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North American Data

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North American Data

By

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of the requirements for the degree of
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# Table of Contents

List of Illustrations iii

I Introduction 1

II The Corner Stories 3
   A. The Very, Very, Very, Very, Very Beginning 3
   B. The Proto-Corner 4
   C. The Story of Mathematics 5

III The Tangents have Awoken 7

IV Lords of the Underworld 9

V Dirty Thoughts 12

VI Soft Targets of the Ice Age 15

Bibliography 17

Image List 18

Images of Artwork Installation 19
List of Illustrations

Figures

1  L. Turgis, *St. Patrick* 2

2  https://enigmose.com/electricity_ancient_egypt.html
Numbered map of the Dendera Light
from the Hathor Temple at Dendera in Egypt 4

3  Malmivuo, Jaakko, The Consistent Rectangular Coordinate System
Malmivuo, Jaakko, Appendix A, Consistent System of Rectangular and
Spherical Coordinates for Electrocardiology and Magnetocardiology

4  Smithson, Robert, & Bochner, Mel, Sign from the Hayden Planetarium 8

5  Burwell, Joseph, *1st Lord of the Underworld*
Acrylic paint on laser engraved plywood, 2018, 10 x 14 in 10

6  Burwell, Joseph, *7th, 8th, & 9th Lords of the Underworld*
Acrylic paint on laser engraved plywood, 2018, 10 x 14 in 10

7  Burwell, Joseph, *5th Lord of the Underworld*
Acrylic paint on laser engraved plywood, 2018, 10 x 14 in 11

8  Burwell, Joseph, *6th Lord of the Underworld*
Acrylic paint on laser engraved plywood, 2018, 10 x 14 in 12

9  Smith, Roberta, “Walter De Maria, artist on Grand Scale,
Dies at 77”, July 26, 2013
Walter De Maria installing his Earth Room in Munich, 1968 13

10  Burwell, Joseph, *Dirty Picture #2*,
Laser engraved plywood, 2018, 12 x 16 in 14

11  Burwell, Joseph, *Dirty Picture #3*
Laser engraved plywood, 2018, 12 x 16 in 14
Introduction

Stories behave strikingly like living organisms. They adapt and compete to survive. These organisms engage in a symbiotic relationship with humans, the history of which is an intriguing story in itself. Stories are also material resources. Archeologists mine them and museums keep them safe. Each person is a unique government of narratives, as is each community. Every narrative “unit” exists to be commandeered. Both detachable and interchangeable, unflinching hybridity is built into its DNA. We’ve been reusing the same stories since the invention of language. In storytelling, matter is neither created nor destroyed. It is only infinitely reorganized.

Materials provide the crucial contingencies to counter logic. I let their resistance guide me toward a poetic zone that lies somewhere between the ambiguous and the very specific. Misinterpretation and information loss are important generators of meaning. Legibility would weaken it. Chance encounters take advantage of the intrinsic modularity of narratives.

The main structure of this installation is a hybrid space: part museum, part theater, and part storage unit. In it are stored core samples extracted from various narrative sources; from paintings and myths to films and architecture. The space recognizes no discernable hierarchy among these sources. It discusses horror movies in the same breath as creation myths. It inserts contemporary biology into esoteric texts. These images, texts, and objects are suspended in

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1 Not to confuse things with competing analogies. Stories can behave like living organisms and be a mined material.
anticipation of narrative employment - accumulated nouns waiting for verbs. They are reassigned new roles according to their physical proximity to each other.

This paper functions as an introduction to the essential actors and their dramatic inclinations within fluctuating scenarios. Each actor holds the potential for a multiplicity of significant interactions; I entice viewers to generate their own speculative narratives. Humans are instinctive storytellers. Stories are essential to cognitive function. It is how we process and remember information. In the end everything is a story. This story starts as they all do, in the corner. This corner is three stories in one.

Fig. 1. L. Turgis, (Active 1855 – 1887), St. Patrick
The Corner Stories

The Very, Very, Very, Very, Very Beginning

The first story of the corner is an umbrella story. It is a creation myth - the Big Bang. It is the story that contains all other stories. Every corner reenacts the Big Bang - expanding from an infinitesimally small point outward into an infinite Cartesian Spacetime. It retells the story of the transition from nothing to something.

Most creation myths are anthropocentric; but what if myths could be stretched to be more biocentric? Couldn’t the single celled organisms, or the building blocks of life that scientists suspect came to earth on meteors, be the fallen angels from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*? We have good bacteria and bad bacteria within us\(^2\) that are known to affect our immune systems and even our moods and our behavior. Could we blame our bad behavior on these demons?

Myths have always been born from compression. Many are created to resolve conflicts that emerge out of colliding cultures and follow the simple paradigmatic formula that the solution is the sum of its contradictions.\(^3\) For example, the story of Christianity + the story of Capitalism = Christmas. The result is a story that rewards good behavior with material objects that stimulate the economy. In another example, the conflict between the stories of science and religion resulted in Erich von Daniken’s 1968 book, *Chariots of the Gods* - the progenitor theory of ancient astronauts and a technological explanation for archaic descriptions of mystical encounters. Syncretism keeps dovetailing our myths with each other.

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\(^2\) Angels and devils? – Or good cop, bad cop?
\(^3\) Krauss, Rosalind. *Under Blue Cup*, 17. Roland Barthes calls this structural linguistic formula a “paradigm”.
The Proto-Corner

The Ice Age was long and ended relatively recently. Twenty three thousand years ago inside a Greek cave called Theopetra, the first human-built wall was erected to block the winds of the Ice Age. The unexpected residual effect was that the first corner was also made, the proto-corner - henceforth to be called The Corner - and along with it was formed an unspoken religion. Since then we have been worshipping The Corner and all it stands for with every structure that we erect. That is the coded story of architecture.

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4 #1 - Priest, #2 - Ionized fumes, #3 - Electric discharge [snake], #4 - Lamp socket [Lotos], #5 - Cable [Lotos stem], #6 - Air god, #7 - Insulator [Djed-Pillar], #8 - Light bringer [Thoth with knives], #9 - Symbol for "current", #10 - Inverse polarity, #11 - Energy storage, http://www.geocities.ws/nephilimnot/ancienttech_dendera_lamps.htm#Top

5 The name itself is symbolic: Theo – God, Petra - Rock. Potentially the God of Rocks? The God of (the first) Technology? The God of Architecture (built of rocks)? Petra is also a version of Peter; Peter is said to have built the church on the rock of our faith. Could the biblical Peter be the name of the First Architect that dwelled within this cave? If so then I like to think that, in the spirit of Shakespearean theories of authorship, Peter was not an individual but a material.
A corner is an object with unstable proportions and significant semiotic and philosophical implications. “Where...does a corner end?”\textsuperscript{6} Every corner since The Corner is a reenactment, an Icon, of the original Corner. A corner and its walls have a Yin and Yang relationship. It balances the positive delineations of its walls with its dark negativity. It collects the shadows and the spirits. It was brought unwillingly into the world through practitioners of the dark arts. I suspect that is why the Oval Office has no true corners. In the Oval Office light and sound behave differently. Time is kept honest because there is no safe place for procrastination. Measurements and plans are made in advance. The Oval Office is a theater designed for real time action, for histories to be written as they happen. Proper use of corners entails knowing when to deny them. Such are the advantages of esoteric knowledge.

\textbf{The Story of Mathematics}

Given: 1. All space consists of physical matter, 2. All matter occupies a mathematical position at every moment.

Spacetime was measurable from the beginning, but it was not measured. The units for the x, y, and z axes came later, but zero always existed in its non-existent way before that. It is understood that the Universe is still expanding from the Big Bang. But a lack of boundaries in spacetime is inconceivable. All narratives have a beginning and an ending, even if not directly addressed. No creation myth is complete without its apocalyptic fantasies.

The Story of Mathematics infiltrates many stories. The cross has obvious significance in the surface narrative of the Bible, but we could also read it as a diagram of the x and y axes. In the

\textsuperscript{6} Chandler, \textit{Semiotics for Beginners}, 24
Story of Mathematics, it is a direct cry for coordinates - a desire for measuring and recording and an archival plea. Consider the bluegrass gospel lyrics,

My Lord keeps a record  
Of the moments I’m living down here  
He know all about me  
All my troubles, my sorrows, my fears

In the alternate Story of Mathematics, your lonely days are numbered.

Fig. 3. Malmivuo, Jaakko, The Consistent Rectangular Coordinate System

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7 *My Lord Keeps A Record* by Carl Story and William York, from the album “Carl Story - My Lord Keeps A Record”, 1968
For the everyday human, optimal perception of three-dimensional space is the first step to controlling the materials that comprise it. A proper corner empowers spatial perception with its units of measurement and location. Diagraming leads to actionable plans and the eventual transformation of materials: the ability to transform wind into light,\textsuperscript{8} or even wind back into wind.\textsuperscript{9}

Plywood, plexiglass, and metal - These engineered materials describe a chapter in the Story of Technology. They are also materials employed by museums to organize information into authoritative presentations of narrative. I have always been fascinated by their ability to instantly mythologize any substance. But sometimes they go rogue. They are left exposed and unfinished, confused even, but still follow instinctive strategies of display. These bastardized materials suffer from the same anxiety felt by the modern artist after the church stopped dictating subject matter, disoriented in their newfound responsibility for both the content and the form.

While we are talking about materials let’s talk about chipboard. Chipboard, another engineered wood product, is a composite material. It is a structure made from the remnants of other structures and held together by an adhesive binder. These remnants work together to make a new panel, a story de refuses. The layering of its multi-toned bits incidentally depicts illusionistic depth. It is a waste product that generates its own meaning. There is no such thing as a dormant material.

\textsuperscript{8} Wind turbine > electricity > light bulb
\textsuperscript{9} Wind turbine > electricity > electric fan
The Henry R. Luce Center for the Study of American Art in the Metropolitan Museum of Art is a storage room open to the public for the display of objects not on display. The viewer feels like an invited intruder. American artifacts such as chairs, paintings, tables, vases, and crystal cups are housed on plexiglass covered shelves and arranged according to the logic of spatial efficiency. It is a delightful regression of the museum back to the cabinet of curiosities, where objects are arranged not by scientific classification, but by aesthetic and spatial relationships. The make-believe intruder/viewer generates uniquely uninformed narratives to link the objects. It is myth making by accumulation.

Fig. 4. Smithson, Robert, & Bochner, Mel, Sign from the Hayden Planetarium
Lords of the Underworld

Rocks were our first technology. They could be considered the forbidden fruit because they initiated a trajectory of human knowledge. They reside in and below the dermal layer of the earth that is the ultimate stage of all materials (more on that in Dirty Thoughts!). Rocks use gravity to process and incorporate the forgotten. The Egyptians carved their obelisks out of single solid blocks of red granite. They chose this for both for its durability and its color, which resembled a sunbeam. Obelisks always stood erotically in the east, the land of the rising sun and the land of the living, as opposed to the pyramids which were built from many stones and stood in the west, the land of the setting sun and the land of the dead.¹⁰

Rocks are anchors in time, sinking further back than we can imagine. They have been around so long they can’t tell the future from the past. They are Time’s greatest foil and therefore champions of the people. Their greatest weapons are their stillness and their durability. Have you ever noticed how comforting it is to look at a rock? We should all aspire to become like them. Perhaps Medusa was not a monster but a misunderstood savior.

An image of a rock is almost pointless. It cannot stay stiller than the rock and the rock will outlast the materials the image is made on. But it could be used to observe and measure these heroes of stabilized matter. We should also not deny the right of one technology to pay tribute to its primeval other. If a laser wants to engrave the image of a rock, its technological predecessor, into a respectful scene, then perhaps it could be considered a type of ancestor worship.

¹⁰ Cooper, W. R. *A Short History of the Egyptian Obelisks*, 11
Fig. 5. Burwell, Joseph, 1st Lord of the Underworld
Acrylic paint on laser engraved plywood, 2018, 10 x 14 in

Fig. 6. Burwell, Joseph, 7th, 8th, & 9th Lords of the Underworld
Acrylic paint on laser engraved plywood, 2018, 10 x 14 in
Fig. 7. Burwell, Joseph, 5th Lord of the Underworld
Acrylic paint on laser engraved plywood, 2018, 10 x 14 in

Fig. 8. Burwell, Joseph, 6th Lord of the Underworld
Acrylic paint on laser engraved plywood, 2018, 10 x 14 in
Dirty Thoughts

Dirt is the default realm of all earthly matter. It is the beginning and end of all life forms affected by gravity. No matter which nation sits upon it, life and death are the same to dirt, as are truth and fiction. Chthonic beings like serpents, rocks, and bacteria dwell there in the underworld.

Children play with dirt for the same reason vampires sleep in it: our ancestors hide there. One of the rules of vampire literature is that a vampire must sleep in the dirt of its homeland every night. This soil sample would contain the original spectrum of microbes that it was exposed to as a child. Bacteria are important not only for our digestive systems but for our immune systems as well. Doctors tell parents to let their children play in the dirt. Could it be that vampires are not immortal but have extraordinary immune systems?

Microbes will alter a bone buried by a dog. Later excavation of the bone by the dog will help improve the dog's immune system but it will also transmit information about both the bone and the dirt in the form of flavor. Dogs are instinctive archeologists.

Dirt is the primordial substance. It inherits the nutrients that nurture life. If we were born from the dirt, as evolution suggests, then we are conflicted, because we were also born from ourselves. Many myths are encoded with this ubiquitous contradiction of science versus religion. In several cultures a human that emerges from the earth is described as having trouble

11 Or day to a vampire. Another rule most of us are familiar with is that vampires must avoid the sun. But the night is actually full of suns, however distant they may be. It must be assumed that it is rather heat and/or light that damage them. In that case vampires behave strikingly like bacteria.
walking or walking with a limp. The transformation from a grounded organism to a qualified surface dweller requires adaptation. The names of Oedipus and of his forefathers all translate to some type of injured foot. Families fall victim in battle with the earth.

The pedosphere awaits us all. Entropy foretells our eventual disintegration, dissolved of all ours sins. Temples have been erected to worship dirt’s constant state of flux. Walter De Maria and Robert Smithson are the high priests.

12 Many of the ideas in this paragraph come from the Claude Levi Strauss’ essay, *The Structural Study of Myth*
Fig. 7. Burwell, Joseph, *Dirty Picture #2*, 2018, 12 x 16 in

Fig. 8. Burwell, Joseph, *Dirty Picture #3*, 2018, 12 x 16 in
5. **Soft Targets of the Ice Age**

Plasticine is a non-hardening clay but it can be formed to resemble stone. It can learn to speak the language of duration and of civilization. Pleistocene is the scientific name for the Ice Age. The Ice Age and the Stone Age coincide almost perfectly. They are crystalized colleagues. Did the harshness of the former send our ancestors into caves? Something happened in the caves. We transformed. We made tools, art, and language, even architecture. Environments are important for our thoughts and our ideas.

Inside caves we would have been exposed to a whole new spectrum of bacteria. Over time the previous colony would have died out and been replaced. Perhaps this microbial displacement, in transferring the power of our behavior to a new regime, was responsible for casting the shadows in Plato’s *Allegory of the Cave*. It turns out that “you’re more microbe than you are human”\(^{13}\) and that we are actually “chimeras”.\(^{14}\) As minority shareholders we are but beasts of burden. To our symbiotes, the oldest life forms on the planet, we are a recently designed technology; surface dwellers to be driven like a car. No wonder they keep us fixated on our feet.

When we emerged from caves, we were engineers and we wielded abstract thought. We started agrarian societies, created civilizations that harnessed us to disease, malnutrition, and politics. Stanislaw Lem believes humans are evolving on a negative gradient:\(^{15}\) that every

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\(^{13}\) According to Professor Rob Knight, UC San Diego, only 43% of our cells are human. “How bacteria are changing your mood.” James Gallagher, BBC News

\(^{14}\) Paul O’Toole, Professor, Alimentary Pharmabiotic Centre, BioSciences Institute at Cork. From the article *I had the bacteria in my gut analysed. And this may be the future of medicine*, Andrew Anthony, The Observer, Feb 11, 2014

\(^{15}\) Stanislaw Lem, *Golem XIV*, from the book *Imaginary Latitude*
technology we develop spawns an exponential number of new problems. The simple life forms have their simple pleasures while our complex pleasures are negated by our complex anxieties. Since that time humans have been natural storytellers. In fact, we can only think in terms of stories. Our cognitive functions instinctively narrativize all information. It is the only way to organize and remember information and to provide meaning, for which we have an insatiable appetite. While developing this work I realized there is an absurd premise attached to the human condition: that we were born to try to solve the mystery of our own creation.
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Cooper, W. R. A Short History of the Egyptian Obelisks. London: Samuel Bagster and Sons, 1877


Image List

Work Exhibited

_North American Data_
Single installation artwork
Wood, steel, plexiglass, plastic, plasticine, silicon, spray paint, gesso, photograph
Dimensions variable
2018

Installation Images

Work by Joseph Burwell
For the exhibition _ca. 2018_
November 10, 2018 – December 2, 2018
205 Hudson Gallery, Hunter College
205 Hudson St., New York, NY 10013

1. _North American Data_ (installation view), 2018

2. _North American Data_ (installation view detail), 2018

3. _North American Data_ (installation view detail), 2018

4. _North American Data_ (installation view), 2018

5. _North American Data_ (installation view), 2018

6. _North American Data_ (installation view detail), 2018
1. *North American Data* (installation view), 2018

2. *North American Data* (installation view detail), 2018
3. *North American Data* (installation view detail), 2018

4. *North American Data* (installation view), 2018
5. *North American Data* (installation view), 2018
6. *North American Data* (installation view detail), 2018