

Sheen

Beauty, latency and the Post-Industrial Landscape



by Peter P. Goché

Jean Dubuffet

"The notions of beauty and ugliness are occidental concepts, unknown to primitive peoples," he said in a speech in 1951. "The notion of beauty is specious. Western man cannot agree on what is, in fact, beautiful. It would be desirable to get rid of this notion and teach men that all objects may be sources of fascination and illumination."

Preface

Just as a silhouette, the shadow of our memory stands in sharp contrast to its background. As the sun passes over, so too does the shadow's distinction. And now, in the late afternoon, we are shown our experience, no longer a shadow. We depart day wondering about the circumstances which calendar such events. And so, too, we speculate on its connection to ancient ritual – to night.

Raised out on the open flat of north-eastern Iowa, I was privy to a wonderful single point perspective from which to cultivate my intense curiosity of self with respect to the earth's surface. And now, with calm economy, I await the ghost hour. In this still moment, I am present. Descending from flesh and bone, a mark (nota/maculā) appears.

Each mark is humble...almost silent.

Inebriated, I study its nuance and am reminded of my childhood tracings while playing in the dirt (humus).

Oxbow crouches near the trash burner and mars the earth; an archeological search ensues. His mind soothed by the wind and dirt. Just beneath fertile plane lies a Zelco 18/8 spoon¹¹. With tenderness, the young boy unearths the metal conveying instrument, rubs it thoroughly with ash and binds it in burlap shreds. At sunset, he reappears and replaces the artifact and its dressing beneath grade with the head of the spoon pointed east. In the distance, his mother calls out.

NOUN 11. Zelco teaspoon, ca. 1960 (stainless steel)

Looking at his father sideways, Oxbow lowers his chin and requests another piece of bread. Off at the other corner of the table¹², his brothers nag at his kid sister for eating like a bird. He doesn't acknowledge his mother's note that it is about to rain.

NOUN 12. Lenoir Dinner Table, ca. 1940 (Pecan wood)

Introduction

This paper proposes *beauty and latency* as a material practice that opposes the objective distance typically associated with research through the immersive act of experiential critique supported by a series of research assemblies with a relative capacity to unite or react or interact with the soft luster of the inherited landscape. Using site-adjusted installations as my primary mode of practice, I deploy an integrated and focused approach to both theoretical and practical questions pertaining to the nature and impact of materiality specific to the re-occupation of post-industrial spaces. My works provoke a temporal-spatial encounter that reconciles the simultaneous and complex nature of cerebral and corporeal experience. Each inquiry utilizes a range of domains including art, architecture and anthropology as a means of exploring not only what material cultivations can be, but also what they, in fact, do. Based on a series of modulated experimental actions (material modalities), each installation is driven by the nascent possibility of a persistent desire to intercourse with existing material surrounds pursuant a philosophical position that leverages perceptual notions of *chiaroscuro* - the disposition of light and dark. By extension, the conscious and unconscious, the seen and the unseen, focus and open awareness and the made and re-made are factors in the realm of understanding and producing **atmospheres**. It is a full-scale, three-dimensional methodology, concurrent with exploratory drawing, photography and videography that seeks to express the affects (immaterial harmonics) found latent in our post-industrial landscape.

Surface Tension

Anthropology is the science that studies peoples past and present, their cultures, and their histories as groups. When anthropologists undertake a study of an unfamiliar culture, they typically write an ethnography. Ethnographic writing is a process referred to by Clifford Geertz as 'writing culture.' Its implementation is dependent on writing field notes; an essential occasion in which the researcher creates jottings (brief texts) based on firsthand (lived) experience while amongst

the study group. Field Notes, is an alternative approach to written jottings whereby the author draws out a visual surface on a substrate to achieve a more subjective understanding of a people and their rituals regarding the labor of food production. The purpose of this work is to evoke a view of the world in which cultural alternatives can be measured against one another in the realm of our collective cultural imagination. In short, making an indication of something not yet apparent. In a word, drawing (*n*).

Field Notes, a material compilation of mental mutterings, represents the various floors of the mouth from which prolonged labor and longing speak. These works, in part, are a biographical recall of ordinary occurrences surrounding the family farm unit as understood from my childhood while growing up on a subsistence farm in rural Iowa in the late 1970's and early 1980's. However, like that of Anselm Kiefer's layers of multiple histories and media or Gerhard Richter's Elbe series and its inherent "knowing" as a matter of making, this work is not planned or conceived but, rather, is a speculative source of enlightenment for the author through making and re-making surface and substrate.

This nascent body of work, being developed in the adjoining drying bins of a defunct seed drying facility, involves working petroleum ink across veneer plywood and assembling found farm detritus on top. Each work is evidence of the labor of working land, what is left behind, what is absorbed and what is furrowed into gesture. It is part of a collection of socio-cultural observations that employs lithography ink and labor's leftovers – wind worn debri (burlap sack, spent tire and galvanized metal ladder) on large (1.2192m by 2.4384m) sheets of maple veneer plywood and building felt. The subsequent surface becomes under tension from the imbalanced forces at the liquid-air interface and corresponding debri field. Consequently, this series of works makes visible (spatiality, surface and substrate) what time tends to obscure or obliterate.

In 2012, I began developing Field Notes, a material compilation of mental mutterings from which prolonged labor and longing speak. However, like that of Anselm Kiefer's layers of multiple histories and media or Gerhard Richter's Elbe series and its inherent "knowing" as a matter of making, this work is not planned or conceived but, rather, is a speculative source of enlightenment for the author through making and re-making. Hence, drawing relies on a renewed primacy of perception assisted by a practice that opens rather than closes one's comprehension of culture.

Field Notes, a material compilation of mental mutterings, represents the various floors of the mouth from which prolonged labor and longing speak. These works, in and of themselves, are a biographical recall of ordinary occurrences surrounding the family farm unit as understood from my childhood while growing up on a subsistence farm in rural Iowa in the late 1970's and early 1980's. However, like that of Anselm Kiefer's layers of multiple histories and media or Gerhard Richter's Elbe series and its inherent "knowing" as a matter of making, this work is not planned, conceived or speculative but, rather, is a source of enlightenment for the author through making and re-making.

This nascent body of work being developed in the adjoining drying bins of Black Contemporary involves working petroleum ink across veneer plywood and assembling found farm detritus on top. Each work is evidence of the labor of working land, what is left behind, what is absorbed and what is furrowed into gesture. It is part of a collection of socio-cultural observations that employs lithography ink and labor's leftovers – wind worn debri (burlap sack, steel strap, blown out tire and galvanized metal building siding) on maple veneer plywood. Field Notes, thus, is an embodiment of the most basic human experience – labor/survival.

Spatial Apparatus

When the world of clear and articulate objects is abolished, our perceptual being, cut off from its world, evolves a spatiality without images. This is what happens in the night. Night is not an object for me; it enwraps me and infiltrates through all my senses. I am no longer withdrawn into my perceptual look-out from which I watch the outlines of objects moving by at a distance. Night has no outlines; it is itself in contact with me...¹

When thinking about beauty and being, I am drawn to the logic of Merleau-Ponty and his central thesis to which he referred as the "primacy of perception" whereby we perceive the world through our bodies; we are embodied subjects. In the field of design, in which realization seems to employ decisions that derive from utility, and rejoin obligations of the world of aesthetics, the act of staging provides an intercession during which revelations particular to 'what constitutes beauty' are formed. In this engagement, we enter into a dialogue with the humanity of place; an intercourse with time, deep time; and thus, are immersed in the visual and perceptual challenges of the inherited landscape and, consequently, its cultural educe. Each inquiry is part of a process by which the perceptual experience of a particular setting is revealed.

This paper proposes beauty and latency as a material practice that opposes the objective distance typically associated with research through the immersive act of experiential critique supported by a series of research assemblies with a relative capacity to unite or react or interact with the soft luster of the inherited landscape.

Black Contemporary serves as an experiential laboratory for ongoing investigations intended to provoke a temporal-spatial encounter and reconciliation of the simultaneous and complex nature of cerebral and corporeal experience within the Midwestern realm of labor and its associated landscape. Based on a series of modulated experimental actions, each research assembly is driven by the nascent possibility of a persistent desire to intercourse with existing material surrounds pursuant a philosophical position that leverages perceptual notions of chiaroscuro in the practice of generating and understanding a set of spatial valence within the material culture of a post-industrial seed drying site.

This first research assembly began by reconsidering the nature of a set of internal spaces within the seed dryer formerly referred to as the plenum. The dimensional nature of Iowa's agricultural landscape is not immediately discernable. This can be attributed to the absence of an outline of objects seen against the line at which the sky and earth appear to meet in the case of its physical dimension. In the case of its cultural dimension, this might likely be attributed to the intrinsic relationship (both symbolically and ethically) between the family farm unit and the expansive ground plane in which it

operates. It is an extent, both physically and culturally, that becomes present and knowable (only) through the first-person dimension; an experiential unit of measure commonly referred to as time.

It is this logic with which the first research assembly has been developed. It is situated within the ground floor plenum space of the seed dryer. Access is provided through a small vestibule at the south end of the entrance hall. With the door left ajar and ambient light emanating from an existing opening in the floor assembly above, the viewer is confronted with the installment of a series of like wood elements and tilted steel plate. The arrangement and extent of this componentry is undeterminable given gradient light levels due to the hyper extended condition of the plenum geometry. As the ocular effect of having moved almost instantaneously from daylight to dark slowly recalibrates, the remainder of the componentry, and ultimately the dimensional and material boundaries of the host space, become evident.

For most of us, our comprehension of the inscribed landscape is the aggregate of various momentary engagements with rural America. Awareness is developed through finite experiences as a matter of passing through or attending a farm event. The rural configuration, thus, is the setting for an experience rather than the experience itself as practiced by the family farm unit as a matter of co-existence. Thus, the contemporary experience, unlike the traditional, is not solitary, is not contemplative, and is less concerned with awareness of the environment.² What eventually replaced the ethical perception of this landscape typology was the restricted vision of our global, rather than local, scale of exchange. This perceptual shift has informed, and been illuminated by, the production of the second research assembly.

The second research assembly employs a derelict metal conveyor lid placed on the floor with respect to the tilted steel bent. The conveyor lid, worn and distorted by weather, is host to a series of thorns that have been attached to its leading edge. Incident light, emanating from the entrance door left ajar and the light source overhead, frames the resultant intercourse between each of the elements and their host space.

Under this new configuration, the assembly – or, more broadly, the ambient configuration – is not what occupies the entrance hall, but what is completely enveloped by the consequent pool of light and surrounding shadows. In other words, the restricted view of the associated componentry yields what David Leatherbarrow refers to as a topographical inscription, a single cultural framework occupied by our collective imagination. In this way, the perceptual experience of the work forges a return to the solitary, contemplative experience; to a provocation of self-awareness with respect to what is known, consciously and subconsciously, regarding farm culture and the inherited landscape.

The third research assembly considers the generative role of site adjustment in a post-industrial landscape. Deceptive in its vacuum when addressed only superficially, Iowa consists of a broad range of diverse systems and approaches that have been rigorously modulated over decades and thus seem integral and thereby a space of absence. Developing an understanding of the rural site, or more anecdotally, “the interior,” necessitates the need for a point within from which one is allowed to perceive for an uncertain duration.

Located along the thrust of the entrance hall, the new set of parts serve as a measure by which people may situate themselves. Developed within a recessed mantel of this set of parts is the arrangement of rotary hoe replacement spoons on a building felt runner. The intrinsic qualities of the existing space are revealed through intercourse with the referent assembly yielding a monadic dimension as referred to in *The Fold: Leibniz and The Baroque* by Gilles Deleuze:

Chiaroscuro fills the monad according to a series which can be followed in both directions: at one end the dark background, at the other sealed light; the latter, when it lights up, produces white in the section set aside for it, but the light grows dimmer and dimmer, yields to darkness and deepening shadow as it spreads out towards the dark background throughout the monad.³

The occupant, by reciprocal examination, becomes aware of his/her personal presence and its coincidence with relation to the referent material and attendant culture. The culminating assembly results in a field of occupation that discloses the ethical relevance of the latent site that is knowable only by the accumulation of routine and diverse experiences of labor and reflection.

The fourth research assembly is an experimental terrain. It situates material from another post-industrial site to this one. It locates and relocates the viewer. It unfolds a history and the dimension of being within and outside of equally. It is mistaken, misunderstood and misaligned. It makes architecture by conflating realities, geographies and topographies. It folds contingent constructs and agencies. It maps its guest to specific geographic, historical and personal conditions. It has to do with surveying realms that are yet to be understood. And this is what the assembly does: it, like a map, “constructs” –

The map does not reproduce the real but constructs one, it connects, it is open, multiple and reworkable. The map, that is, is never a finished product but remains a multiple open work, which inevitably refers to something that is both internal and external to it – a referent that is not represented but produced.⁴

Within is a new type of envelope consisting of sheet lead harvested from a 1924 printing warehouse in Des Moines, Iowa. Originally a shower liner, the heavy metal has been suspended within the entrance hall sharing proximity with the slab on grade. The varied deformation of its topographic surface is incident with the southern light which creeps in over the course of day. The two halves, bisected for the sake of removal from its original host space, have been rejoined and overlapped. It no longer is a single continuum but rather a multi-layered terrain of otherness similar to the landscape just beyond.

Within the logic of landscape studies is an indoctrinated manner of observation. Contemporary culture comprehends and navigates geographical realms via maps, which tend to set up an aerial relationship between reader and subject. Consequent to this intellectual configuration is the necessity to study its other – the atmosphere and outer space. The upper story of the seed dryer operates as an instrument with which such readings can be performed – placing the viewer between heaven and earth; consciousness and the subconscious; certainty and uncertainty.

Located in the upper level of the plenum is an aerial viewing station and a ground-viewing station. The aerial viewing station consists of an offset viewing monitor made of 10-gauge steel and wood bracketing through which the world below is seen. The ground viewing station is located at the far end of the drawing room just in front of the duct opening. This work consists of a camera obscura and a stacked wood area of repose. The camera obscura consists of a set of three painted metal panels as picture plane and 2mm diameter hole in the top of the existing duct as aperture. Light from the external (celestial) scene passes through the hole and strikes the picture plane inside. As stated by Janathan Crary in his 1992 publication, *Techniques of the Observer*:

The camera obscura performs an operation of individuation; that is, it defines an observer as isolated, enclosed, and autonomous within its dark confines. It impels a kind of withdrawal from the world in order to regulate and purify one's relation to the manifold contents of the now "exterior" world.⁵

This optic disclosure, the layering of light and shadows, absolves us of our flesh and bone and allows the body to enter time, deep time, and (as pointed out by Mircea Eliade) our collective transcendent reality.

Conclusion

Our experience as occupants of a particular setting begins with the impulse to instantaneously scrutinize everything. As architect and artist, my goal is to assist the occupant in maintaining his or her initial ontological wakefulness through staging often-temporary assemblies within a host space and thereby extend the passage sequence. In the words of Alberto Pérez-Gómez from his published thoughts titled "Built upon Love":

The discovery of architectural order necessitates the same sort of critical destructuring that is familiar to other arts, engaging dimensions of consciousness usually stifled by technical education. Yet for architecture this is not an intuitive operation or unreflective action, but rather the continuation of a practical philosophy and a meditative practice. Thus, a work of architecture may engage the primary geometry of human bodily orientation as the base line of a significant melody aimed at revealing the enigma of depth, the dimension of space.⁶

To this end, the act of reconstructing our engagement with forgotten space assists in cultivating beauty as a practice of making and thinking. It is a subconscious engagement whereby we become immersed in the world and do not succeed in distancing ourselves from it in order to achieve a consciousness of the world. It is an immersive act of experiential criticism supported by a set of site adjusted research assemblies with a relative capacity to unite or react or interact with the latent dimensions of the inherited landscape. It is an embodiment of chiaroscuro: a pictorial practice of arranging light (the conscious) and shadow (the subconscious) to reveal the smooth emptiness of fragmented time, and thereby, mine its capacity to summon the subconscious and reoccupy the inherited landscape as a dimension of life entwined with the present, a part of our ongoing perceptual experience. We, now embodied subjects, are confronted with the soft luster of an inactive landscape and its consequent expansive austerity.

Epilogue

Imbricated in the weft of labor and survival, each assembly implicates the occupant in a criterion of atmospheric experience situated between host confine and guest subject. Our perception, if perceptual beings at all, thus, sifts through the milieu of surface and componentry in the dimensionless distance between host and construct. We might recall the blue cup to which Gernot Böhme refers:

This colour is something which the cup "has." In addition to its blueness we can ask whether such a cup exists. Its existence is then determined through localization in space and time. The blueness of the cup, however, can be thought of in quite another way, namely as the way, or better, a way, in which the cup is then thought of not as something which is restricted in some way to the cup and adheres to it, but on the contrary as something which radiates out to the environment of the cup, colouring or "tincturing" in a certain way this environment, as Jakob Böhme would say. In this way, the thing is not thought of in terms of its difference from other things, its separation and unity, but in the ways in which it goes forth from itself...It should not cause difficulty to think of colours, smells, and how a thing is tuned as ecstasies.⁷

We submit – laying down our perception before the oncoming blueness of the post-industrial freight train and are extinguished. The audible latency of place moves in.

Standing naked, we embody the cold, concrete hardness of the past with a relative capacity to unite or react or interact with the soft luster of the inherited landscape. A perpetual wind continues to sift and howl through the open ground surrounding Black Contemporary (geographical coordinates: 41°98', 93°64'). A constant banging reverberates throughout as the wind pries at the sloughing metal skin of its neighboring confines. The pain of hunger and longing grow distant. There is a heaviness to these sensations that drowns the flesh and bone in the physicality of its surround. With prolonged periods of such ordinary madness, the conscience drifts. The wind lulls and we are gone from our desire for reciprocal love and meaningful labor. Imagination and self-esteem give way and tumble along the earth's surface.

¹ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978). P. 283.

² John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, (Yale University Press, 1984), p. 63.

³ Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and The Baroque* (London and New York: Continuum, 2006 [1988]), p. 5.

⁴ Teresa Stoppani, Mapping: the locus of the project, (*Angelaki Journal of Theoretical Humanities*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2004), p.

⁵ Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, (MIT Press, 1992), p. 38-39.

⁶ Alberto Pérez-Gómez, "The Ethical Image of an Architecture" in *Built upon Love*, (MIT Press, 2008), p. 210-211.

⁷ Gernot Böhme, Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetic (*Thesis Eleven*, No. 36, 1993), p. 121.