

## **Nothing Is Set In Stone**

### **Performativity, Space, and the Abstract Body**

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*[Stones] owe nothing to patience, industry or merit. They have no market rate or price. Their value is not commercial and cannot be calculated in any currency; it laughs both at the gold standard and at purchasing power. It is not convertible into labor or goods. It depends solely on the covetousness, pride and competitiveness generated by the desire to possess or the pleasure of possessing them. Each stone, as unique and irreplaceable as a work of genius, is a valuable at once pointless and priceless, with which laws of economics have nothing to do. – Roger Caillois, *The Writing of Stones**



*Figure a. A stone. Slate rock from the coast.*

## **Abstract**

This is a performative text. It is written in two distinct and intertwining voices. The first is a lyrical and reflective description of my interaction with the process of creation, materials, imagination, and experience of time. The second is an appropriated permutation of the scientific method of enquiry analyzing the process of the work unfolding and the ultimate presentation of the project in relation to the application of several founding concepts. Each analysis is followed by observations stemming from the application of theoretical elements to the process of creation.

Two main reference points to my thesis practice have been Caillois' diagonal science and the development of the concept affect, specifically here through the text of Simon O'Sullivan. The use of the scientific method through a semi-parody of its steps forms the basis of my approach for the presentation of the concepts of space, affect, performance, and materiality.

The text examines the relationship between the choice of materials, stones, wood, and plastic, and their signifying potential. It specifically considers the moment of interaction between the viewer and the work itself as a site for a network of possibilities of relation. It states that the actions and movements of the artist in the process of creation of the work form an object-trace that continues to inform the conditions of the future-present, the actual passage of time through experience. It speaks to the stages of transformation: of the materials, the action of viewing, and ultimately the work itself. In conclusion, the text reflects on the environment within which it is shown and the problems of determinative presupposition. It finishes with a desire to use aesthetics as a transformative tool in the creation of meaning in art.

## **Rigorous Method for Creative Practices (inspired by Caillois p.88)**

### **A Contemporary Scientific Methodology**

In the search for fact and knowledge, imagination must be put to the test. Art must be run through a series of rigorous steps of experimentation and of observation to examine its relations of potential and ensure its formats fit within the realms of accepted means of understanding. This is established through the following process:

- Create situations of experimentation to determine the ideal conditions for the growth of high quality concepts.
- Arrange interventions for leisure during long periods of high intensity theory and practice for more conclusive analyses of techniques and methods.
- Foster a rigorous development of desire in collecting specimens of curiosity for further study.
- Curate a selection of specimens to test their relational validity by a systematic study of arrangement in every possible situation.
- Analyze the relational potential of each possible viewer through first hand accounts of states of being.
- Determine the experience of the passage of time in the past, present, and future through individual associations from memory.
- Create a standardized methodology for aesthetics designed for every potential environment.
- Expose and regulate any possible bias within a predetermined spectrum of acceptability.

## Signification and Materiality

Pieces of driftwood hang silently from thick translucent lines. They hang to approximately knee level. The wood feels smooth to the touch, having been caressed by the salt and the water since finding itself in the sea. The edges are frayed. They have been collected over months of walks by the shore. They have been chosen specifically, though more through curiosity and wonderment than any rigorous scientific method. The desire has been rigorous, though, and many have been left behind or abandoned to the cost of experimentation. They now hang together, all 875 of them, frozen for a moment in their journey. They will return to the shore after this is all over.

Echoing the sea from which they came, the stones form an abstracted and fragmented shore. They are a steel grey, with tinges of blue and green and lines of time crossing through them in mineral ribbons. They form fragments of transcriptions of actual events from millions of years ago. They used to smell of salt. Now they smell like everything else here. They used to make sounds as well, when they were stepped on; sharp crunching sounds as they twisted deeper into the cracks between them. They now lie on the floor, transported, but together somehow still at home.

Observation a: There is knowledge you can summon without having to find the source of the reference.

Observation b: Any material can be arbitrarily endowed with meaning.

Materials are signs. They form a sensorial language that can point to a subject without ever mentioning what it is. *They hold the possibility to assert subjective presence.* (C.C McKee) They move freely through intersections of time and memory displacing the past into the present through involuntary recollections from chance encounters with sensation. (Taussig p.70) You can be in their presence while being somewhere completely different at the same time. This is their power.

They are also expressions of time frozen at the intersection of their chance perception. They lie and wait to be reactivated by a spectator (O'Sullivan p.126). It is only through

the act of recollection produced by the encounter that they become more than their material properties. They stand as gateways to the experience of individual and collective past experiences. Some have transcended into the realm of collective memory, whether imaginary or lived.

Observation c: All matter is alive and in process, constantly undergoing modification.



*Figure b. Granite. Mineral ribbons through rock.*



*Figure c. An almost perfect sphere of granite.*

## Relational Potential of Situation

Almost nine hundred translucent filaments shape a network of connections between each piece of driftwood and the wooden framework above. It seems almost cruel to put them together but apart like this. They all came from a tree but exist in worlds apart, their forms the result of their trajectories. Perhaps they dreamed of different possibilities when they were trees. But for now, they float here, attached by a thread.

There is a corridor, a break in the shore and the wood and the light. It is an invitation to enter, to begin the happening of experience. Together the viewer's body forms a whole that resonates in changing textures of intensity. It participates in sensation. (O'Sullivan p.130) The corridor is a ritual of experience. It is a ceremony of immersion by objects and lines: 875 glistening and echoing streams of light shifting with each step. They become transitional objects that connect us in a transformation catalyzed by the motion of the body. This is active viewing.

Observation d: The transcendental spirit is alive in complex interrelationships in which active objects and active subjects produce effects that have the capacity to influence or change the environment.

The artwork is founded on the relational potential of mimetic signification and the interactions between the material and its potential audience. Alone, it stands as an object-trace of the gestures that describe the actions of its making. The repetition of limited materials imbued with symbolic significance creates a multifaceted experience of the possibility of the creation of meaning. Its relational qualities depend on activation through the perception of a viewer. *Perceiving means having a body, which in turns means inhabiting a world.* (Merleau-Ponty p. X) It is the sensorial stimulation preceding thought that happens when one's becoming comes into contact with other objects and presences. These influences fall into two categories: the inner category of emotions and psychological states and the outer, cultural, social and environmental influences. (Wood p.163) Their relationship is a relative interpretation of phenomena that occurs at the moment of experience.



Observation e: The actions of the viewer are the generating force of the experiences they create.

Observation f: Time and space are central figures in experimentation.



*Figure d. Several collected stones with slate, shale, mica and other minerals.*

## Traces and Embodiment

In Jeanette Winterson's book *Sexing the Cherry*, there is a story about a city in which words uttered by inhabitants form a cloud of sounds and words over the streets. They are real, chattering away as a canopy in the sky above the houses. They come from a place, go to a place, and are lifted into the skies as physical traces of the passing of time. Cleaners are hired to rid the city of the most furious rows, the most longing of romantic whispers, and scrub the sky clean of these traces. With each passing day and each passing night, the cleaners work to give a blank slate to the inhabitants, who continue to fill their skies with talk.

*The words resist erasure. The oldest and most stubborn form a thick crust of chattering rage. Cleaners have been bitten by words still quarrelling...* (Winterson p.17)

The cleaners are still in danger from these words, though they have long left the mouths of their origin and ears of their destination. These ephemeral moments leave a lasting imprint in the psychology of the city and continue to carve the actual movements of the residents below.

Bodies serve as reflections of their mental conditions – still in relation to moments in the past that have an effect on their present and future. They bear the marks of their experiences and memories of spaces affect their movements within them.

The words combine to form an embodied form of a collective consciousness that cyclically affects the conditions of the present. The action of cleaning the words daily from the skies is a symbol for active erasure, though whether it is possible to fully expunge their actualization remains to be seen.

The body becomes a porous site of exchange. It plays a central role in activating the memory of a particular corporeal experience in order to create meaning. What is preserved in the work is not its material form but the memory of a time and space unique to each individual that endures, preserved in a virtual infinity. (Deleuze & Guattari p.166)  
It is formed by a relationship to the familiar in a fragment of an abstract simulation of a happening. This agency in how the work is perceived allows the viewer to determine the

point of their relation. It could be the light. It could be the stones. It could be the wood or the process of change.

Observation g: Actions leave imprints on our collective and individual consciousness that propel shifts in our identities.



*Figure e. Pieces of driftwood with some bark.*

## Subject and Site

With infinite variations, the image of waves licking the rocky shore is an enduring one. Displaced and re-presented in this space, the situation forms an environment for imagination, of places of nowhere, anywhere, and everywhere. (Koren p.67) There are infinite possibilities for combinations of recollections from the multiplicity of individual and collective memories. (Perri p.844) They generate and regenerate with every interaction. The act of recollection can be linked to a feeling of absence brought forth by the dialogue between the viewer's body and the materiality of the object. (Cvoro p.55) It is a type of melancholy to the inaccessibility of the passage of time. After all, understanding is the processing of past events. All we ever have are the traces of passing moments. (O'Sullivan p.126) This feeling of absence creates a virtual space in which the possibility of involuntary recollection might happen. Intensity is firmly situated within the experience. *There need not be a recourse to the transcendent in order to allow for the possibility of a beyond to everyday experience.* (O'Sullivan p.133) It is filled with thoughts.

The installation is a monument to the passage of the viewer within and around it. It stands as a relic to the movements and performances of its interactions. (De Certeau, Giard and Mayol p.35) It precedes them and is their remainder. The negotiation of movement begets direct experience. The performances come and they go – they ebb and they flow. Do they colour or change the work itself? Are their traces visible, imbued in the materials, or do those change, too, growing new subjectivities with each new relation? The movement is dynamic, rising and falling, spilling over the edges of the space.

We come again to a virtual absence that makes space for something more to happen. It is the tracing of the absence through the interaction of the body with the materiality of the work that conjures the past into the present. (Cvoro p.55) It is the gesture-trace in the physical actualization of the work in relation to the embodied presence of the viewer that creates a shifting realm of possibilities in the interpretation of the work.

The shore is enveloped in fog. The shore is clear and calm. It is raining. It is windy. It is all of these moments at once summoned from the past and imagined into the present.

But it is not the shore that is the subject but the process of experience. It is the mind's capacity to instantly summon a multitude of potential relationships to a certain set of stimuli from the archive of individual and collective experiences. (Manning p.9) It is the bringing of potential relations into actual experience that the work strives to achieve. The objects are placed according to specific situations that open up a relational process between the object-trace, object-subject, and subject-trace. With each new participant the space becomes re-territorialized to a new and changing set of circumstances encompassing each new relation.

Observation h: The work oscillates between presence and absence, performance and objecthood.



*Figure f. Some of the 875 places of connection for the filaments.*

## Transformation

The lines are made of plastic. Initially composed from a multitude of organic materials, it is processed through various stages to become unrecognizable from its source. It is perhaps the greatest transformation of all, the very idea of infinite transformation. The lines stand as physical traces of morphology. (Barthes p.97) They have undergone a complete transformation of identity. Perhaps they are also a symbol of erasure, although I am sure their past lingers in the detritus of their chemical process. The stones are imprints of countless bits of matter formed under millions of years of pressure. The wood, conserving its essence, loses its mass and is stripped of its skin. But plastic forms a complete representation of something else - a new identity.

Transformation is a process of agency, through which a subject undergoes an action to become something else. It does not seek to rationalize the world. It explores the myriad of margins and depths of experience that can lead to new outcomes with different forms of participation. Constructing a view of reality as a series of possibilities allows for a more nuanced notion of authenticity of experience. Filled with virtuality, the work cannot exist in itself as an object. It relies of the potential and possibilities of the past interacting with the future-present. (O'Sullivan p.133) There is no linear and unobtrusive way of knowing the future. *The very act of framing the question may unavoidably influence the answer.* (Wood p.4) The experiences of the participants contribute to rustling outgrowths of meaning. They do not function as passive observers of the work. (Danto p.12) The myth of the impartial observer is obsolete.

Observation i: Participants stand at the threshold of who they were before and who they will become after the action.

Observation j: Nothing can be a fly on the wall.

Observation k: I am not a fly on the wall.



*Figure g & h. Thick transparent monofilament.*

## The Arena of Aesthetics

The filaments are the vehicles for the abstract conditions of atmosphere, catching and holding the light, moving and shifting with the angle of perception. They follow the viewer with their rushing streams of light, almost as if they were aware of their position in the act of being viewed. They glimmer, shift, and disappear. Together they form a myth that is more concerned with first impressions than that of rationalizing its features. (Barthes p.130) They seek response, emotion. They seek to make the milieu felt. (Manning p.9) But the space does not represent the truth or any pre-given reality. (Wood p.134) It is a continuous process of determination of the self.

The installation functions as a transitional space located inside and outside of time. It exists in the present as well as being connected to a particular moment in the past. It exposes the viewer to other possibilities outside of normal or utilitarian interests. It is a point of access to an immanent beyond to everyday experience. (O'Sullivan p.127)

Observation l: Affects are our bodies connecting and responding to the world around us.

Observation m: Affects exist outside of language. They can only be experienced.

No environment is a neutralized zone. There exist conditions of viewing in artistic spaces that speak to the history of the viewing of art. It is a form of consumption. These expect a suspension of belief in agreement with a particular set of conditions for viewing. In spaces for art, there is an expectation of viewing art. Perhaps we can think of the role of anticipation as the theater of belief from which we now view and experience art. Within environments in which the viewer is the most receptive, art becomes a screen for the transmission of messages and information. The audience is placed as the receptor of information stemming from the art within its environment. (Danto p.13) It is a portal to an alternate experiencing of our world – *a world of becoming*. (O'Sullivan p.128) It is a reterritorialization of the current reality into one that is parallel but distinctly different.

The result could be a pantomime. Its meaning is conditional on the potential for some form of relation between the viewer and the art. Since the conditions are never



guaranteed, it can fall into the realm of meaninglessness. The physical form can gain dominance over its potential content, *emptying [its] interiority to the benefit of exterior signs*. (Barthes p.18) All of the presuppositions of potential create infinite pathways of relational meaning. But in a world of infinite possibilities, there lies also the possibility of realities in which meaning collapses. It becomes so diluted that the work falls back into simple objects stolen from the shore and arranged in a clean and static environment.

But appearance is more than it seems. To work with appearance is to work with both physical materiality and its virtual potential. It is a combination of the physical expectations of materiality and the virtual feelings associated with its form. It conjures the past that does not exist in the present. *To feel the real in the actual is to work with the forces of the real within appearance*. (Manning p.13) The actualization of the work is the combination of concepts that force the work to take form.

Observation n: Aesthetics are the first of the portals to meaning.

The stones and the wood and the light come into a dance with the viewer turned participant, in which the aesthetic is activated through a transformation of our sense of self. (O'Sullivan p.128) It is the trace of a multitude of performances of the past that allude but do not point. It is a space of nowhere and everywhere at once.

But for me it is the water from where it all came.



*Figure i. Hanging wooden frame pieces.*

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*Figure j. A bundle of driftwood.*