans as objects. This model provides me with an anthropological distance through which to filter my experience. I use the term *anthropology* to signify my observation of myself and my fellow humans, and my curiosities and confusions as I register the patterns of our daily lives. Positioning myself this way relative to the content of my work allows me to intertwine personal and artistic concerns. During its tenure as a life form, I see the human subjected to numerous indignities so mundane as to seem trivial and beneath complaint. These
include placing itself (I will use the neuter pronoun to distance the usual sense of humanity) within categories convenient to the smooth collection and application of data, but in most other ways dehumanizing – nationality, race, gender designation and other arbitrary demographics, position in the social hierarchy, connection to monetary channels, identification numbers, proof of existence in general.

I view the human as an object in order to better see us as beings continuous with our environment\(^1\). I see each human as a packet of matter possessing sentience, for now, and travelling in relation to all other packets of matter, sentient and not. In time the matter is exhausted and returns to its component parts, its biological resistance to entropy has ended. No longer a discrete unit, it now diffuses back into the larger system, forfeiting its stake as an individual. It has typically attempted to live beyond the imposed limitations of the physical world. This anti-organic vision of the human is a story of structure that has been taken apart and held under a lens for examination. When I scrutinize our coherence as biological units, it is possible to find parallels between ourselves and the surrounding landscape of objects, each coming in and out of proximity and influence by and with one another.

Though the human may be little more than an object that moves about affecting, and being affected by, its environment, its will to self-delusion is strong; it believes itself to be unique. It wishes to isolate its ego from identification with others as an act of personal aggrandizement, but when viewed from afar, the individual is nearly indistinguishable from all others of its kind. This attempt to self-aggrandize leads to isolation.
Although I grapple with themes that can become emotionally oppressive, such as futility and isolation, I also acknowledge the possibility of compensatory entities, aspiration and sociability. The work I make is essentially a bulwark against despair (Weaver), exploring in a sometimes punishing manner those painful things that I feel are impossible to ignore. But even the act of making work about pain lessens that pain’s oppressive power. Feelings of desperation can propel action. In my case, this means recreating some of the physical details of my own history – architecture, geography, images and activities – and streamlining the information to its bare essentials, to an economy of detail that pulls the artwork away from being a too specific re-creation set in the past, and toward an uncanny present day experience. My feelings take physical form through building remembered things. Because the subject matter is so persistent, the forms of mediation I use to connect time and space to my own emotional conception of place and meaning are flexible and varied, becoming a secondary and subservient consideration to theme. The form I give to one artwork may look radically different from another, even one made within the same month².

The range of media I use falls within a few aesthetic parameters: shelters (large structures); virtual spaces (computer models and animation); time-based, audience inclusive performances; and what I call collages - mixed media, documentation of my direct interaction with my environment, or simply one-off experiments that can’t be characterized easily.

* 

*Old Yeller* is a sculpture that can be entered and therefore experienced from inside or outside. It is a simple grey box, clad in cement board and sitting on a cement floor, with a door, dimly lit by
a grey bulb attached to its front. It occupies a darkened room and looms large enough to exceed the size of many sculptural objects - at seven feet it is taller than most people, but still diminutive enough to fit in a room. It would be small for a shelter, more shed than house.

1. *Old Yeller*

Inside the viewer finds all the basic fixtures of a bathroom - toilet, sink, bathtub, mirror and a window - but I have reduced it to theatrical shorthand. The interior is matte black, with the major elements painted onto the walls in a simple, diagrammatic, white chalk line. The toilet, sink, window and mirror all exist as two-dimensional visual cues to help you orient yourself in the space. The only actual fixture is the bathtub. The room has two lights as well, one over the “mirror,” that slowly fades, and one over the tub, where the shower faucet might normally be found. This one remains on the entire time, but, being a black light, does not become really visible until the main light has faded. This occurs over the course of 90 seconds as a computerized voice recites excerpts from the Alfred Noyes 1906 poem *The Highwayman*. The sliced up poem retains only its violent passages, and so the listener hears mostly just the graphic
depiction of two gun deaths, told in epic romantic style, but detached from most of its original context. Once the main light fades, the black light reveals glowing blue material in the tub, a smear at the end and a trail leading to the drain.

I often use this type of single room as a basis for art works. Some can be entered, a few cannot. I normally instill the structures with qualities that reflect common human use, inviting those who enter to connect with their own experiences, both literal and psychological. My day to day interaction with shelter is often perfunctory and unmemorable, but repeated interactions over days, weeks and years builds within my mind a series of psychic spaces whose presence is tied to larger themes and interactions that took place simultaneously with the mundane activities: loss, disappointment, fulfillment, attachment, fear, triumph, disillusionment and so on.

What is different here from previous efforts is the emotional content. I have chosen to include some very specific autobiographical details in this piece, while also muting much of the information – it is almost devoid of color, and the room is just a bare approximation of a bathroom, a familiar personal space that recalls for the viewer untold hours spent there personally, in varying states of vulnerability. In contrast to the muted quality, I layered many elements together that, when taken as a group, insist upon a narrative, which stands alongside the recited poem. I chose to include *The Highwayman* because it is powerfully written and graphic in content, but at the same time, perhaps due to its historical referents, seems to whitewash and romanticize gun violence. The dispassionate dictation of this poem by a computer voice inside a depiction of a contemporary bathroom space is meant to take the wind out of such literary prettiness and instill a more banal and chilling quality in it instead. The viewers must enclose
themselves in the room and lean in closely to make out the audio, leading to a sense of isolated intimacy that heightens the graphic audio content.

I have a background in haunted house design and construction, which informs this work. I mixed personal language and references with a more general sense of horror. I trust that a viewer will comprehend that there is emotional weight in the composition without clubbing them over the head with my personal history. The horror genre, when handled deftly, can inspire understanding in the audience on a nonverbal level, and it is my intention to tap into that deeper understanding of fear, anxiety, and desperation that often lies dormant or willfully ignored.

2. *Old Yeller (interior)*
*Old Yeller* draws on sources with both autobiographical and fictional specificity. I process my own trauma through the use of visual cues and opaque storytelling. In creating *Old Yeller* I connect personal experience with the familiar art genres of theatre, literature and horror films. Depending on the viewer’s own individual history, they may input narrative associations with the physical evidence of the artwork and come to an interpretation that mirrors my own concerns, but via different associational channels. Trauma is indescribable – terrible, painful, and weird - but I believe it is possible to convey its affect by including details in a work that are intensely specific and autobiographical, combined with references drawn from the larger well of shared imagery.

*Old Yeller* exists for me at the nexus between personal trauma and the themes with which I had been occupied when my brother died. To see myself and other individuals as an “it” is not particularly reassuring. Experiencing the sickening realization that my own brother had gone from alive to dead in an instant, and standing in the place where it occurred, seemed to reinforce many of the ideas and concerns I had already explored. It was a culmination, in a sense, of many suspicions I entertained about each individual human’s place within their environment, and the arbitrary nature of their importance, or lack thereof, as well as the precarious line between the living and the nonliving.

I pull back from my species regularly to observe the ways in which we compare to other animals. Achieving this objective distance is of course impossible, but I imagine myself doing it and that is enough to form a different picture of our human condition. Our basic needs are rooted in biological necessity – food, shelter, and companionship – and we spend our time obtaining and refining these things in our physical environment. The human animal takes shelter and occupies
itself with activity. Personal space is identified (purchased or rented, possibly taken forcefully), made secure (walls, locks, gates), and customized to the human being’s desires (subdivision of space, décor, displays of status), but it falls within prescribed limits, established, among other things, by social and economic class. The activities we perform (be they work or play) are not always chosen by us individually, though we may convince ourselves we have freedom of choice. Usually, they are imposed from outside, selected from a menu of available options based on our place in the social order.

I believe we try to identify these non-choices as intentional and unique, convincing ourselves that the desire preceded the decision (be it for a job, a home, our social standing, or even some relationships), rather than what is often the reverse – decisions are based on what we have been told is possible, both by our society and by those most intimate with us, from birth onward. For the most part, our activities all fit within pre-determined boundaries set by our species. The group determines how its members will behave and what they will or will not possess according to an elaborate set of factors established over time and space. Some individuals are rewarded, others punished, and there is little that can be done to alter the flow of this force, which is respected implicitly even as its existence is often denied in lieu of a belief that fairness exists, reward is earned and balance underpins this structure.

In my view, the distinction between what is chosen and what is imposed on the individual can be incredibly difficult to discern. I chose the literary references in this piece with that in mind. The Highwayman depicts what are essentially two suicides: In the case of the innkeeper’s daughter - kidnapped, tied up and used as bait - she feels she is as good as dead and literally “warns [the
highwayman] with her death.” In the case of the highwayman, he charges into certain death, overcome with grief and anger, and is shot down unceremoniously by those he knew full well wanted to kill him. *Old Yeller* depicts the death of a rabid dog, put down by his resigned master. He is beyond help and the only thing to do is kill him. These three deaths represent varying levels of personal agency, but all are shown to be inevitable in some way, and perhaps even necessary, if tragic. My use of these literary deaths is intentional and mirrors my own confusion and disbelief.

*

Shelter in any form calls to mind for me the illusion of comfort, but not indestructibility. Locks can be broken, walls ruined, foundations compromised and privacy invaded. Furthermore, even inside a shelter, it is possible to still feel a lack of stability, resulting from psychological disturbance, perceived social failure or societal inferiority, among other things. I conceive the structures I build as open systems – they variously lack ceilings, doors, locks, or material comforts that would inspire an occupant to rest within them.

The virtual spaces I build pick up where physical construction leaves off, taking it frequently to a level that couldn’t be achieved in the non-virtual world. Without the constraints of physics, material funding, and the permission of others I can pursue an unbridled construction process, incorporating unrealistic elements into rational spaces, the result being similar to video games. This reference is not accidental, as video games have played a key role in my personal history, specifically as a locus for sibling bonding. Video games formed a focal point for our minds, shifting from daily concerns to just a few desirable elements – humorous conversations taken to
absurd extremes coupled with low (no) stakes fantasy narratives for long afternoons and evenings. Videogames provide social lubricant just like other forms of self-medication, with the added element of virtual, roving space and visual entertainment. You sit still in your chair, yet your mind perceives a great deal of bodily movement.

The animation, *Brian’s Room*, is embedded in personal memory. It is a dreamy, video game world that depicts many shifts in scale and mood, moving in and out of interior spaces as the viewer’s perspective (camera angle) floats and travels, coasting sleepily through a world of remembered and imagined places, periodically infused with sounds from my past and from imagination – music from Nintendo *Super Mario Brothers* timed with childish tap dancing, water rushing, lions grunting and other audio narrative clues.

3. *Brian’s Room*
The spatial elements explored in *Old Yeller* are present in *Brian’s Room*, as viewers enter a space containing enough information to suggest a narrative, but the story is not so explicit that they can’t experience the space on their own terms. Once again there is an economy of detail that is quite specific. The surreally distended interior of an unfinished basement gives way to a darkened street, an animate house, an underground pool, an enormous cement parking lot in an overcast desert, and finally outer space as the camera exits the built environment and views its artificial, computer made exterior before re-entering it at the beginning to start anew. The sound of the video game comes in slowly and is all at once punctuated with tap dancing, only to become muffled as the camera leaves that interior. The viewer is drawn down a completely silent, darkened street toward a concrete clad house with its front face exposed. The lone object in the house, a wooden table, suddenly flips backward against a wall with an explosive crash and the house then drags itself alongside the viewer, these movements unexplained and uncompelled by any apparent human intervention. Entering the house, and passing through the door to the garage we now enter a subterranean water world where wooden bowls, plates and vessels bob and roll to the sounds of pigeons cooing and lions snorting and grumbling. At last the camera comes above ground to a desert scape with an endless parking lot. The parking lot gradually weathers and cracks as the viewer glides slowly above it, observing its degradation and reintegration into the natural terrain that surrounds it, accompanied by the sound of a car hitting large plants repeatedly as it speeds along.

The viewer may comprehend personal history in it even though they do not get to know what that is. An emotional core suffuses this digital space, which prevents a strictly aesthetic or intellectual reading, despite the paired down detail. The video itself plays on a TV at the end of
an elongated grey, carpeted room. Two speakers provide sound from behind the viewer while an additional third speaker hangs directly overhead, aimed downward. This soundscape immerses the viewer in the physical space even as it connects them to what is seen on the screen. The presence of humans is only implied through visual and audio clues – the viewer never sees them. The environment itself is animate. The objects have a life of their own and the evidence of human presence is circumstantial. I suggest that the humans are on equal footing with the elements seen and heard, be they animal or object. This world exists despite the lack of humans. Perhaps they have departed, perhaps they were never there in the first place, but they are not clearly the protagonists.

Architecture plays a strong role in conveying emotional content. Brandon LaBelle, in discussing the works of Vito Acconci, *Seedbed* and *Claim*, says, “…space, here, becomes a determining force while giving access to physical and psychological exchange.” In *Old Yeller* and *Brian’s Room*, I employ remembered spaces as a foundation to explore personal history tied to those places, but also to project feelings and uncertainties about a present day psychological place that distorts and undermines that history and calls into question the stability of that architecture as shelter or protective entity. Perhaps the architecture is not there to serve me but has developed a life of its own.

* Time-based and social-interactive pieces are a means to grapple with alienation and feelings of dissociation as I go through the motions of being a productive member of society, as an artist and
as a citizen. Using parody, I emulate cultural forms that I (and much of society) participate in regularly. I am not manufacturing stress, but using stress to find a language. Parody of familiar structures allows me to implicate myself in all I do. Many of the behaviors I include in a performance are common (eating, spending money, filling out forms, performing service for others) and the building blocks I use to structure these projects reflect and mimic ordinary, daily tools (eating utensils, play money, fake medical forms, repetitive action learned from jobs I’ve had). At first these elements can be dispiritingly convincing in their normalcy, but they are quickly revealed to be parodic and a blatantly obvious imitation of the real. The performances have a presence that is absurd, sad, and comical, and can effortlessly engage the viewer.

In The Naught Swap, my collaborator and I constructed a process for attendees that was easy to follow: people filled out questionnaires, got graded, received tokens for their participation and were free to spend those monetary units on having their hair washed. None of the elements quite made sense – the questionnaires were intrusive but anonymous and generic, the grading system was arbitrary and opaque, the wooden money had value only within the gallery, and the hair washing was merely symbolic, using edible solutions and improvisational hand movements rather than scrubbing – but the logic of the system was familiar to anyone. The transaction was immediately recognized for what it was, while its basic structure was held at enough distance to emphasize its strangeness. If there are enough familiar elements in a performance or social interaction that the audience can easily find an entry point, the artwork may successfully illustrate human activity from an objective distance, like a child viewing adults in their inscrutable rituals, or an alien tracking the patterns of a civilization with the detachment of an outsider.
In *Follow Me*, I combined a Skype feed of myself in a bedroom with a simultaneous Twitter feed. I dressed all in tan spandex and covered my face in concealer, to diminish identifying details while not making myself truly anonymous. Anyone can see I am female, guess with reasonable certainty my age, and see clothing and possessions everywhere that cannot help but add context. And those who know me will immediately recognize me. I walked around my room, pausing to take selfies of questionable aesthetic value (that is, not particularly flattering) and posted them to Twitter with cryptic and foreboding text. The result is a little creepy, a little sad. Why would someone take such bad pictures? What does she hope to gain from this one-sided conversation? Does she even realize she is being filmed while updating her Twitter feed? And if so, why is she “spying” on herself? Who is this for? What do the bits of text mean (“it goes away,” “here ruining people is considered sport,” “in living color you are going to see another first”)? Does this represent privacy (blurring of identifying characteristics), or is it an invasion of privacy (voyeuristic video and photo evidence)? In either case, why do this to yourself? If putting imagery of oneself out into cyberspace is meant to be a self-aggrandizing act, this picture of social networking suggests otherwise. If the goal is to make oneself blend in with everyone else, this piece suggests that that is also impossible. Neither flattering nor successful in obliterating personal detail, this imagery makes the individual appear complicit in her own identity dissociation, but it’s hard to say if that is what she wants or if she has miscalculated. I cast myself as object in this piece, and as I did it, felt myself to be both exposed and generic.
The remainder of what I do employs what I define as a collage logic, lying a bit outside my other activities insofar as there is less predetermined structure and it leads to fewer completed works. This includes such activities as filming spaces while I move through them, recording animals interacting with urban environments, making satirical questionnaires, or clipping and combining photos, as well as the use of text from both personal and non-personal (books, internet) sources. I avoid using language in a manner that is overtly rational or narratively easy to follow. I prefer instead to chop it up into excerpts that may not be grammatically complete, or that interact with other excerpts in a way that isn’t chronologically linked. This allows a mentally rambling quality similar to the dispersed, built environments. Much of this work bleeds into the other categories just described. Much of it forms the exploratory phase or raw material to be used later in some more complex composition.

The comic book project, *Phantom Limb*, involves autobiographical illustrations that combine several elements that are personal to me, but could be familiar to anyone: family photographs,
comic strips, and text pulled from a variety of sources. Using the template of my brother’s comic strip, *Planet X*, a *Far Side* inspired single frame series written in the 1990’s for his college newspaper when he was 19, I trace and freehand draw photographs of my family (largely just myself and my siblings) in a loose, sketch-like manner that makes obvious their relationship to actual photos (as opposed to something drawn from memory), arranged within the cartoon frames. I then add text to the scenes to suggest the characters (or in some cases, a third party narrator) are speaking or thinking these things. I pull the text from multiple sources: personal diaries, remembered conversations, and excerpts from psychology essays and archived suicide notes. I remove the language from its original context, sometimes keeping just sentence fragments, and I jumble up the various bits to confound an obvious narrative reading. Instead the pieces appear together in the same cartoon in a way that doesn’t allow a reader to get a comfortable sense of what is taking place within the frame. Frequently I use whiteout and Photoshop to alter portions, making no attempt to hide the correction.

5. *Phantom Limb*
I sometimes pull directly from an original *Planet X*, though the viewer couldn’t possibly know this (fig 6).


By putting present day words into the mouths of historical images of my family I create a time slippage. Not only do these versions of us no longer exist, but the presence of cryptic, anachronistic dialogue in photos intended to celebrate specific moments in time makes my family’s obliviousness in this impossible setting (nonexistent time/space) all the more melancholy. Seemingly innocuous text paired with subtly foreboding text, grafted onto images of someone’s childhood (in this case, mine), gives the sense that these are ghosts foretelling their own destiny, and it makes the images both nostalgic and threatening.
Family photos are an attempt to stop time in its endless unspooling and save events in personal history for eternity. They aren’t able to actually do this; however, as a visual inventory as well as a means to provoke present day feelings about past experience they do have a great deal of power. It’s just that their power is basically static – the photo never changes and any new experience derived from looking at it is the result of a change in the looker’s present day circumstances. It is in this context that photos become uncanny – they are imbued with new meanings without physically changing. In some ways the photo just captures imagery of future cadavers who don’t know, or pretend not to know, that they’re dying.

The people in the comics stare out and speak to you as though they are warning you of what is to come, but it’s already too late. They speak a coded language, legible but confusing, and at times upsetting. These people will die. When you look at a family photo, it can transform in front of you: the formerly alive drop away from the ranks of the living. In the photo nothing is changed. No one seems to realize one of the group has passed on. They continue in their frozen state, oblivious.
Even the concept of a frozen moment is too simple. Though the photo may seem to capture something measurable, it really just gives the barest material form to the space between two periods of time – everything before and everything after the snapshot. The camera slices the timeline in two, then pulls apart the two sides exposing the inside to show something infinitesimally small sandwiched between the before and the after⁶. The likeness of familiar faces in an image produced from this random cleaving of time convinces us nonetheless that they are real, but we also know that they’re only ink on paper or pixels on a screen – no more people than a picture of food is sustenance. The photographs, like the people they portray, are objects in the environment, susceptible to physical degradation and, ultimately, continuous with that environment.
The individuals traced from these images and placed into a comic strip now hover in a queasy non-time that is more like a dream, saying things that they would not have said at that moment. A dream is similar to these photo comics: It contains the idea of people, not the actual people. It tries to create a new timeline, or resuscitate the old timeline by jumpstarting it and hoping that it will continue to motor along again, unassisted. It does not. You wake up. The dream ends. The most a dream can do is approximate the waking life, but it’s fickle and out of control, ending whenever and in whatever manner it chooses. The photo is more reassuring because it’s static and reliable. It doesn’t even come close to jumpstarting the timeline, but you can re-experience the frozen moments repeatedly, on a loop. It’s a record that skips, which is confounding, but allows you to resist reaching any dreaded conclusion.

Art Spiegelman created a personal history in comic form with himself and his parents as the protagonists. In *Maus*, he documents stories his father shared with him about his experience as a prisoner at Auschwitz. In processing the traumatic content, Spiegelman cast all the Jewish characters, his parents included, as mice, the Germans as cats, and non-Jewish Polish citizens as swine. The effect of this animal displacement is both an increased palatability for subject matter that is impossible to fully process, and a disturbingly uncanny anthropomorphism that requires us to think about the Holocaust in the same moment as we revisit every childhood story we ever read that contained human-like talking animals.

The comic within a comic *Prisoner on the Hell Planet*, created a decade prior to *Maus*, and included in the second installment, *Maus II*, documents the suicide of Spiegelman’s mother. It is just four pages and features his (human) parents as well as himself, depicting this event in sober,
stark detail, using expressionist woodcut as a means to interpret the events. The brief and brutal layout of the comic effectively conveys the shock of finality in this type of death, not to mention the impenetrability of such information on the mind of a person so close to the situation.

*Phantom Limb* avoids using a linear timeline, and does not represent the formal qualities of a well-made comic or graphic novel. It does, however, process trauma through personal memory and imagery. My interest in this form mixes the unschooled perspective of a self-trained artist with the informed experience of an artist trained in entirely different media. The final piece is not a comic so much as a series of works on paper, many of which use elements familiar to comics as a template to explore personal history. It includes the cells detailed above with paper cutout collage and reproduced stock photos, all displayed on the innards of a wall, to create a confusing but persistent narrative.
I appropriate some elements of the comic medium (blocking, freeze frame, dramatic close-ups, speech and thought bubbles), poaching it without fully immersing myself in it. I find the format very accommodating to work from photographic imagery and create unreal timelines with scrambled chronologies and characters that jump around their own narratives to be many ages at once. In addition to that, the comic style is typically melodramatic and it’s a good place to dispatch emotional content that cannot be made dignified or tasteful simply to fulfill the demands
of art. It is possible to put the ugliest aspects of personal experience in a comic because a comic
doesn’t demand grace, though it can accommodate it.

*

The overriding belief that most of what determines an individual’s success in life, or lack
thereof, is printed in our genes before we ever enter the larger environment has permeated
conventional wisdom and allowed all kinds of empathy-bypassing behavior, from racism and
misogyny, to a tacit acceptance of poverty, homelessness and even war and genocide as being
somehow destined and therefore unavoidable (possibly even deserved). But even more subtle is
the notion of value based on what you do, how many lines your résumé contains, and whether or
not you are/were good looking or well-liked. This selective assignment of value to individuals
can be fairly damaging and, more significantly, wrong-headed, depending as it does on how
good an individual is at getting a favorable light shined on themself.

The strain of witnessing our species’ willful avoidance of the consequences of our behavior is
complicated further by a realization that much of this behavior may be a defensive maneuver to
avoid noticing that we are actually continuous with our surroundings. And though we are
unexceptional as individuals, we are formidable as a massive, fluid organism that perceives itself
to be working toward some vague future goal, but whose component parts are unconcerned with
destructive behaviors, so long as this cannibalism occurs invisibly, in some non-adjacent portion
of the collective organism.
The energy I expend staking a personal claim to space, maintaining it, and proving myself to be a contributing member of society in general, exhausts me mentally and leaves me despondent. On the other hand, the collection of psychological locations I’ve amassed has the opposite effect. Those inner geographies are the places I actually own and share with others on a non-linguistic, almost unconscious, level. Those places exist, if not outside time, then certainly within a nonlinear timeline. Those places are not inorganic and inanimate. They are continuous with me and they inform how I see my physical environment. It is difficult to believe that I am the subject who rules over my surroundings and all the objects contained therein. That hierarchy of importance – human over its domain – simply does not make sense to me, and, if I believe it, prevents me from even trying to understand the upheaval of fourteen months ago. Though it may sound bleak to see our species as a population of glorified objects, it actually eases my understanding of how a human can pass from animate and alive to inanimate and dead, his remains having changed form irrevocably. Additionally, the hierarchy, if believed doesn’t stop at a simple line demarcating humans from all other matter, but leads inevitably to stratification within our species, where some are deemed to be of greater value than others. My brother believed this. I cannot.

The impossibility of conveying personal history in a way that can ever be received unmodified by the recipient forces me to both trust the viewer and accept that communication must fail. By pulling portions of personal memory and pressing them into service as artworks, I risk being misunderstood, but by not driving the narrative too forcefully to an understanding on the part of the viewer, I expect that they may understand on an intuitive level.
Trauma and ruptures in the linear timeline find their place in interior landscapes, where qualifying experience as pleasurable or unpleasurable is unnecessary and counterproductive. Within the emotional climate of personal space there is room for all experiences, no matter how unthinkable. Even the mundane details that chip away at an individual have their place. The machinelike adherence to bureaucratic ritual that invades so much of my awareness and affects my self-definition is allowed room to breathe. I can even find comfort in the realization that I am one of an infinite number of things populating this world. This mental architecture helps me pull myself away from a too simplistic reading of time, personal history and my position in relation to other people and my environment, allowing me to process experience in a fluent manner, without goals, validation or material reward. I try to convey this place in my work, using language that others might recognize.

1. In Symbiotic Planet, Lyn Margulis makes an argument for the integrated and interdependent nature of humans with all other life forms as well as the inorganic environment.

2. In Under Blue Cup, Rosalind Krauss suggests the term technical support be used in place of the traditional medium (paint, marble, bronze, etcetera) as a way to classify this sort of non medium specific approach to art making: “But what if a medium were not a material support – oil on canvas, tempura on wooden panel, pigment on wet plaster – the materials worked by the guilds? What if it were the very foundation of representation…What if it were a logic rather than a form of matter?” (Krauss 16-17)

3. Gaston Bachelard’s The Poetics of Space gives imaginative and scientific context to this phenomenon. Whether comparing humans to nesting birds or exploring the house as a metaphor for the mind’s landscape, Bachelard finds a profound connection between occupant and surroundings, stressing the significance of being inside versus being outside (Bachelard).

4. He also frames the work as a critique of minimalist sculpture: “…rather than offer up ‘space’ as a free-floating, innocent field of relations through which subject and object meet, Acconci charges it with violent uncertainty. We can understand Acconci’s staging of the body, space, and art as a weaving of the individual subject within a set of social and psychic forces.” (LaBelle, 118-119)

5. Roland Barthes, in Camera Lucida, defines two elements such photographs contain, the studium
(orderly, pictorial, semiotic, readable) and the punctum (personal, undefinable, non-universal). It is the punctum that addresses this personal meaning, read from a photo at a non-linguistic level, by a viewer who’s connection to the image is intensely private (Barthes).

6. Henri Bergson, characteristic of a mathematician, describes the movement of time in a way that recalls a calculus equation for the rate of change in a physical entity (be it the trajectory of a ball or the acceleration of a shadow). He characterizes the breakdown of time into smaller and smaller parts, infinitely small, as a way to understand that, in the end, this is only a model for trying to understand something much more complex than notches on a ruler – the usual way time is depicted. In Bergson’s estimation, time cannot be broken into measurable bits, but must be viewed as a constant rate of change (Bergson). The photo resists this movement, or rather we use photos as a tool to resist this movement.

7. “The complex interaction between the evolution of scientific theory and the evolution of social order means that very often the ways in which scientific research asks its questions of the human and natural worlds it proposes to explain are deeply colored by social, cultural, and political biases.” (Lewontin, 8) The three authors of Not in our Genes: Biology, Ideology and Human Nature take aim at the biological determinism which dominates much of modern science and which has seeped into the consciousness of society’s understanding about human behavior.

Works Cited


Weaver, Tom. 2015. Conversation.
Image List For Installation Shots

1. Brian’s Room
   Computer animation
   5 min.

2. Old Yeller
   Wood, concrete board, bathtub, light, sound
   3 min.

3. Old Yeller
   Wood, concrete board, bathtub, light, sound
   3 min.

4. Old Yeller
   Wood, concrete board, bathtub, light, sound
   3 min.

5. Phantom Limb
   Paper, pen, whiteout
   Dimensions variable

6. Phantom Limb
   Paper, pen, whiteout
   Dimensions variable

7. Brian’s Room
   Vimeo (computer animation)
   5 min

8. Old Yeller
   Vimeo (documentation with accompanying audio)
   90 seconds
4.
6

7  https://vimeo.com/149277033

8  https://vimeo.com/149282926