

GOFF, PETER, M.F.A., *Isthmus*. (2008)
Directed by Billy Lee. 10pp.

The purpose of this thesis paper is to describe the sculptural series *Isthmus*. This project was a direct result of my endeavor with social encounter through the exploration of factors such as place, material and process. The physical landscape between my studio and home was utilized as “place” designated for the purpose of collecting material while connecting with people and nature.

ISTHMUS

By

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APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis as been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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ISTHMUS

The form of a comb or the color of a plastic drinking straw point to the familiar. Kubler wrote: “The modern work takes its measure from the old: if it succeeds, it adds previously unknown elements to the topography of the form-class, like a new map reporting unexpected features in a familiar but incompletely known terrain.” The series *Isthmus* is an encounter with the familiar while at the same time a search for the unknown.

For the past two years I have been looking for a way to engage my concerns with community, environment and social equality through sculpture. The time it has taken to marry these seemingly disparate involvements continues to be a challenge. For me sculpture is not solely the creation of a three-dimensional object, it is the tactile outcome of several decisions. I choose to use found objects in order to take part in a chain that starts in far-off places such as China, Lesotho, Vietnam or Sri Lanka. Involving the decision making of product designers, patent lawyers, marketing firms, retail stores, consumers and finally myself combine to make the resulting sculpture paradoxically local and global in material and process. The series *Isthmus* is a direct result of my exploration of factors such as place, material and process in the production of socially engaged artifacts.

Isthmus in the geographical sense, is a strip of land that connects two larger bodies of land, Central America is one example. It can also denote a narrow strip of tissue joining two larger organs or parts of an organ. I use the term isthmus not only to denote the physical but also to describe a psychological location. The products of global consumerism wash up on the “shores” of my neighborhood sidewalks. Each object carries a history. Starting as raw materials they are transformed through industrial processes into personal products such as sunglasses, toothbrushes or pens. For a brief moment they are useful, then disposed of in a very public place. *Isthmus* is the point where I inject a renewed interest in these abandoned objects.

The “isthmus” that connects my studio and home (although urban) is not without nature. A surprising amount of flora and fauna inhabit this space. Some of the birds have incorporated their own use of the man-made materials into their nest building. A remarkable variety of flowering plants cover the soil just as the track gravel diminishes. I am always amazed by the complexity of forms found in nature even on a restricted growing area such as the strip. I am aware of the vigorous adaptability of nature, it informs my approach to materials. The dynamic points of merger that occur (vinyl record holding plastic sunglasses, thorns and earplugs) owe their grace and elegance to nature.

My work on *Isthmus* has been influenced by the conceptual artist Simon Starling, who works in a manner that I find, thought provoking and humorous. *For Tabernas Desert Run* 2004, Starling crossed the Tabernas desert in Spain on an improvised electric bicycle. The only waste product the vehicle produced was water, which he used to paint an illustration of a cactus. The contrast between the supremely efficient cactus and the

contrived efforts of man is both comic and insightful, highlighting the commercial exploitation of natural resources in the region. I share his interest in journey-based work and the activity of reconfiguring materials.

The action of creating along with selective gathering is influenced by my immediate surroundings, ongoing observations and experiences through travel. A large portion of my formative years (between 1985 to 1991) was lived out in San Jose, Costa Rica. Looking back I realize what an impact the time there had on me. Walking was a part of our everyday routine, whether it was to go to school or catch a bus to the city center. On a cultural level, walking was a way of life; it was not a class issue. The streets of San Jose are full of activity. Vendors, pedestrians, bicycles and vehicular traffic of all kinds crowd the narrow avenues. All this activity compounded by poorly run sanitation department lead to a dirty city center. My friends and I would spend hours playing soccer in the streets collecting cigarette wrappers to use as currency in our dice games. I believe the contact with the city's streets still informs my work.

My understanding and relationship to materials was heightened by the time my family spent near the Nicaraguan border. While we were there a local man named Miguel would take us on long walks through the jungle. With a machete in hand, he taught us how to select breadfruit, jungle carrot and how to drink water from a vine. I was impressed by his knowledge and appreciation of the rain forest. It is through this experience in which I developed an acute sense of observation and the desire to be resourceful. It is through material ingenuity or the handling of the material, not the material itself that one can observe the skill and understanding of the maker.

Walking in Greensboro, North Carolina has different social implications. From my observations people walk for several different reasons all of which are indicative of social status. The part of town in which one walks also points to a clear social divide. In general the affluent walk for exercise (with friends or dogs) or from their car to a near by building. The issue of carbon footprint is one that resonates with this group. The largest group of pedestrians in my neighborhood is the “college class”; this group consists of faculty, staff and students going to and fro from home to campus. People in the “college class” share some of the same concerns and walking habits of the affluent. A third highly visible group comprised of people from all backgrounds is those without vehicles. Many factors prevent this group from purchasing and operating motor vehicles. Huge blocks of time are spent on commuting to and from work or to purchase necessities. Although somewhat general these three groups constitute the bulk of pedestrians in Greensboro.

One artist that incorporates walks into his practice is Francis Alÿs. He has done several walk-based performances. *Zapatos Magnéticos* (Magnetic shoes) 1994 was carried out during the Fifth Havana Biennale. Alÿs put on a pair of magnetic shoes and took daily walks through the streets, collecting scraps of metal lying in his path. With each trip he incorporates the newly discovered neighborhood. *La Gotera* (The leak) 1995 consisted of the artist wandering through the neighborhoods in São Paulo, Brazil carrying a leaking can of paint. When the can was emptied he returned it to the gallery and hung it on the wall. Alÿs’s process is not new but his social and political actions are poignant. His use of simple performances shed light on political and physical boundaries in a way that is more poetic than activist.

Isthmus is the result of my response to place, material, and formal concerns. The processes of walking, collecting, and building are all employed. I am aware of the parallels one might draw from art movements such as Environmental Art, Process Art and Arte Povera. Unlike some Process Art I do think of the resulting object. The actual doing is exciting to me. A performative aspect exists but I make a distinction between process and object. I do not see my work as ritual or rite. Environmental Art offers me a model in terms of thinking of “place” as well as the intention to cause no harm to nature. Tate Modern’s online glossary describes Arte Povera not as an impoverished art, but an art made without restraints, a laboratory situation in which a theoretical basis was rejected in favor of a complete openness towards materials and processes. It is this openness towards material and processes that defines my work.

The components (hair combs, eating utensils, smoking paraphernalia, food and beverage containers...) used in my constructions come directly from the terrain. Collecting for the project took place in the winter months when the brightest colors in the landscape come from litter, not nature. The object is selected for its material quality, not the content. I see the materials as form, visual weight, texture and color in the service of an overall structure, not as a bottle or a cigarette lighter. The things I commingle are familiar to most people in society, allowing an entry point into something (art) relatively exclusive. The artist Gabriel Orozco captures the sentiment for my material selection when he says: “A lot of my work is about traces of human activity. I don’t portray people. What I’m interested in is what people do—or what I do that can be done by anyone.”

Traces of mundane human activity comprise the bulk of my medium. I want the moment of appreciation to be in the formal and structural decisions not the novelty of a material.

Isthmus represents a personal need to define the role of place, material and process by means of sculpture. The complex web of social and political boundaries that are a part of society often separates people, I seek connections with people and places. My desire is to develop a visual vocabulary that will act as an isthmus between the elite (the developed world or people of means) and the deprived (underdeveloped world or people of little means).

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CATALOGUE

1. carry-draw-eat 2008

unknown rubber ring with metal, blue pen cover, blue pen with ink, unknown black plastic in two parts, arc welder rod, wood, dirt, unknown metal with zip cord, neutral pH adhesive, rose nip and stem, plastic cap, Finetex tag, milk bottle tab, synthetic felt with blue ink, plastic grocery bag, iron rod, metal loop
10" x 13.5" x 13"

2. chew-drive-comb 2008

two plastic combs, one brush head, plastic spoon, Skoal can, windshield wiper, latex glove, car antenna, plastic cup, lip gloss applicator, unknown gray plastic with caulk, unknown plastic lever, reflector, neutral pH adhesive, wire and paper from futon, four inches from a tape measure, ceramic tube, plastic bubble blower, sticks, metal rod
14" x 27" x 15.25"

3. cut-drink-nibble 2008

razor blade, plastic bottle, wood, dirt, neutral pH adhesive, aluminum rod, ice maker elbow joint, sunglasses, floral stick, lower jaw with tooth (from a mouse)
27.5" x 6" x 23.5"

4. eat-smoke-celebrate 2008

Vienna sausage can, steel and aluminum lid, spoon, dirt, neutral pH adhesive, umbrella wire, fire cracker stick, cigarettes, beeswax
9.5" x 12" x 15.25"

5. sip-cook-brush 2008

wire, popcorn cooker handle, straws, teeth from plastic brush, neutral pH adhesive, beer can tab

25" x 1.5" x 15.25"

6. listen-clean-stop 2008

vinyl record, wood with orange paint, beeswax, two pill bottles, milk tab, red plastic mesh, bicycle break pad, thorns, staples, ear plug, neutral pH adhesive, screwdriver handle, screw, light bulb glass, wood, unknown rubber, plastic tooth-picker, coffee sipping straw, cell phone antenna, wire from hub-cap, cotton swab, metal from umbrella, unknown black plastic hook, orange plastic fencing

15.5" x 17" x 13.25"

7. graze-hang-light 2008

wooden hair brush, chain link fence element with cement, plastic coat hanger, gray plastic bag, chicken bone, neutral pH adhesive, aluminum fence component, plant stems, paint can spray tip, lighter head, metal, plastic from coffee cup lid, two unknown plastic parts, fork, zip tie, paraffin wax

13" x 13" x 10.125"

8. mark-shade-spray 2008

plastic marker flag with metal wire, rubber inner tube with red earth, sunglass element, banana peel, unknown plastic with stitching, , neutral pH adhesive , red plastic cap, earphone component, unknown rubber with white paint, unknown red/white/blue plastic, tooth brush head, arc welder rod, pen head, spring, staple, plastic wine cork, leather, paraffin wax, blue plastic bag, two black plastic elements

12" x 23.5" x 9.5"