

KILMER SHRINES

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The poet Joyce Kilmer lived in New Brunswick, and Camp Kilmer was named in his honor. He is most famous for his poem *Trees*, which begins "I think that I shall never see/ a poem lovely as a tree". According to John Hills, a 1915 interview "pointed out that while Kilmer might be widely known for his affection for trees, his affection was certainly not sentimental - the most distinguished feature of Kilmer's property was a colossal woodpile outside his home. The house stood in the middle of a forest and what lawn it possessed was obtained only after Kilmer had spent months of weekend toil in chopping down trees, pulling up stumps, and splitting logs. Kilmer's neighbors had difficulty in believing that a man who could do that could also be a poet."

"Happy is one who has learned the causes of things...Fortunate too is he who has found the gods of the countryside." – Virgil

I. KILMER SHRINES

This project consists of the construction and maintenance of shrines dedicated to a network of storm drains in Piscataway, New Jersey. These drains flow into the Raritan River and from there into the Atlantic Ocean. My process is one of paying consistent attention over time, of growth and accumulation through repeated visits. There are six main shrines and several minor ones. I invite viewers to visit the shrines, either independently or on guided walking tours. I intend this pilgrimage to be an experience during which viewers are given the opportunity to try out an alternate way of understanding and engaging their immediate surroundings. The tour focuses on the overlay of geography, ecology, history, and technology onto present day land use. In addition to the shrines and the waterways to which they are dedicated, the tour includes hidden remnants of university infrastructure, the former site of the Mason Gross sculpture department, and landmarks of Camp Kilmer, a World War II military base.

II. JUNK AND JUNKSPACE

The site of Rutgers University's Livingston Campus has been used as a transitional space—a space temporarily occupied between coming and going, itself a non-destination—since the construction of Camp Kilmer. The War Department chose the site, located between Piscataway and Edison, New Jersey based on its proximity to transportation centers such as the Port of New York and New Jersey and the Pennsylvania Railroad in Plainfield. Construction began in 1941, and starting in 1942, Camp Kilmer processed troops for transport to the European Theater of World War II. It was de-activated in 1949 but reopened from 1950 to 1955 for use during the Korean War. After that, it housed refugees

from the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. (To this day there is a large Hungarian population in New Brunswick.)

In 1963, Rutgers bought a large portion of this land and created Kilmer College, renamed Livingston five years later after the colonial governor of New Jersey. This is the only Rutgers campus created from scratch instead of through the absorption of existing local colleges. Just as the increasing popularity of cars made it possible for people to live at a distance from their workplace, the Livingston Campus was oriented towards similar goals and made feasible by the same technological developments. Created as a suburban satellite campus with an abundance of student housing, it is connected to downtown New Brunswick through the campus bus system.

A large amount of parking was created to accommodate the Louis Brown Athletic Center, which the New Jersey Nets made their home from 1977 to 1981. Commuter students now park in these massive lots and use the bus system to travel to more densely developed campuses. The near absence of sidewalks and outdoor lighting means the campus was not built for pedestrian traffic. It is isolated from the rest of Rutgers and known as a “ghost town” on weekends. Student complaints of inferior facilities will be addressed after twenty years with the construction of a new student center, to be completed in 2009.



The result of this proliferation of transitional space and the disembodiment of physical space—the literal removing of human bodies from outdoor space into the space of cars—is the production of what Rem Koolhaas calls “junkspace”. I define “junkspace” as a space invisible from prescribed routes and thus overlooked, unused, untended, and host to numerous extraordinary possibilities. My shrines function as focal points, directing attention into the junkspaces of the Livingston Campus. Through a continual process of resurfacing and remodeling, the state produces space that transforms history, in the words of Henri Lefebvre, “from action to memory, from production to contemplation”. Junkspace is exempt this process: there, artifacts accumulate and history is most visible.



Since the state of New Jersey is defined by its proximity to New York City, it is, in a sense, dedicated to such transitional and junkspace as the Meadowlands, an industrial wasteland veined by Amtrak and NJ Transit rails, overrun with cordgrass reeds and scattered with modern ruins. These sorts of spaces have spawned legends and irrational architectures featured in the magazine *Weird NJ* such as a mythical New Jersey Devil of the Pine Barrens, an eighteenth century grave located in the parking lot of the Loews Cineplex on Route 1, and a “bridge to nowhere” in Stafford Township.

The creation of this sort of suburban transitional space was made possible by new transportation technologies. As a similar precedent, time zones were instituted in response to the popularization of railroads. More recently, the popularization of the GPS system has externalized our geographic awareness to a machine. As the development of more efficient means of travel and communication shrinks distances, I imagine our sense of place changing on a global scale. Langdon Winner writes of Silicon Valley that “knowing where a person, building, neighborhood, town, or city is located no longer provides a reliable guide to understanding human relationships and institutions.” It seems that physical space is becoming disembodied and—in a sense—obsolete. In the city of Bangalore, known as “India’s Silicon Valley”, the contest between authorized and unauthorized uses of junkspace is materialized in the form of impromptu, roadside shrines. These shrines have sprung up around disused



water tanks in Bangalore, a defining feature of the city's urban landscape and ecology. Once providers of water to the city's residents, these tanks are now host to gardens and spontaneous natural growth, physical manifestations of the city's functional infrastructure, and agents of the re-embodiment of space. According to Janaki Nair, "it is the linear use of space that is challenged in such untidy occupations of public space. Some, though certainly not all, 'unauthorized' shrines therefore assert a narrative, producing a renewed 'sense of place'."

These ideas are echoed by Michel de Certeau, who characterizes the act of walking as the "enunciation" of space. Just as poetry may exist unhindered by grammatical rules, pedestrians have the prerogative to break social rules governing the use of space and the transportation patterns within it, as in a Situationist *Dérive*. The map of my pilgrimage is, in a sense, the inversion of the University's map: Where the official map is blank, mine is detailed, and where my map is sketchy, the University's is dense.



The Livingston Campus includes the 370-acre Rutgers Ecological Preserve. Its website boasts of “one of the finest old-growth forests of oak, ash, maple, and beech in central New Jersey”, portions of which have remained uncut since the 1840’s. My shrines exist in forested areas only a short walk from the Preserve, but under vastly different protective rules and restrictions. It’s illegal to dump in the Preserve, so the university dumps its unwanted materials in its junkspaces, hidden from view. Nature grows up around this waste, makes use of it indiscriminately, and thrives. This is Robert Smithson’s “dialectical landscape”: “Nature for the dialectician is *indifferent* to any formal ideal...The image of the lost paradise garden leaves one without a solid dialectic, which causes one to suffer an ecological despair. Nature, like a person, is not one-sided.”



What is the functional difference between a stone and a hunk of asphalt, or between a gutter and a stream? Since it is irrevocably a part of our landscape, junk must practically be seen as a new environmental resource.



According to Richard Dawkins's model of evolution as described in *The Selfish Gene*, strands of "replicator" molecules, the precursors of DNA, made copies of themselves using building block molecules abundant in the primordial "soup". As these replicators became more numerous and complex, building block molecules became increasingly scarce, and so the replicators developed the ability to break down other competing strains in order to use their building blocks to build their own copies. This model of consumption, scarcity, and reuse is reoccurring now on a macro scale: humans are using up natural resources, and so we are turning to recycling and resourcefulness in order to continue and thrive. I embrace these models of resourcefulness by using mostly found materials to build my shrines, and often ones that I collected near the sites I have chosen. I am hardly adding anything new to the landscape; often I am just reordering what was there already.

III: ANIMISM AND ECOLOGY

Vernon L. Scarborough studied a variety of ancient water management systems on several continents and conjectured, in his book *The Flow of Power: Ancient Water Systems and Landscapes*, that the most successful ones generally embody values of heterarchy, multitasking, and accretion as opposed to hierarchy, techno- or labortasking, and expansion. Scarborough's primary example of a successful, enduring system of water management is the complex network of temples dedicated to an equally intricate irrigation system for rice terraces in Bali. According to Stephen Lansing, this system has lasted for millennia, through changes in political regime. Its religious hierarchy of gods is in fact parallel but unconnected to the one espoused by the reigning king. By paying homage to local gods, and by local temples sending delegates to the main temple, Balinese farmers maintain an appreciation for their dependence on each other and on natural systems and resources. Through cycles of planting, harvesting, and fallow periods based on a complex cyclical calendar determined by these water temples, farmers maintain control over pests and are able to distribute and share available water for the benefit of all involved.

Lansing observes that, "water temples establish symbolic connections between productive groups and the components of the natural landscape that they seek to control." He further states that performative rituals connected with the temples roughly enact these symbolic structures. I think this is a great way to think about my project: How might the social organization of the university impact the infrastructure and upkeep of its drainage system? How do my shrines symbolically enact a new set of hypothetical values?

The Rutgers Environmental Health and Safety Department (REHS) uses a hierarchical, top-down structure to maintain campus waterways (as well as to monitor the safety procedures of Mason Gross). The rules are passed down from

the national Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and REHS sees that the university complies in order to avoid fines. This top-down approach is necessary because, as students matriculate and graduate, there is a constant turnover of the local population. This prevents residents from developing a long-term attachment to the area and from feeling invested in its environment. My shrines, on the other hand, derive from a bottom-up, heterarchical engagement with the landscape. In my continued maintenance of them, I have adopted by necessity a kind of stewardship of the drains and streams in the vicinity of the shrines. The shrines are modest enough in scale to have been created and to theoretically be maintained by anyone. In addition, I make practical decisions based on the characteristics of each site instead of based on an overarching set of rules.

REHS has also adopted a “technotasking” approach to the maintenance of the drainage system, meaning it has outsourced most of its activities to technology, thus minimizing the use of human labor. According to the REHS website, one of their accomplishments is the “redirection of discharge” from cooling towers in order to eliminate the need for monitoring by the EPA and the New Jersey Department for Environmental Protection (NJDEP). Not only does this claim immediately raise the question of the destination of this discharge, but their move away from human monitoring, replaced by technological adjustments, represents a move from multitasking (the use of technology in combination with human oversight) to techno-tasking. My shrines themselves are maintained exclusively through human labor, possibly balancing this move.

Lastly, although the university’s presence here was developed using an expansionist model (all at once and from scratch), the campus does seem to have been built on existing roads and spatial organizers from Camp Kilmer. In terms of the drainage system, there seem to be a few different models and materials used for drains that have been installed over the years: ceramic, cement, and now rubber or plastic. This indicates an accretional approach to the

development of the drainage system, echoed by the accumulative growth of my shrines.



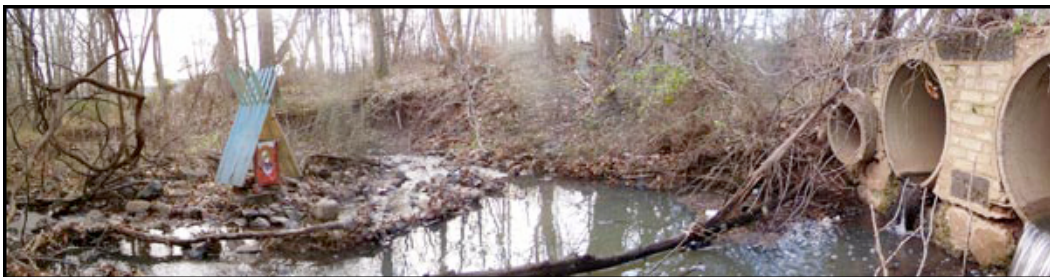
Much can be learned from different cultural systems of understanding our increasingly complex relationship to the natural world. As Rebecca Solnit has written, “If environmental problems are really cultural problems—about the nature of our desires and perceptions—then a crucial territory to explore or transform is the territory of the mind.” In India, a few thousand of miles to the northeast of Bali, there seems to be an acute notion that the history and character of an object or place is materially manifested within it, down to its very dust. An excellent real-world example of the ecological implications of this sort of animistic perspective is the wariness with which Indian farmers regard genetically modified rice, as described by Professor Anne Monius of Harvard:

“While Euro-American criticisms of bio-engineered food have focused on potential health risks and various ethical considerations about the origins of manipulated genes...complex Indian views of the substantive world as imbued with distinctly

moral qualities or *gunas*, factors of purity and pollution, temperature, and emotional valences render GM products impossible to classify.”

This idea—that objects and places have responsive characters—resonates with the use of found materials. Furthermore, if this idea is taken seriously, it follows that one should treat places and things as one would persons: with respect.

An animistic approach to space and substance is defined, according to Graham Harvey, by the extension of personhood to “other-than-human” entities, including animals, plants, rocks, weather systems, places, and “artefacts” (objects made by humans). Harvey quotes Viveiros de Castro: “Personhood and ‘perspectivity’—the capacity to occupy a point of view—is a question of degree and context, rather than an absolute, diacritical property of a particular species.” The house shape that characterizes most of my shrines not only implies a body in space and attracts physical bodies to that space but also symbolizes an animistic embodiment of nearby drains.



John Frow understands material agency in a metaphorical sense, as the displacement of human agency into objects: “All ‘social’ relations mix together chains of humans and nonhumans. Latour’s exemplary objects—a speed bump, a hotel key with a weight attached to it, a door closer, a camera—are inscribed and programmed by human will and in turn, as nonhuman delegates, require humans to behave in certain ways.” I understand the term “personhood” as referring to entities that exhibit social behavior, defined by receptivity and responsiveness. A water supply can certainly be considered as such.



Through this project I seek to blur arbitrary boundaries defining what is natural and unnatural, animate or inanimate. Through the playful reordering of found materials and the accumulation of small gestures, this project embodies values of resourcefulness, awareness of connectivity, thoughtful engagements with the natural world, and the importance of place and physical location.

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