

How To Make A Stick

And Other Recipes For Unnatural Disaster



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By Stacia Verigin

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Head of the Department of Art and Art History
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, S7N 5A4

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“It is incumbent upon him [Don Quixote] to fulfill the promise of the books. It is his task to recreate the epic, though by a reverse process: the epic recounted (or claimed to recount) real exploits, offering them to our memory; Don Quixote on the other hand, must endow with reality the signs-without-content of the narrative. His adventures will be a deciphering of the world: a diligent search over the entire surface of the earth for the forms that will prove that what the books say is true. Each exploit must be a proof: it consists, not in a real triumph – which is why victory is not really important – but in an attempt to transform reality into a sign. Don Quixote reads the world in order to prove his books. And the only proofs he gives himself are the glittering reflection of resemblances.”

Michel Foucault, (on Don Quixote) *The Order of Things*

How to Make A Stick and Other Recipes for Unnatural Disaster

On Recipe and Unnatural Disaster

There are two ways to make a stick. One is natural, and the other is most definitely unnatural. How has this come to be? This paper accompanies my thesis exhibition, *How to Make A Stick and Other Recipes for Unnatural Disaster*. *How to Make a Stick* refers to both the matter-of-fact instruction of a recipe and the telling of a tale of discovery. Recipe refers to the simple science at play in my work. Yet, it is also not unlike the telling of a story.

Writing recipes, as a method of working, has always come naturally to me. As such, I am imparting my story within this framework – as a list of ingredients following a loose set of directions. Recipes tend to be about the essential, everyday science in our lives. They involve improvisation, balance, timing, direction, experimentation and result. The best recipes (or parts of them) are often kept secret. My goal is to help you taste some of the secrets in my work and, if you choose to linger and consume enough of it, you will see how certain ‘recipes’ have been passed down through generations.

However, this thesis is not a cookbook. And not being a cookbook, it is a complex process to translate the ‘go by feel’ nature of my work – with its visual pinches of this and that – into the more precise measurements of written language. And, as in every good tale, there are unanticipated factors at play. Disaster is in the making, so please take my thoughts as the raw ingredients in this unnatural recipe and mix them well before serving.

Glue: The Binding Ingredient

It may seem odd that an everyday material such as glue is the key ingredient and hero of this story. But, do not dismiss its character so easily. For, it has been my goal over the past few years to reveal the overlooked integrity hidden within this substance. It is the struggle between unnatural and natural forces that binds this exhibition together. So, it is therefore only right for me to begin here: with a little information on how a sticky,

synthetic mass became my window into the world.

Glue may be used as both a noun and a verb. My ongoing study attempts to reveal both the properties and processes of glue. Buckminster Fuller once said, “Don’t fight forces - use them.” This statement continues to shape my practice both in terms of my relationship with materials and the many natural and unnatural forces at play. My process of discovery emphasizes the need to work with the inherent qualities of the glue rather than against them.

As author David Wade explains in *Li: Dynamic Form In Nature*, “Clearly form of any kind depends on its component parts holding together, just as its ultimate dissolution is a result of falling apart.”¹ Looking around, I began to notice how heavily I relied upon glue. Glue was in the walls around me; in the books I read; in the table at which I sat – yet, it was completely hidden. Surely a work of art exists within this substance? How could I honor this material and impart this understanding?

Glue is utilized in relation to other materials: to hold and attach. If glue exists between things, how could I break apart and perhaps even isolate this bond? Furthermore, if the nature of glue is to be concealed, how should we ever reveal it?

Glue marries things together. Working to combine ‘this’ with ‘that’ can result in numerous and unnatural combinations. Some things are combined so well that we may not necessarily recognize the individual components. If the goal is to create the illusion of many parts becoming something whole, we do not want the glue to be apparent. If the glue is visible, it is a distraction and the illusion of wholeness is destroyed. This kind of distraction is often synonymous with poor craftsmanship and an inattention to detail. Thus, glue is manifestly destined to be a hidden material – ideally lost and forgotten in the attachment process.

¹ David Wade, *Li: Dynamic Form in Nature*, (New York: Walker Publishing Company, Inc., 2003), 4.

Pure Glue Explorations

In order to extract glue to the essence of what it is, it is necessary to remove any other surfaces from the equation. For, when glue is not working towards combining two or more surfaces, it is left to hold itself. As an early investigation, I produced the *Cone Forms* which came from an effort to discover a solid form in which the glue expressed its independence. By pouring thick amounts of glue into a long plastic trough, the bottom stayed wet and the top dried making an unusual kind of sticky tape. The cone form emerged as I rolled the cast-glue, tape-form into a loop. In this way, the glue was able to fulfill its purpose as an adhering surface, but in an ironic gesture that left it holding itself.

These cones were constructed out of white and yellow (carpenter's) glue or Polyvinyl Acetate (PVA). While, initially, resin dyes were added to the cones as colour tests, the latter cones relied upon the glue's own colouring agents. As I had noted that the resin dyes worked to hide the fact that the cones were made of glue, it was necessary to remove the extraneous colour references. I had not considered the colour to be a 'surface'. The color redefines the glue's surface as artificial or not *glue-like* in appearance. The cones made of glue without resin dyes changed over time. The yellow cones became dull, and the orange glues faded to black. Even prior to these changes occurring people had a difficult time recognizing that these objects were made of glue. Seeing this material in its pure – although dried – form was very unfamiliar. If this material was destined to remain hidden, could I reveal it?

Sifting The All Purpose Dust

Like glue, dust is an everyday, and nearly invisible ingredient that is integral to my work. Although the surface attachment of dust is not about sticking two materials together, it does refer to the impermanent shuffling and coming to rest – upon surface - through accumulation.

Sawdust, in particular, is the most appropriate choice of dust for my work. It is a natural byproduct of the lumber industry, and one that I have contributed to in my own woodworking practice. By the time the wood reaches my worktable, its appearance is already far removed from the visual form of a tree. Thinking about these circumstances as two points of 'growth', I imagine what it might have been both prior to, and after, the industrial process.

I first began collecting the sawdust that was generated by sanding prior works made of Medium Density Fibreboard (MDF). MDF is so far removed from natural wood that it cannot be considered in the same category as most lumber. Yet, it is still considered a wood product. It is a highly processed wood comprised of wood fibres, glue, and harmful chemical preservatives. This mixture is then heated and pressure is applied to form it into sheets. Taking inspiration from this industrial process, I decided to produce my own homemade MDF without the harmful chemicals. I wanted to work away from the manufactured 'sheet' forms and produce, instead, objects that would reflect - and remind us of - the natural environment. I wanted to emphasize and enlarge their fragmented condition in hopes that it may take us back to the site of this harvest; this unnatural disaster; the conceptualized space of the natural environment from which it originated.

How To Make a Stick

The Sticks were the first forms I made out of a concoction of sawdust and glue. Here, the fragments of sawdust became a more readily understood fragment of the forest. I enjoyed making these forms because there was no perfect model of what a stick should be. They were also tools of the imagination. The stick form was a result of choosing to isolate the first physical response I had with the sticky mixture, which was to simply roll it, like bread dough, with my hands.

The surface of most of the sticks was lightly sanded and was suggestive of bark, with the ends left unsanded in contrast. The sanding also created a subtle difference in color and texture and allowed for further sawdust to be gathered and recycled back into the

work. Working in small batches, the sticks began to gather and settle all around me. I was strangely fooled by their presence, yet they were freakishly unnatural. Here they were, a new body of dust, a shell of what they once were - each a Golem² rising to the surface.

Studies In Grain

The ability of wood grain to tell a story and reveal the passing of time was a point of reference for me in the production of my homemade sticks. Grain most certainly helped to distinguish my wood from the smooth and uniform qualities of MDF. To better understand how a tree grows, I researched *The Principle of Aggregate Tree Growth*.³ This is a formula that calculates each year in an individual tree's growth, showing the probable result of both human and natural environmental factors over a period of time. Interestingly enough, this formula also considers random or unknown factors. And, the experiments in my work were mostly comprised of random or unknown disasters.

For example, scientists in Lituya Bay, Alaska, discovered salt-water traces in the tree samples taken between an unusual line of old- and new-growth forest. The investigation began with a simple observation that the mature forest did not extend all of the way down to the water's edge. After taking several cuts from the trees along this line, one sample revealed healthy wide rings followed by a scar and stunted growth where something had struck it very hard. From this, the scientists determined that a natural disaster of an unimaginable scale must have occurred during the trees' lifetime. It was later discovered that a mega Tsunami with a wave of over 150 meters high had struck the Bay.

In response to this ability of nature to record events in an organic way, I began layering different colored collections of sawdust mixtures to create a homemade grain that I

² Gustav Meyerink, *The Golem*, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1986), (the Golem is an artificial man made of clay which comes to life when a magical phrase is placed behind its teeth, and stiffens back into clay when that phrase is removed)

³ Henri D. Grissino-Mayer, *The Ultimate Tree-Ring Web Pages*
<http://web.utk.edu/~grissino/principles.htm>

could then cut as sample. I layered the sticks in the form of *Logs* and *Stumps*, and also began a series of *Grain Balls* or round trees that imitated concentric tree growth patterns. Unlike the *Logs*, the center layers of the *Grain Balls*, one on top of the next, remain hidden inside. The contents must be cut open to be revealed. The Grain Balls are cut in half and also quartered like strange fruits. This act of cutting brings the human hand into play once again and takes the sawdust back to the original place of unnatural form. The layers of sawdust glued together in rings act to record the history of their industrial demise. The growth reveals a heavy pattern of our consumption, and the time commemorated in each ring is from many trees, and perhaps even many forests.

The Entireland (detail)

It is interesting to me that people are capable of describing a place of fiction and one of reality. Can we ever do this without it somehow being in relation to those things we have already witnessed? Within my developing practice, I find myself caught somewhere between describing a place of fiction and reality. As the number of sawdust and glue objects I make steadily increases, a kind of wooden landscape emerges. It is a chimerical clear-cut, full of glue and broken form putting itself together and falling apart. There is some truth to this fiction. I am able to stand back and let the curtain rise to reveal the *landscape* in its simplest terms – as a pile of sawdust. The amount of sawdust I generate, and collect from others as a waste product of industry is overwhelming. There is also something very satisfying about giving this nearly disintegrated dust a little more time as ‘wood’. The diverse forms of sawdust and glue suggest an unnatural and yet somehow organic evolution. Is it *my nature* now assisting this chaos with a new order? Through this unnatural ‘diversity’ I dream up many fictions about how this land once lived. Perhaps the hollow round forms hold the seed forms that grow into trees, of which only sticks and logs will remain? I often wonder, “Where would Darwin begin?” Some objects, like the pits and seeds are created out of this fictitious reverse taxonomy to help me display, document, and account for this imaginary evolution.

The objects are initially made with the gallery in mind. However, with my focus on material exploration, the order of things seems to become secondary to the potential gestalt and the news this might bring. The title of the collective study of sawdust and glue work is *Entireland (detail)*. The language of stories and tales inspires the title. As it is familiar to hear a tale whereby an enchantment of some kind is cast upon the entire land, it attempts to provide the reader with an imaginative space. Both are ‘whole’, and seemingly without borders – the land as far as the eye can see. It is a skimming of the surface to a great distance, with many stories (and recipes for disaster), unfolding in between. My work exists within this conceptual space. The fragmentation of this ever-evolving body of work cannot be viewed in its entirety, but it always exists conceptually as part of something whole. In this way, each object exists as a detail...a piece of the entire land and a piece of the *Entireland*. The gallery itself becomes another ingredient composing the narrative of this constructed environment. Within these (details), it is my hope that people will look to translate the *Entireland (detail)* in relation to what is missing.

The author Anne Carson uses the brackets “[” and “]” to indicate destroyed papyrus and lost text in her translation of the work of the (7th century BC) Greek lyric poet Sappho.⁴ Translation is an interesting and unavoidable topic for discussion with Sappho’s poetry. Although she is hailed as one of the greatest lyrical poets, the majority of her poetry exists as fragments. Sometimes, only a single word exists to be translated onto the page. Each translator must somehow deal with the space between what has survived.

Carson leaves a physical and bracketed space between the words as an aesthetic gesture, affecting the readers understanding and experience of the broken poem.⁵ I find that this gesture restores the temporality of the poem. As my eyes travel down the page between the destinations of broken text, I am pleasantly surprised to find my mind interpreting the space. I am impressed with Carson’s metaphorically physical discontinuous approach to translating the experience of this loss. “Even though you are

⁴ Anne Carson, *Fragments of Sappho* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2002), xi.

⁵ *Ibid*, xi.

approaching Sappho in translation, that is no reason you should miss the drama of trying to read a papyrus torn in half or riddled with holes or smaller than a postage stamp – brackets imply a free space of imaginal adventure.”⁶

Disaster: Fragmentation and Missing Pieces

It is the relationship between what is found and what is missing that makes Sappho’s poetry so interesting. The fragmentation in Carson’s translation is successful on this imaginal level because I am instructed by the space in between “[“ and “]” to understand that at one time there was more. It is like unearthing the bones of a dinosaur, knowing that it was once somehow complete. How do we visualize this place we have never been to? How do we construct it in a way that its incompleteness is acknowledged? What if the *place* itself exists as a fragment?

In my own objects, I am aware of a mirroring and fragmentation at play. The sawdust can be viewed as a fragment of a tree or any number of trees. How much forest contributed to the making of a homemade stick? How much creation and disaster takes place for this to occur? In my desire to create objects between the constructed and natural environment, it is obvious that we cannot have the same understanding of growth by experiencing my work that we can from nature. This body of work exists in a liminal state. It is not created with the chemicals that usually go into manufactured wood to help preserve and protect it. The sawdust comes together, one last time, a shadow of what it once was, before disintegrating into the ground.

“Whereupon every stone that has ever played a role in my life rises into existence and compasses me around. Numbers of them labor painfully to raise themselves out of the sand towards the light – like monstrous, slaty-hued crayfish when the tide is at full – as if venturing their lives to compel me to see them, so that they can give me tidings of infinite importance.”⁷

⁶ Ibid, xi. As Carson further explains, “imaginal adventure” is a free space in which the reader is enabled to create individual narrative through the process of imagination.

⁷ Gustav Meyerink, *The Golem*, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1986), 3.

Just as Meyerink's character in *The Golem* dreamed of all the stones encountered in his existence, I envision all of the sticks in mine. The tidings of my own constructed landscape appeared to be of a cyclical nature. According to the Greek philosopher Empedocles, "...all the change and movement in the universe, including all the processes of creation and destruction, stem ultimately from two great principles of attraction and repulsion"⁸ Using the glue to reconstitute the sawdust brings the act of glue and the act of dust, in terms of 'surface attachment', to a common denominator. I defined my objects less as art and more in line with the definition of glue as *surface attachments*. They are like a magnified dust rising from and settling upon the surface – a temporal product of disintegration and accumulation with more than a page of "imaginal" space in between.

Collection and Accumulation

In order to acknowledge this space in between, it is necessary to establish a physical distance to create a philosophical space for observation and discovery. I do not want to position the *Entireland (details)* in a way that loads them with too much significance in terms of either science or natural history. The reading of the work is based in exploration but not in reference to any one specific field of study. The unnatural accumulation of fragments takes precedence. In effect, I aim to create the desire for order. If the work reflects a disorder, the audience is given space to metaphorically collect these objects together for themselves.

The words 'collection' and 'accumulation' are often referenced when people experience my work. 'Collection' is used synonymously with gather and harvest. But, as I desire a reading that leans towards biological notions of the words 'accumulation' or 'aggregation', 'collection' has consequently become misleading. A collection may be defined as a group of objects or works to be seen, studied, or kept together. The unavoidable aspect of study, and the academic implications that follow, remain problematic. Within a gallery setting, my work as a collection - as formally arranged art

⁸ David Wade, *Li: Dynamic Form in Nature*, (New York: Walker Publishing Company, Inc., 2003), 4.

objects - are, by default, automatically subjected to this institutionalized narrative. Therefore, display strategies that turn this inevitable formality back on itself are necessary. The viewer is then engaged directly within this expectation; and, a dialogue is sparked about both the fragmentation of objects and the fragmentation of observation.

The Prism Scopes

Observation is a key ingredient in visual art and, for me personally, successful works of art often involve a play on expectation. The great responsibility to locate the audience in relation to the work, the space, and the time is often overwhelming. In my exhibition, I address both the virtue and the novelty of observation. The *Prism Scopes* were developed, in part, as a gimmick to provoke the viewer into a self-conscious act of engagement. They are designed in response to the small plastic novelty item of the same name. As prism scopes were originally intended to be amusing toys for the upper class, they often reinforced the notion of sight as a privileging act.

There are two parts to consider for the homemade prism scopes, the lens and the body. To emphasize the richness and luxury of the view I abandoned the plastic toy versions, and designed my own faceted lenses from cast glass. The lens designs are based on the top *round brilliant cuts* of diamonds and other gemstones. The bottoms are flat to allow you to see through the faceted top portion of the 'gem'. This kind of lens makes seeing more difficult, especially in terms of exploring the finer surface qualities of the art objects on display. The number of facets in the prism scopes' design function to isolate – yet multiply – the subject of the view. If you rotate the scope, the refracted image is also 'animated'. The lenses imply assistance in terms of an observational distance to be covered, but they do not function to bring us any closer to the work than we already are.

Each prism scope stands on a tripod-like armature. Using an armature from the language of telescopes plays upon the viewer's expectations. The telescope is most effectively understood as a tube-like instrument that helps our sight to travel a physical

distance. It is an instrument of explorers, inventors, scientists, pirates, and curious minds in general. The presence of these telescopic 'bodies' emphasizes 'as far as the eye can see' - the boundaries of the Entireland. In pointing the telescopes at the ground, I am directing the gaze by imitating the anticipated behavior of the audience. I am playing with our expectations with optical devices. One expects to see things somewhat clearer through the telescope body, while the lens has been fashioned to cloud and complicate things further.

There is some truth, however, to the multiplicity and fragmentation of the view. Fragmentation and distortion are all that the eye can truly grasp when looking through the Prism Scopes. The act of looking is also heightened by the scopes' ability to contain and fence in the eye. When looking through the *Prism Scopes*, the external space of the gallery disappears as the viewer's focus is diffused by the lens.

Formally, the *Prism Scopes* also add a loitering verticality to the exhibition. Similar to the *Sticks*, I am strangely comforted by their presence in the physical space. There is always a viewer, however inanimate, however implied, poised in dedication towards understanding the multiple fragments of my practice.

Of Shadows and Dust

By dint of repeated deviations, the infinite diversity of the animals came to pass.

-Maupertuis

The fragmentation of the Prism Scopes is similar to the projection of the detached Shadow Creatures. The diversity of these creatures comes about by repeated deviation. Solely comprised of the filmed cuts of my right arm, hand and fingers, these silent characters come to dance for us in the dust and the light. They are yet another 'detail' adding some life to the Entireland. I am reminded of the "dead land" we visit in T.S.

Eliot's poem, *The Hollow Men*, whereby "in this last of meeting places we grope together and avoid speech".⁹

I have come to relate the shadows' existence in relation to light. This body of work was created and developed using the familiar gestures of shadow play. I refer to the white empty space of projected light, as an 'infinity'. The detachment of the creatures from my body gives them the freedom they need to swim, fly, run, and wriggle. It is an experiment in putting myself back together again; in adapting within this ever-changing environment. The shadow cuts are also similar to the *Entireland* through the constant shuffling of pieces striving to maintain a 'whole' before falling apart. The creatures seemingly materialize out of nowhere, trapped yet freed within this spot of light.

The shadow creatures are reminiscent of footage involved in 'sighting' a mythical beast. It is reminiscent of the cutting and pasting of images to pass off as evidence towards the local legend of a monster. In the editing process, I combined fragments, cuts and pieces into a desired 'whole'. The hard edge of each image was intentional. These 'cuts' refer back the process of construction and are intended to maintain a spirit of puppetry and shadow play. Despite this, the creatures' actions were surprising in their final forms. As the video was shot separately and combined frame by frame, the end result of the creatures' behaviours could not be fully anticipated.

It is somehow fitting that I have been working to create this land without creatures, and have now created creatures without a land. The shadow creatures mark my physical gesture and link my presence to the space. They are a product of my movements alone, and my nature is revealed through them. These shadow constructions add another layer to the puzzle. They strengthen the aspect of fiction and narrative within the exhibition and prompt an investigation into an apparent evolution.

⁹ T.S. Eliot, *Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1954), 79.

Conclusion

I often position my practice between Darwin and Don Quixote as I take on the role of scientist, explorer, and/or knight. Whatever the brackets may be I work towards maintaining an imaginative space of creation and discovery. In the process of constructing my work, the observations I make create histories all their own. This record becomes something that is simultaneously written and being written. I strive to contribute something demonstrative; to explore something so real it must be imagined and something so imagined it must be real.

The *Entireland* is a testament to the many directions a single idea can take us. Each (detail) is a lesson and a tale to be told. And, most importantly, the lessons in this story are ever changing and continue to develop over time. Understanding our actions in the world has left me with an urgent desire to pick up and assemble some of the pieces left scattered along the way.

The impact of our actions has the potential to become a 'recipe for unnatural disaster'. Yet, at this point in time, there still remain two ways to make a stick.



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