

A Vacuum for Artificial Turf

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There are specific tones, styles, gaits adhering to places. This affect is produced by the collective efforts of individuals and circumstances: town hall meetings, housing styles, power outages, moss-covered sidewalks, unfinished repairs, demolition derbies, a new swimming pool, a large hole left from excavating the old swimming pool, and so on. Incidents add up, and by appearance reveal something about the inhabitants and the space.

This collaboration between ourselves and everything outside us is nearly subconscious. It involves our necessities and desires confronted with other autonomous entities and consistent fluctuations in environment. The landscape is interwoven with effort and deficiency, creating a visual game with enigmatic rules.

Within the routine of soul-crushing tasks, flowing from antics of self-preservation, are moments of levity. Solutions to mundane problems propagate a nearness to humor. Melancholy moves toward empathy when laughter trails off into the chasm of comparable circumstances.

Shape, space, velocity

We need to categorize. We put everything into stacks according to traits (blue sweaters, '60's Mustangs, Tuvan throat singing¹)— curious in that nothing is so isolated that it can't escape one group and fit into another. Even the radio station that plays "everything" has a set rotation cross-pollinated from several themed locations on the dial. This act of gathering into clumps must have something to do with retaining or sharing information. A generalization is easily consumable, loose phenomena are baffling.

It's easier to arrange and retain a thing based on contextual comparisons. As categories get more specific, they reverberate back up the ladder. A vessel is a cup, is a coffee cup, is a novelty coffee cup. Specificity of labels causes a mental block in regard to function. The vessel can serve many purposes, but the novelty coffee cup makes us believe it can only hold brown water with a hint of sarcasm. By holding pens instead of coffee, the object breaches categories. A subversion of intent expands the potential and perception of a simple object.

Sets lead to countless subsets; a necessary parsing for clarity rendered moot by an evasive essence. The blue sweater is not the same blue, is not the same cut, is not the same material as another. Chasing deep accuracy ends in microscopic dissection or philosophical coma. Remaining tethered to the practicalities of daily life allows us to judge the cover of the book without forgetting about the rest of the library.

Objects are arranged counter to the fabricator's intention immediately after use; many objects never realize their intended purpose. A cardboard box contains goods until delivered and is immediately converted to a structure for a child to play in. Further on, the box is tossed out. It is not destroyed (an altogether more complicated conversion). Rather, this paper pulp and packing tape assemblage becomes part of the landscape as refuse, as structure, as figure to ground.

Categorization comes into play to help us understand where we are. One of the most basic navigational techniques, dead reckoning, is predicated on recalling where specific sensory input fits into a "history of your travels":

When you accelerate from a stoplight, you will, see objects in front of you seem to get larger as you approach. You hear the engine revving. You feel the acceleration. You don't process each bit of information, but you have an overall sense of motion that comes from the integration of these sensations happening simultaneously.²

The problem isn't so much to find out how we have reached this point, but simply to recognize that we have reached it, that we are here.

- Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces*



We build categories as we move through space and “take in” the physical world visually. I’m interested in gathering information by direct experience while also creating a representation. Making photographs is a way to be present, experiencing and absorbing, while also acting and producing. I try not to dissect what I’m seeing until returning to view the discoveries as photographs.

There is something to the act of walking that correlates with understanding a space. In his explication of daily life, Michel de Certeau describes the act of walking in an urban space as a way of structuring and realizing the navigational options:

If it is true that a spatial order organizes an ensemble of possibilities (e.g., by a place in which one can move) and interdictions (e.g., by a wall that prevents one from going further), then the walker actualizes some of these possibilities. In that way he makes them exist as well as emerge. But he also moves them about and he invents others.³

The photographs I’ve been making are located in the Western United States. One of the pervading factors of organization in this part of the world is the determination to align everything to the four cardinal directions on a square-mile grid. So, before I begin to move there is a system that sets certain parameters of experience. This is why if I drive down Interstate 5 through Oregon I have the opportunity to shop at more than 11 Home Depots. Repetition develops as a symptom of the grid, but it also becomes a tool.

This all-pervading sameness is by and large the product of the grid—not simply the grid of streets in every town and city west of the Mississippi, but that enormous grid which covers two-thirds of the nation...It is this grid, not the eagle or the stars and stripes, which is our true national emblem. I think it must be imprinted at the moment of conception on every American child, to remain throughout his or her life a way of calculating not only space but movement.⁴



This system, at the base of urban planning, choreographs our movement. I'm curious about a willful obedience to the grid as a way of gathering information about the place. In an effort parallel to a *Dérive*⁵, I wander through a place on established routes, on sidewalks, up and down streets, drawing geometric shapes with my movement. Following the grid as a rule-based game relieves the necessity for planning and allows the focus to be on seeing the shape of the land and making pictures as exercise, as practice.

This game begins with the allure of intuitive glances and an itchy trigger-finger. It progresses by winnowing excess and insubstantial calculations. The final move grinds a sloppy visual sentence into a decisive yet ambiguous punctuation.



Behind what appears to be an apartment building is a small parking lot. It's paved with rough asphalt that retains patches of green moss and grass throughout the year. The lot is never completely full, but one item is a consistent tenant: a modified utility trailer with full-size wheels and tires, sided with plywood and crowned with a blue tarp. The tarp is not connected with bungee cords or ratchet straps. Instead, it is neatly upholstered to the body of the trailer like suede over a La-Z-Boy.

From the trailer to the building runs a combination of extension cords. There are no doors on this side of the building so the cord enters the wall through a hole cut in the cinder block. No holes have been cut in the door of the trailer requiring the cord to squeeze under the edge of the padlocked hatch.

Such are the "state of affairs"⁶, as Ludwig Wittgenstein put it. These are the facts that make up the world and are comparable to the other facts taken in continuously. If we "detect anomalies" in the patterns of the world they become waypoints, and in this case, literal landmarks.

I want an untainted look at the facts but since this is impossible, I'll settle for "discovering the meaning of ordinariness from ordinary things."⁷ The innocuous environment of everyday life can be read like a detailed description. Propping up extra building materials is not intriguing without contemplating the way those things are propped up, the way their propping looks. Photographs of these things represent the objects while also being objects (if not objects, then at least conditional and repeatable abstractions of objects).

To implicate myself among the participants, I build unique frames for each piece. A variety of hardwoods extend the work from a 2-dimensional surface through angles, notches, asymmetrical extensions and specific marks. These calculations create a link from observation, reduction and representation to the forces involved in what is depicted.

Some broken wood, a yellowed newspaper and a molding grapefruit are set under the leaves of a blackberry bush. Gravel, seemingly drained of color, fills the gaps between foliage and refuse. The aesthetic of the rock bands advertised in print reverberates off the objects in this coincidental tableau.

Everything goes out into the physical world in tangible patterns. It comes back in through our hard-wired capacity to detect patterns and report any anomalies to our consciousness through blips or floods of emotion.

Dave Hickey, *Formalism*



There is effort revealed in the form of the world. An anonymous hand has placed a foam plate beneath a PVC pipe. The plate is vertical and slightly compressed by pipe and ground. This bent, disposable dinner tool creates visual tension while also signaling a psychological slant. Within arm's reach of the plate are disparate elements: plants attempting to grow in diffused light, asphalt degrading from time and moisture.

What is most intriguing to me are efforts that side-step reason. They are not completely non-sensical but perhaps in line with Vilém Flusser's definition of a gesture: "A gesture is a movement of the body or of a tool connected to the body for which there is no satisfactory causal explanation."⁸ Integration of human and non-human efforts are a constant. When reading the environment as a series of gestures there is an impulse to personify inanimate objects. Are we trying to pull specific answers from things that can't testify precisely? Deciphering images quickly slips from visual analysis lacking concrete answers to speculative conclusions that conform to the program from which they are assigned.

There is a building covered in mid-century shiplap siding. White paint accentuates the vertical lines where the siding comes together. Rather than staggering the lengths of the boards on each row, small gaps between boards betray the erosion of the entire building. Construction (of questionable provenance) promotes a presentation of the other forces at work (gravity, time, neglect, etc.).



Joke Adjacency

Something discovered in these pictures is close to a joke. These are situations for which we might say, “That’s funny.” but never really laugh. A slight rise in the corner of the mouth mixes with an inquisitive yet indifferent, “huh...” It is a bluntness that speaks to collectively acknowledging the soluble ground we build upon; as if we’re saying to each other, “Yeah, I’m inadequate too.” Relatability of mundane situations bends the response toward comic relief, a shift away from judgment.

Half-hearted solutions project the limits of our motivation. Instead of putting the spare tire back in the compartment beneath the car it is upgraded to passenger status. This decisively incomplete maintenance is permeated with a light odor of apathy. The action postpones immediate obstructions in exchange for repeated calls to address the same issue. We settle for quick fixes.

Perhaps there is a social contract evident in the photographs. A fence held together by a purple bungee cord is displayed for pedestrians; a borderline absurd solution cannot be taken seriously. In this minute detail lies the mixture of earnest effort and melancholic daze. I want to laugh at the choice to use a highly stretchable material to corral unstable fence boards but, as soon as the smirk begins to rise, I recall comparable moves I’ve made to solve problems.

A lot of our laughter is doing kind of social affiliative work. So, we’re laughing as much to show that we like someone, we know someone, we’re part of the same group as someone. We understand them.⁹

Sophie Scott















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For Hannah and Otis: without you I woulda drifted

