Christina McPhee: A Commonplace Book

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Voracious readers have always required some form of assistive storage device wherein they may record, parse, and organize the overwhelming glut of diverse information and complex ideas with which they engage. In fact, human cognition, such as it is (unlike, say, slime intelligence), seems to consistently desire an external site of material inscription (an archival fever, perhaps); if only for the purpose of recall, a separate place that is also, by definition, a displacement (or, rather, a discognition). This necessary externalization of thought, which manifests onto, into, and through these inscriptive mechanisms, operates as a double form of remediation: while repurposing consumed content and inspired ponderings alike, selectively so, distinctions frequently blur between repetitive iteration and additive marginalia. Inscribed repetition, in the literal and the performative sense, becomes folded and fractured by intertextual appendices and slippery omissions, transforming, via the process itself, into self-generative and aleatory worldings.

It is certainly the case, these days, that the actively-engaged and engaging palimpsest of the “commonsplace book” has become less and less common, replaced instead by the passive associations produced through online platforms, from scrolling “newsfeeds” to clicking “likes,” “hearts,” and “pins.” All these styles of readership have one thing in common: within diaristic recording, references may as serve as surrogate, or maybe as synecdoche, to biographical narration and, by extension, point to the individual user/archivist as a transcendent subject. By contrast, from note-taking to underlining, from marginal scribbles to the commonplace book, analog inscription problematizes a conception of the archivist as always outside of, and antecedent to, the archive. As numerous pedagogical studies have shown, writing itself, even doodling while listening to a lecture, is an essential component of effective memorization and a boost to cerebral processing. Gestural marks, therefore, don’t just point (or rather gesture) to external, or even self-reflexive, ideations; the actual physical act of making a mark, the spatial movement of the hand across the paper, also inscribes new neurological pathways within the brain, such derives from the Greek concept of topos (topics), a foundational aspect of rhetorical training, whereby authoritative arguments and prominent texts are absorbed by the student through repetition and prescriptive categorization. The more active and participatory the material externalization, the more permanent and profound the conceptual internalization. The archive quite literally produces the archivist, as much as the other way around. Around this embodied notion of the gesture and mark-making, the tradition of the commonplace book finds contemporary mutation in the creative practice of Christina McPhee.
The term “commonplace,” etymologically, is a fairly literal translation of the Latin locus communis, which itself derives from the Greek concept of topos (topics), a foundational aspect of rhetorical training, whereby authoritative arguments and prominent texts are absorbed by the student through repetition and prescriptive categorization. As Marko Juvan has pointed out:

Commonplaces supported the edifice of Western cultural memory: they were passed down with help of mnemonics in which images, ordered in spatial schemes, could be associated with pertinent categories of certain discipline or knowledge. Speakers or writers were thus able to invoke a particular topos, not only with spontaneous associations, but also by their mnemonic skill...

In traditional practice, students would assemble commonplaces by labeling pages of an empty notebook with thematic headings (known alternatively as topics or places), and then fill those pages with relevant quotations from institutionally-sanctioned authors. In this way, they could memorize a set of officially preordained phrases and concepts that might be easily recalled and invoked within academic debates whenever the need arose. A rather similar form of rigid pedagogy around repetition was in use within the fine art academies throughout Europe at around the same time. Art students would produce drawn copies from engravings and plaster casts of prescribed masterworks, before turning to their own creative projects. In this way, it was assumed, they might, through a combination of muscle memory and learned visual preference, internalize classically-normative proportions, compositions, and techniques. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres once stated, in defense of this process, “our task is not to invent but to continue... following the examples of the masters.”

By the time Ingres would write these words, the practice of commonplacing within a general humanities education had already changed quite dramatically. In 1706, John Locke published his influential text, *A New Method of Making Common-Place-Books*, wherein he posited an alternative agenda and structure for organizing commonplace books. As Michael Stolberg points out, “by Locke’s time, commonplacing had long ceased to be a tool merely for the collection and memorization of quotations from classical authors. It was widely used also by physicians and natural philosophers as an important means to collect and organize excerpts as well as personal observations and empirical knowledge acquired from others.” Locke not only advocated heterogeneity in source material, but also launched an elaborate indexing strategy: multiple and seemingly unrelated headings (topics, places, etc.) would appear adjacent on the same page, collapsing previously distinct themes together into unexpected conjunctions, logical leaps, and conceptual gestalts. As the commonplace book shifted away from a site to parrot ‘universal’ knowledge, it found a new, independent locus for interdisciplinary discovery and intertextual innovation.
Christina McPhee works in a ludeic and lucid meditative practice whose origins she traces to childhood. Her mother would prescribe drawing as a way to distract her daughter’s imagination (“go draw it out,” she would suggest): this was a free form complement to discipline at parochial school, where children were set to task, to (apparently) endless copying of moral phrases on chalkboard, after class. Drawing, as such, became a pharmakon, both a poison to be expelled/expressed, as well as a cure to solve emotional states. In a mode of curative discognition, her drawings reiterate inscriptions, throw off aleatory lines of flight, and merge into adjacent, overlapping, gestural orbits. While it is easy to connect this practice to Surrealist automatic drawing, even to Bataille’s concept of l’informe, for McPhee the catharsis seems to emerge from the act of creation itself, rather than revelation of unconscious trajectories. While certainly personal, little is explicitly biographical in the output. What surfaces is a lifetime of intellectual self-fashioning, developed through years of autodidactic study and the ongoing repetition of learned gestural patterns, culled from a plethora of distinct disciplines. Like a musician able to effortlessly improvise after years of playing repeated scales, McPhee enters this improvisational state of discognition in order to mine and combine the structural forms of different visual vocabularies, from geological and medical diagrams, to genres of cinematic display, to the conjugation of glyph-based languages.

In doing so, she presents a multilaceted ficto-criticism: she tells speculative stories within what anthropologist Michael Taussig, calls the “less conscious image realm…the dreamworld of the popular imagination.” Future-tripping into a schizo-ecology of molecular aggregates, she maps future behaviors of the carbon cycle, as if, through sustained accumulation of greenhouse gases, a dense atmosphere might etch Earth’s surfaces with the lines of Venus-like tessellations. Her images invite comparison to the ethico-aesthetics of what Donna Haraway calls the Cthulhucene—and, what a timely endeavor. As Haraway puts it:

It matters what stories tell stories, it matters what thoughts think thoughts, it matters what worlds world worlds. That we need to take seriously the acquisition of that kind of skill, emotional, intellectual, material skill, to destabilize our own stories, or retell them with other stories, and vice versa. A kind of serious denormalization of that which is normal is held still, in order to do that which one thinks one is doing. It matters to destabilize worlds of thinking with other worlds of thinking.”
A dialogic, rather than dialectic, structure of McPhee’s artistic practice corroborates Georges Didi-Huberman’s assertion, in Confronting Images, that “to resemble no longer means, then, a settled state, but a process, an active figuration that, little by little, or all of a sudden, makes two elements touch that previously were separated (or separated according to the order of discourse).” Even the media with which McPhee works refuse, under her direction, to sit still: by drawing on top of painting, she explicitly surfaces the linear scaffolding that more typically serves as the eradicated and inaccessible unconscious of the painted image. In her Double Blind Studies series (2012-), she photographs antecedent drawings, digitally butterflying and displaying them for forensic inspection via lush silver gelatin prints. Already existing at a remove from themselves, these Rorschach-like blots are glutted and gutted. In these dream-works, the box of representation is smashed open. As Didi-Huberman continues, “all contrasts and all differences will be crystallized in the substance of a single image, whereas the same substance will ruin all philosophical quiddity in the splitting up of its subject. Such are the disconcerting poetics of dreams: time is overthrown in them, rent, and logic along with it. Not only do consequences anticipate their causes, they are their causes—and their negation.”

Nowhere is this more powerfully expressed than in McPhee’s recent video, Microswarm Patchwalk (2016), which invokes a post-surgical walk down an empty beach, seen through the damaged, but recovering, eye of the artist herself, cut (interspersed and interlaced) by flashes of various coded systems, including previous drawings, remediated by the voracious hunger of the video camera. Instead of the Kantian eye of the connoisseur, for whom, as Kevin Hetherington points out, “aesthetic judgment is the product of a disinterested eye,” here the viewer experiences the world through the artist’s discognitive eye. Discognition does not here imply lack of thought—just the opposite, in fact—but it does link thought, as an ongoing exchange, directly to the flux-of-the-world. Charlie Gere, in his essay “Slitting Open the Kantian Eye,” discusses “the moment in Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí’s film Un Chien Andalou when a young woman’s eye appears to be slit open. This is the slitting of the Kantian eye, that allows all the heterogeneity to spill from within the subject into the material world of things.” McPhee has participated in her own curative cut, establishing reciprocal feedback around largesse, rather than lack. Hers is not a disinterested eye, but a distracted one, connected to a mind as generative as the world it regards. Such a mind inevitably finds solace and rejuvenation in a discognitive place of repetitive, but also creative, inscription; a (common-)place that is not so common, a place that can never be (just) one.

2 Marko Joun, History and Poetics of Intertextuality (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2009), 20.


5 Ibid.


9 Ibid., 148-49.
