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A POSTCARD, OR SOMETHING LIKE IT
has been approved by his committee as satisfactory completion of the thesis or dissertation
requirement for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

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May 16, 2006

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A POSTCARD, OR SOMETHING LIKE IT

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at
Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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May, 2006

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Abstract

A POSTCARD, OR SOMETHING LIKE IT

By Derek Côté, Master of Fine Arts

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2006

Major Director: Amy Hautt
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Postcards highlight the most invigorating, awesome and memorable aspects of events and places. They serve as mementos to be shared or as a testament to experience, proof that “I was here.” While postcards were most widely used at the turn of the twentieth century, they are quickly being outmoded by the immediacy of technology. Thanks to digital photography and the world wide web, sharing memories is something that happens almost as quickly as the original event is experienced. The history and function of postcards are not the topics that I will address in this essay. Rather, I will look at how geography and experience influence the formation of memories and illustrate how postcards, in highlighting the most mundane and forgettable aspects of place, can act as a mnemonic device. I will also touch on ideas of the simulacra to explore how the simulation of an event or object can be truer or at least more authentic than the original.

Time, Place and Memory

As a child, my family moved around a lot. I was not a military brat, an orphan, or in the circus. I was born to young parents with intrepid tendencies who were not inclined to stay put. We covered the gamut of locations from urban, to small town, to rural, and even remote. I would survey my new environment on my trusty two-wheeled vessel, building forts and claiming territory in the name of the King. Every move was an opportunity to take my place among history's great explorers. As I got older and recounted tales of places I had experienced I recognized that the stories were loaded with detailed imagery, as though they had just taken place. However, the imagery was not always on the order of that associated with adulthood. It had not been filtered through decades of knowledge and experience and thus remained rich, and somewhat abstract in its purity. For me, place is linked to a particular time in my personal history. Before I recall an event, I create a mental picture of the place in which the event took place. This plays a large part in setting up a context for the recollection of that event. Is place related to time as a function of memory? When asked how old I was during a particular event, I first think of where I lived at that time in order to give an accurate answer.

The manifestation of place in my work is directly influenced by travel and personal displacement. Moving every four years on average meant periodically recalibrating to new conditions. The frequent moves have instilled in me, to this day, a curious desire to travel and discover new environments. I am fascinated with place, its inhabitants, and its relationship to history and events. What happens at a particular site during different places in time? How does the function of place differ over time? As time marches on and the human race consumes and reforms

increasing amounts of open space, the importance of experiencing place sooner rather than later becomes apparent. Things are never what they used to be.

If I stand in a given spot, that spot will be different after one hour has passed. Growth, decay, and erosion will have taken their toll on that site to transform it into its ever-present state. Though I stand at the same site, I will no longer be standing in the same place at all, but in a different place relative to time. Because of something called the distance-time premise, time and distance cannot be measured independently from each other. In order to measure time, particles have to travel a certain distance over a period of time.¹ This can be seen as the internal workings of a mechanical clock, the electrons moving in a digital clock, or the movement of one's self in relation to the sun. Though I stand still and remain on the same site I am in a different place as a result of having traveled a distance, through time, while planted on a rotating sphere.



My Anti Gravity Machine is a Treehouse, 2004, wood, artificial grass, FGR, Bondo, flannel, 12'x12'x40"h

I have vivid memories about the houses in which I have occupied throughout my life. Each location denotes a specific length of time and is relative to one particular site. I am able to recall living in certain places as a result of linking images representing these places. But do these places

actually exist anymore? Of course the sites remain, they are merely coordinates on a map. While I can always visit the sites, can I ever revisit the places? If one employs the distance-time premise, then it would be logical to conclude that these places no longer exist, since one cannot travel back in time. I propose that the memory, or simulation, of a place or event is more authentic than the actual, since the actual no longer exists, and can never be recreated in its originality. The question is: can the simulation of a place or event be sufficient to recreate the feelings, emotions, and meaning, of the original place? *22 Hideouts* explores this notion of time, place, decay, and growth relative to every place I have ever lived.



Where's Tonto?, 2005, plywood, hand-embroidered paper, 12'x12'x56"h

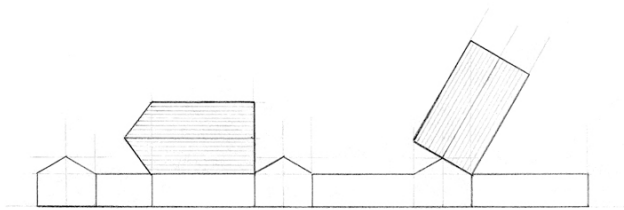


Oh, The Places I'd Go With a Swimming Pool Full of Whiskey, 2005, painted wood, child suitcase, 17"x22"

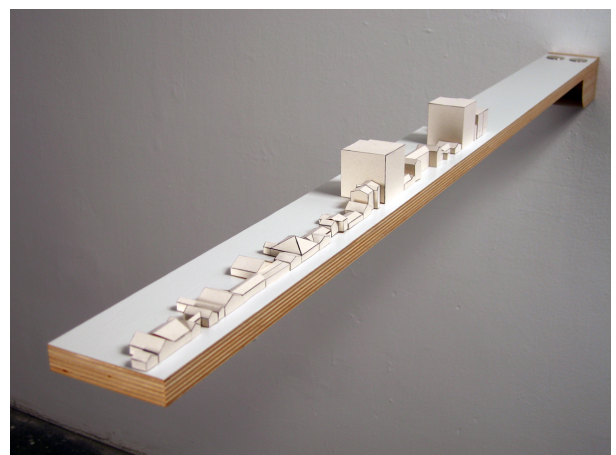
22 Hideouts began as a conversation about the places in which my peers grew up. While some were born, and raised in the same house, and the same town, others have had the experience of numerous homes, in numerous places. This encouragement to reflect on all the houses and places I had ever lived in, led to the realization that I had occupied twenty-two houses to date. As an exercise, I wanted to recall all of the houses in terms of their physical attributes. Starting with my bedroom, as a standard unit of measure (if my room was 10'x10', then the living room must have been 15'x12', etc.), I began to recreate the houses, from memory, in an

uninterrupted fashion by circumnavigating each house to create linear drawings as if each house had been unfolded like a skin and the roofs popped open like a tin can. Upon cutting out these “skins” and folding them into a three dimensional form, It became perceivable that the memory of each house, which seemed so apparent, was not so clear. Many of the cutouts did not fit together as they should have. Scale shifts between single-family homes and apartment complexes were completely disproportionate. Other discrepancies led to walls that did not align, and rooflines that were unable to meet at the eaves. Though this was a very simple gesture, it introduced me to the inaccuracies of one’s memory. It seems that memory acts in the same way that a secret does, never being retold or recollected as accurately as the original.

What started out as a straightforward exercise, has led to the visual research of the phenomenon of memory. In one way the memorized reproductions of each of these dwellings are more real than the actual places. These memorized constructions are based on real experiences during a specific time, except they are more authentic due to the fact that there is nothing else left on which to reflect; the original has passed and cannot be regained. Is memory, then, a preservation of time or place, or both?



Study for *22 Hideouts*, 2004



22 Hideouts, 2004, folded paper, 48"x4"x3.5"h

Memory is described as the knowledge or impression that somebody retains of a particular person, event, period, or subject. Because comprehension is an active process, one will often construct meaning that adds to the material to-be-remembered. One way meaning is constructed is through the addition of imagery, or emotion, to events that promote the retention of information for recollection at a later date.² What happens then, to memories that are recollected at a much later time? For example, if one experiences an event at an early age, say four years, does the association of emotion or imagery available at that time hold up to accurate recollection thirty years later? The ability for one to assign emotions and/or imagery at four is much narrower than the same person at thirty-four because of a lack of prior knowledge; degrees of prior knowledge are responsible for differing degrees of remembering.³ In addition, one's sense of the gestalt, the ability to take visual imagery for granted, is not yet fully developed, due to a lack of knowledge and experience of things. So the assumption would be that the memory that is recollected at thirty-four may not be as pure or refined as the original moment when the event took place. There is likely to be a lapse in the assignment of meaning and emotion as one gains knowledge of the world around them, and what the true meaning-of-things really are. Visiting each of the studied sites and documenting the actual discrepancies that exist between the original drawings and the actual structures would be one way of exposing the gaps in the persistence of memory.

The Dysfunction of Objects and Ideas

A postcard is a paper stand-in of an original event experienced by the sender. Thus, receiving a postcard does not recreate the experience of that event; it merely creates a representation of experience. Upon receiving a postcard the receiver immediately experiences a dye-saturated piece of paper, otherwise known as a postcard. The receiver may be compelled to automatically assign a conditioned feeling of empathy towards the printed image, but will never feel the unique and authentic experience of that place or event. Postcards are generally intended to promote positive elation; there is a certain gestalt to receiving a postcard. Once the signifier of the postcard is recognized it is assigned epistemological value that automatically reduces the number of interpretations it can entertain. Because it is only a representation of an event, how can it possibly evoke an even remotely similar experience as the original? One may also argue that because the postcard was experienced within an established cultural supposition that the experience of the postcard is more authentic than the representation of the actual place or event.

When does a thing stop being a thing and begin as an investigation into experience? How does representation fit into this dialog, and is representation truer than what is being represented? Ecclesiastes tells us that: "The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth — it is the truth that conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true."⁴ To say that the copy is more real than the original sounds somewhat irrational; how can a copy made from unoriginal parts be more real than the original?

Consider the object as representation. If one has a Chevrolet, crashes it, and repairs it with non-genuine aftermarket parts it is still a Chevrolet. However, if an artist fabricates a Chevrolet out of “stuff” to look exactly like a Chevrolet down to the last detail, it is still not a Chevrolet. The difference is that while one automobile looks exactly like an automobile, smells like an automobile, and can still function like an automobile, the fabricated imposter will never drive off the gallery “showroom” floor. What the non-functional imposter does that the original does not, however, is promote thinking outside of the designated sphere. The imposter allows for thinking along pathways that have nothing to do with logic or rationality. The imposter allows for the viewer to look into the language that is presented and dislodge a commentary that has nothing to do with miles per gallon, limited warranties, or scheduled oil changes. In analyzing the imposter the viewer is allowed to consider spatial and intellectual relationships. It is liberated from living solely within the territory of function and desire and, rather, takes on the role of enlightenment.



Training Simulator for a 17th c. Fur Trader, With Rock Pile, 2006, m/m with hand-embroidered paper, light, Bass wood and 5-channel surround audio

If the imposter is fabricated to look real enough as objects, both the actual automobile and the imposter are representations of the same. It is not until they are taken out for a test drive that the meanings begin to change; as soon as the real automobile hits the road it loses its ability to

deliver meaning. As a functional object, its meaning is apparent - to transport. As an imposter, its meaning can exist on a number of levels. As far as seeing is concerned, both objects are equal. If a real automobile is placed adjacent to the imposter in a gallery, does it then take on the characteristic of art, or is it still an automobile? Changing its context in this way transforms the automobile into an object that represents an automobile. The gestalt takes over and allows the viewer to assign meaning in terms of what they see. The representation of an object does not hide any secrets, and is open to scrutiny. It does not immediately impose meaning but, rather, invites deconstruction and interpretation.

Displaced Revelations

The Hopi Indian Nation word, *tuwanasaapi*, means “the centering place, the place where you belong, the spiritual core of the Universe.”⁵ This may or may not account for the reasons why people travel to foreign places. I do believe that we crave difference. We crave to learn how others experience the world in hopes that it will allow us to see the world differently. I also believe that by experiencing that which is foreign, we are one step closer to finding the place that is central to our moral fiber. I am not merely talking about a physical place but perhaps a mental place. This is a paramount aspect of how I research and carry out the work in which I am involved. While driving cross-country recently, I realized four things:

1. Anonymity provides a novel perspective conducive to unique experiences.
2. Unfamiliar settings alter the way in which the world is interpreted and experienced and therefore, affect the way one works.
3. Anonymity and unfamiliarity circumvent predictability and encourage spontaneity.
4. Commercial billboards, many of which are blank, layer the path to everywhere.

Though a blank billboard may not appear to be something unusual, it was the context in which I experienced them that defined their meaning. A blank billboard may seem to be empty and silent; without anything printed on its face, it has no message. This view could not be more misunderstood. I would argue that a blank billboard actually speaks more about its present status than its adorned counterpart. The blank billboard is testament to the vapid world of advertising that has no regard for where or how it delivers its message, whether in a crowded metropolis or an impoverished outpost. Ironically it is in the impoverished areas that

blank, unused billboards speak loudest. Without care or difference to the absence of the thing that allows it to exist, the blank billboard is naked, stripped of its signifiers, honest. Ironically, on the same token, it is this empty and decrepit version that manifests the most beauty.



Displaced Revelations, 2005, custom 4x6 postcards, series of 20, edition of 20

Without its assigned messages, the blank billboard allows for a more visceral interpretation. It can be seen as a sign testament to a way of living rather than a way to live. It no longer tells one what products to use or to what doctrine to subscribe. Rather, it invites contemplation about the world in which we live. Instead of telling us how to live it asks us to look at how we live presently. It is, quite literally, a blank screen on which to project revelations. As I passed an increasing amount of blank screens I began to question the way I lived and how I interpreted my surroundings. This is what I came up with:

The best plan is no plan. If you must have a plan, follow it loosely. Don't try to cram too much into each day. Don't be afraid to talk to strangers. Never start a conversation with "what do you do?"

It's ok to judge a book by its cover, but always be willing and able to revise your findings. Discussing aliens with people has its time and place. Don't forget to smile. Go to parades. Small towns feel the same, no matter where they are.

Find the local watering hole and hang out for a while. Stay at places off the beaten path. When you find a place you like, spend some time there. Stop to take pictures. Stay at a hostel. Try to have good judgment. Don't camp in a bear reintroduction area. Within reason, always participate in illicit activity. Try everything twice. Don't think too much.

Always carry more water than you think you need. Always pack more underwear than you think you need. Always catch the sunset, and if you can, the sunrise. Keep a little loose change in your pocket. Only eat fast food in an emergency. Always sample the local brew. A beer and a banana will go a long way. Always stop at hot springs.

There will always be a place for old hippies. Nothing is ever what it used to be. Sand dunes are never boring. Sometimes nature can be noisier than the city. Sirens sound the same in the desert as they do in New York City. Counting stars works better than counting sheep. A nice breeze is better than a/c. Listening can be more rewarding than talking. Talking to yourself is not all that it is cracked up to be.

It's ok to forget a name but don't forget a face. Never forget about old friends. Never forget the best times of your life. Escape every now and then. Shower at least twice a week. Make the most of every day. Trust your instincts.

Literature Cited

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www.comcity.com/distance-time.

² Eugene Zechmeister, Stanley E. Nyberg. Human Memory: An Introduction to Research and Theory. (Wadsworth, Inc., 1982). pp. 275-295

³ Human Memory: An Introduction to Research and Theory. pp. 307

⁴ Mark Poster, editor. Jean Baudrillard, Selected Writings. (Stanford; Stanford University Press, 1988), pp.166-184

⁵ John Hanson Mitchell. Walking Towards Walden: A Pilgrimage in Search of Place. (Perseus Publishing, Cambridge Massachusetts), 1997, pp. 1

Vita

Born 1972 in Chicoutimi, Québec, Canada

Solo Exhibitions

- 2004 *Opening*, Flat International, Richmond VA
2001 *Do Not Play On or Around*, Make Space, Madison WI

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2006 *4th International Student Triennial*, Marmara University, Istanbul, Turkey
 Nova Art Fair, Kathleen Cullen Fine Arts, Chicago IL
2005 *Radius 250* (curated by John Ravenal, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts), Plant Zero, Richmond VA
 MFA Biennial, Delaware Center for Contemporary Arts, Wilmington DE
 Displaced Revelations, ADA Gallery, Richmond VA
 Exchange Rate, Skylab, Columbus OH
 Are We There Yet, Corrugated Box, Richmond VA
 Sweet Substitute, California Institute of the Arts, Valencia CA
2004 *Open House: Working in Brooklyn*, Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York NY
 Top Shelf (curated by Lisa Schroeder, SchroederRomero Gallery, Brooklyn, NY), Barrel Factory, Richmond VA
2003 *Take Out*, Dieu Donné Papermill, New York NY
 Exit Biennial: The Reconstruction, Exit Art, New York NY
2002 *Collaborations*, Dieu Donné Papermill, New York NY
 Momenta Art Benefit, Momenta/White Columns, Brooklyn/NYC NY
2001 *Love or Money*, Dieu Donné Paper Mill, New York NY
 Art Heals, Eyebeam Atelier, New York NY
2000 *Landescape*, Dieu Donné Paper Mill, New York NY
 Alternative Processes, Williamsburg Art Center, Brooklyn NY
 Untitled, Western Gallery, Bellingham WA
1999 *Art Auction & Benefit*, Dieu Donné Paper Mill, New York NY
 Chunk 3, Jorgensen Gallery, New York NY
 The Portrait Show, Jorgensen Gallery, New York NY
 Coaxial, Star 67, Brooklyn NY
 Babel, Roebling Hall, Brooklyn NY
1997 *True Art*, Tacoma Art Museum Biennial, Tacoma WA
 Environments, installation, Appel Farm Arts & Music Center, Elmer NJ
 Best of Show, Artspace, Seattle WA
 C.A.R.B.O., Equinox Gallery, Seattle WA
1996 *Penny Lick*, Site 21/21, Albuquerque NM
1995 *The Land*, Tacoma Art Museum Biennial, Tacoma WA

Bibliography

- 2006 *In Search of Inspiration*, Paulette Roberts-Pullen, Style Weekly, Richmond, VA. May 12
 Dear Mom, Derek Coté, published in Daily Constitutional, Richmond, VA. Summer 2
2005 *Manifestoe*, Derek Coté, Daily Constitutional, Richmond VA. Winter 1
2003 *A Space Reborn, With a Show That's Never Finished*, Roberta Smith, New York Times, New York NY. May 8
2001 *A.V.A.F.S.*, review written by Derek Coté, Zing Magazine, New York NY. Summer
2000 *After the End of Art...*, Matt Levine, Indie Planet.com, New York NY. April/May
 Mob Rule, A Small Space in Chelsea, NyArts Magazine, New York NY
1999 *Conceptualisticationism*, review, The New Yorker, New York NY. Dec 20
 Williamsburg, Ester Partegas, Disco 2000, Barcelona Spain, Fall
 A Large Space in Chelsea, panel discussion, NY Arts, New York NY. Nov.
 Babel, review by Carol Kino, Time Out New York, New York NY. Feb 11
 Babel, review by Dominique Nahas, Review Magazine, New York NY. Feb 1
 Babel, review by Susan Hamburger, Waterfront Week, Brooklyn NY. Feb 11

- 1996 *Critical Reflections*, Whitney Kay, THE Magazine, Santa Fe NM. Summer
Artists on Alert, Lynn Hunter Kline, The Santa Fe New Mexican, Santa Fe NM. May 31
AlleRT, review by Brendan Doherty, Albuquerque Tribune, Albuquerque NM. May 29
Mixing it Up, Jeffrey Lee, The Alibi, Albuquerque NM, May 29
1995 *Summer of Regionalism*, Victoria Josslin, Reflex, Seattle WA. Oct-Nov

Related Projects

- 2006 Co-Curator - 'For A(n) Relation(s)', *ADA Gallery*, Richmond VA
2005 Editor/Art Director - *Daily Constitutional*, Richmond VA
98-00 Founding Director - *Star67* (gallery), Williamsburg, Brooklyn NY
1999 Curator - 'Conceptualisticationism', *Star 67*, Brooklyn NY
1996 Juror - 'AlleRT' - *Site 21/21*, ARC, *Nonsequitur*, *Parasite*, *Harwood Art Center*, *Andaluz*, *Offsite* (Santa Fe), Albuquerque NM

Grants/Residencies/Lectures/Teaching

- 2006 VMFA Professional Artist Fellowship, *Virginia Museum of Fine Arts*, Richmond VA
Visiting Artist Lecture, *Western Washington Univ.*, Bellingham WA
Portfolio Development, professor of record, *Virginia Commonwealth Univ.*, Richmond VA
2005 Research and Travel Grant (22 Hideouts), *Virginia Commonwealth Univ.*, Richmond VA
Basic Sculpture, professor of record, *Virginia Commonwealth Univ.*, Richmond VA
2004 William Clopton Scholarship, *Virginia Commonwealth Univ.*, Richmond VA
Intro to Sculpture, studio instructor, *Virginia Commonwealth Univ.*, Richmond VA
1996 Artist in Residence, *University of Wisconsin-Madison*, (Brittingham Fund Grant, Anonymous Fund Grant)
Visiting Artist Lecture, *University of Wisconsin-Madison*, Madison WI
97/98 Sculpture Instructor, *Appel Farm Arts & Music Center*, Elmer NJ
1996 Best of Show, *C.A.R.B.O.*, ArtSpace, Seattle Washington

Education

- 2006 Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA (MFA)
1997 Western Washington University, Bellingham, WA (BFA)
1996 University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM (National Exchange)