Christina McPhee: A Commonplace Book

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This conversation takes place within an ongoing exchange between Christina McPhee and Judith Rodenbeck around McPhee’s drawing/shed practice and its relation to tectonics and trauma, not long after a talk considering the drawing practice of Joan Jonas, given by Rodenbeck. The conversation was recorded on June 9, 2016, in Ojai, California; during the audio session, two workers from Pacific Gas and Electric climbed into the neighboring canopy of one-hundred-year old oaks to prune.
Reflecting on your recent discussion of Joan Jonas’s installation, They Come to Us Without a Word, for the 2015 United States Pavilion at the Venice Biennale—you describe how she presents a techne, in the form of an imaging of transmission, to children of the future. Against this sense of an apocalyptic future, is there, in the action of her drawing, itself, a flow, that’s almost like a material form of hope, or a material transmission of a type of knowledge? I’m thinking specifically of how one moves images into a plane where they can be accessible in a time of chaos. This is a projection of what my desires are in drawing.

Part of what I see happening there—and we’ll use Joan Jonas as a reference point for me—is that Jonas/the drawing agent is acting as a kind of channel for mark-making, on the one hand, in a given type of material and a set of substrates, where that mark-making (and its strata) is thought both concretely and then more abstractly. There’s a through-line to aspects of Jonas’s oeuvre, and the through-line becomes really visible in the Venice project in its conjoining of environmental and trans-personal concerns. This is an artist who is very particular, and who has very particular ways of working; these latter are hard to parse, idiosyncratic, hard to read, and that idiosyncracy is often read as rendering the artist as magus, or exterior, eccentric to the social world. And yet, what is happening in that work, at the very same time this otherworldly conjuring is taking place, is the making of a socius. Working with these children, who come more or less—they come to us without a word, they come without prejudgments—in the workshops with the kids, the kids take up Jonas dance moves, Jonas drawing moves, Jonas animal moves, but it’s not her training them to be Joan Jonas, but rather, engaging them in an open space.

Right, it’s a transmission.

Where’s the starting point? There isn’t one, right?

CM There isn’t one, right, and so each of these objects that I make, or performance works that I do, have frames or bounds, but it’s almost as if it’s just a film still from within some larger sequence.

JR Let’s just say that’s the temporal frame—

CM Do the drawings exhibit a temporal constraint?

JR Well, you finish them, there’s that. But as perceptual objects they’re pretty temporally dense. I want to press on this seismicity as metaphor and as what is one’s lived experience, and what is the expression of—well, now I’m backing myself into a corner, saying that any artwork is an expression of experience.

Drawing could be a kind of knowledge production, but the production is not autobiographical. Sometimes, people want me to reveal particular experiences that have led me to do xyz; and then an interpretation can set up a grounding through a causal chain about things you’ve said to me and in your writing about your work and ways you articulate things like seismic fields and transfers not only in naming suites of drawings but also in kinds of procedure that are actually seismic, both in terms of individual marks and in terms of layering. That layering is profoundly geological, it’s metaphorical, it’s real.

CM I’m making an outlandish, or in-land-ish claim, on the part of an anyone/artist to draw, but as a transmission in feedback loop system with Earth itself. For example, I draw between seismicity and post-traumatic stress disorder. As with visualizing seismicity, drawing layers of shifting, there’s a groundedness—or is there? There’s a shifting—

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JR The causal notion is the one that is the problem, certainly with something as open-ended as an art work...

CM A recourse to biography.

JR A hunting-back of causal links—this is one of the problems of neuro-aesthetics in my mind: and so if we discover that the brain is wired in such and such a way, to look at or to produce art, and—

CM There’s that great title of a book, by Gloria Anzaldúa, _This Bridge We Call Home_. She wrote this beautiful book about activism, and I love that architectural image. It reminds me, too, of a rock climber sending out a belay—so the line becomes the thing you can actually walk on to get to the next space.

JR It makes the next space... and (working the belay) the retrieval—proceded and retrieved, in a way—

CM When I think about retrieving content out of crushed drawings, or when I work a painting—because if you rely on this generative-line method, then often the material object will fail—it’s not being constructed primarily as an object to begin with, so if it’s lucky it may end up as a thing, but it may not. As I shoot photographs of the drawings, and then manipulate the photographic digital files as drawings; what then? Then I’m in... is it recuperation? That sounds like a health thing. Recaptured? Connaissance? In French, that’s “to apprehend” wisdom?

JR Connaissance is knowledge, in an old fashioned way—deep knowledge. Glissant talks about connaissance as co-naissance, right, born together, so it’s that kind of knowledge—

CM Now we’re getting at it...

JR Well, this idea of being born together, however one wants to take that, is a way of thinking about knowing, if you want to deal with issues of process and how one is with a process, and we’re really
talking about your drawing. I'm remembering the piece you did with Pamela Z (Carbon Song Cycle, 2013). There's that moment when you're actively working, you were lying on the floor and drawing, fully inhabiting this space of the line so that the mark made was secondary to this other thing that was made, not quite dance, but something else, and that to me is this co-naissance idea.

CM I was listening to the musicians, simultaneously drawing, using the relay of light from my mobile phone to draw what I was hearing. Then the electronic expression of my drawing motion, that's what the musicians were playing. It was a triple cycle going on.

JR A triple axel.

CM A triple axel (yeah, right!), immediately I think about autopoiesis and... enclosed... homestead drawings as temporally bound. In the performance of Carbon Song Cycle, nearly simultaneously, the musicians read and perform my live drawing as a score.

JR It's an open score. So say more about autopoiesis. There's an engagement that's been ongoing for you, if I'm not wrong, with language around the concept of autopoiesis.

CM Autopoiesis calls up, to me, an imaging of a world, a giant world or a tiny world, full of infinite moving parts that are self-generating. Before Carbon Song Cycle, I was working on the Tesserae of Venus project, in 2009; I was drawing the tectonics of Venus, which are characterized by complex ridged folds, or tesserae. Allegorically speaking, if our terrestrial climate got hotter and hotter, like Venus, one might imagine that the tectonics of Venus would start to appear, here on Earth, complete with folded-ridge terrains; as if climate could shift geologic plates, or supersede them.

I made models (using folded paper drawings) of how this was going to (somehow) look. It was a fantasy apocalypse. Against this, autopoiesis implies there's no end, or, a "world without end." We think that our world is changing and falling away from us, or taking leave of us, or we of it. A continuous sensation of loss relates to our experience of being mortal.

JR Self-consciousness—

CM Consciousness itself is based in loss, but sometimes drawing teaches me there is no loss; for the processes of autopoiesis, loss is subsumed within a full, complete set of possibilities. That's comedy as paradise. Right now, the Pacific Gas and Electric technician is liberating power lines from tree limbs with a buzz saw, while we're trying to do this thing: maybe our conversation in the midst of sawing is a little comic hit, a bit of paradise right now. That sounds a little like Annie Besant!

JR So here you are (in Ojai!). Speaking of Besant, when you look at the early twentieth century, there are a number of figures dealing with issues of repetition across time, transhistorical and transcultural repetitions, Aby Warburg and his pathosformel, for instance. I like to think about Warburg being connected to someone like Kubler, with his braids of time and form. Those thinkers, then, allow one to imagine that form (let's say) expresses itself through individuals: that we're expressing form, which, in a sense, performs us. And that's another way of getting away from the causal version of art. One of the things that I so appreciate about your drawing, and one of the things that got me into thinking about Jonas as well, was to ask, what does it mean to return—and return is the wrong idea—

CM—Reconnoiter—
JR Reconnoiter (or even reconnaitre), to fold oneself back into a fundamental creaturely mark-making, in an era in which everything is made of electronics, is about the instantaneous and trivial, zeros and ones. In such a context, a relatively devalued practice like drawing is not trivial at all.

CM No, quite the opposite. There’s something about the primacy, in drawing... that, well, there’s no time-edge... the drawings may generate their own ‘real’ in my lifetime and after; somehow that’s a resource for hope. It’s not like I have a message.

JR You’re not Annie Besant—

CM No, the work can make itself available in and create its own times and places, beyond whatever small world I happen to inhabit.

JR This is provocative when considering the Anthropocene, and thinking about how to convey the topic to young people. For instance, we are going through this election season (2016), and for many of us it’s a moment of profound concern about the nature of discourse in the United States. You talk to young people and they’re excited or they’re not excited or they’re engaged or not engaged, however they approach their being in the political world; but their memories are short. Their knowledge of history is slim. It’s not that the world renews, or recycles, it’s a brand new thing for them. Their experience of the world is that this is simply how it is. There is student debt, this is just the way it is; there is a level of discourse that is abysmal—and they haven’t lived through something different than that. So thinking in terms of the Anthropocene is also asking us to think in terms that are not dictated by three score and ten, the average lifespan, or a set of family relationships that are within knowledge, but rather detaching one’s “self” from that sort of timescale, going scalar.

CM That’s another thing I want drawings to do: drawings are constantly involved in movements of scale. Integrating tiny threads of diagrammatic content and glyphic content into large compositors, from within a six foot frame, towards the millimeter differentials—I find tiny pivots or switches in drawing. Lines cluster into small tesselated planes, with an accumulation, almost to a point of collapse: a certain angle of repose is about to fail, and a cascade of marks is about to slip.

JR Well there’s this filigreed quality to some of what you’re doing but it’s deliberate, it’s not decorative, it’s—

CM Skeining—

JR The way in which you are working both with deliberation and automatism is quite provocative.

CM Well I think that’s it.

JR I leave you with that, provocative.

CM That’s a great way to stop.
Hungry Ghosts (Of Desires the Key to Vertigo, After Tristan Tzara), 2016
Shellac-based, sumi and acrylic inks, flashe, watercolor, and graphite on canvas, 137.1 x 167.5 x 6.3 cm / 54 x 65.75 x 2.5 in