

COLLISION

Vol. 1, No. 3 (2012)
Art and the City

A new genre of speculative writing created by the Editors of *Evental Aesthetics*, the Collision is a concise but pointed essay that introduces philosophical questions raised by a specific aesthetic experience. A Collision is not an entire, expository journey; not a full-fledged argument but the potential of an argument. A Collision is an encounter that is also a point of departure: the impact of a striking confrontation between experience, thought, and writing may propel later inquiries into being.



Nakano, Alan. "The Incidental in the Work of Inouk Demers."
Evental Aesthetics 1, no. 3 (2012): 33-40.

ABSTRACT

Incidents are peripheral, rather than central, phenomena. This Collision considers sound and installation artist Inouk Demers, whose recent work explores the incidental in both its geographical and conceptual relationships to the megalopolis of Los Angeles. In *Zine-o-file*, *Conveyance*, *Wireless Landscape*, and *Custom Audio Products*, Demers offers the incidental as an alternative to straightforward themes and fleshed-out narratives.

KEYWORDS

Inouk Demers, zines, installations, sound art, incidental

The Incidental in the Work of Inouk Demers

Alan Nakano



Incidents are peripheral, rather than central, phenomena. We usually bracket them out of our experience of art, but I don't think we're obliged to do so. Neither does Inouk Demers, a sound and installation artist whose work I've recently come to know. I found an issue of his zine, *Zine-o-file*, in a coffeehouse in Redondo Beach, California. Now, I've been reading zines for years, and have strong opinions about them. A zine is a self-published pamphlet – "zine" is short for "magazine" – and usually contains some mixture of text with images. Most zines are heavy on the text. Many contain multiple paragraphs; some contain enough prose to count as novellas. But *Zine-o-file* is positively laconic: short sentences and fragments from unknown local contributors (or perhaps just Demers himself). They obliquely speak of exhibitionist neighbors, rude neighbors, worried neighbors, and stoned neighbors. The photos capture elements familiar to me as a lifelong resident of the South Bay (a collection of beach towns just south of Los Angeles): washed-out, shabby stucco condos; shitty cars; junk piles on sidewalks and in streets – all this smack up against million-dollar homes. The stories, if you could call them that, seemed too short given what I was used to. So I read it once, threw it on a pile of papers, and forgot about it.

A few weeks later, I saw in the same coffeehouse some of Demers' recordings next to *Zine-o-file*, with the title "Sounds of the South Bay" in a super-1970s-disco font. No liner notes or track titles, no text, just field recordings of grocery stores and Muzak. After I listened to the disc, I began to discern the quality that makes Demers' work distinctive: his interest in the fragmentary, in the unresolved tangent. Demers' biography sheds light on this interest in the incidental. He is Canadian, grew up in Toronto, and attended university in Montréal before moving to the States. For reasons that remain unclear to me, he now lives in Redondo Beach. Now, we all hear stories of artists who move to LA. And those artists usually end up in craptacular hipster havens like Echo Park or Silverlake. The South Bay is not hip. It's not a destination. It's for sort-of rich whites, middle-class Asians, Christian singles, and anyone with dreams of one day moving to La Cañada or Palos Verdes. The South Bay, with its mixture of wealth and the working class, its relative irrelevance to opulent Hollywood and the West Side, is incidental to Los Angeles.

Demers achieves what Gore Vidal does in a moment that has long haunted me, from his novel *Julian*. The book is a series of recollections about the fourth-century Roman emperor Julian, who fought unsuccessfully to repaganize the empire after his uncle Constantine imposed Christianity as the state religion. One of Julian's friends describes the imperial campaign against the German barbarians who then occupied Gaul:

...while riding outside the walls of a Gallic town, I saw a cemetery where several of the graves were covered with fishnets. I asked one of the native soldiers what this meant. "It is to keep the ghosts of mothers who die in childbirth from stealing back their children." There is a lot of interesting folklore in that part of the world and I hope some latter-day Herodotus will record it before the people become so completely Romanized that the old customs are forgotten.¹

I was perplexed the first time I read this. Why flash this beautiful, dark pearl of a story, only to let it drop? Why not give us more, even just one sentence more, to explain this bizarre custom?

But that's not the point. Exhuming this bit of Gallic superstition would dull the pearl's glow. This digression haunts me because it is brief, comes out of nowhere, and then disappears. It is not central to the story,

only peripheral, and there lies its power, for the peripheral is the site of the uncategorized, that which has not yet been contained or neutralized. And like Vidal does with his Gallic-folklore throw-away, Demers gives us a passing glance at places that are unexplainable, then closes the door before our curiosity has the chance to sate itself. He thus reminds me of how unsettling the South Bay is, something I haven't felt since I was in grade school.

But the South Bay lies in the shadow of the beast Los Angeles, and that's where two more of Demers' works point. *Conveyance* treats a subject that might seem all too familiar thanks to films like Polanski's (1974) *Chinatown* – water policy. Los Angeles is in the middle of a desert. Natural water supplies barely sustained native and preindustrial populations in Southern California. What made the construction of Los Angeles, San Diego, and their suburbs possible were gargantuan water relocation projects like the LA Aqueduct, and the manmade flood that led to the creation of the Salton Sea, projects that deprive local farmers and communities of badly needed irrigation. Today, water redirection has made both Southern California and the agriculturally critical Central Valley fantastically verdant and fertile, as well as vulnerable to drought, climate change, and terrorism. Water wars, disputes over water rights, are already vicious and will prove even more so as demand increases while supplies remain constant or diminish.

This is all old news, and any artwork treading on this subject risks sanctimoniousness. But *Conveyance* is respectful enough to assume that readers and listeners will make the necessary connections, and otherwise stays out of our way. *Conveyance* is a hybrid: it's a stand-alone audio work with field recordings of dams, reservoirs, lakes, and storm drains, interspersed with brief voiceover texts. It's also an ongoing serial work currently available to Facebook subscribers, in which audio excerpts are available alongside written texts, photographs, and maps.² *Conveyance* offers cryptic facts on the careers of water boomtown industrialists like William Mulholland, Faulknerian antiheroes who schemed to supply their real or coveted constituencies with life-giving water. One of its voiceovers states: "Before heading the LA Department of Water and Power, William Mulholland worked in San Pedro digging ditches." Underscoring this statement are source recordings of some coastal location (perhaps San Pedro, although it's never made explicit), with foghorns, seagulls, crows, and water lapping on a dock. Sounds of the periphery are the centerpiece of *Conveyance*: microphones inserted in a storm drain that opens onto a

street grate. Every time a car drives by, the drain vibrates cavernously. Demers' voiceover about the Machado Lake revitalization project lists mysterious improvements, including "bio-swail" and "smart irrigation," ending with the ominous observation that Machado Lake lies next to a golf course and oil refinery. *Conveyance* is replete with such moments of intimation. Its sounds are never clearly beholden to a particular source or location, so the piece avoids identifying one person, policy, or region as the aggressor or villain in water policy. Rather, *Conveyance* reiterates what every Angeleno knows: there is no center to Los Angeles, no obvious scapegoat on which to heap the blame for the city's problems, just countless incidental neighborhoods, each with its own secrets.



Inouk Demers. *Conveyance*. Used by permission.

To make sense of Demers' work, we can turn to Hal Foster, who speaks of the turn in recent art towards ethnography.³ The artist here assumes the role of an ethnographer who addresses cultural alterity rather than traditional subjects, techniques, media or narratives. Modern-day ethnography patterns itself on the hard and social sciences, and thus ethnographies within artworks assume the dimensions of targeted

investigations, permitting no room for data incidental to the subject of inquiry. Not so, though, with the father of history (and ethnography), Herodotus, whose *Histories* never had to answer to such disciplinary mandates. Herodotus can spend pages recounting engrossing stories like that of the king Candaules who, so boastful of the beauty of his wife, forces his best friend Gyges to watch her undress. The queen discovers what has happened, and summons Gyges the next day to tell him that he must either kill Candaules to usurp the throne and marry her, or else be killed immediately. Gyges chooses the former, wins the kingdom and the beautiful queen, and the story comes to an end. But not quite...for Herodotus then leaves us with a coda describing the bowls that Gyges later gives to the oracle at Delphi as recompense for having recognized him as the true king. Why on earth are these bowls important? How could bowls serve as a fitting epilogue for such an arresting story? Again, there are no answers to such questions; the draw of such moments is their inexplicability, their strangeness.

It is this older form of ethnography that is at play in Demers' *Conveyance*. Most people are already well aware of the tortured, contested relationships between water, cities, people, and people's bank accounts; and Demers knows this. What are not so obvious are the accidental, incidental, bizarre connections that give these machinations meaning, sense, or at least reaffirm their incomprehensibility.



Here, then, is the center of Demers' work: the off-center. He takes this quite literally in terms of space and location. If cities and urban exigencies are the usual fare of art, public policy, and culture, then what occupies Demers' art are the places incidental and adjacent to the city. For *Zine-o-file*, this is the South Bay. And for his installation *Wireless Landscape* (2011), this is the desert somewhere outside Los Angeles, sparsely populated by extremists, addicts, and cellphone towers. *Wireless Landscape* consists of a diorama containing a truck camper, a discarded television set, and four cellphone towers strewn amid brush-covered mountains. Alongside the diorama, two speakers play a random collage of shortwave radio transmissions of conservative talk radio, static, and noise.

As in *Conveyance*, sound in *Wireless Landscape* engenders space, or rather vacuum, in the sense that the exurban desert emerges as a lunar wasteland, a no-man's-land. It is not the ecological oasis we might imagine in our more optimistic fantasies, because it is littered with detritus, poles, and transmitters. And there is no grounding narrative that would make the desert *make sense*. There are merely details, grace notes that reveal the melody to be just a bit off.



Inouk Demers. *Wireless Landscape*. Used by permission.

Recently, Demers shifted his focus from the city and its discontents to mechanisms concomitant with urbanity. *Custom Audio Products* is a set of techno-inspired music loops composed for any instrument. Each lasts only a few seconds, and can be realized in any order, successively or simultaneously. CAP is legalistic Muzak, and it is packaged as such with its accompanying Licensing Agreement. Here is an excerpt:

“Custom Audio Loops” may embody the Licensed Material as any product in any format, sensory, printed or otherwise, heard or unheard, known or unknown, yet to be devised or never to be devised.

The center or focal point of the piece is not the music itself, for as Demers implies, there is no longer any such thing as “music itself.” In the wake of postmodernism, New Musicology, and social networks, we have relinquished any claim on music for itself. What remains is music for use value, music for expressing one’s taste and cultural identity, and most depressingly, music for filling up the void that cannot be filled. In a more honest world, CAP would be broadcast in shopping malls and call-centers, to perk up workers deadened by monotonous and dehumanizing corporate procedures. It sounds like music fit for consumers and big box employees, because like those disenfranchised worker bees, CAP owes its existence to its monetary value, its potential to accrue income, and not to any innate aesthetic or spiritual value. For the record, the loops in CAP are catchy, groovy, and well-written. But that’s incidental, too, because music, aestheticism, and happiness have become incidental. And that’s where Demers excels – at underscoring the things that have fallen by the wayside on the road towards the big city.

• Notes •

¹ Gore Vidal, *Julian*, New York: Vintage, 1992, pg. 221.

² See www.facebook.com/conveyance.

³ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996). pp. 181ff.

• Bibliography •

Foster, Hal. *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996.

Herodotus. *The Histories*. Trans. Aubrey De Sélincourt, Ed. John Marincola. New York: Penguin, 2003.

Vidal, Gore. *Julian*. New York: Vintage, 1992.