

Keith's Cults

By Charlotte Townsend-Gault

Cults? Why think of Keith Langergraber's rhizomatic obsessions as cults? And cults in what sense? The root of the word comes from the Latin verb *colere* meaning "care, cultivate," and in its adjectival form *cultus* "inhabited, cultivated, worshipped." By the early 17th century the French *culte* denoted homage paid to a divinity. The etymological link between cultivate, cult and 'culture' is useful here because Keith's assemblage of interests – too weak a word, obsessions is better, cultic devotions even – in various ways connect culture with cultivation, bio-cultural processes with sub-cultural groups. He seems to be making such connections as he reveres, and mimics in his own processes, assorted cultural pattern-making – the artifice of a movie, the revelations of an artist, the apparent oddness of a geological formation. He presents them in a way that only seems to be guileless as materialised metaphors for the unknowable, because the unknowable is just out of reach but it is weirdly compelling to try to reach it.

Much art-think mileage has been derived from the notion of the 'rhizome' as developed by Gilles Deleuze. It has proved to be a productive biomorphic metaphor for thinking about the bio-political, not to say bio-cultural. It has coincided with a resurgent interest in animism in a post-humanist climate. Given the bio-morphism it seems to fit here too. But, to drop another big name, much less cited in art worlds these days, though probably just as distorted as Deleuze by the take-up of a few lightly-grasped insights, Ludwig Wittgenstein's ideas about 'family resemblance' seem to match up with something that goes on across the Langergraber topography, something that connects his cults. By poking around in the processes and pattern-making of the organic and the inorganic – silica deposits, industrial decay, film locations – he comes up with some complementary pattern making of his own. He seems to be cultivating his own mannered search for family resemblances between cultural forms, cultivation, and the cultic. Resemblance may substitute for explanation.

In earlier work he drew on the cultivation patterns of Chinese market gardens at Musqueam to get at inter-cultural connections. Think also of Kwakwaka'wakw clam gardens, Dutch polders, English hop fields – looking down at them any space ship, however amateur, any raven however preoccupied, would have been able to discern the culturally specific patterns that these forms of cultivation laid down in British Columbia. Since then, his train of thought has looped through assorted cultish territory – the work of Robert Smithson, the 1970s, fan films, time travel, location spotting, earth art, space travel – fact, fiction, and fantastical, genre-bending sci-fi, scalar surprises in the search for the origins of life; going solo round the world; the strangeness of lakes – Spotted, Pavilion, Mono; the obsessions of other artists – Thomas Hirschorn, Tacita Dean, Sam Durant, Mark Dion – and back in on itself, so establishing Keith's own cult of the ab/para/normal.

It may then be something like rhizomatically connected socio-, bio-, and aesthetico-resemblances between the organic and inorganic, the inert and the historical fragment that 'explain' KL's mash-ups. At first random, or guileless, but then not so much. Anyway a wide-eyed homage befits the cultist. And he has made pilgrimages: to the microbialite protruberances under Pavilion Lake, (from one point of view – that of relativity – lakes could be wormholes into other time, other space, other universes); the hoodoos near Osoyoos, the perfect circles on the surface of Spotted Lake, the saline crystallization along *Spiral Jetty*, the copper mine at Britannia Beach, BC, once the British empire's largest, now a tourist destination. Pavilion gives him his model. Its coral-like structures are formed from fossilized remains of micro-organisms (microbiolites) that are considered to be similar to some of the oldest known life-forms on Earth. Microbiolites are believed to have formed a critical stage in the evolution of life on earth, an idea used by NASA scientists to model the search for life, or its fossilized remains, on other planets.



The work in this show allows for a few psycho-geographical turns around Keith's cultic topography while keeping an eye out for fissures between sites and non-sites. The dystopic, entropic Smithson – a romantic hero faced with the awe-fulness of the sublime, found it most famously in Utah's Great Salt Lake. There was also Passaic, New Jersey, with its pustulating sloughs, and the abandoned copper mine at Britannia Beach up the coast from Vancouver. Imagine Smithson as he imagined himself in his notes about an unrealized work in BC. No, not the glass island, another one. He is at the end of one of the damp horizontal tunnels burrowed straight back into the living rock of Britannia Beach. He would focus his movie camera on the tiny pinprick of daylight two kilometres away and work his way along a horizontal wormhole, a kind of reverse *Wavelength* (Michael Snow's 1967 minimalist classic), and out into the open.

Keith's *Theatre of the Exploding Sun* captures the absurdist amateur seriousness of future fantasies and fact-ions – a party of grunge-clad androgynes plod through post-industrial



decay (at Britannia Beach again) to be confronted by a vaguely anthropomorphic Keith leaping out of another kind of hole in the ground, intoning about spirals, and the suitability of sites, then ordering the camera to cut. Better still, wearing a flowery shirt, he puts the finishing touches to a replica of the Eye of Jupiter – a large hoodoo formation, remnants of the silt formations near Kamloops – in a 1970s Vancouver living room. These short films depend on family resemblances, and Keith, who sometimes plays grown-up geek, develops them in his work. “They play off each other,” he says of the films, they set out “the organizational principles” of the rest of the work. But, significantly, not as “primers for connecting the dots.” Rather, they help to establish family resemblances.

Langergraber refers to himself as “a temporalist.” What could be more time-bound than an archive? The art-historical period identified by Hal Foster’s “archival impulse” took Smithson’s archive as a supreme example and Langergraber has worm-holed into it. Where homage meets sampling, where experience meets experiment, where the cultist’s fanatical devotion leaves no stone unturned, where stuff has a life of its own, and where the passage of time, at whatever speed, rules. And where making a film is a metaphor for whatever unknowable it was that slipped under the radar, and past the camera. Jack Flam suggests that Smithson turned metaphors into things. Could it be that Langergraber, Smithson cultist, turns matter into metaphor?

References

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