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everything is exactly the same

I make art as a method of documenting the reality of the world around me, and the work I produce is an aestheticized, heightened, and self-contained version of that reality. The work I have created, which ranges from photography to embroidery to installation art, is not meant to ignore reality or change it, but instead to amplify the beauty of what I'm capturing or representing. In *everything is exactly the same*, I have created an intensified and compact version of nature that interacts with and responds to its inhabitants. The audience's presence triggers events within the piece, but they do not control it. This version of nature is meant to be reminiscent of a utopian environment.

The conceptual basis for this piece has been in the background of my work for the entirety of my short artistic career. Because of my strong foundation in photography, I naturally view my art, no matter the medium, through a photographic lens. My understanding of my photographic practice is especially indebted to John Szarkowski's *The Photographer's Eye* (1966), which suggests that the photographer's job is to recognize, anticipate, and clarify the beauty of the world through photography.¹ On the surface, installation art or embroidery may not seem to be aligned with photography, but the work I have done in those mediums has accomplished similar goals in vastly different ways. My shifts over time between different media and themes may seem indecisive, but in fact this wide range of exploration has helped me to understand the more narrow range of objectives that

¹ Szarkowski, John. *The Photographer's Eye*. New York: Museum of Modern Art; Distributed by

my work accomplishes. In the way that photography allows me to understand my environment, and postprocessing photography helps me continue that understanding and distill it down to a few elements, the function of my work is to process my environment. My past work has been have been informed by the same aesthetics and intentions that inform my photographic work. I am intent upon aestheticizing everything within reach by way of reconfiguring, however possible, the available visual information in order to represent the broader reality of a situation. I have continued to explore and push the limits of my ability to reproduce and augment nature, and I have found myself constantly returning to these themes.

Over the course of the academic year, I went many different places with my work. Looking back, it's evident to me that my strongest pieces included photography and interacted with nature. In one of my pieces for the fall semester marathon, I took a panoramic photo of Ithaca Falls, a popular gorge in upstate New York, and systematically removed all visible people and their associated accoutrements, moving from the left and ending at the right. The piece itself was a series of these images that demonstrated the removal process, both a reference to my interest in photographic postprocessing and my artistic objective of a more aesthetically pleasing world.

One of the strongest pieces to come out of the fall semester, during which I did a lot of embroidery, was my *windows* series.



windows, Olivia Garahan, 2014.

To create these, I set fabric printed with my own nature photographs into small embroidery hoops and then used embroidery floss to lightly embellish details within the photographs. For instance, in one hoop, I used a photograph of rough granite and added small amounts of silver embroidery floss to the deepest grooves in the stone. These particular hoops always attracted a lot of interest during my critiques, and I felt that there was some link conceptually to something else I wanted to work with. These pieces allowed me to use my own photographs of nature, which were already very intentionally framed and postprocessed, and process them further, adding abstract thread elements that imagined a different type of reality. The idea of reproducing and altering or augmenting nature appealed to me, as it has in much of my other work over time.

My urge to aestheticize every aspect of a work, including the process of making any given piece, heavily influences the type of work I produce and the materials I use. The choices I make when creating art, be it embroidery,

photography, or installation, are not meant to ignore reality or change it, but instead to amplify the beauty of what I'm capturing or representing. *everything is exactly the same* is an extension--perhaps the most fully realized extension--of my objectives.

Photography, for me, is a method of processing and understanding my physical environment, and my other artwork is a continuation of that process. In any given situation, my urge is to rearrange and reconfigure elements to demonstrate a portion of the events occurring in that situation--and of course to photograph it.

This edited, concentrated set of details can become illustrative of the whole, but not in a literal sense--I am not endeavoring to reproduce anything exactly. In that sense, and in the sense of *The Photographer's Eye*, I am selecting a portion of my physical environment and editing it so that it can become representative of the whole.

The realistic details that I isolate and combine are chosen based on my internal concept of beauty. They are small, truthful attributes of an environment, but are not reassembled with the intention of recreating the exact environment. John Ruskin, in *Modern Painters I*, explains the difference between truth and imitation; truths are small details that help to distinguish an object or idea, and when those details are compiled, they become a facsimile of what was meant to be reproduced. However, it is possible to simply compile a collection of details, or truths, without the eventual objective of complete imitation. These truths do not always have to be exact, and Ruskin states that there are different ways to approach the truth. Although it's noticeable if an element of a work appears drastically different from its real-world component, intensifying or aestheticizing these elements will likely go unnoticed.

This editing of elements is something I do with the end goal of beauty in mind, as

nebulous as that concept may be. Ruskin explains that it is notoriously hard to understand what constitutes beauty, or why anything is beautiful:

“...if a person receiving even the noblest ideas of simple beauty be asked why he likes the object exciting them, he will not be able to give any distinct reason...to which he can appeal as a source of pleasure. He will say that the thing gratifies, fills, hallows, exalts his mind, but he will not be able to say why, or how.”²

In my work, I am taking the hard-to-identify idea of beauty and reworking existing elements in order to fit that definition. This process is as much about understanding my own definition of beauty as it is shaping things to suit that definition. To that end, I isolate specific details of my physical environment and intensify them, in order to isolate the truths of the beauty I see. For example, in *look out*, a photography book, I used tightly-framed photographs of various details of Point Lookout State Park, and paired them with single words. I would repeat photographs within the book, pairing them with different words, in order to push viewers to examine images in different contexts and determine for themselves what an image implied.

In *everything is exactly the same*, I am endeavoring to reproduce certain aspects of nature in an exhibition environment. The viewer enters through a thick curtain of artificial flowers and leaves into a room where the floor and back wall are covered in artificial grass. They can hear crickets quietly chirping. As they walk into a dark room, small points of light begin to appear on the wall they're facing. They

² Ruskin, John. *Modern Painters*. Complete ed. Sunnyside, Kent: G. Allen., 1888.

can walk around the space or sit down on the artificial grass-covered seat on the back wall. These elements are not natural, but are inspired by nature. In reality, the construction of this space is a fiction; none of these elements would exist together in this space. The space is a compressed, intensified version of nature itself, although it is not meant to be overstimulating or upsetting to the viewer, but rather relaxing. In addition, the elements of the space itself are artificial--the leaves and flowers are made of fabric, the grass is paper and plastic, the sound, a real recording of crickets, is piped in through speakers, and the stars are much too close to the viewers to be real.

The concept of constructed nature stems from two places: the idea of a nonspecific place in nature, such as what David Claerbout created in *Travel*, and the creation of a space free of the negative aspects of nature: a utopia. In *Travel*, Claerbout creates a sweeping nature narrative that takes the viewer through a park, a forest, and a jungle, eventually closing on a suburban view. While Claerbout did a lot of filming for this piece, he ultimately used computer-generated imagery in order to create places that were at the same time everywhere, universally recognizable, and nowhere, not specific to any place. While Claerbout is exploring the concept of the banal,³ I am endeavoring to create a space that has all of the positive qualities of nature and lacks the negative ones. The idea of this space is that its constructed nature allows viewers to stay within it longer and interact with it in a way that nature would not allow them to. The temperature is constant, and precipitation, dirt, and allergens are not an issue.

³ Claerbout, David. "Travel, 1996-2013." David Claerbout. <http://davidclaerbout.com/Travel-1996-2013>.

To the same end, the stars in *everything is exactly the same* lose their inherent lack of approachability, and their mystery, but they in turn become something entirely different. They become something that the viewer can change, exist near, and work with. While they mimic the look of stars in several ways, they are much more physically accessible to the viewer simply by virtue of their proximity. That makes them more present, and more of an element to be engaged with. While the stars humans see today are often already dead by the time their light reaches us, viewers can engage with these stars in their own time. In addition, as an effort to make the stars feel more understandable and approachable, I chose a low-resolution projector so that the pixels that make up each star are clearly visible when projected. This calls attention to the artificial nature of the work, and the very basic nature of the stars that the viewer is presented with. The installation is a static space, and although it has dynamic elements, the changes that occur over the time to the starfield do not affect the space dramatically or permanently. The constructed nature aspect of *everything is exactly the same* is integral; the conceptual basis for the piece would not be complete without this compressed, intensified replica of nature, and with that idea, utopia is the natural next step.

Agnes Denes writes about her 1982 piece, *Wheatfield*, in which she planted a two-acre field of wheat in Manhattan and managed to harvest over 1000 pounds of wheat. Her mission was similar to mine, although her execution was dramatically different. She, too, was artificially constructing a space in a context in which it would not normally be found. However, hers was truly and uniquely created by nature-- although she cultivated and cared for it, natural forces were what ultimately made

that wheat field grow. Creating this space is a spiritual experience for her, as an artist and as a person. Her installation affected a wide variety of people, including farmers, children, and New York professionals. She considered it a therapeutic, life-changing space that was symbolic to her both on a global level and on an individual level.⁴

In my installation, nothing is naturally growing. Everything relies on my creation, and things will not grow and multiply independent of me. This renders the installation static. However, that is not to say that the installation cannot respond to the needs or desires of the viewer. I intend this space to fill an emotional need in the viewer: the need to feel acknowledged and accepted. Part of what I am creating stems from a need to create a space that is tailored to my own needs, and that acknowledges I exist. To that end, the room is darkened, the only light is starlight, and the space is comfortable to sit in for long periods of time. The mere act of the viewer entering the space triggers the sensors and adds to the starfield, which is the space itself greeting them. The audience has no idea what their actions do, or what will affect the space, and are therefore left to themselves to experiment and understand. The interactive element is executed by having multiple sensors placed throughout the installation. When a viewer enters, they are greeted by the sight of stars appearing, and as they continue to move through the work, stars continue to appear, or begin to disappear if they stand still long enough. The sensors are wide-reaching but many are centered near the back of the installation, where the seat is, in order to encourage people to stay longer. The idea of a responsive environment

⁴ Noble, Richard. *Utopias*. London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2009.

links deeply with the idea of utopia, and also emphasizes the intensified, artificial nature of the piece. Utopia is, in fact, impossible, both in the world created by nature and in the world created by humans. However, what is often poorly understood is that the divide between the “natural world” and the “digital world” is much more murky than it appears to be. Humanity as a whole does not consider itself part of nature, but rather something more elevated and important. However, humanity is a part of nature, and as such humanity's creations are a part of nature. A digital utopia, or something as close to a utopia as can exist, is not inherently less valid than the glory of what is understood as the natural world. Both the interactive aspects of this installation and the constructed nature of the work help align it with the concept of Utopia: a perfect world, and a place that does not exist.

My work functions as a way for me to process the environment around me. This is immediately evident in my photographic work, but it also extends to my work in other media. The fact that this piece is a constructed, interactive space that can never exist in the natural world deeply links it to the idea of utopia. *everything is exactly the same* is a reflection of my methods of processing by reconfiguring, isolating, and editing elements of my environment in order to better understand it and make it self-contained.