

EXHIBITION ESSAY

A Stroke of Moonlight

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**“Stories about places are makeshift things. They are composed with the world’s debris.”
— Michel de Certeau**

A heart attack, it’s universally acknowledged, is not desirable. As the title of his piece/project announces—*Swimming to give myself a heart attack to stop the moon’s recession*—Shane Huffman tried to have one. It isn’t clear how close he came to his disconcerting goal, nor why he would ever have wanted to succeed. Huffman’s installation outlines his odd exertions, leaving it to us to understand what swimming in pursuit of a “heart attack” has to do with the Moon.

The Moon is within reach—every infant proves that by reaching for it, only to be puzzled that something so shiny can’t be grasped. This is lesson one in “reaching out and coming up empty handed,” the lesson of distance. Planets are always distant, and swimmers do distances, so there’s a loony logic in swimming to the Moon, as Huffman has already done. Huffman’s work is about longing, if that means setting out, fully aware of the “just-out-of-reach-every-time complex,” to cross a distance imbued with desire. Moreover, this focus on distance and desire makes Huffman’s art very much a spatial practice.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau describes walking in the city as an exemplary spatial practice (1). De Certeau contrasts two perspectives: the overhead, panoptic, technological/theoretical view versus the street-level, everyday, “anthropological, poetic, and mythic experience of space.” At street level, a walker actively creates a path that links a “here” to a “there” in singular, qualitative ways. Each walk assumes the character of an individual utterance, since “the act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language.” As such, walking can be understood in terms of rhetoric, possessing its own turns of phrase, and by extension, capacity for mythopoesis. Spatial practices, like “the long poem of walking,” personalize, appropriate, and manipulate “spatial organizations, no matter how panoptic they may be.” They are a way of going against the grain of “accepted frameworks” and “imposed orders.” Huffman’s spatial practice—swimming—produces its own rhetorical figures, its own “stylistic metamorphosis of space.” It enables the artist to voyage in a cosmos of his own devising. Graciously, he invites us along: Interplanetary swim, anyone?

Every child marvels at the Moon’s faithful companionship, comforted or alarmed that it follows along steadily no matter how fast he or she moves. Harold, purple crayon in hand, recalls that the Moon is always right outside his window, so he draws his window frame around the Moon and finds himself back home (2). Like Harold, Huffman locates himself by means of personal gesture. In *It’s all Alone. Shut up. THE END OF CIVIL HIGHLIGHTS (i.e. the Everyman)*, he rejects dogma about the cosmos, and declares a personal cosmology. By “civil highlights,” Huffman means our consensus notions (de Certeau’s “accepted frameworks” and “imposed orders”). For instance, hundreds of years ago, few doubted that the Earth was the center of the universe, and, not so long ago, it was widely believed that the Moon was a destination worthy of scientific exploration/exploitation—no longer, “it’s all alone,” orphaned by the ideas we impose

on it. Recognizing that the Moon is up for grabs, Huffman adopts it. He projects on his plaster planet the word “mine.” Huffman’s Moon is not the Moon of received ideas, not the everyman Moon, but the Moon in itself.

If ignorance of the laws of nature is the basis of superstition, there’s an element of deliberate superstition in Huffman’s willful revision of cosmic order. Huffman reinvests interplanetary space, drained of mystery by the imposed order of cosmological description, with something “extra and other.” In de Certeau’s view, superstition is precisely what makes space habitable; remove stories and legends, banish all ghosts, and the resulting sterilized space lacks memory, history, and distinction. “Haunted places are the only ones people can live in—and this inverts the schema of the Panopticon” (3). Combining the roles of aquanaut and cosmonaut, Huffman reenchants the galaxy, rendering it fit for humans to swim in.

In my attempts exemplifies what de Certeau refers to as “another spatiality... an anthropological, poetic, and mythic experience of space.” Deceptively simple, the work has the appearance of a basic photographic exercise, three exposure scales on rectangles of photographic paper, correlating exposure time to density. Huffman endows this exercise with surplus meaning (superstition): his scales correlate the exposure time of experience to its density (i.e., greater intensity results from more exposure to, or accumulation of, experience). Nor is it the same every time, as differences between the three attempts show; there is no invariable formula for calculating the intensity of experience. The darkest black marks out the zone where the void eclipses the phenomenal world, where we head toward the intensity of mystical experience, “into the deep.”

The exposure scales might also be read as cross sections of planetary atmosphere, suggesting a correspondence with a diagram in *Real Heart and the heart-inside-the-body* that draws arrows from human to uni-verse (sic) through various mutually influential levels. The link Huffman makes between terrestrial and celestial bodies allows us to grasp the relation of the heartbeat and the movement of the Moon. The Moon slips away from the Earth at the rate of some three inches a year, and, with every heartbeat, the distance increases fractionally. Suddenly having a heart attack makes sense: who wouldn’t wish to stop the heart when its every beat is so linked with pushing away what it desires?

Perhaps it shouldn’t surprise us that the artist, swirling his arms in the orbits of the butterfly stroke, while holding his breath (increasing intensity/exposure time), thinks he can change the Moon’s orbit. Johan Huizinga, in his classic study of play *Homo Ludens*, further clarifies this action. Huizinga discusses a type of sacred performance whose participants believe that it “brings about an order of things higher than that in which they customarily live.” Calling this “actualization by representation,” Huizinga notes that such a performance:

“... is played or performed within a playground that is literally ‘staked out’, and played moreover as a feast (i.e., in mirth and freedom). A sacred space, a temporarily real world of its own has been expressly hedged off for it. But with the end of play, its effect is not lost; rather, it continues to shed its radiance on the ordinary world outside, a wholesome influence working security, order, and prosperity for the whole community...” (4).

Huffman immerses us in such a space: the gallery floor, covered with swimming-pool-sized paper upon which a wavy grid is traced—as if a tile pool floor seen refracted through water—is marked out as a precinct for the free and mirthful play of meanings. Although Huffman counsels us, humorously, not to “draw too much on the drawings,” consider the traces, recorded on paper in *Real Heart and the heart-inside-the-body*, of his butterfly strokes, or the voids in the large blue panels of *Dryland exercise (one constant orb, one constant stroke)*. Tracing these orbits, the artist whirls his arms in a ritualistic dance. Huffman’s action resembles another case of “actualization by representation,” described by Huizinga: “According to ancient Chinese lore, the purpose of music and the dance is to keep the world in its right course and to force Nature into benevolence towards man” (5). In Huffman’s terms, “if you can get it right, the moon will get it right.” The perfect stroke, a masterstroke, can stabilize the Moon’s orbit. While he may not intend to influence “Nature’s” attitude towards man, does Huffman’s performance shed radiance on our ordinary world? What is its wholesome influence?

To an impatient glance, Huffman’s unprepossessing scrawls and scribbled misspellings might seem impenetrable, his hermetic links between text, photograph, and sculpture producing double meanings that drift toward indeterminacy. Huffman’s project is, in the strictest sense, ethical, an attempt to establish a way to be in the world, but contemporary art world orthodoxy might decry its apparent lack of an accessible social dimension. Huffman’s self-generated cosmology, his aquatic mortifications, and the bachelor-machine qualities of his *Dryland* contraption, could be (mis)taken as symptoms of self-absorption. But we shouldn’t miss the humor, hope, and generosity in this art, nor fail to enjoy its cheesy-daft romanticism. Huffman proudly shows us in *Cast* that his head—his swim cap—is full of some milky, moony substance. Ultimately, this is a self-portrait of a solitary swimmer (made clear by the bilateral symmetry of the wall sprawl, heart in the middle, embracing arms on either side). *Everything that is me, is not mine*, Huffman’s photo mosaic informs us. The Moon has no light of its own—the gleam it bestows upon the Earth is borrowed from the Sun. Shane Huffman’s art reflects our image: it’s also our portrait. This is its wholesome influence, the radiance it sheds: as he swims, Huffman points to the constellations around us—“No, look, the ‘*Heart-in-the-body*’ is not the ‘*Real Heart*’!”—and, in the process, shows us how much magical thinking shapes our everyday lives.

1. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life Berkeley* (1984), 91-110.

2. Crockett Johnson, *Harold and The Purple Crayon* (New York: 1955).

3. de Certeau, 108.

4. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: 1955), 14.

5. Ibid.