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WITNESSING THE WASTE LAND: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL ACCOUNT OF LANDSCAPE AND ITS DISCONTENTS

MARK ALLWOOD

“Witnessing the Waste Land: A Phenomenological Account of Landscape and its Discontents” is a text and image experiment centred around the urban wilderness of Tommy Thompson Park in Toronto, Ontario. The text can be read in numerous ways by oscillating between philosophical thought, poetry, photography, stream of consciousness, and the analysis and inclusion of documents. In some ways this approach is an imitation and a reaction to the postmodern urban schizophrenia one encounters at a park that operates as a waste disposal facility, a habitat for flora and fauna, a research centre, a bike trail, a habitat creation project, a birder’s paradise, and a waste land.

“Witnessing the Waste Land: A Phenomenological Account of Landscape and its Discontents” est une expérience textuelle et visuelle centrée sur la nature urbaine sauvage du parc Tommy Thompson de Toronto en Ontario. Le texte peut être lu de manières différentes entre la pensée philosophique, la poésie, la photographie, le flux de conscience, l’analyse et l’inclusion de documents, Dans une certaine mesure cette approche est une imitation et une réaction à la schizophrénie post-moderne que l’on éprouve dans un parc utilisé à la fois comme décharge municipale, habitat pour la faune et la flore, centre de recherche, projet de création d’habitat, paradis pour ornithologues amateurs et désert urbain.

FIRST VISIT TO TOMMY THOMPSON PARK: OCTOBER 3RD, 2017.

I am driving eastbound on Lake Shore Boulevard East past a Canadian Tire, in what is known as the Port Lands of Eastern Toronto; I immediately perceive a drastic shift in the cityscape. Make a right on the lights, on Leslie Street, Gin said. The atmosphere is already dustier here, and the path leading to the park is mostly populated by heavy-duty trucks carrying loads of industrial materials. The establishments I gaze upon metamorphose from Starbucks and Staples to CBM Aggregates, a linguistic shift of seismic proportions indeed. Even though The Beaches community, with its million-dollar homes, is a few kilometres away, the vibe here is more about industrial infrastructure, the streetcar yards at Lake Shore and Leslie, and the hustle and bustle of materials and aggregates of the city of Toronto. The theme here is cement, soil, gravel, salt, limestone, brick, satellites, and waste disposal. This is why I've come to this place. I am interested in the industrial unconscious of a city that prides itself on gentrification. The air smells differently in this small stretch of road that leads to the Leslie Street Spit, as it is colloquially known by Torontonians. A subtly acrid hint of ash and burnt rubber blends in with the common smells of any other lacustrine community. Here you are not greeted with the usual blend of exhaust fumes and cannabis smoke. Tommy Thompson Park is the place I am here to explore, to shake hands with.¹

The entrance to the park neighbours the Leslie Street Allotment Gardens on the east and Baffinland Iron Mines Corporation now known as Strada Aggregates on the north, and Portlands Energy on the west. On Unwin Avenue, parallel to Leslie, one can see the Toronto Yard, a sizable operation whose space is mantled by monochromatic clusters of indiscernible aggregates: a ubiquitous site in this side of town. A group of satellites are housed near the parking lot of this establishment; an eighteen-wheeler zips by, creating a cloud of dirt that fogs my view; and on this hot summer day, the site has attracted hundreds of cyclists, joggers, and all kinds of nature enthusiasts who are out for a stroll in this strange landscape. As I begin to make my way into the park, through the heavily congested trail, one or two cyclists ring



Figure 1: Dilapidated gate and factory next to Tommy Thompson Park

their bells to notify me I must permit their smooth passage. Toronto bikers continue to be an instance of culture shock for me. They have always struck me in the same way that car drivers do by asserting themselves in the battlefield that is San Salvador traffic.

One must walk by these places before entering the park, and I was struck by the presence of satellite dishes in an establishment that deals with aggregates. The satellite dishes are framed by security fences and warning signs alerting pedestrians about the dangers of radiofrequency exposure.² I considered the warning but took a few shots anyways.

A street on the entrance to Tommy Thompson Park alerts visitors that the vehicular transit of Leslie Street ends at this point. Cars are not permitted inside the main road unless you are headed to dispose of some industrial waste or going to The Aquatic Park Sailing Club. If you are member of this club, their website suggests that you can access by both water and through the main entrance at Leslie Street. By water, members can access via sail or motorboats, or simply by swimming or paddling to the club's dock.³



Figure 2: Satellites outside of Tommy Thompson Park

The entrance to Tommy Thompson Park is adorned by six signs pertaining to basic regulations and park hours. We are informed that park hours vary from day to evening, being closed from 5:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Monday to Friday. The park is open during these times on weekends and statutory holidays only, but open Monday through Sunday from 4:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. I can observe that the park attracts numerous cyclists, as they swoop past me. Among the many signs here, a sign designates 20km/h as the maximum speed. I assume this is meant for those with augmented modes of traveling, like cyclists and skaters. Furthermore, a graphic illustration of a bird suggests that the park attracts a myriad avian species. In a similar way that Paul Virilio's theory (Virilio 89) of the integral accident suggests the invention of the ship was also the invention of the shipwreck, we see how the sign and the announcement of avian diversity seem to have brought a great number of professional bird watchers and aficionados to the park whose presence and enthusiasm, albeit innocent in nature, poses a threat to the ongoing habitat creation project and demands a myriad of prohibitive warnings from park authorities about the limits of human presence.



Figure 3: Entrance to Tommy Thompson Park

“When you invent the ship, you also invent the shipwreck; when you invent the plane you also invent the plane crash; and when you invent electricity, you invent electrocution...Every technology carries its own negativity, which is invented at the same time as technical progress” (Virilio 89).

According to the park’s official website, the community owes its biodiversity to its location within Lake Ontario, functioning as a pit stop in the migratory sojourn of the many species one can observe here. So far, I am describing to you a park like any other, but to any informed citizen the idea that a park built on top of industrial waste and substratum that is bursting with wildlife seems counterintuitive at best. It is often assumed that park or wilderness reserve is surplus left over from urban expansion and development. When you are at a park you can envision what once was or could have been if condos and paved streets were not around. This is not only a naïve and misinformed perspective, but it ignores the violent history of colonialism that eradicated indigenous communities and wildlife from the land that belonged to them. I would argue that the strangeness of

a manufactured landscape at the Leslie Spit confronts visitors in a more honest way, not attempting to masquerade as pure nature and further perpetuate the myth of Canada's wilderness but rather making visible the fact that all wilderness is manufactured or at the very least attained through colonial violence. The park's website addresses this unique situation in the following manner:

"From its origin as rubble and sand, Tommy Thompson Park has developed into a complex mosaic of habitats, which support a diverse community of flora and fauna species. [...] Due to the nature of construction and substrates, TTP is quite impervious to water infiltration. The consequence is standing surface water that creates seasonally wet areas that are highly attractive to a variety of wildlife. These seasonally wet areas are heavily used by migratory shorebirds and as nesting sites for regional and locally rare bird species such as Virginia Rail, Sora, and American Woodcock. Seasonal pools are also important breeding areas for amphibian" ("Birds of Tommy Thompson Park").

The park is human made from rubble and sand. The website celebrates its inception by highlighting its emerging habitats and what they call diverse communities of flora and fauna. Nowhere in this rather romantic description do we get a description of the history of the rubble. One immediately asks what is meant by rubble? Does rubble not imply destruction, dereliction, and displacement? Sure, the complex mosaic of plants and animals is positive, but what exactly was the human toll that made this place possible? I can't avoid skepticism when reading this kind of description, and it seems so tone deaf to be celebrating habitation during a relentless housing crisis in a city that is becoming increasingly unlivable for most of its human inhabitants.

Spiraling currents move between
Bifurcating between the sheets
Edges silently scraping
The wind spoke, the patience melted.



Figure 4: Birds at Tommy Thompson Park



Figure 5: Hawk at Tommy Thompson Park



Figure 6: Rusty Beach at Tommy Thompson Park



Figure 7: Rebar at Tommy Thompson Park



Figure 8: Rebar at Tommy Thompson Park



Figure 9: Praxis Rock at Tommy Thompson Park

“PRAXIS” FROM THE GREEK PRATTEIN, PRASSEIN. TO ACT. TO DO

What can we do about the paradox of capitalism’s tendency to extract, exploit, and eventually destroy that which it needs to create value? Without resources, human beings, and the earth, can capitalism go on? Does capitalism need us, need the earth? Perhaps it can and already does exist as a malevolent automaton that operates independently from us as its beneficiaries. Production for production’s sake until nothing is left. These are questions I ask myself as an academic when I step outside of my viewfinder. My subsequent research led me to uncover the history of displacement and gentrification that brought these industrial materials here. The “rubble” which Toronto posits as an almost random occurrence is not random at all but dates to development practices that prioritized urban development over low-income housing in the 1980s. A darker social history predates the romantic discourse of accidental wilderness that surround the Spit.

In their paper “Buried localities: archaeological exploration of a Toronto dump and wilderness refuge,” Heidi Schopf and Jennifer Foster help us demystify the notions of a serendipitous landscape that Toronto falsely claims to have stumbled upon. Their text provides a comprehensive archeology and historical overview of the different stages that led to the erection of the Spit as we know it today. Shockingly, they uncover a material history of personal household artifacts that signal a much darker history than what is included in official channels about the park. Schopf and Foster write:

“Most surprisingly, this research finds that the 1960s’ deposits contain high levels of personal artifacts, suggesting that whole households were demolished and dumped at the Spit. This discovery challenges the claim that the Leslie Street Spit is solely composed of “clean fill” and rather suggests that early dumping activities included food waste, personal items, and household debris in addition to construction rubble. The key findings of this research illustrate that the Leslie Street Spit is not just a landscape defined by its wilderness, but is also

a landscape defined by the development, destruction, and renewal of the built form of the city” (Schopf and Foster 2).

It becomes apparent as we examine the history of this park that, like any urban environment, the Spit is not devoid of a troubled history of power and imperialism. The so called “accident” that led to the mosaic of ecosystems is a product of uneven power dynamics and the state’s oppressive force. More simply put, the park is a product of what we call progress these days. Archaeological digs like the ones conducted by Schopf and Foster prove that the ground is not only composed of industrial rubble and sand but made up of tiles, tea pots, children’s toys, and other personal items that we can assume were left over during a difficult process of domestic displacement. The ground of the Spit is not exclusively formed by the idyllic transformation of industry into nature but in a large part by Toronto’s long and problematic history of gentrification and urban renewal dating back to 1964. Findings from this time included “teacups, bits of glass, medicine bottles, plates, diapers, electrical wire, rusted metal, eye-glasses, toothpaste tubes, and even food waste” (Schopf and Foster 7).



Figure 10: Brick Fragment at Tommy Thompson Park

The academic in me must acknowledge this history and look beyond the veil of the aesthetic allure of the park. As a scholar I have a responsibility to critique accepted narratives and problematize the hegemonic discourse surrounding this place. But ... I am also a photographer, and to be a good photographer you must ignore the preconceptions you may have about a place. As a photographer I embrace naivety and I witness this place in all its feral aesthetic glory. The Spit is a perfect example of the scars that are left behind by the parasitic practices of extraction, expansion, and progress. But here, in this wretched artifice, where the ground is made of rubble and industrial fill has replaced soil, life finds a way. Here, where industrial refuse finds its forever home, nature finds refuge from the storm.

“Much of the appeal of the Spit lies in popular appreciation for what is perceived as an untamed, sublime, and feral aesthetic, where nature is able to heal the scars of industrialisation”
(Schopf and Foster 2)

This is how I feel as a photographer who is interested in contradictions and aesthetic aberrations. A critical reading of the park leads you down its complex social history, but an aberrant aesthetic reading leads you down the path of what Simon Critchley calls the monstrous, that which is absolutely-too-much. In the realm of aesthetics, the monstrous is unlike the sublime insofar as it escapes comprehension and traditional models of beauty. As Critchley writes: “For Kant, the sublime is ‘the almost-too-much,’ and is distinguished from the monstrous understood as ‘the absolutely-too-much.’ That which is monstrous defeats our capacity for conceptual comprehension” (Critchley). As an impartial observer—initially unaware of the park’s dark material history—I approached the sights here with wonder. I was enchanted by the monstrous sprawling anthropogenic rebar structures intertwined with a blossoming natural ecosystem. These two contradicting elements shouldn’t make sense and coexist as well as they do here, but they do...

Approximately two kilometres into the park’s main trail, visitors encounter the first few clearings looking out into Lake Ontario. To get to the “beach,” one must traverse what is no longer a trail made of



Figure 11: Rebar Sculpture at Tommy Thompson Park

dirt but rather a trail layered almost entirely out of what looks like residential debris, a mixture of bricks, concrete, and tiles. In these eerie trails, leading toward the different beaches in the park, one encounters an exorbitant number of industrial rubble and materials. From house towels to bricks and floor tiles, the path is not an easy one to traverse and even though we are moving, a degree of agility and caution was required.

What poses a real danger to visitors of this Canadian park is the sheer number of industrial metals, omnipresent in every trail, grassland, and shoreline. The pathway is staggered with sharp metal objects, household items, and bricks, among other forms of ambiguous rubble. Along the passage I spot an abandoned towel on top of a bed of bricks. The disembodied towel reminds me of human remains—with its almost forensic shape—and sets an eerie tone to the rest of my travels. Perhaps this feeling is unfounded, but there is a certain psychological and semiotic shock that occurs when you see a personal item in such a decaying state. A kind of abjection in which I project my own mortality. Knowing after my first visit that the Spit



Figure 12: Rebar Sculpture at Tommy Thompson Park



Figure 13: Plants and Metal at Tommy Thompson Park



Figure 14: Abandoned Towel at Tommy Thompson Park

houses the ghosts of a city that looked entirely different from what it does today, household items like this towel confront me with a melancholia that haunts my vision with memories of El Salvador's impoverished cities. As a newcomer to Canada my camera is accustomed to seeing clean landscapes devoid of waste and human presence, but at the Spit I see a different side of the Canadian landscape. Perhaps a more honest one? Perhaps one where waste is not buried in the unconscious? Visible on the surface of nature and, in a radically aesthetic way, making up the surface of this simulacrum of nature.



Figure 15: Oh, Canada at Tommy Thompson Park

Aca Nada

Aca Nada

Here, nothing

Here, mine not yours.

Rousseau, the performative utterance of private property.

Mercantilism, abolition, genocide.

What's left?

Shattered dreams made of plastic?

Canadiana as a ruin, instantiating the fragile simulacra of

Canada,

Aca Nada

(Mark Allwood Portillo, 2024)

I am now at one of the first accessible beaches at the Leslie Spit. The water of Lake Ontario is roaring and blue as always, but the sand has been replaced by metal, debris, and other types of discarded matter. Even reaching the water poses a difficult challenge, but I take a couple of photographs, trying not to scrape my leg on a piece of corru-



Figure 16: Waves at Tommy Thompson Park

gated metal rebar. I simultaneously feel horror and a sublime magnetism that hypnotically attracts me to this post-apocalyptic scene. Maybe it is the stasis of the metal and concrete in relief to the recurrent motion of the water that produces a spectacle unlike anything I have ever witnessed. Perhaps it has to do with the monstrous, as described by Critchley, that being enacted in this place with the forced dichotomy of nature and waste?

Nature, with its boundless motion, juxtaposed with the ruins of the city, the remnants and sublime excess of capitalist industrial progress. What I witness is the excess of production and ruins of urban expansion discarded by the wayside on the shores of the waters of an imposing Lake Ontario.

The lacustrine breeze in synchrony with the rays of an autumnal afternoon sun clash with the meandering and Surrealist forms of metal figures that have completed their sojourn to the park's shore. Perhaps at some point these metallic formations served as an important component of a building's foundation, but to me, in their current iteration, they resemble Modernist motifs akin to Picasso and Pollock. The unusual and unexpected juxtaposition of materials embody forms and motifs despite their apparent fragmented nature. Just like how Picasso summoned the human form from an assemblage of disparate geometric shapes, we find at the spit figures and forms that have been assembled by anonymous artists or simply accidentally by chance. Many of the forms I encounter here have been a result of chance operations that remind me of Pollock's methods. The image



Figure 17: Rubble at Tommy Thompson Park

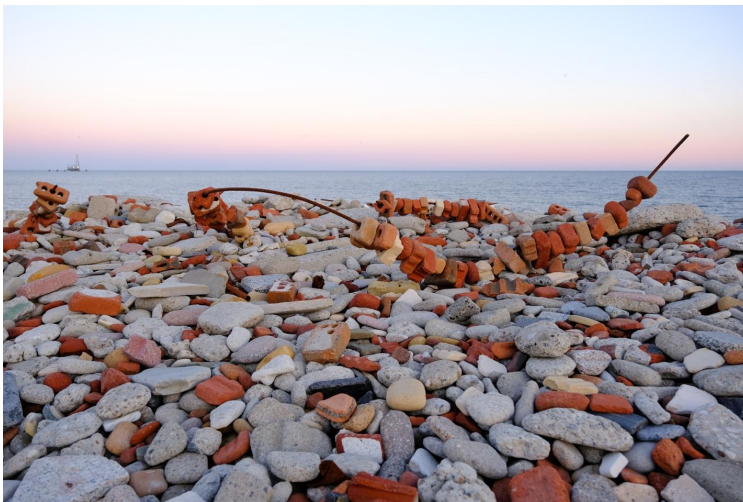


Figure 18: Sunset at Tommy Thompson Park



Figure 19: Jazz Players at Tommy Thompson Park

below reminds me of Picasso's numerous paintings of men with guitars. I have called this one the Metal Jazz Ensemble spearheaded by a metallic trumpet player on the left side of the frame.

There is a Brutalist element to the aesthetic experience of this park; from the hardness of the ground to the harshness of the metallic remnants that adorn the shorelines of this artificial peninsula. The exposed beams, the sand made from bricks and tiles, and the shards of metal poking out of the tall grass breathe a Modernist quality into this place. Like Brutalist architecture, there is something beautiful about the deconstructed materials that constitute the physical feature of the park. When reaching the first clearing pictured below, one is quickly reminded that this is not a natural peninsula, but a man-made artifice constructed entirely out of industrial waste that has been abandoned and reclaimed by people and nature. This is the most breathtaking aspect of the Spit—the ways in which nature reclaims that which was taken from it, and the way nature finds haven and expression in the harshest and most unlikely conditions. The human efforts of preservation are remarkable but the resilience of na-



Figure 20: Peninsula at Tommy Thompson Park

ture—stemming from its origin in dredging and later its designation as a landfill—prove that nature always finds a way.

Keeping on the theme of Modernism, I encounter another remarkable example of what we can call Modernist mimesis. This accidental work of art reminds one of a famous sculpture that adorns the entrance to the National Gallery of Canada. I first saw Louise Bourgeois' sculpture *Maman* 4 years ago in the Canadian capital on a steamy summer afternoon. *Maman* depicts a spider in its surreal modernist glory; it can be found in only a select number of sites around the world as a permanent sculpture. Luckily for Canadians, one of those permanent locations happens to be adjacent to the main entrance to *The National Gallery of Canada* in Ottawa. The gallery spent a third of its budget in acquiring the bronze figure back in 2005, reportedly spending a staggering 3.2 million dollars (“Huge Spider Erected Outside National Gallery”). Whether or not the investment paid off, it is truly breathtaking to witness a part of Surrealism's history and to have, here in Canada, a work of one the most renowned Surrealist artists. The metallic assemblage pictured below reminded



Figure 21: My Maman sculpture at Tommy Thompson Park

me of Bourgeois' work, and in many ways, mostly due to its context and location, the rusty rubble structure at the Spit affected me in a far more visceral way. I immediately began thinking about the history of this metal, its trajectory to this specific place, and its journey into achieving its current undulating psychedelic form.

Accidental sculptures like this one have a fascinating aesthetic force. Instead of indulging in the sheer beauty of an artwork as you would with *Maman*, I am sent down a completely different line of inquiry. There is an initial moment of aesthetic indulgence, but after that initial effect dissipates, I ask myself a series of ontological questions. How many stories do these waste assemblages tell? Where does it all come from? What was its original purpose? And now that it is here what purpose does it serve? Does it imitate the forms of nature on its own accord, or was this entire spectacle curated by an artist with Modernist sensibilities? Would the illusion that the aggregates have been placed here consciously by an artist make it any better? Many of these questions are obviously unanswerable, but scholars like Foster and Schopf and more recently Walter H. Kehm in

Accidental Wilderness: The Origins and Ecology of Toronto's Tommy Thompson Park help us understand the reason of being of the Spit. A book like Kehm's with Robert Burley's enchanting photographs reminds us that the park was initially "a construction site with bulldozers moving landfill from hundreds of trucks arriving daily, carrying concrete blocks, bricks, metal bars, rubble from new subway lines and house demolitions, and waste from old brickworks and glass foundries" (Atkinson 126).

Similarly, the work of Schopf and Foster reminds us that the "collection of material at this location on the Spit suggests that full houses with belongings still inside were demolished, compacted, and then dumped in Lake Ontario. Finding household debris, personal items, and food waste does not support the claim that the Spit is only composed of clean fill" (Schopf and Foster 7). Schopf and Foster's work is essential for us to deconstruct many of the myths of cleanliness and sustainability that are advertised by the city to justify the existence of the waste disposal operation at the park which is at odds with the habitat creation and preservation projects happening simultaneously. This was the most jarring aspect of the park during my first visit. How could preservation and waste coexist seemingly so peacefully? How can new habitats be created while heavy metal is being dumped next door?

We can answer this question by returning to the theme of accidental art that we discussed earlier in this paper. There we consider the origin of some of the metal "art" that make this place a public art exhibition of sorts. Thanks to Schopf and Foster we now understand where the materials originate from, but I am also interested in the transformation of the materials once they arrive here. Some are made up by anonymous artists and some have been dumped in accidentally aesthetic positions. Even though we can't truly differentiate between what is manufactured and what is a product of chance, some of the metal-heavy sections of this park have gone through a profound transformation by virtue of their material past. My guess is that instead of being a singular artist, it is primarily the collective effort of visitors to the park contributing their artistic efforts when they visit. I speculate that throughout the years the whole process

has become a kind of collaborative public art exhibit and ritual for the visitors and the spectators. As a photographer I identify with the latter group. It must be mentioned that when we visit and set our gazes on these monstrous constructs, we are faced with an ethical choice of sorts. We can either be appalled by the pollution these materials signify, or we can embrace their raw industrial beauty juxtaposed with the natural ecology of the park.

After all, parks are precisely the kind of public spaces in which the people are able to rekindle a primal enchantment with the flow of nature and find temporary refuge from the concrete stasis of urban spaces. Walter H. Kehm provides a beautiful, albeit a bit romantic, observation of the role of the Spit for the people:

In essence, my findings from over 35 years of observation reveal the importance of this urban wild as a place for re-enchantment. There are new miracles revealed every day and every season at the park. Perhaps that is why this park continues to attract ever-growing numbers of people. The park's landscape offers a high level of natural richness through its diversity of plantings, water and sky vistas, landforms, and wildlife. It is where one can have an introduction to the miracles of nature while walking through narrow, meandering paths framed by large trees or through meadows with wildflowers and butterflies or along the lake edges listening to the sound of the waves. Rachel Carson was prescient, since there is "a sense of wonder" in the park (Atkinson 154).

The Toronto Harbour Commission (now the TPA) was created in 1911 to oversee the "reclamation" of the marsh. Filling of Ashbridges Bay commenced in 1912, and by 1960 the marsh was completely gone. According to their website:

The Tommy Thompson Park Bird Research Station (TTPBRS) was established in 2003 to aid in the understanding and protection of birds and their habitats through monitoring, education, and research. Tommy Thompson Park (TTP) is recognized as a globally significant Important Bird Area (IBA) by Birdlife International and it's the Canadian partners for its significance

to populations of nesting water birds and migratory species. The combination of an 'urban wilderness' with internationally significant bird life and close proximity to a large city makes TTP an ideal venue for a permanent center for bird studies and education ("Tommy Thompson Park Bird Research Station").



While the city acknowledges its value as a reclaimed ecological site for a diversity of migratory birds and other species, it also actively operates as a site for the disposal of industrial matter. The guidelines can be found on the Internet, but I am including them here below as yet another element that contributes to the Leslie Spit's visual and discursive imaginary. The guidelines below demonstrate the kind of visual and discursive contradiction that I observe at this park. The remarkable efforts of conservation, as I have stated above, are obscured by the active waste disposal efforts taking place here. This resource is incredibly helpful for understanding what exactly we see at the park, and for the reader, you can understand what my photographs are showing. Reinforced concrete with rebar, pipes, pillars, beams, and light poles make up a lot of the surface of the park, but as per this guideline they are no longer accepted. What the city calls materials type "B" such as broken concrete, brick, ceramic tiles, and

clean porcelain materials are accepted as long as they comply with certain size and condition restrictions.

TORONTO PORT AUTHORITY Notice to Contractors and Truckers Leslie Street Lakefill Site Effective September 2, 2011, Type "C" materials, consisting of reinforced concrete with re-bar, such as concrete pipes, pillars, beams, light poles, and so on, are NO LONGER ACCEPTED.

Effective May 20, 2003, Type "A" materials, consisted of clean, dry earth, clay silt, shale, sand and backfill sand, are NO LONGER ACCEPTED. ASPHALT MATERIAL AND SHEET ASPHALT ARE NOT ACCEPTED. NO GARBAGE, RUBBISH, WOOD or any other material will be accepted that might contravene the following anti-pollution regulations:

1. Toronto Port Authority Practices and Procedures Article 26.
2. The Ontario Environmental Protection Act 1990, amended June 1992.
3. Ontario Regulation 735/73 Schedule 9.
4. Improved Lakefill Quality Control Program amended January 1993.

Truckers found concealing unacceptable materials will be liable for the cost of removing the same and will be prohibited from using the area.

ACCEPTED MATERIALS Type "B" Unreinforced concrete, broken concrete, brick, ceramic tiles and Clean porcelain materials. There is a size limitation of 8" x 8" x 16" on all accepted material (size of cinder block). Toronto Port Authority approved rubble Type "B" to contain less than 5% by weight of Type "A" material. CHARGES: \$33 per truckload, tax exempt (Payment by Cash, Bank Draft, Money Order, Certified Cheque, Debit card, VISA Card or Master Card) SPEED LIMIT Maximum speed as posted applies within the site area. Drivers exceed-

ing those limits, or driving without proper care, may be prohibited from use of the area. NO LIABILITY: Toronto Port Authority assume no liability for the safety of persons or vehicles using the site. Drivers and vehicles enter the area entirely at their own risk of injury and damage, howsoever caused. Drivers retain sole responsibility for safety, irrespective of any dumping directions they may receive from Toronto Port Authority personnel. Visiting vehicles must keep clear of the Toronto Port Authority equipment engaged at the site. CONDITION Entry to the area constitutes acceptance of the foregoing conditions. Opening Hours at Leslie Site (#1 Leslie Street ,Toronto) , : Monday to Friday, 7:30am.- 4:15 pm ACCESS CARD Available at Toronto Port Authority, Works Department at 62 Villiers Street, Tel: (416) 462-1261, (open Mondays – Fridays, 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m) REFUNDS All refund requests are to be made at the Works Department Office. Proof of Purchase (i.e. Original Receipt from Toronto Port Authority) must be presented to obtain a refund. Only one (1) refund per Proof of Purchase (i.e. Official Receipt) will be made. Updated June 6, 2012 (“Notice to Contractors and Truckers Leslie Street Lakefill Site”)

“...I discover vision, not as a ‘thinking about seeing,’ to use Descartes expression, but as a gaze at grips with a visible world, and that is why for me there can be an other’s gaze” (Merleau-Ponty 315). By having a writing pad and operating a camera, I attempt to position myself in the middle of nature and technology, of the external world and the apparatus with which I see the world. The eye, the camera, the laptop all help me construct and formulate my thoughts. Forces assemble around me by virtue of pointing the camera to the world. A circuit of communication. What does it mean to be in the midst of an event? To use this device critically and democratically you must be in the middle, not outside or inside. I don’t bring the concepts of nature and beauty into the capture, but I attempt to remain neutral and make myself a medium between the mechanical eye and the world. I attempt to let the world of the Leslie Spit speak in its own voice. How does this practice differ from photojournalism and writing? Is this praxis? I use the camera as a tool for “being” in a situation and



Figure 22: Surveillance at Tommy Thompson Park

my own experience is the datum, inventing through it a method, a role, a witnessing. The world comes crashing into me like waves of sensory data, slowly approaching and retreating ad infinitum.

People love it here even though it's full of sharp metal and the ground is uneven and unforgiving. As I learned from the plurality of signs that populate the trails, the government of Canada also likes the idea of this place. Exercise is good. We continue to enhance our cardiovascular health so we can survive the stasis of work. This place is a habitat creation project. Introducing and promoting the habitation of a select number of species and creating a safe haven for wildlife. The Leslie Street Spit, Tommy Thompson Park, bird sanctuary, or dump site? Going for jog, disposing of industrial waste, or birding? Tommy Thompson Park is also an art gallery, a recreational space, a habitat for animal species, and the home of the forgotten materiality of the city of Toronto.

The Leslie Street Spit is a *xenotopia*. Human-made from rubble it now welcomes a blossoming diversity of elements, human beings, animals, metals, concrete, brick, and so much more. Foucault paves the



Figure 24: Tires at Tommy Thompson Park

way for us to think of other spaces, of spaces imbued in and made of otherness, in which the boundary between the sacred and the profane is collapsed. At the park, the profane—in the form of industrial and human waste, urban displacement, and cemeteries—coalesces with the sacred—in the form of trees, dirt, grass, wildlife, and so on. All these contradictory elements come together in what is promoted as wilderness, but hides a complicated past of destruction, urban progress, and gentrification. This place could be in fact thought of as a mass burial ground for the profane leftovers of a city that is becoming inaccessible to most. The spit was man-made by destroying nature and erecting an alien wilderness; a “natural” space created with the debris of urban growth and the reclamation of a marshland deemed useless in favour of industrial projects. Because of this very reason, it approaches us in an ambivalent, confused way. The Spit as a space and commons is not entirely sacred or profane but straddles the thin line in the middle of this dichotomy.

According to the Toronto Parks website:

"In 1959, filling to construct the Leslie Street Spit or Outer Harbour East Headland (Tommy Thompson Park) was initiated by the THC (now the Toronto Port Authority) in the area of Leslie Street and Unwin Avenue for 'port related facilities.' In 1973 the land base of TTP was dramatically increased with dredge from the shipping channel in the Outer Harbour. From 1974 to 1983 approximately 6,500,000 cubic meters of sand/silt were dredged from the Outer Harbour and placed at the spit. This resulted in the formation of the lagoons and sand peninsulas which account for a significant proportion of the land base of TTP. In 1979, a major expansion of land area occurred with the construction of an endikement on the lakeward side of the Headland. The endikement provided protected cells for dredged material from the Inner Harbour and the Keating Channel" ("Tommy Thompson Park").

What is interesting about The Leslie Spit, in the context of its official documents, is the fact that what is being presented as an "urban wilderness" is in fact a human-made landscape that replaced a once blossoming ecosystem. Literally manufactured from rubble and waste, this peninsula extension now encumbers upon Lake Ontario, replacing the once vital ecosystem of the Ashbridges Bay Marsh. The Spit is evidence of humanity's role in the Anthropocene and our participation in the dramatic change and decimation of the earth and its resources, a process which is at an all-time high ("Anthropocene"). Simply stated, the current rate of population growth and urban development cannot and will not be sustained by the earth in the foreseeable future. Yet the Toronto park proves that ecological catastrophes can acquire a positive value out of the tumultuous tension between cities and nature. City dwellers travel this peninsula all year round, and judging from the people I have talked to, no one seems to know the buried histories of the territory⁴ in which the park is situated on, or its usage as a full-time landfill. The location presents itself as a park but simultaneously serves as an active landfill for specific kinds of industrial waste during the week. Excess of infrastructural material from the city is dumped here, and in the process, as reports

and witnesses testify, all kinds of unusual matter and objects make their way to this place.

People have uncovered materials ranging from displaced graveyards to the domestic and infrastructural remnants of urban displacement and gentrification. A witness provided me recently with a photograph of a doll's head taken many years ago. One can speculate that this object, which now encounters itself desolated in this strange wasteland, once found its place within a familial environment in the hands of a child who treasured it inside their home. Jennifer Foster and Heidi Schopf's seminal 2013 paper "Buried localities: archeological exploration of Toronto dump and wilderness refuge" provides me with a critical and archaeological framework necessary for engaging with and interpreting the semiotic content of a place that reads like a park and acts like a dump. Foster and Schopf illuminate the complicated history of the park and uncover the buried truths about the materials that make their journey to this land.

The park greets you warmly with its extensive trails and biking paths, surreal landscapes made of rubble, and its blossoming new ecologies. In Jennifer Foster and Heidi Schopf's words: "Much of the appeal of the Spit lies in popular appreciation for what is perceived as an untamed, sublime, and feral aesthetic, where nature can heal the scars of industrialization." As Foster (2007) explains, "It juxtaposes a degraded and discarded city with fertile and vigorous ecology, a place where nature has colonized the post-industrial urban spoils" (Schopf and Foster 2). The aesthetic attraction of the site lies in the dualistic redemption of nature over (industrial) man-made decay, and it demonstrates to the public the potential of hope in the context of the real, collective fear of losing nature altogether. With the conclusions made by Foster and Schopf in mind, I believe that this side of the Spit is at once an undeniable truth and the veil of a problematic social history buried underneath the surface. The city presents this space as the harmony of nature and "clean fill" techniques of disposal while being heralded as a triumph of nature over the destructive effects of capitalism and a testament to the idea of nurture over nature. Its official website advertises the park as a place where you can enjoy



Figure 25: Metal and Ice at Tommy Thompson Park



Figure 26: F*** the Police at Tommy Thompson Park

nature and simultaneously feel good about the efforts of the city to re-wild what once was only a product of dredging, a no man's land.

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NOTES

1. This is a reference to Andy Goldsworthy's land art. His process involves allowing a place to introduce itself to him before he begins to work with it. I am here to begin a multiyear work with the Leslie Spit, and I am allowing it to present itself to me, my camera, and my pen.↵
2. Per their website: "Baffinland Iron Mines Corporation (Baffinland) is a Canadian mining company, mining iron ore at the Mary River operation in the Qikiqtani region of North Baffin, Nunavut, Canada." The corporation oversees mining, crushing, and shipping high grade iron. <http://www.baffinland.com/mary-river-mine/our-operation/?lang=en>↵
3. If you have a proclivity for maritime travel, the official coordinates of the park are 43°39'7.68" N 79°19'22.60" W.↵
4. I speak here of the recent history of this park, but it is important to acknowledge that this place we call a park today is first and foremost situated on the land of the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation.↵