

## Abstract

Title of Thesis: Materials, Metaphors, Mysteries

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The following thesis does not directly address my work or the process that forms it. Rather, it exposes that which occurs before the making commences. The first section, entitled "Materials," discusses the emotions evoked by working with particular materials and attaches them to a specific instance from my childhood. Section II, "Metaphors," talks about the work of San Francisco based artist Terry Fox and his ability to resist the temptation of attaching personal significance to impersonal objects. The third section, "Mysteries," uses my childhood experiences with mosquito bites to metaphorically discuss the difficulty of ignoring the desire to logically connect my work with the emotions it awakens. As this section concludes the thesis, it makes the point that attempting such a connection is futile, and it is better to proceed in mystery than to search after something that can never be uncovered.

Materials, Metaphors, Mysteries

by

Nancy Ellen Dillon

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## Materials

The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object (in the sensation the material object will give us) which we do not expect.

Marcel Proust, Swann's Way

The movement of a hand, a sitting position (one leg folded under the other), the combination of materials-- wood, dirt and glass; aluminum, dirt and rope; glass, copper and clay-- evoked momentary flashes of familiarity that arrested my reason. As to whether these recollections pointed toward the past or recalled some mercenary memory carried over from a dream was indeterminable. Emotions arose, the depth of which precluded naming, and coalesced into the realization that I had done this before. Conscious that this response was brought forth by working with particular materials in particular ways, I wandered through my mind, seeking a time, a place, a remembrance that would tell of their significance.

I had to ask permission to climb the steps that lead to the garden: broad slabs of peanut rock, low and level at first, rising with the railing into irregular chunks. A



loose line of cement delineated the base of each step, as steps lifted steps away from the hill, revealing cool dark earth-- mud beneath stone.

Beneath the black-iron archway (some sort of trellis) where the wild grapes grew, the steps turned steep (a separate staircase it seemed) into the hedge-- a bushy green wall, as dark and cool as earth beneath stone. A pathway burrowed by bodies bored through the wall, into the garden, onto the hedge-hidden hill. Its declivity explained the stairs' steepness. Well-watered grass, over-grown and glossy, made it hard to stand.

But the land leveled off at the top of the bank. Foot-holes marred its muddy front. Grass and dirt mixed in the mounting. In where the vegetables grew, more hedge configured a modest patch of tilled topsoil. Beyond the bean poles, a white gate offered exit onto a backstreet, four hundred feet above sea-level.

### Metaphors

The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum. It may partly or exclusively operate upon the experience of the man himself; but, the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly the mind will digest and transmute the passions which are its materials.

T.S. Eliot, Tradition  
and the Individual Talent

In the fall of 1992, I attended a lecture given by San Francisco based artist Terry Fox.<sup>1</sup> He had no sternum. Battered by eleven years of radiation therapy for Hodgkin's disease, it had deteriorated and was consequently removed. He claimed that if you placed your hand on his chest, you could feel his heart, pumping unprotected, floating among his floating ribs.

During the last year of his illness (he was cured by 1973), he visited Chartres Cathedral and walked the 552 steps that comprise the eleven concentric rings of its labyrinth, taking thirty-four turns until he reached its center.<sup>2</sup> An overhead view of the labyrinth projected above the left side of the podium confirmed these calculations. The slide also clarified the

difference between a labyrinth and a maze. Although both set their journeyers on relentless paths of blind alley turns, unlike a maze, a labyrinth has no dead ends.<sup>3</sup> It plays no tricks, presents no difficulties, requires no decisions, does not frustrate or disappoint. More importantly, the labyrinth's puzzle is not one of finding a way out but of locating a center, an unabashed inevitability, demanding only obedience and constancy in the form of forward motion.

Although Fox didn't spell it out, the relationship between the structure of Chartres' labyrinth and his illness was evident. Eleven circles interlocking the centrosomic twelfth, each dictating directional changes against which struggle arrests motion toward the motionless center. Eleven years of treatment for a disease that remitted and recurred with cyclical regularity was a course of action Fox submitted to willingly.<sup>4</sup> He learned to anticipate, receive, almost give into the mandates the cancer made on his body until it withdrew, leaving him still and sternumless.

These correlations could have led Fox to see the labyrinth as a symbol for his experience. But his view was not that limited. Knowing the labyrinth's history



and the mythology that built it, Fox realized that it already belonged it to Chartres' medieval parishioners --prostrate pilgrims who blindly obeyed its path and equated its demands to the will of God and its center to His city.<sup>5</sup> Unable to usurp their metaphor as a means of addressing his suffering, Fox chose to explain the metaphor itself, basing six years of his work upon the labyrinth's structure.

After about two hours of listening to Fox, the audience broke for lunch. While most of the people picked up their box lunches, a few of us wandered into the gallery where a retrospective of Fox's work was on display. My attention was immediately drawn to a lead ball suspended from a thin wire. It was swinging, slicing a circular path through the air surrounding a half-full glass of water. I watched the diameter of its course contract, waiting for the ball to make contact with the glass. The anticipation was intense.

As it came within a few inches of its target, its path elongated into an ellipse, swinging from side to side. With each swipe, the ball's turns around the glass tightened, until it grazed the glass and stopped. The gentle chime it produced called to the other gallery-goers, and as the guard bowed back its wire,

more people gathered to once again witness the ball wind its way toward the center of its path. Site Pendulum is one example of how Fox composed a metaphor out of ordinary objects to metaphorically explain the labyrinth's structure.

At the end of the day, a friend of mine asked me if I thought the making of successful work depended upon some knowledge or experience external to the work itself. He remarked, "You know about literature; Terry suffered from Hodgkin's disease." Fox's suffering may have brought the labyrinth to his attention, but it did not surface in his work, although he could have easily justified its appearance.

Instead of using the tangible-- the labyrinth's structure-- to express the intangible-- the intensity of his emotions-- Fox transcended the typical metaphor making process and avoided the trap of self-expression. Employing physical objects to explain a physical structure assigns both the labyrinth's significance and Fox's pain peripheral importance. The emotions evoked by these experiences move back and forth through his pieces, much like the swing of a pendulum, leaving the work suspended somewhere in the middle, still and solitary, much like the labyrinth's center.

## Mysteries

I mean negative capability, that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.

John Keats, Letter to George and Thomas Keats

As a child, I could sense the approaching climax of the mosquito season. The spring rains determined its intensity, forming small stagnant breeding pools in tree trunk hollows. I listened to the adults reminisce about how the insects ruined outdoor parties and other pleasures, knowing soon my arms and legs would be covered by flaming red dots and then pink blotches of calamine lotion.

My mother tried to avert disfigurement by coating my exposed skin with a roll-on insect repellent that smelled like Pinesol. Her application was aggressive, especially concerning certain vulnerable parts-- behind the knees, the neck, elbows, wrists, the forehead. Thoroughly convinced of the product's protective powers, she'd let me out to play, worrisome of every possible harm except mosquito bites. But it didn't work. At twilight, I'd enter the house, and they would



start to emerge, small and white until I began to scratch.

Crusty clumps of calamine lotion collected under my fingernails. Caladrill worked as well as its meeker cousin. Afterbite was no more purposeful than before bite sticks and sprays. I was reprimanded for fidgeting, sometimes forcibly saved from embarrassing myself in public and warned against future scaring. But I still scratched, even after appeasing pleasure turned into hot pain.

One summer afternoon, a bite appeared on the back of my hand where the skin is too taught to sustain a response to scratching. I couldn't leave it alone. My grandfather noticed my preoccupation and went to the bathroom, I thought to get one of those useless cures my mother was found of administering. But he returned with a box of Band-Aids. Puzzled, I pointed out that the bite wasn't bleeding. He opened one anyway and covered the spot that I had aggravated into a swollen welt. He claimed it would take the itch away, and the solemnness with which he said this bound me to accept his solution without understanding its secret.

Silent and still, I waited for the cure to take effect. The tickling burn beneath the bandage begged

for attention from my opposite hand. It went toward the core of the itch, but all it could get at was gauze under plastic. Instilled obedience made removing the Band-Aid improbable. So I tried scratching around the bite's inflamed perimeter, but the satisfaction was minimal. Frustrated by my inability to satiate the itch, I stopped trying. Although the sensation continued to jerk my hand, I ignored it. Eventually it stopped too.



Notes

<sup>1</sup> Moore College of Art and Design, Philadelphia, PA, 7 Nov. 1992

<sup>2</sup> Constance Lewallen, "Terry Fox," in Terry Fox: Articulations (Labyrinth /Text Works), (Philadelphia: Goldie Paley Gallery/Levy Gallery for the Arts in Philadelphia, 1992), 18.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

#4 NANCY DILLON  
ATLAS SEALED - 1994  
DIRT, WOOD, MASON JARS



#3 NANCY DILLON  
MUD AND FODDER - 1994  
WOOD, DIRT, TWINE



TOP

#1 NANCY DILLON  
UNTITLED - 1994  
WOOD, DIRT, CARDBOARD BOX



TOP

#6 NANCY DILLON  
LAMENTATION 2 - 1995  
WOOD, WIRE, SAND SIEVES



TOP

#7 NANCY DILLON  
BOX 2 - 1993  
WOOD, CHALK



TOP

#2 NANCY DILLON  
UNTITLED - WALLPIECE  
1995 - WOOD, PIPE CLAMP



TOP

#5 NANCY DILLON  
LAMENTATION 1 - 1995  
WOOD, PLUMBER'S STRAP



TOP