Captain's proLOGue
Master of Fine Arts Thesis Exhibition
Jana K Weaver
5/9/14-5/13/14

Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art
State University of New York at New Paltz

Alice and Horace Chandler & North Galleries
1 Hawk Drive, New Paltz, NY 12561
www.newpaltz.edu/museum

Opening Reception:
Friday, may 9th, 2014
5-7pm
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Exhibition Hours: Friday-Tuesday, 11am to 5pm
Artist Statement

First and foremost, I am a maker of objects, a giver of gifts, a caretaker and a cultivator of flora and ideas. While addressing themes of ecological and social interdependency, I am able to develop a personal tapestry of scientific and emotional understanding. By referencing ecology, biology and psychology, it is my hope to cultivate more compassion and understanding for myself and the viewer. The interdependence between all things living and inanimate allows my practice to work with many materials, whether they be natural, man-made or through social actions. Installation and individual pieces often incorporate two and three dimensions to invite the viewer to physically interact with the works. By implementing the use of ink, gouache, paper clay, repurposed materials, photography and natural specimens, multiple views of experience may be addressed.
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A gilded speck pushes on the black heavy air until it sighs a Prussian blue. Those more serious about life’s assignments get on with their busy work while the less diligent fight the heavy lids of soon to be forgotten dreams. Long before my mind begins to stir out of night’s enveloping womb, sap in branches pulses towards what bit of light trickles across the corn field, the knock, knock, knock of beaks make haste only pausing on days of great wind and rain. Dry crunches sound out beneath cloven hooves as steam feathers out of wet black noses. On days of quiet snow, life is muffled only in terms of our ears. It is here, in this place, my day begins, but it isn’t just my day, is it?

By developing a greater awareness of the subtle changes outside and inside of myself, can I come to better understand my interdependence with all humans, flora and fauna? Developing a practice that incorporates these subjects, I hope to establish a greater reverence for how my existence has come and continues to be, as well as a deeper understanding on how my own personal agency functions. In this, I expect to become a more responsible caretaker of myself and all that surrounds me. Ultimately, my goal is to provoke greater curiosity and reverence surrounding the workings of our inner and outer world so that we, and consequently our world, will continue to flourish.

To begin the conversation the potentially problematic term, nature, will be defined as such by the American Heritage Dictionary: The forces and processes that produce and control all the phenomena of the material world.

It is essential to see humans as an intrinsic part of nature before we as a species can find our personal agency within its process. During the early twentieth century, paradigms in philosophy and science created a chasm between humans and animals (Haraway 127).
Current notions in animal rights and feminism are helping to close the gap, as people are becoming increasingly aware that our culture is part of nature and that we are not separate as we had once believed (Haraway 127). Potentially, this could create a feeling as if one is just a cog in the universe. Returning to the idea of agency, we may find some purpose or feeling of solace. Lars Bang Larsen’s explanation of agency gives humans, things and systems practice, interaction and intelligence (Larsen). According to Larsen an ecosystem or a garden plot has agency because it’s an assemblage of organisms, as are humans. If humans or systems have the ability to produce effects and events, then they are agents. In this case both are agents in nature (Larsen). As an artist, any project I execute and every piece I make gives me agency. Having realized my own agency as part of a greater whole, a larger happening that includes things such as ecosystems and cultural systems, I can now approach the concept of interdependency with ease. If we are indeed agents, then our actions most certainly bring about effects and events within our realm of existence and by my previous definition, this is nature. If all happenings and all things are a part of nature, then not only is cultivating understanding of my immediate environment ‘s natural and human history lending me a sense of place and identity in it, but also so is cultivating human culture. Understanding that I am a relatively conscious agent and have chosen to be an artist as my occupation, I must set about deciding what sort of agency I will bring to my life and my artistic process.

First and foremost, I am a maker of objects, a giver of gifts, a caretaker and a cultivator of flora and ideas and a user of desks. How can I as an artist make these tendencies work in service to the whole? Is not the first task to dissolve the fallacy of autonomy? Is not impossible to say where one begins and ends when considering the
interconnectedness of our existence? To continuously search to fill the gaps in our knowledge and to develop greater reverence for all that composes our reality and supports our lives, we must be seduced into looking at things differently. While those predisposed to partaking in spiritual and religious practices would say daily rituals and meditations would foster such a shift in perception, those more passionate towards empirical evidence would side with the inquiring technique of the scientific method to illuminate possibilities of perception. More than often, the average person makes use of both types of practice. What if the two were to merge? What if realms of the esoteric, the subjective were handled with a scientific approach? A desk is just the right place to conduct these investigations.

A desk is not just a piece of furniture, a desk is a place where things begin and end. A desk is where novels are born, missives of love and loss are scribed, a place where orders are dictated and confidential meetings are held. A desk is where theories are concocted, secrets are locked away and histories are recorded. A desk traditionally holds pens, paper, stamps and envelopes, letter openers and guns. A desk hides prized bottles of scotch, Cuban cigars and lockets of our firstborn’s hair. A desk is not a desk, a desk is a place. A desk is an agent. And in this case, a desk is a seducer. This place/agent will be the command, visual and interactive center of my thesis installation. All objects will migrate from this desk into the hands, eyes and minds of the viewers/participants. This desk will birth collections from physical and emotional realms and scribe uncharted territories. This desk will be an agent of change, a place to get to work.

Being knowledgeable about the history of the place you are from or the place you reside functions as a tool to identify yourself. In exploring the theory of Place, we are taught
to consider an area’s historical and anthropological background, this is how Place is distinguished from Landscape (Lippard 12). This notion and idea of Place has been based on a speciesist precept, perhaps not in a consciously cruel way, it is human-centric nonetheless. Is not a landscape teeming with communities? Or furthermore, isn’t a desk? Why would desks not be considered places rich in history? To identify oneself solely on the history of human presence would be only a small part of your story, our story, its story, the story.

While the desk has agency and the ability to seduce, the captain’s prime directive is to do as little superfluous activities in life as possible, first and foremost focusing on basic and fundamental relationships with nature and loved ones. Tying into Taoist ideas of naturalness, the uncarved block, “prior to the imprint of culture” this proves difficult in what seems to be an ever increasingly complicated world. While doing little as possible this does not mean that what is done constitutes few parts but rather does not deny the complexity of life. That which is left in the doing still leaves its mark in accumulated patterns changing the waves of the journey this way and that. It seems as though there is no purpose to its randomness but it is the naturalness of the movement, the nature of water, that is what the desk dances upon.

Now identifying a desk as a teeming community of ideas and experiences, something with agency, it has the power to move within our world. The desk has become a vehicle for traversing the changing waters, for organic movement in the world. To illustrate the desk’s new ability, it takes sail upon the fluid waters of Nature. The desk becomes a way of looking, of being. In Taoist philosophy, air and water are used metaphorically to explain
Nature (Loy, 73-80). These elements enable the desk to move naturally to and fro with the movement of life, on, in, over and through its environment. With sail and sea added to the desk’s colony of agency, it now is fully prepared to embark on its journey. A Persian-like rug supports the desk to stay afloat as a raft would; while at the same time fosters a feeling of home. This place of home has now become ever-shifting and able to traverse life in a more natural way.

Again, drawing from Taoist philosophy, the goal is to move through life, in the world, in a natural way. The sail references the Tao Te Ching:

“may not the space between heaven and earth be compared to a bellows? Tis emptied, yet it loses not its power; Tis moved again, and sends forth air the more. Much speech to swift exhaustion lead we see; You inner being guard, and keep it free.” (Tzu 9-10)

This air is intrinsic to Nature; it has always been and will continue to be. In this, the past, present and future reside. This is echoed in the sail’s construction fabrics referencing air; water and land are used to illustrate their inseparability. In addition the quilt is made for the second function to honor my parents who have provided the opportunity for me to tend to my studies and develop a way of moving through the world with my new way of seeing and understanding. The quilt will also function as comfort for them after the installation is over, staying in motion, not falling into disuse.

The contents on and in the desk are integral to the paring down of my exploring and experiencing the world. While the top of the desk supports the books and journals that have recorded and influenced more external experiences, the drawers contain the remaining
evidence of those experiences, the detritus from the caring of those inside and outside of my immediate home. In this, the drawers reflect what is most natural about being human, our altruistic and social dependency with one another. That is, save for the center drawer, here, the viewer finds only sand. Sand that moves much like and with the water as it moves with the drawer’s movement as the viewers peruse its contents. This in turn reflects the natural movement that I refer to from Taoist philosophy.

Photography’s function is highly mutable and can be used in many different ways simultaneously (Lippard 20). Photography lends itself to portray a place as it was in a moment in time, that is, a moment in time selected by the photographer who is choosing what is most important in a place to photograph. By visiting a designated area of the property where I live at the same time everyday and photographing it, I will be documenting the visible ecological changes while simultaneously creating a sense of place with which I hope to achieve a closer connection. The collection of photographs also functions as romantic propaganda of a landscape to lure the viewer into further investigation.

To know and identify with this place more deeply, nature and the practice of natural history will be explored and recorded. During my photography sessions each morning I will also, examine the area for evidence of animal activity, new and old plant growth as well as weather impacts. Each experience will be recorded and illustrated in a daily log, as well as samples collected that will be available to the viewer. The collections will not be displayed in the traditional fashion of natural history museums but rather through a subjective lens. Items will be parceled in handmade vessels to reflect my own personal connection and understanding or role of each item. Viewers will be encouraged to handle the vessels to
develop their own connections with the experience and item. A daily log will be available for reading and inspiration in areas that are often overlooked in our daily lives. Becoming more a part of these daily changes and participating in this daily activity begins to dissolve the idea of autonomy that is so strongly ingrained in our culture.

With the exterior and internal factors being addressed as well as emotional ones, interior, or rather, subjective experiences will be the remaining evidence for viewers to investigate. Being that human existence is the only one I can emotionally, subjectively understand, I will seemingly continue with the methodology of collecting empirical data but now with cataloging my subjective experiences of the daily visits. While I sit at the desk, a recording of the morning’s emotions before and after I visit the site will be recorded with predetermined categories of emotional experience. In that, a new way of seeing and understanding my own emotional balance will be created.

Remaining in the vein of new emotional understanding, I will implement a time old technique, an homage to days of yore, the personal journal. This too will be on the desk, along with the ledger and the site’s daily log, available to the viewer to peruse. In my willingness to share and reveal such intimate information, it is my hope that others will feel freer to not only explore their own experiences in the written word, but also be more willing to share them with others as well as cultivate more compassion for those expressing their own experiences.

Creating an interactive project can be problematic. Examining the works of Mark Dion and Rirkrit Tiravanija have guided me in the limitations and potentials of interactive and socially engaged art. Pablo Helguera points out that the theory of socially engaged art
has evolved more quickly than the actual practice of it, which has had many artists and potential practitioners at a loss of how to integrate the plethora of interdisciplinary information one must accumulate to be an effective agent of their ideas (Helguera ix-xv). Socially engaged art appears to have no clear definition but many variances of explanation such as: Social Aesthetics, Relational Aesthetics and Social Practice. While it once made sense to bond with the concept of Social Practice, the more I research, the more divorced art seems to be from the practice. What I mean by this is, the concept is so open I do not believe art need be part of the equation but rather social activism in many cases.

Dion's Neukom Vivarium is more accessible to a larger demographic of the public compared with Tiravanija's Untitled/Free. Dion's piece is located near cultural centers and residential areas and is clearly identifiable from the street in its large glass carapace. The piece is presented in a fairly formal and educational setting, while Tiravanija's is sequestered to a gallery setting accessible to a smaller sect of the public (Radar). In the case of raising people's awareness of a certain structure, in this case, ecological and social structures, Neukom Vivarium is more successful at informing a larger demographic with its emphasis on natural history and focus on the process of change and transformation as an old growth hemlock tree degrades, rebirths a new forest and fosters many species of flora and fauna living on it (Otto). Tiravanija's piece is limited as it is only offering a possibility for approaching a very specific community to a different perspective. Nothing is guided and nothing is suggested, aside from sitting down and eating tom kha soup with other people that know of the gallery's happenings. Both pieces are offering a new line of inquiry and awareness to the participant. But, it would be naive of me to say that Tiravanija's is less
effective because of its limited audience; a more ubiquitous approach doesn’t necessarily make one piece more effective than the other. Each artist has his own concerns, some of those may be more nearsighted but no less important. This is something that concerns me in my own work, I don’t want to be sequestered to the limited audience of galleries, but hope to be able to bring my work to the greater public, out of doors and in other institutions with ease.
Bibliography


