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An Expedition

Sam Cotter and Fraser McCallum

January 30 – February 22, 2014

By way of introduction to *An Expedition*, it is appropriate to return to a fictionalized interview that artists, Sam Cotter and Fraser McCallum, wrote in 2012, taking place between the fictional explorer scientists that are represented in the exhibition:

Let's start where it all began, the experiments we undertook during that hot, arid summer. We started a series of tests, observing natural phenomena and collecting hard data. Alone with our gadgetry and guided by only our powers of observation and reason, we knew that nature's underlying order could be revealed." [1]

Of course "where it all began" is what is being interrogated and revealed by *An Expedition*. Cotter and McCallum appropriate historical systems of knowledge accumulation, production and representation as a visual trope that underlines their performance as scientists in order to complicate the obnoxiously enduring and still dominant ideal of a singular, Eurocentric authority in science and culture. The artists' interest in this same ideal authority stems from the role that image-making and visual documentation played in the construction of European knowledge claims, as well as the subsumption of Indigenous epistemologies and technology in the Americas and elsewhere. This imagery supported historical definitions of mastery over nature and other(ed) bodies in order to justify the territorial claims of the colonialist era. The artists inhabit these idealized scientific authorities in an effort to deflate their associations with mastery.

The combination of scavenged detritus presented as 'expeditionary artifacts' in the vitrine and the looped slide projections that comprise Cotter and McCallum's exhibition denotes their ongoing presence and production on the Leslie Street Spit, a "new" expanse of land created by the build up of compacted industrial construction and excavation waste on the edge of the city of Toronto. The two scientists therefore prod, observe and use the methodologies of possession—documentation and classification—with a physical manifestation of the unclaimed and abject, a landmass composed of waste.

As mentioned, *An Expedition* uses visual mimicry to explore two specific histories of constructed imagery that underlined the political power of European colonialism. The first of these are early twentieth century ethnographic travelogues and photos. These travelogues, two examples of which are Robert J. Flaherty's 1922 silent film about an Inuit community, *Nanook of the North* and the photographic archive of Edward S. Curtis, employed fictionalization, misinterpretation, and wide circulation to establish Eurocentric perspectives of the nineteenth and twentieth century Americas and its First Nations.[2] These ethnographic travelogues and documentation enabled an hierarchical positioning by placing those who perform the classifying and visual representations above those "Others" who are subject to being classified, visually represented and eventually came to be defined as 'vanishing' into North American settler culture.[3]

Leading up to and during the colonialist expeditions the role of artists became as important as scientists due to the capacity that images had in constructing a scientific truth. The authority conferred upon explorers by these images as 'discoverers' of nature and geography translated into economic advantages and contributed to the increase of European states' prominence as colonial power, explained in the following quote by Daniela Bleichmar:

At a time when European powers undertook the exploration of distant territories as a matter of key economic, political, and scientific importance, the production of images represented a central practice for investigating colonial nature and incorporating it into European science. In the eighteenth-century study of nature, seeing was intimately connected to both knowing and owning. Images of plants and animals were more than pleasant, secondary by-products of exploration: they were instruments of possession."<[4]

Cotter's and McCallum's images of amateurish 'gentlemen scientists' dressed in white shirts, sun hats, khaki shorts, black socks, hiking jackets, toques and always sensible shoes inhabit the foreground in a series of photographs. A temporal ambiguity implied by the scientists' matching outfits is countered by the otherwise depopulated landscapes and shorelines composed of jettisoned rubble and contemporary urban detritus.

The artists' performance as scientists plays with the visual culture of the Western naturalist, surveyor and adventurer. In one slide they set out towards the open water, in others they focus their tools and instruments on imagined specimens. A continual loop of images oscillates between depictions of adventurers on a mission and modern men quietly contemplating the world before them. The trials of survival and the pursuit of knowledge undertaken by the figures in *An Expedition* comically fall short of the vast and inhospitable landscapes of jagged mountain ranges, looming wilderness and stormy seas encountered in the nineteenth century romanticism of artists like Caspar David Friedrich, images that often conjure up the bravery of explorers. Instead *An Expedition* engages a visual disjuncture between the earnestness of the subjects and the pointlessness of their actions in order to empty the visual tropes that underline the global West's cultural claims to power, truth and knowledge.

Ostensibly when Cotter and McCallum's camera is turned back onto their performance of the two scientist-documentarians it is to establish their image as the consummate source of knowledge and authority for the viewer. However unlike the images of Flaherty and Curtis, *An Expedition* offers no visible 'Other' associated with the nature in the frame. In the absence of ethnographic subjects, the scientists themselves become the focus of the artists' cultural investigation. In this way Cotter and McCallum re-present naturalized images of modern Western knowledge and inquiry as a vanquished and 'vanishing culture.'

-Denise Ryner

[1] Sam Cotter and Fraser McCallum, *Two Geniuses in Conversation* (Toronto: self-published, 2012).

[2] The documentarian Edward S. Curtis often requested that his photographic subjects wear elaborate attire for the benefit of his photographs and films and removed European objects such as alarm clocks from his images to increase the perceived-cultural distance between post-contact Aboriginal groups and the settlers that they interacted with.

[3] Documentarians like Edward S. Curtis were commissioned with the intention of capturing images of Indigenous North American culture in advance of its 'vanishing' into extinction, an idea that is still presented in some museums and texts.

[4] Daniela Bleichmar, "Painting as Exploration: Visualizing Nature in Eighteenth-Century Colonial Science," *Colonial Latin American Review* 15, no. 1 (June 2006): 81-104.



Xspace gratefully acknowledges the support of the Toronto Arts Council