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Photo: John Muse

Toying with Rocks: Jottings on the Ardmore Cairn

by Nishat Hossain

thINKingDANCE recently partnered with local online publications Artblog, Velvet Glove, Curate This, and Title to judge submissions to Artblog's 2017 New Art Writing Challenge. We are thrilled to share Nishat Hossain's "Toying with Rocks: Jottings on the Ardmore Cairn," our honorable mention. Congratulations, Nishat!

"Let me know if my note-taking feels intrusive, and I'll stop," I inform John Muse as he sits cross-legged and hunched on the ground of a derelict lot, balancing a stack of rocks. He is building a cairn, and I am observing him.

"I'm too much of a narcissist for it to feel intrusive," he says, as he cradles the unsteady stack between his palms. "I like being watched."

[The Ardmore Cairn](#) is a project maintained by artist John Muse in an empty parking lot, at the corner of West Lancaster and Ardmore Avenues in Haverford. As a frequent passerby of the lot, I often encounter Muse and his rocks. It is difficult not to. My eyes immediately jump to the visually unexpected little stone towers poking out from above the barren stretch of land. They are spectacles, as is Muse who trespasses onto the lot to build the cairns, and the Facebook page where he documents his builds. The more I watched him build, the more curious I grew. Why does he build these stacks of stones every day? And that too, for years now?

I took to observing John, building cairns, interviewing pedestrians, and attending Township meetings to answer these questions. The result was over fifty pages of ethnographic jottings. I concluded that the cairn-building on the site is a deceptively low-stakes form of play that draws attention to high-stakes questions about the legal and economic forces shaping the barren lot. The lot has been built on and bulldozed over at least thrice now, with construction on another big-box retail space due to begin soon.

I attended the Township Planning Commision Meeting discussing the details of this construction. A good part of the meeting was spent

discussing ways to minimize the danger that the increased volume of vehicle circulation would pose to elderly people who frequently walk by the lot. There was an analysis of left and right turns available to vehicles, and the means of design, structural nudges, with which to guide these. Also discussed were large windows that would allow pedestrians to see into the building and thus encourage window-shopping, while avoiding the closed-wall styles of big-box stores like Rite-Aid and Wal-Mart the Commission found aesthetically displeasing and disharmonious with the historic architecture of the site. Planners and architects design spaces, public or private, with subtle nudges. Nudges, that increase your safety, encourage you to turn in a certain direction, or inspire desire for commodities displayed at a store front. These are nudges that guide how you utilize the space they are constructing for you, by promoting calculated behaviors.

This is why Muse's misuse of the lot is significant. Rather than experiencing the lot as calculated by its planners, rather than following the architectural nudges that signal certain uses of the space, and treat its users as imperiled and desirous— and thus in need of nudging— he uses the space for a purpose contrary to what its designers and public officials intend. The site, its rocks, its rubble, its waste, all thus become surfaces of potential, material with which to make. A private but commercial space is thus repurposed to become a public site of play, even if in a low stakes way. *The Ardmore Cairn* asks its passersby to think: How do we use our spaces and why? Who governs and structures them? Could there be alternative ways of using and structuring these spaces?

Or at least that was the neat analysis I arrived upon at the end of my ethnography, and am now tossing aside along with all my jottings and observations. I thought of asking John: Why do you build these cairns every day? How did you get others join? But, I grew afraid the truth might be so simple as to ruin all the intrigue and curiosity he and his cairns inspire in me, the intrigue and curiosity that drove my ethnographic research. So, I instead turn the questions toward myself. What about these cairns moves me so much? Why is it so important for me to understand what they mean? Why is it important to me that they mean anything at all?

Perhaps, it is John's earnestness. Perhaps it is the futility of what he builds. Perhaps, it is the tenderness I feel when I see a new a cairn crop up and imagine John's square figure stooping beside it. Sculptures are objects to be pedestaled, exhibited, preserved, sold, acquired, and critiqued. Cairns are objects to be demolished, built, rebuilt, mocked, adored, greeted, and engaged with. The impermanence of the cairns throws into relief the effort, time, and energy expended on building them, and thereby the futility of building them at all—they are only ever built to fall, and once built, fall again. But it is in falling that they ask to be tended to by caring hands and watchful eyes—eyes and hands that have earnest investments in seeing them stand the vicissitudes of the lot.

How can I tell whether the curious object I find myself puzzling over in a gallery is art? Usually by the frame enclosing it, the pedestal supporting it, the repute of the institution it is preserved in, the price tag on it, the curator lauding it, or that new article on ArtForum I read before visiting it. How can I tell whether the precariously balanced cairn made of rubble, standing on the side the road is art *to me*? Because it engages and moves me, because as I walked past it on the way home one Monday, a cheesily decorated rock painted with the words "love, joy, and peace" sat by it, because I then stopped to look at this rock and laughed as I felt its cool coarseness between my palms, because I knew John would laugh similarly when passing by it later that afternoon.

By Nishat Hossain
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