

Pursuing A Point:  
An Obsessive Collective

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obsession: 1. Compulsive preoccupation with an idea or an unwanted feeling or emotion, often accompanied by symptoms of anxiety.  
2. A compulsive, often unreasonable idea or emotion.  
--American Heritage Stedman's Medical Dictionary

I obsess over the seemingly minute details of life. I collect and hoard that which I do not need; and through these seemingly unreasonable practices, I have managed to develop an artistic habit. Art has been my means for exploring my hidden obsessions in an attempt to understand them, or at the very least, eradicate them from my present state of mind. This year, I have taken the time to delve into some of the most cluttered corners of my mind and have done so through an object with which most are familiar: the pencil. I originally wanted to give the pencil a voice; allow it to speak forth against its unappreciative owners, but after some time, I realized that my desires were far more selfish. I was not interested in facilitating the pencil's voice, but rather in speaking for it. I wanted to learn about the pencil and then use my newfound knowledge to express my wishes for the pencil and also to express my own life and world through this one object.

I began by simply exploring the pencil as an object of its own right, searching for answers to questions such as: What is it made of? Where does it come from? Why is it yellow? etc. These simple questions were the first steps on the journey that eventually led me through my own life and mind, exploring methodical and obsessive practices, searching for connections between my complex inner-workings and surroundings and the seemingly basic concept and figure of a pencil. I wanted to become completely immersed in every aspect of the pencil in order to connect it to something beyond its surface use, to something that extended into my own life.

The pencil began as an object I simply found deserving of contemplation. I own countless pencils which I use every day, and yet I cannot recall the last time I finished one off, discarding a small stub into a waste basket. When my pencils become too small to fit comfortably in my hand, I simply set it aside and sharpen a new one. I have never given a second thought to a pencil as an individual; there are always hundreds more available that could perform the same job as the one on my desk. Each pencil has no specific characteristics to make it any different from the thousands of replacements waiting to step in; a pencil is just that, a pencil. There are no favorites and no special features. It is what it is: a simple and effective utensil; or is it?

I love writing with pens, but every now and then I get the craving to use a wood-cased pencil. I have always considered this to be one of my many obsessive quirks, but I finally decided that it was time to give this particular obsession a second look. I had never seriously contemplated the pencil outside of its utilitarian functions. Until now, the pencil has never been anything more than a simple object that I use to make marks. It is a small member of my otherwise large world. Through the work of Aganetha Dyck, however, I came to learn that the small are often far more worthy of my time than I had previously thought.

“I am interested in the small – in the really tiny of the world. We’re going so fast, because we have so many people to feed and house and so we just bulldoze ahead. It’s the simple things that already exist that work so hard for us, that I think we’re kind of ignoring...”

Aganetha Dyck strives to expose the “tiny of the world” in her work. The tiny of her world are bees. These insects are responsible for the pollination of 30%-50% of the food we eat yet most people are unaware of their astonishing contribution to our lives. Dyck treats bees as collaborators, using their input as the missing element in her work. She installs her pieces into

living beehives and waits for the insects to complete her artwork (Gibson). I have found pencils to be a part of my own version of Dyck's "tiny of the world." Pencils are seen as utensils, if they are seen or noticed at all. And while they do not pollinate our food or even directly effect any of our consumption needs, they do fill an important position in our lives. Through my work, I attempt to parallel Aganetha Dyck in striving to magnify this small object.

A pencil appears to be nothing more than a writing instrument, something designed to make marks on surfaces, yet of all the writing utensils that have evolved throughout the years, the traditional wood-cased pencil is the one that has remained for over 450 years (Petroski). Endurance such as this is remarkable for such a small and simple object. But my obsession was not satisfied with a simple mental acknowledgement of endurance, so I began to physically explore the pencil in a bizarre and obsessive manner, hoping to discover something more. I sharpened pencil after pencil until I was left with a line of tiny, sharp stubs. I erased blank sheets of paper until I was scraping metal and tearing the pages, collecting the tiny eraser shavings. I took off the metal bands with the erasers, leaving a trail of "headless" pencils. I removed the metal bands and erasers all together, analyzing and studying each half of the pencil "head." My obsession was in full force.

Weeks later, I was surrounded by pile after pile of pencil pieces, and looking around myself, I felt just as lost as I had when I began my journey. I felt accomplished in having successfully dissected a few hundred pencils, but I was no closer to understanding and subduing my obsession than I had been before I began. I looked around at the discarded pencil parts and only then did it hit me: the parts I was removing were not just parts, they were *appendages*. The pencils had body parts. They had a life force in their graphite and a skeleton in their wood casing. They had a head in their toppers and skin in their yellow paint. With this discovery, the

door to the realm of the pencil had opened. I now had ideas of entering the world of the pencil and subsequently opening my own life to the pencil. How do we intertwine and where do we overlap? How does the pencil represent the struggles I have in my own life? These are the questions that began to float through my mind. I had finally begun to see the pencil as something more than a utensil.

I began stripping off the outer layers of the pencil –both literally and figuratively– to expose its inner life force: the graphite. The entire pencil is built around the graphite, without it there would be no pencil. The wood is used to protect it, the eraser to edit its marks, and the metal band to connect the two halves and hold everything together. I was interested in removing the protection and exposing the graphite. I wanted to expose the vulnerability of the pencil. This led to my first piece, a display of three pencils, shaved to their core, suspended in a manner that vaguely references its original function.

Through this piece, I was able to display the pencil in a new way, as a figure apart from a utilitarian object, but this led me to a new challenge. How can a utilitarian



object exist in a world where it is seen for nothing but its function. Not everyone saw the pencil as I now did, as an actual object and not just a utensil. I had to find a way to make them see it as I did. I decided I would have to create an environment where this existence could take place. I turned to the work of Jeanne Quinn for guidance.

Working with both personal narrative and pre-existing forms in her work *I am Penelope*, *I am not Penelope*, Jeanne Quinn displays ceramic objects in a manner that places them in a “non-real space.” She has made objects such as tea cups and saucers and removed them from

their typical environments, forcing the viewer to re-contextualize them in this new, almost surreal place. Her objects have a distinct physicality and location, much like my pencils, and yet she has been able to extract the objects as an idea and place them in an almost surreal environment, while maintaining the identity of the original object. I am managing my pencils in a similar manner, although while Quinn's discovery of the surreal place was accidental, I am intentionally searching for this location. I want to place the pencils in a new space, one that allows the pencil to exist as itself, but in a way that separates the pencil from its utilitarian past in a coffee mug amongst highlighters and pens. If I can manage to bring the object of a pencil into a new space, I can make connections and assumptions that would not be possible of a pencil sitting on a desk. I was able to achieve this once, but I knew that creating multiple pieces would require the creation of a space and the means to view the pencil in a new way.

“Pencils, like automobiles and bridges, are meant to be more than just objects to be admired when they are new. The pencil is designed to be destroyed, its wood to be cut away, its lead to be used up, however slowly.” (Petroski) A pencil is meant to be used by a human hand. The graphite will become dull and as time passes, the object will shrink. The pencil will not disappear or leave behind a container, but instead it will leave behind a smaller version of itself. This smaller version is still an object, but because of the human role in the life of a pencil, that shrunken pencil is considered to be dead. I wanted to investigate this idea of a shrinking object but in a way that would not lead one to think of a useless or deceased object, but instead as simply a shrinking or changing object. I approached this task with the goal of deconstructing the pencil in a new way. I erased off the eraser, removed the metal band, and scraped off all the paint. I then sharpened away the graphite, leaving three distinct piles: one pink, one yellow, and one black. These were the ashes of a pencil. I collected the dust from countless pencils and



amassed them in piles made to represent the collective pieces of our utensils, but rearranged and combined in a new way.

Once I had grouped the parts of the pencil, I realized that I had not quite done what I had set out

to do. I had discovered a new way of shrinking the pencil, but I had done it in such a way that removed the singularity of the pencil. So I returned to my task, and created five steps of decomposition. I laid them out to show the composition of a pencil in order of not only decomposition, but reconstruction as well; adding another layer to display. The pencil now not only shrank in a way separate from its use, but also was able to reconstruct itself.



The idea of the pencil as representative for a living being was still plaguing my mind. I had to return to the graphite and explore this element apart from the rest of the pencil. I wanted to remove its wooden shell and examine how it could exist on its own without protection? I began exploring the physical qualities of the graphite sticks once removed from their shell and was fascinated by their fragile and yet durable characteristics. I wanted to amass these sticks much like the ashes I previously collected, but this time forming something representing life and existing completely separate from the pencil. I had been staying within the confines of the pencil as a figure but was ready to take it beyond this point and into a much wider space. I decided to connect the graphite sticks in order to form horizontal lines composed of the vertical sticks, referencing the horizon line of a mountainous landscape. I then took the piece one step farther from the pencil and mounted and framed the

piece, completing the piece and taking it one step closer to the idea of a traditional landscape. I wanted to show the individual



pieces as fragile figures but also how their connection as one solid group gives them strength and power. The reference to a horizon allows the graphite to act as a part of nature, which reflects similar characteristics of power and fragility. I had successfully allowed the graphite to exist in a space apart from the pencil. It was able to exist as itself, but also able to reference something much larger than the pencil from which it came.

Pencils have stood quietly in their role of the controlled utensil for quite some time. They go unnoticed and forgotten even though they play a part in our every day actions. I find their importance to be one worth noting and one worth months of exploration. I spent countless hours thinking over possible ways of dissecting and reconstructing pencils to represent my life and my world. Through my work I have strived to explore the pencil and use it as a means of exploring my own obsessive practices as well as exploring and pushing the boundaries that define the pencil as what it is known by today: a writing utensil. By removing the pencil from its passive position and integrating it into my life and my environment on an intimate level, the pencil takes on a different role, changing from an everyday utensil to something more. While this new role does not physically exist in our world, I strive to create a world in which this relationship can exist, suspended in a fabricated reality. The search for and manipulation of this reality has become representative of not only the search for a more meaningful existence for the pencil, but also for the pursuit of a purpose for the basic act of obsessive exploration. In the end, this obsessive exploration has made itself clear as the ultimate goal of my thesis collection as well as my artistic practice, and my life in general.





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