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Generative Movements, Cabbage Juice, & Habitats of Selfhood

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Generative Movements, Cabbage Juice, & Habitats of Selfhood

by

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Andrea Blum

Signature

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Carrie Moyer

Signature of Second Reader

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Generative Movements, Cabbage Juice, & Habitats of Selfhood

My father was a fundamentalist protestant minister. He idolized revival preachers and conservative radio hosts and often screamed their messages from the pulpit. He hated what he referred to as the “ways of the world” such as premarital sex, feminism and gay rights and shouted out against it on any given Sunday. Outside of the church he was mostly an even tempered man that worked as a house painter to supplement what our small church could not afford to pay him. My mother cleaned houses. Needless to say, as a gay man growing up in the Rust Belt, my experience in the church was in stark contrast with what I later experienced at St. Mark’s Church-in-the-Bowery in dance workshops. St. Mark’s Church is an Episcopal congregation that hosts interfaith religious events, political rallies and is the home of Dance Space for over 20 years. Outside the church is a Black Lives Matter sign and a sign that reads “Refugees are Welcome” with a picture of a darker skinned Mary and Joseph looking for shelter.

Through the downward spiral of the Trump Presidency the columns of the St. Mark’s Church began to resonate with me. After the inauguration I was struck by how in just one day, the White House went from being a symbol that advocated for me and my family, to a symbol that worked against us. In one day, LGBT rights, civil rights, and information about environmental protection disappeared from the White House website, and that was just the beginning. Similarly, I experienced this at St. Mark’s Church and how it was such a different religious institution than the one I was raised in. I was drawn

to the columns as structures support and noticing how they can also easily represent the aggression of abusive power.

A Body in Relation

In 2017, I participated in an improvisational dance with Patrick Gallegher, a trained dancer who introduced me to authentic movement techniques from the Judson Church tradition. (Fig. 1) Our duet made me aware of the forms my body created in environments that charge me. The ritual of the dance and the density of the physical material facilitated an intersubjective experience with Patrick where I developed awareness of my desire through their access and negation. These early movement exercises became a blueprint for constructing spaces where something performs, even if it is not me. Dance is the ultimate sculpture, it reads slowly, relates to the body and space, contorts into unique form and has emotional and intellectual resonance. I began making work that directed movement that implied the dynamics of my own asymmetrical relationship with my spouse. My desire for this line of communication is limited by my aging untrained body and introverted personality so I reached out in other ways, through the making of objects which became surrogates for me. I use my body as an apparatus to elicit movements of interior experiences and experiences in interiors which end up as sculptural form. I locate the voice of my work by looking at the tone of other artists as a way to direct my own. Consequently, both the body and voice of my work is communicates through the development of a language, which translates my personal experience into relatable form. These evolving markers of selfhood have inspired a study

of processual ontology which has shed light on some of my art making impulses. Moving from dancer to sculptor, I render fluid experience into kinetic sculpture. The works of novelist Jean Genet, the landscape design of Frederick Law Olmsted and theoretical writings of Karen Barad serve as an analytical framework for how I view and articulate my process. Their specific tone and distinctive style have helped me identify and locate my own.

Origin

As precursors to my thesis work I constructed several sculptures made out of drywall and organic material in order to address the body as a site that manages both illness and desire. These pieces referred to banal architectural form or a shower rack as it might have appeared through the fog of pain.

Genet's Bed, (Fig 2), was made of layers of freestanding drywall broken down to reveal a metal substructure that strained cabbage juice which then trickled into interior pipes into a cast coconut oil bed which lay beneath a shower holder. Echoing the fluid processes within the body, ***Blue Java***, (Fig. 3), named after the antiquated French form of dance, was a drywall structure that was propped up by trays of healing ointment and cabbages.

Jean Genet: Floral Language & Intimate Interiors

French novelist Jean Genet has expanded my ideas about aesthetics and desire. He paired the sweet smell of wisteria with an acidic description of sexual initiation. His rawness is softened by punctuations of poetic floral descriptions. My attraction to this

elegant contrast has foiled my own proclivities for prioritizing formal beauty over the abject.

Genet and I share similar root desires and yet our social circumstances have shaped our voices in different ways. He was a gay man living in France during the mid-twentieth century surviving by means of sex work and theft. I live in a post Stonewall era during a time where assimilation has dominated the mainstream LGBT political discourse. He was sequestered into an abject life in prison and relished the unique homosocial cultures that thrived there. In my own lifetime, the homosexual social gathering place was not a prison, but a bathhouse. Bathhouses have disappeared in recent decades due to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, but historically have been locations for gay men to secretly convene for sexual encounters, shrouded and hidden from public society. Our circumstances have shaped the nature of our voices, but by immersing myself in his anachronistic world my understanding of what is possible in both content and tone is broadened. His work has helped me contextualize the way I express desire within a continuum of queer male experience that aids me in envisioning bolder forms of sociality. His lush description of flowers has eased me into an untamed world which has emboldened my voice while keeping the quieter notes intact.

In Genet's texts, he incorporates obvious floral specimens such as the rose, and less expected choices such as cabbage and yarrow weed. His accounts of these botanical metaphors often begin as first-person observations, but unravel into surreal fantasy. He experiences a mixture of grief and unbridled sexual fantasy, the purple cabbage

functioning as a memorial for this duality. I use foliage to represent the abject body. I draw from his many references as a type of ingredient list, assembling them throughout my sculptures as a way to interject the noun and the verb of his metaphor. The placement of these signs within the porous surface of drywall or cedar, affects them, changing their form and making them fragrant. The organic nature of the foliage interacts with the structures in unexpected ways that support the metaphor, contradict it, or connote an altogether different meaning.

Generative Movements, Cabbage Juice, & Habitats of Selfhood

Drywall, cabbage juice, and coconut oil, rotting roses, and plywood planks. These physical materials are not simply the building blocks of my artwork – they are extensions of memory, intention and pleasure. From warm memories of bathhouses and the flesh of others, to the wicked ailments of bodily illness, my artwork distills a lived experience into material reality. These material realities take the shape of sculptural networks that serve as biographical bio-domes. (Fig. 4)

As I work with the materials there are two important theoretical influences that have helped me to articulate my own process: 19th century landscape designer, Frederick Law Olmsted, and physicist and cultural theorist, Karen Barad. I am drawn to thinkers with materialist, scientific foundations. Not unlike the discipline of sculpture, science has an analytical relationship with the properties of physical materials and their processes. What unites Olmsted and Barad is an interest in how natural and cultural processes push and pull on one another.

Frederick Law Olmsted

In 1857, Frederick Law Olmsted designed Central Park with the notion of the *picturesque landscape* in mind. Olmsted's aesthetic interests lie in allowing his landscapes to include active components for their natural ecosystem. He regarded the picturesque landscape as one with ideal forms that also included the more wild aspects of nature, like a tree struck by lightning. Olmsted used the term *picturesque* as a synthesis between the formal beautiful (thesis) and destructive (antithesis) aspects of a landscape. In Robert's Smithson's 1977 Artforum article on Olmsted, Smithson describes the ecosystem of central park as one that merges the wildness of nature and culture within the design of the park. During a visit to the Rambles, Smithson writes;

“Now the Ramble has grown up into an urban jungle, and lurking in its thickets are ‘hoods, hobos, hustlers, and homosexuals,’ and other estranged creatures of the city.... Walking east, I passed graffiti on boulders... On the base of the Obelisk along with the hieroglyphs there are also graffiti. ...In the spillway that pours out of the Wollman Memorial Ice Rink, I noticed a metal grocery cart and a trash basket half-submerged in the water. Further down, the spillway becomes a brook choked with mud and tin cans. The mud then spews under the Gapstow Bridge to become a muddy

slough that inundates a good part of The Pond, leaving the rest of The Pond aswirl with oil slicks, sludge, and Dixie cups.”¹

In his observations of the Rambles he describes a space where the untamed aspects of nature and culture meet and exhibit what he calls a “process of ongoing relationships existing in a physical region.” These are relations where the overgrown thicket and the men engaging within it, and a Dixie cup, all have agency in the landscape.

My current work is an immersion into a similar type of space of steam room or saunas that are designed to hold the active properties of water and the cultural expressions of pleasure. Like Olmsted’s theory of the picturesque, they are constructed to control natural elements, but those where there is always the potential for their untamed aspects to emerge. The collection of these symbols and materials work symbiotically in my sculpture to evoke not only these various sentiments, but more importantly a new sensation altogether

Karen Barad

Ontologist Karen Barad details an elaborate world composed of constantly interacting phenomena. Barad notes that the world is not made up of separate entities, like atoms or quarks, but active phenomena with agency that move amongst each other.

¹ Smithson, Robert. “Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectal Landscape”. Art Forum International, New York, New York, February 1973

Her work on *agential intra-actions*, is a study of quantum fields where matter is constantly intra-acting².

In an ontology where everything flows she locates particular exclusions within the system as *agential cuts*. These are delineations in the field made by an apparatus with agency. She uses the term agential apparatus in her field of science to acknowledge the role apparatus's pay in making objective measurement. She notes that because the apparatus is composed of matter, it becomes part of the material field it is attempting to analyze. Like Smithson's observations of the dixie cup and the individuals cruising in Central Park, Barad finds value in both entities within this habitat.

Conclusion: Everything Flows

The forbearer of processual ontology in the west is the Greek philosopher Heraclitus who coined the motto *panta rhei, or everything flows*. His philosophy is based on the notion that all things change and that change is an explanation for stability over time. He believed that being is not a static, isolated experience but "to be *actual* is to be a process."³ His most potent analogy is "one cannot step twice into the same river."⁴ Heraclitus's view of ontology counters much of what has dominated western philosophy, such as Aristotle's Substantialism, or Plato's Ideal Form, which reduce matter into self-contained qualities.

² Barad, Karen. "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of how Matter Comes to Matter." In *Material Feminisms*, 120.

³ Stein, Ross L. "Towards a Process Philosophy of Chemistry." *Hyle* 10 (1):5 - 22, 2004, 7

⁴ *Ibid.*, 8

My work has a way of revealing the nature of its making or, unfolding as it is exhibited. I liken these spaces to interior ecosystems where organics and building materials effect each other over time. Though my work is not made to illustrate any particular theory, I look to artists and scientists who study the processual aspects of nature as a model for my own process.

The wilderness of my memory is on display here. The materials have offered up unique properties that alter my intentionality at every turn. Plants with literary origins and symbolic references take on entirely new qualities, their associations catalyzing a gestalt of new sensations. This work is the result of selfhood within and among a network of relations.

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Image List

Figure 1: *Untitled*

5 minute performance with Patrick Galleger
Spring 2017

Figure 2 & 3: *Genet's Bed*

metal, drywall, PVC pipe, rope, organic material
61" x 98" x 63"
Fall 2017

Figure 4 & 5: *Blue Java*

Metal, wood, drywall, fabric, ceramic, organic material
36" x 47" x 57"
Fall 2017

Figure 6: Exhibition Shot

Metal, wood, drywall, ceramic, organic material
24" x 59" x 56"
Fall 2017

Figure 7: *Untitled*

Metal, wood, drywall, ceramic, organic material
24" x 59" x 56"
Fall 2017

Figure 8: Exhibition Shot Including *Love Machine, Untitled, Divers*

Metal, cedar, ceramic, plexiglas, humidifiers, roses, cabbage and cabbage juice
Fall 2018

Figure 9: Partial exhibition shot of *Untitled, Divers*

Metal, cedar, ceramic, soil, roses, yarrow, cabbage and cabbage juice
Fall 2018

Figure 10: *Untitled*

Metal, ceramic, cabbage, roses, yarrow, soil, cabbage juice
Fall 2018

Figure 11-13: *Divers, and Divers Details*

Metal, cedar, ceramic, plexiglas, string, roses, cabbage and cabbage juice
Fall 2018



Figure 1



Figure 2, Figure 3

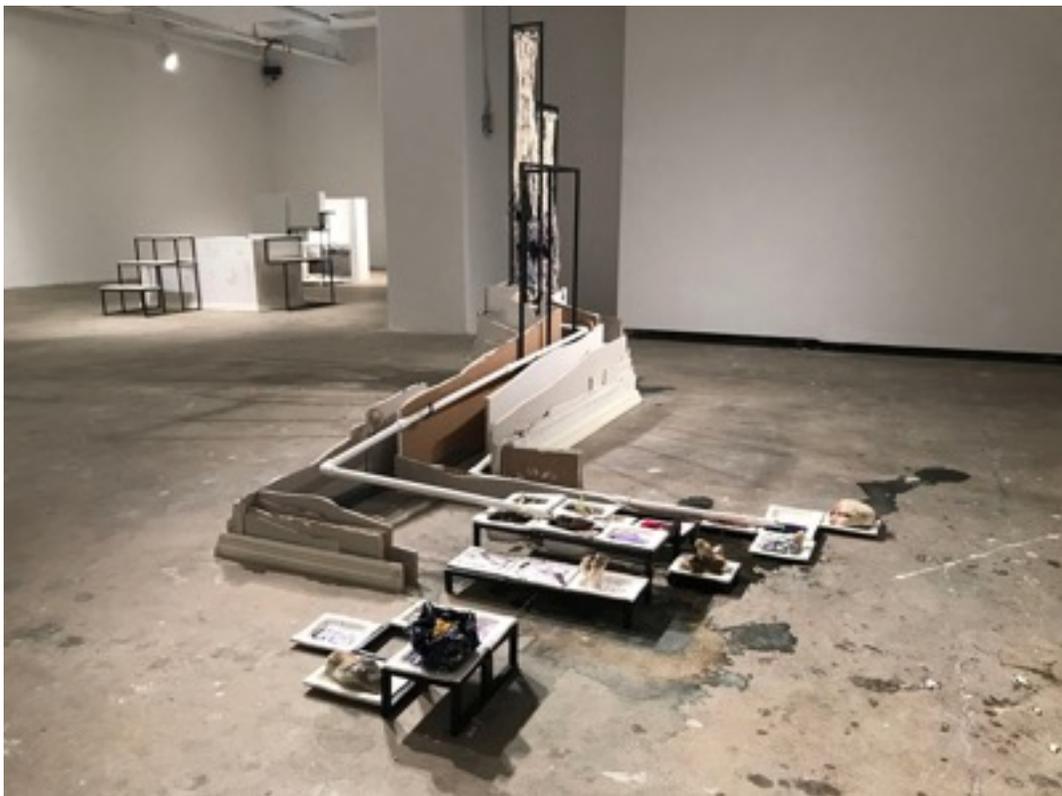




Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6, Figure 7





figure 8



Figure 9, Figure 10





Figure 11



Figure 12, Figure 13

