

## A. Laurie Palmer



### Eating Dirt

Blind as a vow, my nose has a shovel on it. I have a strong neck. I am making headway. Crumbly sand with wetter, softer, humus in my face; behind me a narrow tunnel I could be proud of but for what. It is simply how far I have come. Sometimes the tunnel behind me caves in. It doesn't matter. I can survive long periods without air. The earth is surprisingly full of air anyway, particulate and porous, unless I hit clay. The medium that I move through varies in density. Sometimes I have to spit to dissolve a little of what's ahead. My hands are webbed. They work like paddles. I am moving forward but not in a straight line. The iron in my nose shovel senses the pull of magnetic fields. These signals are often interrupted by buried electrical lines or the exploratory beeps of lonesome men swinging measuring instruments up above. But no one is watching me. I don't know how far I have come, or where I began. But I am making headway. I have nipples, little pink tits, that hurt from scraping on the grit tunnel bottom. My coarse hair grows from front to back; something terrible would happen if I backed up. I don't know when I started. May. My memory has been erased and replaced many times since then. I feel worms. I eat them. I also eat beetles along with the dirt. I could be quicker if I wasn't digesting as I dig. If I hadn't chosen to push against dirt down here, to live hidden, hard, slow, blind, unmapped. But I am telling this. I would prefer not to tell. To remain blind and speechless after disgorging. But I can't help myself. My movements reverberate. I feel those reverberations as a second effect. I need to comment. My method? Momentum (or inertia?), sensory involvement in empirical research, refusal of the metaphor of light (to "uncover," to "discover," to "reveal," to "clarify," to "make apparent") and myths of progress (as if the present is related to the past in an uninterrupted litany of cause and effect). These are the temptations of language, as if transparency were possible, or revelation is anything other than a shudder in the heart. My nose is a tool and a guide, the tubular digestive tract my mechanical shovel, filter, and mind; my tiny webbed feet work with the force of monster tractor tires – slow, unwieldy, inexorable. Encountering resistance in every direction, my work is joyful: I am making a path, but not necessarily one that could (or ought) to (ever) be followed. Making space, temporarily. When I break into a network of other tunnels, and space is amplified a thousand times by linking up to the work of others, my exaltation is almost equal to my surprise and disorientation.

### Rage and Its Antidote

With a reductive capitalist logic as the absolute principle and only guarantor of meaning, conditions for living grow worse and worse: increasingly inequitable and unjust, increasingly xenophobic and racist, increasingly homogenous and controlled (socially, spatially, visually), increasingly toxic and violent. The physical effects on the material world – animate and inanimate (including place) – and on human creativity and spirit, feel like the tightening hug of a muscular snake, limiting vision and destroying intimations of potential.

The primary source of exaltation and power is in discovering radical perspectives that address collective needs and desires unanswered by larger systems and running counter to market logic – articulated or enacted attitudes, positions, projects, signals from hearts directed towards collectivity and joy as antidote to stricture, punishment and closure. How do we find these people? It is necessary to practice, borrowing Doug Ashford's phrase, "affection for our unknown public" – to proceed with the assumption of finding, meeting, sparking events of mutual recognition.

### Uselessness

The idiocies of the Bush administration in particular require specific activist tactics and strategies in resistance. But structured ideologies with longer trajectories and larger bases than the bravado of the current administration continue to help create the present. They take form in our thought and language patterns as much as they do in concrete, plastic, and glass hangars housing corporate, military, and state department personnel.

How do we reconfigure the surface of our thoughts when they mimic shapes of domination and instrumentalist logic, and when ideas only take form in relation to what's possible (or worse, the form of glossed over myths of the past)? Ends and means thinking, in which planning attempts to follow intentions with effects, has, in its deep structure, an instrumental dimension that I would like to aerate and intercept in my work as an artist. Because capital's logic is linked with efficiency and because usefulness falls into step with cost/benefit analyses, I aim to maximize complexity instead, and highlight, rather than attempt to resolve, contradictions.

## Opacity

What if our first response to a radical proposal was not “that’s impossible,” but rather, “what does impossibility offer?” The possible involves what we can already see; the impossible is a link to what we don’t know (yet).

Herbert Marcuse described art as a kind of parallel world to that of existing reality, in which the limits of the latter don’t constrict (and depress) the potential of the former, allowing a gap of imagination and the potential for change. “Art re-presents reality while accusing it.” (1) In contemporary philosophy, the idea of the virtual suggests a latency without bounds simultaneous with, but separate from, the world of experience, a realm of potential variability allowing for change, surprise, accident, motion.

## Piecemeal

Expectations of language and thought yearn for complete sentences, developed understandings, clarity, and overviews. But the view from the highest building is always still partial (both incomplete and biased), not to mention expensive, controlling, generalizing, and glossing over important details. Attempts to comprehend and visualize wholeness deny what is or what wants to be obscure, risky, dangerous, opaque – and severs a relation to the unknown. We are neither autonomous “selves” (fully in control of our actions), nor are our intentions ever perfectly mirrored in their effects.

The missing pieces of images sent by satellite from one of the first Mars Rovers were filled in with a uniform chalky green. I look for these blank spots on the map, not to reveal something, but because they are likely to be full of rich contradiction, whatever it was that was impossible to represent. The place to apply pressure is where there is resistance, not that there is something to uncover that is more true, only that there is likely to be more – folded, packed in – more (but never “all”).

## Openness

Past projects like “3 Acres on the Lake: DuSable Park Proposal Project” (2000-03) and “Flood” (with Haha, 1993-95) were built as open-ended structures – a certain conceptual autonomy accompanied by indeterminacy as to how, and to some extent if, each project would develop. With Flood, a hydroponic community garden in a storefront space in Chicago growing vegetables for people with AIDS, the question was how (and whether) participants might use the garden space beyond its initial intentions, how they/we might extend its initial timeframe by finding new energy (and resources) to keep it going, and/or invent new structures from it. All of this happened, partially, – though the garden as initially conceived no longer exists.

With “3 Acres...” (public art project calling for proposals for an undeveloped plot of public land) the question was how (and whether) the exhibition and publication might influence the trajectory of the land’s actual development, without having to be sucked dry by the deadening city politics involved in promoting any one specific proposal. The 65 speculative proposals remained autonomous, free and clear of constraints based on safety or maintenance, while the project overall has accompanied, and amplified, efforts by activists to draw attention to the city’s abnegation of its promise to develop the land and to commemorate a black historical figure. The project has intercepted and changed the situation that provided its initial platform, while retaining a degree of the volatile virtual – or whatever you want to call it – a mote unhampered by the logic of “sense.”

## Time

A primary goal (along with insisting on the value of doing things that don’t make sense in an era of rationalized efficiency) is to create situations with multiple points of access – theoretical, social, material, spatial – that aim towards negotiation of very different conversations simultaneously. It takes time for indirect and qualitative projects to gather enough critical participation to contribute to their course; it takes time for potential to realize itself through indirection. Unsensational fragments accumulate insistence over time, allowing not just for “execution” but also for evolution, participation, growing wisdom, changing understandings, shifting participants – development, but not along a pre-determined narrative – and invention.