

The A.W.E. Society

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The Area Wilds Exploration (A.W.E.) Society

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Abstract

The A.W.E. Society hosts playful social events that cultivate our ability to read, listen, and come into more intimate relationships with urban ecologies. The mission of this work is to cultivate place-based inquiry, meaning-making, and care within local contexts and beyond disciplinary boundaries of traditional study. With this work I aim to recover a sense of belonging and ecological connection even in the midst of overwhelming environmental loss. The exhibition and this written document explores how creative processes can be used to transform our relationships in and to local environments.

Keywords

Deep ecology, environmental ethics, urban nature, happening, embodiment, relational, trespassing, localization, nature engagement, environmental art



PROLOGUE



Even as a kid I was attracted to the margins of the city. Many afternoons and summer evenings were spent with my two best friends, Jimmy and Steven, on little expeditions through the suburban wilds. There was magic in the margins: the wooded hillside behind my childhood home, the wild backlands of the shopping center, the strangely symmetrical retention pond alive with frogs and ducks. As a child I felt an effortless sense of home within the landscape, a deep existential feeling of belonging.

My family's home was among the first built upon a certain wooded hilltop in suburban Eau Claire, Wisconsin, on the land of the Ojibwe peoples. This land, located at the convergence of clear flowing rivers, was once a densely forested place alive with bobcats, elk and deer. My early explorations took me down a steep embankment into a prairie with grasses and weeds that were as tall as me. I listened to the soft crunching of the grass bending under the weight of my body as I lied down in the depressions made by the bodies of sleeping deer. I heard the rustling of tiny unseen animals and the percussive chirps and



Fig. 2. Google Satellite View of Suburban Development in Eau Claire, Wisconsin

droning calls of insects living deep within their miniature worlds. I built forts with fallen trees and discarded pieces of construction material dumped beside the fire road, which was the boundary of my territory. My friends and I found an arrowhead embedded in the bark of a tree like the tip of a great iceberg with a vast unknown history. Here we acted out fantasies based upon what we found in the world around us. Play uncovered poetry in the landscape.

As I grew, so did the subdivision. The prairies transformed—first into muddy construction sites and then into electric green lawns. The sounds of the insects and birds were overtaken by the din of machinery: excavating equipment, concrete mixers, pneumatic nailers, and eventually lawn mowers. In a matter of a few short years the familiar landscape transformed completely. As the land transformed we continued our free-ranging play, often even within the construction



Fig. 3. Snapshot of me in a stormwater culvert

sites. Once during a game of tag in a half-built home, I accidentally ran out of a second story door that opened onto a deck that had not yet been built. In that moment I felt my precariousness deeply.

Geographically it was the same neighborhood, but amidst the construction the place around me became so deeply altered that I felt a profound sense of disconnection--like a body floating in space. I began to feel pangs of alienation as development engulfed these magical places. At the time, I lacked the understanding that our house, one of the first in the subdivision, was just as imposing as the ones that followed. I was not yet aware of the legacies of colonization, exploitation, slavery and displacement that shaped the land and my inherited position in the world: an upper middle class white girl in the midwest United States. It was only later that I understood the deep irony of my sadness at the "lots" being cleared and speculative development transforming the landscape

Trespassing and creative misbehavior were ways to maintain intimacy with the shifting, living assemblage of the local environment. My friends and I threw rocks at the water tower just to hear the satisfying timbre of impact. I led them down into the stormwater tunnels beneath the mall parking lot. Of course we had no particular right to this place—my presence was just as much an imposition as that of my newer neighbors—but as a kid I wasn't yet able to see how I was actually connected to larger transformations taking place within this landscape. All I knew was what I felt, and I felt a lessening of the gravity that previously held me in place.

Just as the physical change in landscape had an alienating effect, another disconcerting force was at work — this one epistemological. My initial, inborn sense of wonder and connection with landscape was intuitive, affective and personal, but as I progressed through school, I learned that the only true way to uncover the hidden truths of landscape was through science--and science, I was told, this was something for which I simply had no aptitude. I wanted to learn by

being present with my senses and through relationship and playful action, not through memorization nor following rigid operations nor through abstractions. Additionally, the way that history was taught felt strangely settled. History seemingly only applied to places deemed more significant than the land on which I stood. It was something written, not experienced. The reality I knew and loved became less alive as I tried to see it this way -- disembodied, supposedly objective. It wasn't until much later that I understood how this way of knowing was conveniently used to see the world as a field of resources rather than as a place of relationships and wonder. This purportedly scientific way of seeing was the perfect tool for continued resourcism and exploitation.

Without attention to feelings and ethics supposedly objective fact is easily co-opted for capital interests at the expense of all else. Conversely, without science, we lose our ability to explore beyond the reaches of our own thoughts and feelings. Both perspectives are needed, and in fact are not in opposition. Science is greatly needed to protect ourselves and the beautiful world we call home. But in a time of so much alienation and disconnection we also urgently need to establish a sense of connection to the place we live if we are to muster the rigorous work of understanding and transforming our relationships with the world.

Our relationships to the world--economic, political, ecological--are generally troubled and in need of transformation. My creative work searches for new ways of relating to the world. Though creative inquiry and action, I hope to develop my own distinct bond with place--one that acknowledges the dangers of our time while also honoring the real and urgent beauty that can guide us to increasingly reciprocal, just and lively ways of being in the world.



INTRODUCTION

Like this land, I too have lost parts of myself.¹

-Jesse Wolf Hardin

I have always been driven by an unwieldy curiosity about what is around me. The practice of guiding people in explorations of place has remained constant in my life and work. As an artist, I host explorations

¹ Jesse Wolf Hardin quoted in Stephen Harrod Buhner, *The Secret Teaching of Plants: The Intelligence of the Heart in the Direct Perception of Nature* (Rochester Vermont: Bear & Company, 2004), 302.



of nearby nature intended to foster moments of reconnection between people and the landscape. My emphasis on reconnection and rebuilding our relationships with the environment stems from a belief that much of our collective degradation of the environment stems from a sense of separateness from the world. The anthropologist Joan Halifax refers to this linkage between our personal suffering and environmental degradation as “[t]he World Wound.”²

2 Joan Halifax, *The Fruitful Darkness: Reconnecting with the Body of the Earth* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993), 1-20.2

Within the context of declining resources, climate change, privatization of drinking water, species loss and other modern challenges, it is imperative that we seek a new relationship with the world. Studying behavior change as it pertains to global warming, the environmental psychologist Raymond De Young defines the task as much bigger than simply teaching people about problems and solutions posited by experts; instead we must actually enhance our abilities to be mindful of the relationship between our everyday behaviors and the health of our bio-region.³ The environmental problems we face and the social injustices that are inextricably linked to environmental degradation will require that we rethink many of our everyday behaviors and even the core concepts underpinning our culture, such as domination over nature and constant growth on a finite planet. Globalization powered by cheap and plentiful fossil fuels, and technology has increasingly pulled our attention away from our inhabited places and into mediated environments and adapting to environmental change will require a return to living largely within the biophysical constraints of our local landscapes. This shift requires a radical transition within our culture. I envision my work as part of this cultural shift.

With my art, I aim to carve out small, quiet places where we can intuit our connections to the world and begin to rebuild our ecological relationships. I hope to create moments in which we can fall back in love with the world and feel a deep sense of being at home in the present moment and in the very places we occupy--even the troubled places. With my creative work, I ask: How can nearby interstitial ecologies help us understand and transform our relationships with the environment? In taking time to observe marginal wilderness, the cultural and physical barriers between “human” and “nature” become more evident, which has led me to ask another question through the

³ Raymond De Young, “Supporting behavioral entrepreneurs: Using the biodiversity-health relationship to help citizens self-initiate sustainability behavior.” In *Biodiversity and Health in the Face of Climate Change*, Marseille, M., J. Stadler, H. Korn, K. Irvine & A. Bonn [Eds.] Switzerland: Springer. (2019)

work: How can participatory art within marginal nature overcome these obstacles in order to facilitate moments of reciprocal care between people and local environments?

My thesis work consists of several events that were enacted under the name: The Area Wilds Exploration (A.W.E.) Society over the course of two years. These events include activities such as site-specific vocal improvisations within stormwater culverts, backyard ecotherapy spas that reunite participants with “old friends” soil bacteria, and public performances that invite participants to transform into a walking forest. With this work, I invite people to play within the borderlands between the city and nature, between the psyche and the environment. Realms that are not distinct, but instead are completely interwoven. Through the process of creating, experiencing, documenting and reflecting on these events I hope to gain new understandings on our relationships to nearby ecologies while using creative participatory performance as a way to facilitate intimacy and feelings of belonging and care in nearby ecologies.



CONTEXTUAL REVIEW

This document illuminates the relationships between the context in which I am working, the methodologies that I use and the creative work that I have produced over the course of two years that focus on these questions through four artworks created under the umbrella of The Area Wilds Exploration (A.W.E.) Society: “*The Resonant Underbelly of Suburbia*”, “*How the Earth Sees Us*”, “*Constructed Realities & the Never Ending Painting*”, and “*The Skin of the Earth Cinema*”.



Environmental Trouble and Alienation

We live in a time of immense environmental upheaval. Climate change is already disrupting familiar weather patterns and causing catastrophic droughts and floods. Despite growing scientific evidence of the dire consequences of our fast-paced and consumptive lifestyles, Americans have for the most part resisted the behavioral changes

necessary for a more responsible and sustainable habitation of the earth.

In its 2018 report, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change predicted that we have twelve years to reduce our carbon emissions by fifty percent or else risk a global temperature rise of two degrees celsius, which would result in rapid species loss, as well as increased severity and frequency of floods, droughts, and food shortages.⁴ The United States of America is lagging: in 2018, carbon dioxide emissions actually rose by 1.4 percent.⁵ The deferral of an effective response is due in part to mainstream thought and academic focus based upon the notion that we may find our salvation through creating more “green tech” or by gaining more control over natural processes in a manner that keeps pace with our highly consumptive lifestyles. Consumer- and technology-driven approaches to environmental responsibility have not, however, resulted in lowering our use of resources nor our production of waste.⁶ Environmental problems are posited as external problems, therefore requiring external solutions.

As climate change progresses and environmental limits are becoming more perceptible, there is a growing choir of voices who suggest that salvation will not come from increased domination over natural systems or through technology alone. Rather, a process is needed to change our underlying culture and our fundamental relationships to the environment and each other. The environmental psychologist Ralph Metzler suggests: “[W]hat individuals and groups can do ... is to change their relationship to the Earth and the ecosystem in which they live—

⁴ *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Global Warming of 1.5°: Summary for Policymakers (Geneva, Switzerland: IPCC, 2019).*

⁵ “Preliminary US Emissions Estimates for 2018,” Rhodium Group, 8 January 2019, <rhg.com/research/preliminary-us-emissions-estimates-for-2018/> (20 April 2019).

⁶ George Monbiot, “Consume more, conserve more: sorry, but we just can’t do both,” *The Guardian*, 24 November 2015, <theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/nov/24/consume-conserve-economic-growth-sustainability> (10 November 2018).

and this would contribute to the healing of the earth as a whole.”⁷

Modern industrial society is founded on a worldview that the nonhuman environment is a field of resources to be extracted for profit and convenience, which is both a cause and a product of increasing global urbanization.⁸ As more and more people live in cities, as cities expand, a growing disconnection from nature can be evidenced by looking at the cultural products of our times. Since the 1950s, references to natural environments in books, songs and movies have been on the decline.⁹ The impact of rapid environmental change, like that experienced since the industrial revolution, wherein people are living in environments that are drastically different than the environments that our ancestors co-evolved with is likely to have profound effects on the health and wellbeing of both people and the environment. We are beginning to understand the profound health benefits of time spent in natural environments, yet few people regularly spend time in nature. If, as Metzler says, we must reimagine our relationship with the environment, then what does it mean that we spend less and less time outdoors in direct contact with wilderness?¹⁰

Our growing disconnection from nature results in a breakdown in cross-species communication. Theologian Thomas Berry refers to this as an “autism” with respect to the earth. Inquiry into human/environmental relationships requires an approach radically different from the current strategy of business-as-usual green tech responses. Adjusting our trajectory in our relationship with the earth does not mean simply

7 Ralph Metzner, *Green Psychology: Transforming our Relationship to the Earth* (Rochester, Vermont: Park Street Press, 1999), 35.

8 “More Than Half of World’s Population Now Living in Urban Areas, UN Survey Finds,” UN News 10, July 2014 <news.un.org/en/story/2014/07/472752-more-half-worlds-population-now-living-urban-areas-un-survey-finds- (28April 2019)

9 Selin Kesebir, and Pelin Kesebir, “A Growing Disconnection From Nature Is Evident in Cultural Products,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 12, no. 2 (2017): 258-269.

10 Oliver R. W. Pergams, and Patricia A. Zaradic, “Evidence for a Fundamental and Pervasive Shift Away from Nature-Based Recreation,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 105, No. 7 (2008): 2295-2300.

acting upon the external world through technological intervention, but instead requires that we approach our environmental problems as dysfunctional relationships. This requires that we understand that environmental problems are not just something “out there,” but are actually problems that reside, as well, within the human psyche. As with interpersonal relationships, we cannot change the behavior of others per se, but we can listen carefully and look for ways to change our actions and responses.

There is an urgent need for careful and focused observation utilizing the senses of the human body and engaging the full breadth of our cognitive capacities, including the realm of emotion as well as the transformational realm of the imagination. A recent study entitled “Beyond Knowing Nature: Contact, Emotion, Compassion, Meaning, and Beauty Are Pathways To Nature Connection” states that the act of interpreting meaning, beauty and feelings is an important strategy for connecting with nature.¹¹ Inviting the emotive and imaginative capacities into conversations about ecology does not mean turning away from science, that said, a sense of connection and love or disconnection and indifference shifts the types of questions we ask about the world and ourselves.

Relational Ethics & Aesthetics

Since the beginning of the modern environmental movement debates often have broken down into two camps: intrinsic vs. instrumental. The intrinsic camp tends to believe that nature should be valued based upon its inherent right to flourish. In contrast, instrumentalists base their arguments for the protection and potential exploitation of nature upon its usefulness to humans. To cite a concrete example, John Muir advocated preservation based on intrinsic values vs. Gifford

¹¹ Ryan Lumber, Miles Richardson, David Sheffield, “Beyond knowing nature: Contact, emotion, compassion, meaning, and beauty are pathways to nature connection” PLOS ONE 12 no. 5 e0177186.

Pinchot, the first head of the American Forest Service advocated for an instrumental relationship with nature. Gifford defined forestry as: “The art of producing from the forest whatever it can yield for the service of man.”¹² Interestingly, both intrinsic and instrumental positions can result in advocacy for sustainable causes and the protection of nature.

New research suggests that framing environmental issues as relational issues (rather than leaning on either intrinsic or instrumental ethical framing) has the potential to resonate much more broadly. One such study asserts that:

We see potential to utilize relational values as a means to solidify or enhance connections to the natural world, by invoking other held values that are not necessarily environmental. That is, instead of thinking of nature as external or outside of oneself, by connection to family, places we care about, and human well-being, ‘nature’ becomes part of an individual’s realm of care.¹³

Relational statements are distinct from intrinsic or instrumental statements because they highlight human relationships with environments. Examples include: “There are landscapes that say something about who we are as a community, a people,” or “[m]y health or the health of my family is related one way or another to the natural environment.”¹⁴ These statements resist a separateness that epitomize concepts of nature that are dominant in the West.

In Western cultures, the separation of humans from the rest of nature has a long history that permeates the realm of scientific study as well as our everyday attitudes towards nonhumans and the wider environment. Theologian Thomas Berry speaks to this separateness:

12 Gifford Pinchot, *The Training of a Forester* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1914), 13.

13 Sarah C. Klain et al., “Relational Values Resonate Broadly and Differently Than Intrinsic or Instrumental Values, or the New Ecological Paradigm.” *PLOS ONE* 12, no. 8 (2017). e0183962, 14.

14 Klain, 14.

Our scientific inquiries into the natural world have produced a certain atrophy in our human responses. Even when we recognize our intimacy, our family relations with all forms of existence about us, we cannot speak to those forms. We have forgotten the language needed for such communication. We find ourselves in an autistic situation. Emotionally we cannot get out of our confinement, nor can we let our outer world flow into our own beings. We cannot hear the voices or speak in response.¹⁵

Berry suggests that the degradation of feelings as a mode of knowing the world around us is particularly damaging to our relationships with the ecologies in which we are situated and that the assumption that scientific study is the only way to know hidden truths of landscapes has rendered us deaf to a whole spectrum of messages being voiced from the ecological community in which we are enmeshed.

Similarly, Robin Wall Kimmerer, an Anishinaabe scientist, integrates an indigenous perspective that seeks out connections between subjects in order to guide her practice as a scientist-- and to recover from the deficiency in knowledge created by an underlying presumption of separateness. Kimmerer was drawn to science out of curiosity and aesthetics: she wanted to know what made asters and goldenrod look so beautiful together. In her book *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*, she recounts the moment when a college professor sought to dissuade her of pursuing science:

He offered me only the cliché that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and since science separates the observer and the observed, by definition beauty could not be a valid scientific question. I should have been told that my questions were bigger than science could touch.¹⁶

15 Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1988), 16.

16 Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013) 45.

The biologist, philosopher and nature writer Andreas Weber suggests that we can only come into a good relationship with the environment by embracing aesthetics and feelings such as connection and love as relevant guides for action:

For centuries many scientists have explained that our joy in other beings is only a sentimental illusion. Such a viewpoint, however, ignores a deep human insight which connects us with other living subjects. Today, researchers are discovering that feeling--the experience of a subjective standpoint--and the desire to exist are phenomena that lie at the heart of a modern concept of biology. This message is so radical that, so far, it is not readily understood. It flouts respectable scientific opinion. Perhaps there is a subliminal resistance to new biology because it implies a wholesale reconsideration of so many other things. It means nothing less than the world is not an alien place for humanity, but our home in a profound existential sense. We share it with innumerable other beings that, like us, are full of feeling.”¹⁷

Weber goes on to recommend that we embrace a viewpoint called “poetic ecology,” which regards the environment and all biotic activity as being a creative rather than a simply mechanical process:

Poetic ecology restores the human to its rightful place within “nature”--without sacrificing the otherness, the strangeness, the nobility of other beings. It can be read as a scientific argument for deep wonder, the romantic connection and the feeling of being at home in nature are legitimate--and how these experiences help us develop a new view of life as a creative reality that is based on our profound first person observations of ecological relationships.¹⁸

¹⁷ Andreas Weber, *The Biology of Wonder: Aliveness, Feeling and the Metamorphosis of Science (Gabriola Island: New Society, 2016)*, 5.

¹⁸ Weber, 3.

Acknowledging that environmental relationships are not simply mechanical, but instead creative, means that art, language and other forms of communication are particularly fertile zones for unveiling and transforming ecological relationships. The anthropologist Joan Halifax notes that many indigenous cultures used story, song and art in order to come into relationship with wider ecologies. Far from being decorative or merely sentimental, cultural and artistic practices were seen as connective tissue between the human realm and the environment:

Earth and language meet and metabolize in zones of dreams and visions, in story, poetry, song, and prayer, and in direct communion with untamed beings. These zones comprise the boundary lands where social constraints and social habits are overridden, where tribal folk, shamans, and children, the mad and inspired, are caught in the holy wind of creation.¹⁹

Positioning art as a tool for communicating across the human and non-human divide, and positioning environmental issues as relational issues at their core, means that relational art is particularly suited for coming into new creative relationships within an ecological context. If a relational lens is used to conduct creative work, then local landscapes reveal themselves not as static fields of information nor as simple storehouses for resources but rather as complex webs of relationships. Claire Bishop describes relational art as a tool for reimagining our relationships:

In using people as a medium, participatory art has always had a double ontological status: it is both an event in the world and at one remove from it. As such, it has the capacity to communicate on two levels--to participants and to spectators--the paradoxes that are repressed in everyday discourse, and to elicit perverse, disturbing and pleasurable experiences that enlarge our capacity to imagine the world and our relations

¹⁹ Halifax, 84.

anew.²⁰

The unique position of art (as social performance or object that manipulates social processes) allows it to function as a fulcrum between the present landscape and social milieu and an imaginal realm in which new relationships become possible. Art offers the space for experimenting with new modes of perception and relationship with landscape. The relational forms that I create with my work provide a glimpse into a reality that we can “live into,” yet these forms continue to occupy a third space that is neither ordinary life nor purely artifice.

What happens when we envision the field of possible collaborators and participants as inclusive of the wider ecology in which humans find themselves? In her essay “Symbiogenesis, Symptoiesis, and Art Science Activisms,” Donna Haraway suggests that “science art activism” might help us to incorporate multi-species relationships built on noticing, interacting and even the creation of emotional bonds:

This is an ecology inspired by a feminist ethic of ‘response-ability’ ... in which questions of species difference are always conjugated with attentions to affect, entanglement, and rupture; an affective ecology in which creativity and curiosity characterize the experimental forms of life of all kinds of practitioners, not only the humans.²¹

One of the many reasons I am drawn to interstitial, marginal wilds of the city is because I see them as sites of contact between anthropocentric worlds of the modern city and the more-than-human ecological community. Through direct contact with the multispecies assemblages of the urban wilds, we can see the lives of humans and nonhumans coming into contact. Seeing evidence of the past intermingled with the

20 Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012) 284.

21 Donna Haraway, “Symbiogenesis, Symptoiesis, and Art Science Activisms for Staying with the Trouble,” in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*, ed. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing et. al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), m2.



Fig. 4. Robert Smithson and Nancy Holt, Photo by Gianfranco Gorgoni

lively present, we cannot help but imagine the world as a place that is messy and unfolding not through a singular management plan or vision but through the creative action of many organisms in interpenetrating relationships. We are both viewers of, and active participants in, this collaborative assemblage.

Earth Art: From Intervention To Relationship

From an art historical perspective my work shares many sympathies and fascinations with works made by Robert Smithson and Nancy Holt in Passaic, New Jersey in the 1960s and 1970s. This work was spatially grounded in the wake of sprawling suburbs, filled-in wetlands, abandoned mines and contaminated industrial sites. Having grown up in the area, Holt and Smithson felt an affinity for, but also disgust with, a landscape that was increasingly exploited and homogenized. I share the same ambivalence with the the place that I now inhabit. A place profoundly shaped by the global automotive industry, Warren, Michigan is a suburban/industrial town comprised of filled-in wetlands, contaminated surface water, derelict lots and rundown storefronts.

In many ways, Smithson's and Holt's practices mirrored, from a critical standpoint, the effect of globalization's transformation of landscape. Smithson's essay "The Monuments of Passaic" turns a critical and artistic eye to the local landscape, narrating a tour of oil derricks, wastewater ponds, and bridges, each reframed as a monument:

Passaic seems full of 'holes' compared to New York City, which seems tightly packed and solid, and those holes in a sense are the monumental vacancies that define, without trying, the memory-traced of an abandoned set of futures. Such futures are found in grade B Utopian films, and then imitated by the suburbanite.²²

Smithson saw landscape as a historical record that reveals insights about the psyche of the people living there. His ability to see meanings within ordinary landscapes and his critical sort of wonder still resonate

²² Robert Smithson, "The Monuments of Passaic," *Artforum* December (1967): 52-57.

today. In his gallery-based *Nonsites*, Smithson incorporated materials extracted from quarries with maps and photos of the locations themselves, intending for viewers not only to consider the materiality of landscape generally but also to inspire them to travel to the specific sites. Although using extraction and dislocation as methods, practices that formally separate and divide elements of landscape, Smithson had desires for his work to offer new connections between people and landscape.²³

During their explorations in Passaic, Nancy Holt created *Pine Barrons* (1975), a film shot while in motion... out the window of a car and on foot. Although no people are seen in the film, the voices of locals walking along with Holt narrate their connection with landscape, and the myths and stories of the Pine Barrens. The juxtaposition first person narratives of place and the constantly moving camera that never captures a human figure evokes a sense of longing for connection. Holt and I share an interest in infrastructure as sites for human connection to the earth. Her poetic reappropriation of familiar concrete tunnels transformed into large-scale installations, as with *Sun Tunnels* (1973–76), directs attention to the elemental and to the

23 Nancy Holt, "Fall Exhibitions Celebration Keynote Lecture," at the Princeton University Art Museum, 5 October 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hRNeN9Y1YQo&t=3023s> (29 April 2019). 34:52.



Fig. 5. Stone Ruins Tour by Nancy Holt

impossibility of representing the earth. Nancy Holt also employed performative strategies and direct experience in her work--e.g., *Stone Ruin Tour* (1967), a guided walk performed with Smithson, Joan Jonas and other friends. Following a script that functioned as an event score, the walk initially appeared to be a standard guided tour, but a deliberate lack of detail caused Smithson and Jonas to transition from passive participants to more actively engaged collaborators.

Smithson was transfixed by entropy and decay. He often employed methodologies that mirrored the industrial transformation of landscape, including extractions of resources and large-scale interventions. In his rearrangements, he treated the earth's surface as inert matter. By contrast, Holt's practice demonstrates a concern for lived experience and cosmic order (such as with *Sun Tunnels*). While my creative research shares Smithson's interest in reading the landscape as a work of art, I do not, see the land as inert matter awaiting intervention. Rather, I host events that invite people to perceive the landscape itself as a living assemblage already full of meanings. In this way the methodologies that I employ more closely resemble the work of Nancy Holt and Fluxus artists, who sought to reveal the forms of everyday life as art in themselves.

One hallmark of Fluxus is the use of a "score" to invite engagement



Fig. 6. Sun Tunnels by Nancy Holt

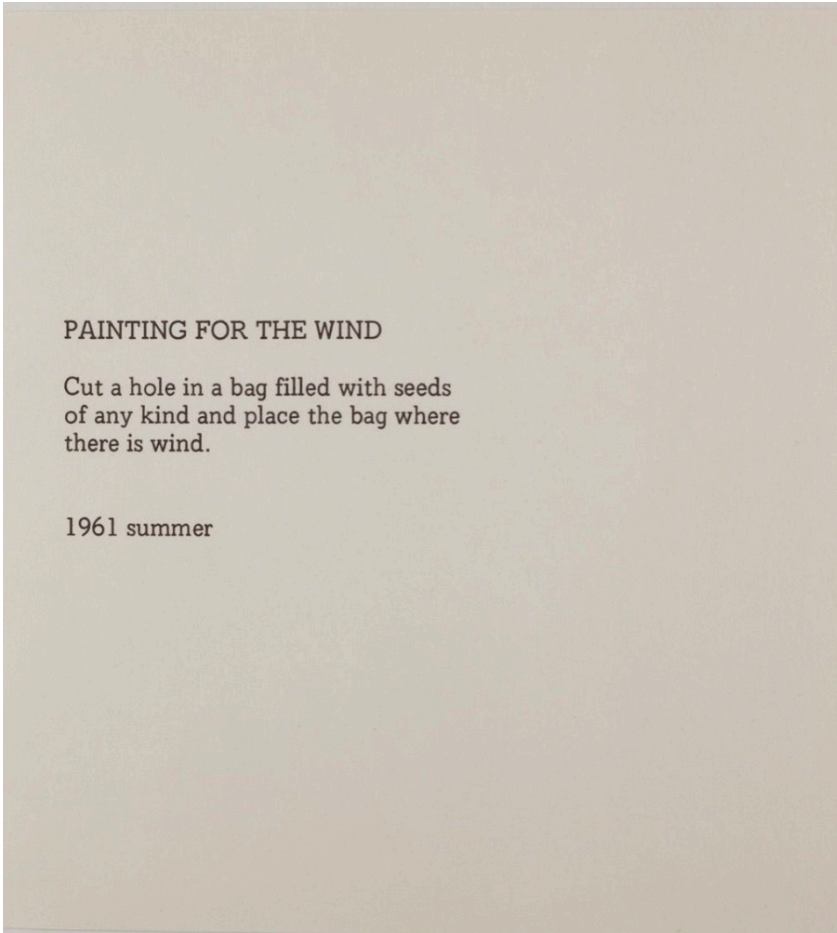


Fig. 7. Painting for the Wind, in *Grapefruit* by Yoko Ono

and participation. Scores often use text, diagrams or symbols as instructions intended to be interpreted by collaborators and audience members (who, through participation, can become de facto collaborators). The text below, by Yoko Ono, illustrates a score that, when performed, has transformative potential vis-à-vis landscape--in this case, through the subsequent sprouting of seedlings--and seeks to create a novel relationship between the participant and the landscape.²⁴ The meaning of the work is experienced through the

²⁴ Yoko Ono, "Painting for the Wind," in *Grapefruit: A book of Instructions and Drawings* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1964).

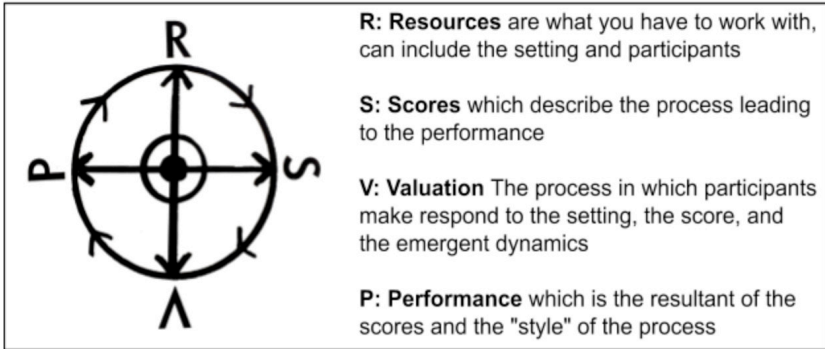


Fig. 8. The RSVP Cycle, Illustration By Lawrence Halprin with adapted text by Bridget Quinn

imagination of audience and can also be brought into being through the audiences active performance of the text.

In planning site-specific performative artworks, I often include language and diagramming to help me to visualize the aesthetics of movement through physical and psychic space. This method closely resembles the way that fluxus artists used scores as mediating object between audience, artist and environment. In the book *RSVP Cycles: Creative Processes in the Human Environment*, Lawrence Halprin articulates a useful way to think about a wide range of scores, their context and effect on performances, called the RSVP cycle.²⁵

Careful attention to the form of a score allows artists to create parameters for action that disrupt common behavioral patterns while opening up new, previously unknown courses of action and relation. The character of scores vary widely- one of the most noticeable variables is the degree to which a score controls outcomes or conversely energizes the creativities of participants.

The events and exhibitions hosted by Matthew Coolidge and the Center for Land Use Interpretation or CLUI (1994-present) are also prime examples of creative practice seeking to help us perceive the landscape in new and critical ways. The work of CLUI includes intensive

²⁵ Lawrence Halprin, *The RSVP Cycles: Creative Processes in the Human Environment*. (New York: George Braziller, 1969) 191-193.



Fig. 9. Matthew Coolidge, of the Center for Land Use Interpretation

research into vernacular landscapes tours and exhibitions, as well as an online database of sites of interest in the American landscape. CLUI typically focuses on sites that are heavily disturbed, huge in scale and oftentimes unseen and not discussed, one example being a recent exhibition at its Los Angeles museum that features photos of large-scale “earthworks” which are actually phosphorus mines (a critical ingredient of industrial fertilizer). The exhibition employs traditional methods of landscape interpretation (e.g., descriptive landmark signage) but remains distinct through its application to

sites that have typically been neglected or hidden or deeply disrupted by industry, and such change in focus has a stronger tendency to reveal the connections between our everyday actions and large-scale environmental change.

As opposed to physical intervention, Coolidge directs attention to the large-scale transformations that our way of life has already inflicted upon the landscape, as he states in a recent interview:

We believe that there is work to be done in just understanding the current conditions of the world (in our case the United States). What is out there, what have we done? What does it really look like? And then, based on that we can make better judgments in the future when we have a better idea of what we are working with. Also, just to encourage people to be more literate in their readings of the landscape so they see more and they understand more, ourselves included. A lot of what we do is not teaching, it's exploring and shared exploration. It's different to research from a scientific point of view where science establishes a theorem, and then you try to prove your theorem. In our sense we sort of support a kind of open-ended research where there isn't a specific objective. We aren't trying to prove "this" that we already suspect. It's kind of open-ended in that we are just following patterns and strains as they develop and trying to get to the bottom or top, whatever that is.²⁶

While my work shares CLUI's open-ended, exploratory approach to landscape, it differs in its focus on the more mundane and "everyday." CLUI tends to engage in vaster landscapes like remote mines and large industrial sites, whereas my work resides in smaller, more accessible patches of local urban nature. Both scales are necessary and complement each other; however, considering that larger

²⁶ Matthew Coolidge, "Matthew Coolidge on the Center of Land Use Interpretation," Édh a School of Art, December 2013. <<https://vimeo.com/132418526>> (29 April 2019) 11:00.

environmental problems may soon force us to sustain ourselves within more local bioregions, my work strives to enhance understanding of our relationships to more immediate places. The local bioregion offers firm grounding upon which to base a relational way of looking at the larger issues of the biosphere as a whole.

The research-intensive work of Helen and Newton Harrison is similarly rooted in observations of landscape, yet rather than simply documenting and describing environmental degradation they create meticulous and evocative visualizations of proposed solutions. Their creative renderings of ecological restoration projects--such as *Atempause: Breathing Space For the Sava River* (1989-1990) and *Lessons From the Genius of Place* (2003-2008)--have resulted in actual policy changes and enormous restoration efforts. Their projects demonstrate the power of artists to navigate vast realms of information, to cross disciplines, and to create needed visions of the future. They describe "conversational drift" as a critical research methodology. The art historian and critic Grant Kester described the results of this approach as "the unanticipated new images and forms of knowledge generated by open-ended dialogue across disciplinary boundaries, focused on a given ecosystem."²⁷ The creative work that resides in the gallery is the result of years of ongoing conversations with ecologists, residents, and local political officials.

The Environmental Performance Agency (2017-present) is a Brooklyn-based artist collective that situates its creative action within the context of nearby marginal wilds. Their methodologies include performative strategies for empathy and connection with multi-species communities. They define themselves as "an artist collective using artistic, social, and embodied practices to advocate for the agency of all living performers co-creating our environment, specifically through the lens of spontaneous urban plants, native or migrant."²⁸

²⁷ Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community + Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California, 2004) 64.

²⁸ Christopher Kennedy, et al., "About," Environmental Performance Agency,



Fig. 10. Lessons from the Genius of Place, Helen and Newton Harrison



Fig. 11. The human members of the Environmental Performance Agency include: Catherine Grau, Andrea Haengi, Ellie Irons, and Christopher Kennedy.

While their acronym (EPA) conveys purposeful political implications, their creative actions take the form of poetic invitations to develop playful, intimate and friendly alliances with nonhuman life. Their events have included participatory movement workshops that invited audience members to use their bodies to interpret the movements of plants, small-scale interventions called “Asphalt Cut-Outs” in which they unearthed compacted soil from beneath pavement so that it could eventually become repopulated with weeds, and creative writing workshops in which participants composed messages on behalf of urban plants and sent them to the United States Environmental Protection Agency. Though we work in different locations--Brooklyn, New York and Warren, Michigan--the similarities in our methods and interests have prompted us to begin collaboration on a Feral Landscape Guide, a publication regarding rewilding manicured lawns.

Place-based education incorporates a similar ethos of creativity and imagination as tools to enliven our understandings of ecologies. Mitchell Thomashow, a proponent of place-based education, frames his work in terms of creating a “place-based ecology of perception” that emphasizes the importance of weaving two “interconnected learning pathways—natural history/local ecology, the life of the

2017 <environmentalperformanceagency.com/about/> (29 April 2019).

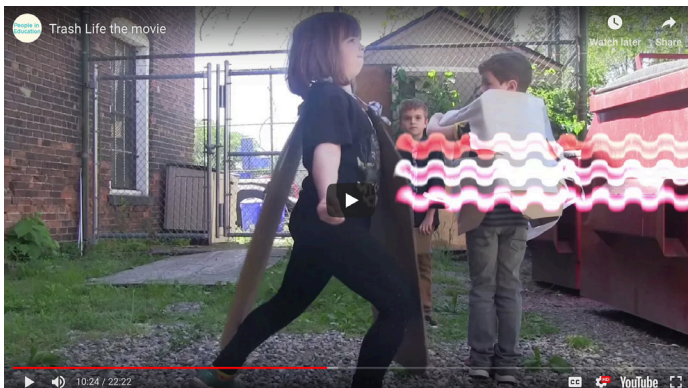


Fig. 12. Video Still from Trash Life, a video produced by People In Education

imagination.”²⁹

Fusing environmental inquiry with creative practice, the Detroit-based organization People In Education exemplifies this type of place-based approach: resident artists attend classroom environments, where the students develop their own questions about the places where they live. The teachers and artists facilitate creative inquiry around those questions.³⁰ One of their projects is a short film called “Trash Life,”³¹ produced by first- and second-graders at The Boggs School with the help of artist Matthew Daher and classroom teacher Kelly Rickert. The film emerged from a question about the smokestacks of a nearby trash incinerator and involved students directly with uncovering the larger answers lingering in their environment, spurring them to develop media and communication techniques to showcase their individual perspectives on local issues.

Environmental education, however, has a long history of using extended trips to remote locations for the purpose of connecting to nature. Expensive and therefore inaccessible to under-resourced communities, these approaches unfortunately extend Western/Romantic conceptions of nature as something “out there” to be explored and even conquered.³² By significant contrast, adventures into nearby and everyday ecologies allow for a more widely accessible path to environmental relationships that are reciprocal and just, rather than imperialistic and exploitative, and available to participants in their immediate vicinity without significant cost.

29 Mitchell Thomashow, *Bringing the Biosphere Home: Learning to Perceive Global Environmental Change* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 5.

30 *People In Education*, “About,” People In Education <<https://www.peopleineducation.org/about>> (29 April 2019).

31 *Trash Life*, produced and directed by Matt Daher, Kelly Rickert, students at the James and Grace Lee Boggs School, 22min., *People In Education*, 29 March 2018 <youtube.com/watch?time_continue=3&v=KKKdEm9NeKw> (29 April 2019).

32 Jay W. Roberts, “Re-Placing Outdoor Education: Diversity, Inclusion, and the Micro Adventures of the Everyday,” *Journal of Outdoor Recreation, Education, and Leadership* 10, No. 1 (2018): 23.

Localization

My creative inquiry focuses on local contexts for two primary reasons: (1) it is a scale at which the results of our behaviors become sensible and where intimate ecological relationships can be created; and (2) due to energy descent and global warming, human societies will inevitably need to shift towards more local ways of living.

In *The Localization Reader: Adapting To the Coming Downshift*, Raymond De Young and Thomas Princen argue that, in the context of climate change and energy decent, human communities will eventually be forced to live within biophysical limits of the regions that we inhabit. This is not a matter of choice; it will be a matter of survival. They argue that we should look for ways to make this a positive transition, one in which people choose to adapt to a more locally sustainable way of life in advance of environmental catastrophe: “In a localizing process, people’s attention is focused on everyday behavior within place based communities. ... Ultimately localization’s high level goals are increasing the long term well being of people while maintaining, even improving, the integrity of natural systems.”³³

Positive localization has the capacity to end the exploitation of distant ecologies and people and initiate a simpler, slower way of life. Not only for purposes of ecological health but also as a matter of social justice, we will need to relearn the ability to live largely within a more limited bioregion. Such localization is distinct from the more popularized, commercial forms of localism that are attainable mostly only by the wealthy. The affluent lives of citizens of the global North have come at the expense of both people on the other side of the earth and the poor within our own nations. Positive localization, on the other hand, has the capacity to end the exploitation of distant ecologies and people and initiate a simpler, slower way of life that do not rely so heavily upon huge infusions of internationally sourced materials. Not only for pur-
³³ Raymond De Young and Thomas Princen, *The Localization Reader* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012), xvii.

poses of ecological health but also as a matter of social justice, we will need to relearn the ability to live largely within a more limited bioregion.

Amateur Knowledge

Only in tangible contact with the ground and sky can we learn how to orient and to navigate in the multiple dimensions that now claim us.³⁴

-David Abrams

In approaching my primary research question I sought to gain a more nuanced understanding of how our environmental relationships are inscribed upon the landscape itself within marginal ecologies. I explored local history through site visits to the local history center, conversations with local residents, and reading up on environmental regulations and local hazards. As I researched the hidden truths of vernacular landscapes I also relied heavily upon primary research into my local environment and my own interpretations of landscape. In my work I grant authority to first-person observations and experiences with local landscapes. It is through direct engagement with place, not just engagement in the theoretical realm, that meanings are uncovered. I invite people to explore subjective and embodied forms of inquiry during events like *The Resonant Underbelly of Suburbia* (2017-2018), *How the Earth Sees Us* (2018), *Constructed Realities and the Never Ending Painting* (2018), and *Skin of the Earth Cinema* (2019-Ongoing). These imaginative engagements with landscape seek to create space for more connected and increasingly reciprocal relationships to emerge.

As opposed to bureaucrats - city planners, and businesspeople who oftentimes make decisions about the transformation of landscapes based upon plat maps, data, and economics-- pedestrian understandings of place include the lushness of actual sensual experience. Maps and data sets necessarily represent a simplified reality, where certain

³⁴ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books), x.

aspects are rendered in great detail while features deemed unimportant remain unrendered and larger contexts are invisible. The geographer J.B. Harley explores the implications of disembodied knowledge of maps and data in his essay “Deconstructing the Map”:

The question has now become: do such empty images have their consequences in the way we think about the world? Because all the world is designed to look the same, is it easier to act upon it without noticing the social effects? ... [I]n our own society it is still easy for bureaucrats, developers and ‘planners’ to operate on the bodies of unique places without measuring the social dislocations of ‘progress.’ While the map is never the reality, in such ways it helps to create a different reality.³⁵

From the pedestrian perspective the world is no longer a blank slate. The world experienced through walking and direct contact is one that is full of lively and unfathomable details. Those details are far more

35 J.B. Harley, “Deconstructing the Map,” *Cartographica* 26, no. 2 (1989): 14.



Fig. 13. *Our Bodies, Our Soils*, Claire Pentecost

likely to evoke feelings of wonder, curiosity, joy and disgust--where- as a map remains an abstraction or fact. Western industrialized cul- ture has an extreme bias towards disembodied and abstract ways of knowing which privilege the experience of distant experts over what is before our very eyes. I believe it is critical that we examine the many ways that this bias impedes attachment and care for the places where we live. People generally tend to be more inspired when an emotional connection exists. Where the goal is deeper understanding and care for ecology, simply exploring landscape abstractly or theoretically-- through text, data sets or evidence offered by others--does not pos- sess the same potential as direct physical experience and the motivat- ing connections that result.

In this process I am unabashedly amateur, in its etymological sense (from the French phrase "amoureux de," which means "lover of"). The art of exploring and making sense of our surroundings is not the exclu- sive domain of experts. The artist Claire Pentecost uses a methodology that she calls "the public amateur."³⁶ This methodology involves amat- uer inquiry made public through art and writing. Using this approach she conducts investigation of complex scientific and political issues. Pentecost does not hide her amateurism; instead she wears it on her sleeve as she creates art that interrogates our relationships with soil and food production. Her research into soil and industrial agriculture manifests as exhibitions, text and educational presentations that reach beyond traditional art venues and audiences. Such is the case with her work *Exepochacra* (2005), a piece of writing on her website that outlines research into how American companies like Monsanto have altered the landscape of Argentina in drastic ways and how the tech- nology of genetically modified crops and industrial farming has led to extreme and harmful concentrations of wealth.³⁷ The same champion-

36 Thom Donovan, "5 Questions for Contemporary Practice with Claire Pen- tecost," *Art 21*, 31 January 2012, <[magazine.art21.org/2012/01/31/5-ques- tions-for-contemporary-practice-with-claire-pentecost /#.XMc4Q5NKhsM](http://magazine.art21.org/2012/01/31/5-ques- tions-for-contemporary-practice-with-claire-pentecost/#.XMc4Q5NKhsM)> (29 April 2019).

37 Claire Pentecost, "*Exepochacra*," *Public Amateur*, 2005 <[publicamateur. org/?p=92](http://publicamateur.org/?p=92)> (April 29 2019).

ing of local amateur knowledge takes place in her project *Our Bodies, Our Soils* (2015)--a series of workshops in which she invited participants to create portraits of their backyard soils through the process of soil chromatography. These soil portraits and samples were displayed within a gallery and viewed by participants through a microscope. In a presentation delivered at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, entitled "The Quick and Dirty: Towards a Civic Art," Pentecost quotes Edward Said, who describes the motivation of amateurs as:

The political scientist James C. Scott argues similarly that large-scale developments of the state have often failed due to their lack of attention to local knowledge, and he posits that amateur local knowledge is indispensable in the creation of just societies. According to Scott, amateur local knowledge and inquiry is critical because it enables a deeper, site-specific understanding of an environment's problems, as well as potential solutions that are durable for the particular community. When local knowledge is ignored solutions are bound to fail.³⁸ We have largely entrusted care for the environment to designated experts. These experts rely upon generic knowledge and abstractions of information of necessity (due to the sheer size of the task). Increasingly mobile populations results in a lack of ongoing observation of environmental changes specific to place, and perhaps just as importantly this mobility results in an erosion of a sense of connection to particular places. Scott refers to the particular local perspective that results from emotional investment and ongoing observation of place as "mētis", he uses the metaphor of a ship captain and an insurance company to illustrate the difference between the generic view and mētis:

We might reasonably think of situated local knowledge as being partisan knowledge as opposed to generic knowledge. That is, the holder of such knowledge typically has a passionate interest in a particular outcome. An insurer of a commercial shipping for a large, highly capitalize maritime firm can afford

³⁸ James C. Scott, *Seeing Like A State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

to rely upon probability distributions for accidents. But for a sailor or captain hoping for a safe voyage, it is the outcome of a single event, a single trip that matters. Mētis is the ability and experience to influence the outcome--to improve the odds in a particular instance.³⁹

It is easy to see how citizens living within an bioregion will have a perspective that is distinct from the commercial interests that pass through, and even from the government officials that often choose short sighted economic gains over the long term health of an environment. By the time environmental consequences can be felt, the commercial interests and the politicians may be gone, and the people that still live there will be left with the consequences.

In Michigan specifically, it is notable that experts have not prevented the Flint water crisis (2015-ongoing) and other environmental disasters like the rampant contamination of surface water and soil with PFAs and PFOAs, chemicals used in as a flame retardant in manufacturing and fire fighting foams that are persistent highly toxic.⁴⁰ Both of these examples of state failures to protect citizens illustrate the importance of local knowledge and communities of careful repeated observation of local environments. The recent state coordinated surveys of PFA's contamination, which has resulted in the discovery of some 11,000 contaminated sites was triggered by the efforts of a ragtag group of residents in Rockford, Michigan who called themselves Concerned Citizens for Responsible Remediation (CCRR). This group assembled after Lynn McIntosh, local piano teacher and writer who lived just blocks from a tannery launched a failed attempt to get the city to do an environmental assessment of the newly vacant land once occupied by the shoe manufacturer Wolverine. This failed attempt lead to the CCRR conducting an independent research project that lasted three years

³⁹ Scott, 318.

⁴⁰ Keith Matheny, "PFAS contamination is Michigan's biggest environmental crisis in 40 years," Detroit Free Press, 26 April 2019. <<https://www.freep.com/in-depth/news/local/michigan/2019/04/25/pfas-contamination-michigan-crisis/3365301002/>> (28 April 2019).

and included public document requests, conversations with scientists and even observation of the demolition on the old factory and other on-the-ground detective work .⁴¹

As a matter of fact, experts have been complicit in environmental deregulation, the privatization of our water, and defunding public education in favor of commercialized education alternatives that have proven largely less effective.⁴² As our regulatory experts hold hands with the multinational corporations that claim larger shares of ownership of the planet, amateur local inquiry and civic engagement are sorely needed to restore care for our environment as a commons.

The Wilds of Warren, Michigan

The landscapes of the suburbs and edge cities like Warren are sites of overwhelming forgetfulness. The seeming cohesion of our grids of strip malls, vast manufacturing sites, chain restaurants and cheaply constructed suburban homes is paradoxically disorienting. *In Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*, the cultural critic, activist, and writer Lucy Lippard writes about this suburban condition:

The loss of contrast, of different histories, settlement patterns, and cultural markers results in an undifferentiated sprawl and a supremely disorienting landscape, now recognized as an environmental hazard as great as the pollution and decay of the inner city.⁴³

41 Sara Talpos, "Citizen sleuths exposed pollution from a century-old Michigan factory, with nationwide implications," *Science*, 16 May 2019, <<https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2019/05/citizen-sleuths-exposed-pollution-century-old-michigan-factory-nationwide-implications>> (May 27 2019).

42 Mark Binelli, "Michigan Gambled on Charter Schools. Its Children Lost," *New York Times*, 5 September 2017. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/05/magazine/michigan-gambled-on-charter-schools-its-children-lost.html>> (28 April 2019).

43 Lucy R. Lippard, *Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: The New Press, 1997), 233.

The marginal wilds--the overgrown, the neglected edge-spaces, the swampy, peripheral spots deemed too small for development--resist assimilation into the intended image of the city. In these messy places where objects come together in surprising combinations, where the residue of human and non-human actions exist together in the same living assemblage, new meanings and stories rise to the surface with no one person controlling the story completely. In these margins, evidence of action and history send the mind wandering in an active and interpretive way of looking. Urban theorist Edward W. Soja suggests the value of this kind of search for alternative meanings and argues that it is an operation of deconstruction:

'To deconstruct' it is argued is to reinscribe and resituate meanings, events and objects within broader movements and structures; it is so to speak, to reverse the imposing tapestry in order to expose in all its unglamorous disheveled tangle the threads constituting the well-heeled image it presents to the world.⁴⁴

These are places where we can come into contact with a messier type of history. By looking to the weedy margins we can encounter our history and present that is neither written in history books nor tidy nor resolved.

It was in the urban creek system of the Red Run and Bear Creek that I began my own explorations into local marginal ecologies. When I started to really look at these places I began to see clues about the city's ecological relationships. As the road-facing signage shows, in Warren the waterways that flow through the city are described and managed as "drains." The important difference between a drain and a creek is how we treat them. A creek is seen as an ecosystem or a habitat, whereas a drain is seen as a place to dump or dispose of waste. The signs marking the Red Run refer to it as "Red Run Drain." The choice of the word "Drain" renders the next phrase, "Ours To Protect," quite confusing, because people are not practiced at protecting a drain in the
⁴⁴ Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies : the Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989), 14.



Fig. 14. Sign along the Red Run



Fig. 15. Altered sign along the Red Run



Fig. 16. No Trespassing Sign posted along the Red Run



Fig. 17. Big Beaver Creek in Warren, Michigan

same way that they might otherwise be inspired to protect a creek.

Moreover, the edges of the creeks are densely packed with “No Trespassing” signs, sternly communicating that this land is not a commons, that it is not in fact truly considered “ours to protect.” This alluringly walkable place forbids curious walkers, but for those intrepid enough to trespass beyond the signs, out of sight and down into the riparian zones beneath the busy roadways, the creeks are bursting with life that is both beautiful and troubled, hosting herds of deer, flocks of ducks, and great blue herons foraging in the wet, green folds for food amongst the litter and other evidence of human carelessness.

Reciprocal Healing

During my explorations in nearby marginal wilds, I experienced first-hand the restorative effects of time spent in nature. This prompted me to wonder if events that bring people into direct contact with urban ecologies could foster a type of reciprocal healing between people and place. If our lack of care and attention for the urban wilds had led to their contamination and degradation, could it not be possible

that events focused on reconnection with these places might help us to heal the wounds that we have inflicted upon the environment and our psyches? The concept of a reciprocal relationship between people and the environment, prevalent in many indigenous cosmologies, re-emerged in Western sciences in 1984, when Edward O. Wilson published the book *Biophilia: The Human Bond With Other Species*. The book explores Wilson's theory that humans evolved in symbiotic and reciprocal relationships with other species. Wilson believed that environmental destruction and species extinctions had the potential to destroy the human species materially, psychologically and even spiritually.⁴⁵

Increasingly we are seeing the many ways in which our health and wellbeing are tied to the state of the environment and other living beings. Beyond the obvious detrimental health effects of a degraded environment, mounting evidence suggests that human beings are generally happier⁴⁶ and better able to respond with compassion⁴⁷ when we spend time in nature. Time spent in nature has even been shown to have restorative effects on cognitive functioning.⁴⁸ Conversely, when we are cut off from nature, living in increasingly sterile and artificial environments, we tend to suffer from increased anxiety and depression⁴⁹, and we become less able to deal with conflict.⁵⁰ The common condition, directed attention fatigue is caused by immersion in environ-

45 Edward O. Wilson, *Biophilia: The Human Bond With Other Species* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

46 Colin Capaldi, Raelyne Dopko, and John Zelenski, "The Relationship Between Nature Connectedness and Happiness: a Meta-analysis," *Frontiers in Psychology* 5 (2014).

47 Stephen Kaplan. "The Restorative Benefits of Nature: Towards an Integrative Framework," *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 16 (1995): 169-182.

48 Mark G. Berman, John Jonides and Stephen Kaplan, "The Cognitive Benefits of Interacting with Nature," *Psychological Science* 19, no.12 (2008) 1207-1212.

49 Christopher E. Stamper et al., "The Microbiome of the Built Environment and Human Behavior: Implications for Emotional Health and Well-Being in Postmodern Western Societies," *International Review of Neurobiology* 131, (2016): 310- 313.

50 Frances E. Kuo, William C. Sullivan, "Environment and Crime in the Inner City: Does Vegetation Reduce Crime?" *Environment and Behavior* 33 No. 3 (2001) 343-367.



Fig. 18. Example of marginal nature, rich in soft fascination

ments that are highly distracting or that place high demands on our attentional capacity, such as urban environments, and many modern work environments. Directed attention fatigue leaves people irritable, indecisive, antisocial, and less able to help others.⁵¹ Turning towards the environment in order to heal ourselves can have profound implications for the healing of the environment. We must begin to see the healing of the earth and the healing of ourselves as deeply interwoven processes. Encouragingly, even small patches of urban wilderness have

51 Stephen Kaplan and Marc G Bergman "Directed Attention as a Common Resource for Executive Functioning," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 5 no. 1 (2010): 43-57.

the capacity to provide people with the restorative effects of nature.⁵²

Attention restoration theory proffers that activities that provide people with a sense of being away from everyday troubles and immersed in environments that are rich in soft fascination, such as nature, help us to recover from a state of directed attention fatigue.⁵³ The A.W.E. Society's events typically occur in locations that people do not typically explore, notwithstanding that these places reside in their local environments. These micro-adventures facilitate such sense of being away from everyday worries. The chosen locations are rich in features which evoke soft fascination, a form of involuntary attention. Humans are evolutionarily tuned to be attentive to aspects of our environment that are critical to our survival. This hardwired attention to the environment increases our ability to avoid attack by predators and makes us naturally drawn to plants, animals, and water, all of which support our survival as sustenance, medicine or kin. The stimuli that elicits soft fascination tends to capture our attention because these elements of our environment are related to survival yet do not trigger a fight or flight reflex; examples include: plants, water, cooking fires and non threatening animals. Soft fascination, which is a critical element to attention restoration theory, is distinct from other forms of involuntary attention because, it doesn't consume all our mental bandwidth, we are left with room for reflection.⁵⁴

The practice of forest bathing (also called *Shinrin-yoku*), operationalizes attention restoration theory. Slowness and attention to the senses in wilderness settings, are combined to enhance the therapeutic benefits of nature. Surprisingly, forest bathing originated as a ecotourism campaign in Japan in the 1980's. In early forest bathing walks, partic-

⁵² Raymond De Young et al., "Some Psychological Benefits of Time Spent in Urban Nature: Mental Vitality From Time Spent in Nearby Nature," *Advances in Psychology Research* 116 (2017).

⁵³ Kaplan, 174.

⁵⁴ Avik Basu, Jason Duvall and Rachel Kaplan, "Attention Restoration Theory: Exploring the Role of Soft Fascination and Mental Bandwidth," *Environment and Behavior*, May 16, 2018.

ipants underwent simple blood pressure and cortisol tests before and after walks in the forest. What started as a marketing campaign for nature recreation areas helped to develop a critical base of knowledge about how environments and sensory connections to natural environments affect people physiologically and psychologically. Forest therapy has demonstrated a wide range of physical and psychological benefits: increased immune functioning, stress reduction, pain reduction, and relief from depression and anxiety.⁵⁵

Forest therapy practitioners utilize perceptual prompts called “invitations,” to maximize the psychological benefits of time spent in nature. Thoughtfully designed perceptual interventions are help people to feel the psychological benefits of environments more acutely. In the book *Playful Perception: Choosing How To Experience Your World*, the psychologist Herbert Leff developed a series of “awareness plans” intended to help enhance creativity, enjoyment and insight into one’s environment:

Despite the satisfaction possible from just noticing things and actively using our knowledge to perceive our surroundings more insightfully, our normal awareness plans often drift into lazily ignoring much of the richness of the world. We get used to things, overlook much, and simply store knowledge without using it to enliven our perceptions.⁵⁶

Leff states that students and research participants have demonstrated the power of awareness plans to achieve “enhanced creativity and self direction,” particularly in educational environments.⁵⁷ Leff’s awareness plans range from those intended to enhance enjoyment, aesthetic awareness, tuning into the senses, evaluating, and imagining

55 Margaret M. Hansen, Reo Jones and Kirsten Tocchini, “Shinrin-Yoku (Forest Bathing) and Nature Therapy: A State-of-the-Art Review,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 851, no. 14 (2017).

56 Herbert L. Leff. *Playful Perception: Choosing How to Experience Your World*. (Burlington, Vermont: Waterfront Books, 1984), 53.

57 Leff, iii.

improvements to what he calls “basic enlightenment” and “synergistic consciousness.”⁵⁸ The environmental psychologist Jason Duvall conducted a study of how “cognitive engagement strategies” inspired by Leff’s awareness plans could influence the health benefits received from short walks. Duvall found that walkers who used cognitive engagement strategies experienced improved attentional functioning and higher levels of reported contentment when compared to walkers who simply walked without an engagement strategy.⁵⁹

In order to better understand how the A.W.E. Society events affect participants, I began asking them to describe how these events make them feel, using just one word. I found that most responses fell into three categories: (1) calm (i.e., relaxed, serene, peaceful), (2) prosocial (i.e., connected, enmeshed, playful), and (3) curious (i.e., alive, invigorated, awake, inspired, full of ideas). I was delighted to hear responses suggesting that the events were restorative.

According to psychologist Barbara Fredrickson, positive emotions such as those listed above are uniquely helpful for encouraging creativity and reducing automatic behaviors. Just as fight-or-flight emotions like anxiety and fear are biologically linked to our need to survive immediate threats, positive emotions are also adaptive but provide access to a broader range of possible responses. Fredrickson found that positive emotions aided in “a momentarily broadened scope of awareness, creating a form of consciousness within individuals that included a wider array of thoughts, actions, and percepts than typical.”⁶⁰ According to Fredrikson, positive emotions--like happiness, joy and love--have served as better aids to avoiding threats that are less immediate but just as real:

58 Leff, vii.

59 Jason Duvall, “Enhancing the Benefits of Outdoor Walking with Cognitive Engagement Strategies,” *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 31 no. 1 (2011): 27 - 35.

60 Barbara L. Fredrickson, “Chapter One - Positive Emotions Broaden and Build,” *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 47 (2013): 15.

Positive emotions ... carried adaptive significance for our human ancestors over longer timescales. Having a momentarily broadened mindset is not a key ingredient in the recipe for any quick survival maneuver. It is, however, in the recipe for discovery, discovery of new knowledge, new alliances, and new skills. In short, broadened awareness led to the accrual of new resources that might later make the difference between surviving and succumbing to various threats.⁶¹

The positive emotions widely reported by the participants of A.W.E. Society events might prove to be important wayfinding tools as we enter into a time in which we urgently need to reassess our fundamental relationship with the environment. Can the wonder, joy and connection that we feel in urban ecologies provide us the insight, intuition and tenacious sense of love that we need to reimagine a good life within troubled environments and uncertain times?

One critique that could easily be leveled at my focus on human psychology and affect, is that it is anthropocentric. It bears repeating that I am locating environmental problems as problems of human relationships with nature. As the Environmental Scholar David Orr Asserts: "The disordering of ecological systems and of the great biogeochemical cycles of the earth reflects a prior disorder in the thought, perception, imagination, intellectual priorities, and loyalties inherent in the industrial mind."⁶²

⁶¹ Fredrickson, 15.

⁶² David Orr, *Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment, and the Human Prospect*. (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1994), 3.



METHODOLOGIES

Trespassing: An Ontology of

Re-Connection

Marginal nature is not consistently managed by the state or by private citizens. Distinct from parks, these emergent ecologies are not pre-designed but rather sprout with their own logic. Escaped garden plants, invasive flora, and resilient native plants--they all commune in these



places. Groundhogs, racoons, possums, and coyotes make their homes in these lively areas of non-human creative agency. Human artifacts accumulate, as well, sparking the imagination to construct narratives and potential histories and meanings--sometimes relatively banal like the aftermath of an apparent teenage hangout, sometimes more serious as with uncovering the makeshift shelters of human inhabitants of marginal wilds. While hosting a vocal meditation at a roadside culvert, the A.W.E. Society stumbled upon someone's makeshift home,

a stark reminder that these untended places are not only where nature has been marginalized but also where dispossessed people have sought refuge.

A lack of consistent maintenance permits these wild places to spring to life, yet the same neglect exposes them to contamination. These places require care and attention but not in the customary fashion of assimilation into the grid. The wildness of these places provides a complex and critical habitat for many plants and animals; these are critical zones of multispecies familiarity. If they were to be transformed into manicured parks, then they would become assimilated to human-centered desires at the expense of the rich complexity that nurtures many forms of life. Rather, what is needed is the development of a new ethic suited to an ecological commons and the development of reciprocal relationships that do not view human needs as oppositional to the needs of other species.

Curating social events to facilitate engagement with these forbidden places activates the potential for building the social connections necessary to restore our public rights and responsibilities to the commons. The Ramblers Association of the UK demonstrates the power of mass trespassing. Since the 1930s, when the Ramblers staged a mass trespass of Kinder Peak, the Association has been encouraging walking, advocating for public land access, and protecting the countryside. Their use of trespassing as a tactic and political strategy has resulted in significant legislative change, including the Countryside and Rights of Way Act, The Right to Roam, and the Land Reform (Scotland) Act of 2003.⁶³

In an attempt to rediscover the landscape as a set of dynamic relationships, I choose to navigate in ways that actively ignore boundaries. I want to make real, even if only for a moment, a relationship with landscape not as master or owner, but rather one in

⁶³ The Ramblers Association, "Our History," Ramblers: at the Heart of Walking, 2019 <ramblers.org.uk/about-us/our-history.aspx> (29 April 2019)



Fig. 19. Portrait of Ramblers, from the Rambler's Federation

which we may participate as partners. With trespassing, as managed within my hosted events, an everyday act like crossing a spatial boundary can be experienced as a crossing of an epistemological barrier. I attempt to help participants consciously consider that spatial transgressions are conceptual points of departure. Rather than seeing landscape through the typical Western viewpoint of discrete binaries (e.g., private/public, owned/shared, etc.), the goal is rather to see landscape as a broader multi-dimensional field of relations that has the potential to synthesize and bring cohesion to these otherwise separated concepts.

Performative Prompts: Enlivening Perception

Without imagination, we cannot penetrate our psyches, nor will we allow ourselves to be absorbed by the world around us.⁶⁴

A central methodology to my practice is the use of performative prompts that help people perceive everyday environments in new ways.

The A.W.E. Society focuses on nearby ecologies that can be quite

⁶⁴ *Halifax, 110.*

mundane (or sometimes, on the other hand, so densely packed with vegetation) that people are prone to uncertainty as to how to navigate them. Performative prompts, however, can help people find new ways to navigate these challenging or seemingly banal environments, helping people to feel immersed in the oftentimes overlooked details of a place. The preformative prompts that I design are similar to forest therapy invitations and Leff's awareness plans, but rather than being generic and applicable to many different sites, they are created for specific environments. This means that I often use metaphors that are present within the environments themselves to craft experiences. For example, using the metaphor of water moving downstream to prompt a specific way of vocal improvisation, or encouraging movement between internal and external space and inwardly focused and outwardly focuses attention. In designing prompts, I consider both the landscape in which we are working and the emotional and imaginative states that I am hoping to foster, such as wonder, relaxation, and belonging. Sometimes I use prompts to highlight something mysterious or meaningful within the landscape, while at other times I use prompts to help people employ their senses in novel ways. These imaginative prompts help to disrupt automatic behaviors and shift us into a more inventive and performative behavioral space.

I rely on three primary tactics in order to shift people out of everyday ways of seeing and into more enlivened modes of perception. These strategies include slowness, animacy and storytelling. Following is a list of examples of such performative prompts:

Imagine your voice is like water flowing downstream, and vocalize without words for 15 minutes. (slowness)

Select a weed as an ally. (animacy)

Write a story from the perspective of a local tree. (storytelling and animacy)

Rather than automatically reperforming our culture's fast, consumptive

and competitive traits, I invite people to slow down and reconnect with their senses and with the present place. Herbalist and poet Stephen Harrod Buhner articulates how attention to the senses and to one's feelings within landscape can have profound effects on one's ability to see meaning. He asserts that the type of careful attention that we utilize in interpreting human-made forms, like writing and art, should be turned outwards and towards other, co-produced forms of landscape:

[T]he world is also filled with meanings. Meanings laid down long before the emergence of our species and as we encounter those meanings a complex symphony of feeling occurs within us in response. If you just look closely at what is in front of you, immerse yourself in sensory noticing, and then ask yourself-- how does it feel? A moment of contact is initiated. There is, in fact, a rich exchange that occurs. Meaning flows into me from the world. I feel feelings in response and then something flows from me back out into the world.⁶⁵

Slowing down the flow of information is a critical precondition to this type of awareness. Frequently I utilize limitations, such as asking people not to talk or requesting that they refrain from other types of vocalization in order to dedicate themselves to mimicking certain sounds or gestures taking place within the immediate environment. These limitations can disrupt normal social patterns and create space for new relationships to form. It is easier to hear the muted messages of the landscape when we are not talking or aggressively intervening.

I also use animacy as a tactic for inviting people to see landscape differently--as fully alive. In the book *Fields of Green: Restorying Culture, Environment and Education*, Heesoon Bai posits that, in order to reclaim our connection to the earth, we must change not only the

⁶⁵ Stephen Harrod Buhner, *Activism, Deep Ecology & the Gaian Era* - Lynn Margulis, Stephen Buhner and John Seed, 45 min. Produced by the Hitchcock Center for the Environment of Amherst College, 2005. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zc99ikb3KXY>> (29 April 2019) 33:45.

content of our perception but also its modality. She asks:

How can we reanimate our numbed perceptual consciousness so that the earth appears to us in full sentience and presence? How shall we recover the sensation and feelings in our numbed psyche so we can see, hear, feel the joy, pain, wonder and despair in experiencing the earth and all its biotic communities?⁶⁶

Bai theorizes that a return to animism and enchantment is an indispensable perceptual technique that helps people reconnect with landscape. When one sees the earth as a community of living beings, a level of care that is typically not granted to dead matter seems to well up.

The performative activities of the A.W.E. Society are intended to help people reconnect with their senses and go slowly. For example, on a recent guided walk, I simply asked people not to socialize in the ways they might ordinarily, but instead to turn their attention to their surroundings. In this example I framed this initial prompt as an invitation to listen to and converse with place. This simple instruction shifted behavioral norms away from the automatic and into a more observational and quiet place.

In creating performative prompts, I pay close attention to language. Just as story and language reveal existing relational dynamics, it is also a tool for transforming those relationships. I hope to help people see connections between realms that are often considered separate; I do so by utilizing text and language in a manner that creates pathways to different perspectives on landscape. My writing takes the form of imaginative prose that collages together many perspectives on vernacular landscape including personal memoir, natural history, and scientific and bureaucratic descriptions, and conscious use of animacy as a tool for helping people to see landscape as alive.

⁶⁶ Bai, 136.

We need stories to make clear the relationships that exist between the mind of the forest and the mind of the city, the mind of the river and the human heart. We act on, and in terms of, those relationships.⁶⁷

Participatory Social Happenings

I host participatory performances in marginal nature that bring people into direct contact with nearby ecologies. In this role, I help people to come into more intimate connection with the very places that we regularly occupy and see that they are already filled with meanings. Although I often perform research as part of planning these events, I hope to retain a sense of openness that encourages exploration. I do not intend to position myself as a sole expert. Instead I collaborate with others, including non-artists, in both the planning and in the execution of the events. Each collaborator and participant sees the landscape differently, and those differences are fertile territory.

I aim to create social atmospheres that are welcoming, inclusive, playful and focused on observation. I hope to make everyone feel encouraged and seen, which is critical to helping people get comfortable enough to really open up and explore. To this end I have crafted a series of small hosting aids, including, importantly, small and easy-to-transport cushions for people to sit on. These small cushions serve the purpose of inviting people to sit while also keeping their butts dry--a small intervention but nevertheless an important aid to helping people feel comfortable and welcomed. In more support of basic needs, I also prepare simple snacks or tea that we can share. Sometimes I also include small gifts e.g., a commemorative pin that features a detournement of an institutional logo (Fig. 22.), or incorporate activities that involve crafting small tokens of the experience. (Fig. 28 and 32)

⁶⁷ Halifax, 106.



Fig. 20. Sharing tea at an A.W.E. Society Event

Claire Bishop points out that relational art is frequently rooted in an anti-capitalist worldview, yet the producers of this work often use the free labor of participants to create the artwork, which reveals a potentially troubling structure in which audience members volunteer essentially to be subjugated by the artist.⁶⁸ In the role of facilitator or guide, I envision and execute my relationship with participants quite differently. Rather than relying upon their labor for my artistic work product, I seek to offer restorative experiences that are enjoyable.

⁶⁸ *Bishop, 275.*



Fig. 21. A reading circle at an A.W.E. Society event, with spare sit-upon in foreground



Fig. 22. A Small gift: University of Michigan Trespassers Club pin

These events focus on observation rather than production. In the book *What We Want Is Free: Generosity and Exchange In Recent Art*, Ted Purves outlines an emerging trend in socially engaged work that incorporates the giving of gifts and services as a way of creating social bonds:

[T]he giving of unexpected and unsanctioned gifts creates a double transgression that rips through the fabric of what we have accepted to be a given, a tyrannical and pervasive market of the senses that gives nothing without taking something in return. A gift offered in the midst of a transgressive act not only destroys, it also creates. What it creates is the existence of something altogether different, a community and a bond that is not the bond of bondsman to master or that of addict to dealer, but of giver to the receiver, who then becomes kin and neighbor.⁶⁹

Group exploration is important because it provides participants with a sense of safety as they navigate potentially uncomfortable environments. Relationships with nature are not only individual and cultural, but they also are deeply affected by gender and race. Women often feel less confident traversing the marginal wilds because they have been educated that they are likely to be victimized in areas of dense vegetation.⁷⁰ People of color tend to have very different associations with urban nature due to a legacy of exclusion from land ownership as well as a legacy of police harassment.⁷¹ These dynamics lead to women and people of color often having far lower levels of comfort in navigating urban nature. By undertaking these explorations as a group, safety, legitimacy and comfort are afforded to the

⁶⁹ Ted Purves, *What We Want Is Free: Generosity and Exchange in Recent Art* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 27.

⁷⁰ Jennifer K. Wesely, and Emily Gaarder, "The Gendered 'Nature' of the Urban Outdoors: Women Negotiating Fear of Violence" *Gender & Society* 18 no. 5 (2004): 645-663.

⁷¹ Jason Byrne, "When Green is White: The Cultural Politics of Race, Nature and Social Exclusion In a Los Angeles Urban National Park" *Geoforum* 43 (2012): 596.

participants. In response to a survey that I crafted in the aftermath of one event, a local artist and friend reflected:

I think that the [A.W.E. Society] offers something REALLY important especially to people (lady people? ladyish people?) who fear for their safety when out and about exploring. The freedom to adventure is something I never really have felt unless I've had a 90 pound dog or friend with me. Being invited into trespass is such a generous invitation. My favorite memories of Detroit come from walking the train tracks together. I got to see my new city totally differently. ...I truly have had my city-view changed from these events. I especially love the way they are simultaneously both 'special' and 'not special' ... There is something mundane about all of these opportunities and places, yet it is such an honor to be invited and to get to go together. I have a deep trust for you, Bridget, and I love the safe-danger that you bring me to/through. You let me love the landscape in all of its weird brokenness--with all of its history and industrial picturesque.⁷²

Modeling playful and cooperative ways of seeing is an important aspect of generating social cohesion among participants, enabling them to be comfortable seeing and being in an unusual place. Such group cohesion is a well-documented outcome of adventure therapy, a practice similar to mine which also involves groups acting with a certain level of risk or challenge.⁷³ Social cohesion is vital to the goal of recommoning the landscape.⁷⁴ The degree to which participants will share their remarkably diverse perspectives on landscapes depends

72 *Emmy Bright, Questionnaire response submitted to Bridget Quinn, 11 December 2017.*

73 *Anita R Tucker, "Adventure-Based Group Therapy to Promote Social Skills in Adolescents," Social Work with Groups 32 (2009): 315-329.*

74 *David Bollier, Think Like a Commoner (Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 2014), 3.*

heavily upon the establishment of social cohesion:

It is an immense realm which needs many kinds of explorers. Any landscape which is so dense with evidence, so complex and cryptic that we can never be assured that we have read it all or read it aright. The landscape lies all around us, ever accessible and inexhaustible. Anyone can look, but we all need help to see that it is at once a panorama, a composition, a palimpsest, a microcosm: that [with] every prospect there can be more and more that meets the eye.⁷⁵

Notes on Subjectivity

As an artist creating work that is inspired by and situated in landscape, I have become aware, not just about the multiplicity of interpretations of landscapes but also how gender, race, socioeconomic status and other factors influence people's perceptions of landscape. My whiteness perhaps made me feel more free to explore and to trespass without the fear of having the police called. Gender also plays a role here because people tend not to be as fearful or suspicious of a small-framed woman. Of course my gender also means that I have been socialized to be fearful of attack in public space, especially out-of-view places like marginal wilds. Unfortunately, I learned first-hand that fear of attack in the margins is not abstract-- in 2018, I was chased by man while exploring a brownfield site in Warren, Michigan.

When I lived in Austin Texas (2009-2013), I began to notice how funding for public art always preceded gentrification-- and that my creative work was part of that larger process. By the time I left Austin for Detroit I began to be more critical of my own position within changing landscapes. I was also aware of how many young artists were flocking to Detroit and treating it as if it were a stage or a blank canvas awaiting their artworks. My disappointment with the way my

⁷⁵ Donald W. Meinig, *The Interpretation of Everyday Landscapes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979): 6.

work affected landscape in Austin and my movement to Southeast Michigan inspired me to shift away from creating physical interventions in place to a practice that is more observational, social and ephemeral. I wanted to find ways of working that were less colonizing and more tuned to uncovering larger social patterns. I sought to cultivate a practice built on listening before speaking, and participation in community instead of ownership and conquest. In this process I have become increasingly interested in places that are close to home. Places where I have a stake and am a member of the community. I am ever in-progress in redefining my relationship with place and the human and nonhuman communities of a place. In making this shift, I have found that exploring with other people, all of whom will have unique perspectives is particularly generative in terms of uncovering blindspots and also in reimaging how we might develop more just, creative and lively relationships with place. In my role, as a facilitator, I often reveal my subjectivity, rather than trying to hide it. In the context of call out culture and virtue signalling, I hope to turn to vulnerability and disclosure, rather than trying to create a false brand of purity or “having it figured out”. As a facilitator I do not position myself as expert, but rather as a co-explorer.



CREATIVE WORK

The Resonant Underbelly of Suburbia

- Place:** Inside the concrete stormwater culverts and the city council chamber of Warren, Michigan.
- Action:** Mimicking the flow of water with our voices
- Time:** October 21, November 3 and 24, 2017; January 9, 2018



Choir members: Timothy Boscarino, Emmy Bright, Stephanie Brown, Robert Fitzgerald, Brynn Higgins-Stirrup, Kim Couchot, Masimba Hwati, Osman Khan, Megan Major, Joe Mason, Liz Mason, Anne Elizabeth Moore, Brenna K. Murphy, Jule Osten, Bridget Quinn, Rowan Renee, Mayela Rodriguez, Sherri Smith, Zeb Smith, Julia Solis, Moneé Stamp, Nick Tobier, Gregory Tom, and Trevis True. Recordings mastered by Dominic Coppola.



Fig. 23. Photo documentation of *The Resonant Underbelly of Suburbia*

The Resonant Underbelly of Suburbia was a series of three site-specific vocal meditations in stormwater culverts on the Red Run and Bear Creek in Warren, Michigan. During these events I invited participants to venture down into the riparian habitat and then into the stormwater tunnels. Once in the tunnels, I recited text that I had written that wove together personal history, geologic time and local history. In order to prompt a type of vocal improvisation that did not utilize words, I asked participants to imagine their voices flowing like water, tumbling across the landscape, and to listen carefully as our voices filled the resonant space with our phonic abstractions for fifteen continuous minutes.

These non-linguistic syllables have been referred to as vocables. Such phonetic expressions have been used in shamanic rituals and ceremonies of many cultures to initiate contact with ancestors and non-human beings⁷⁶: “Vocables are about sound and breath ... that unite the singer and the beings around him or her into a bond of power that is far beyond the human realm ... Vocables can be described as a type of

⁷⁶ Halifax, 88.

spirit language, animal language or a language of ancestors.”⁷⁷

Vocables have a way of creating bodily connection to place. As our breathing and listening become responsive to the sounds in the world around us, a feeling of bodily connection can be initiated. Experimental, wild, harmonious and disharmonious, messy and polyphonic, our site-specific vocal meditations were captured on a digital field recorder, and then, after fifteen minutes of singing, we regrouped on the top of the culvert and looked out on the meandering green creek from the side of the road and shared a snack and enjoyed casual conversation. Participants remarked on how difficult it was at first to vocalize in this way but also indicated that the prompting led to playfulness and feelings of reverence that struck them as surprising in light of the circumstances and location.

While preparing for one of the events, I went kayaking down the Red Run with my friend Jule Osten in search of more resonant tunnels in which to sing. During our trip we stumbled across a large stormwater outfall with a continuous oil sheen spilling out. We reported the sheen to the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ), who initially was unable to locate it. When I returned a few days later, the sheen was still flowing. I sent a detailed map of the location to the MDEQ, and approximately one month later the news broke that a woman kayaking on the Red Run had reported a sheen which led to the discovery of E. coli levels exceeding Macomb County’s testing capacity.⁷⁸

Two months passed with no follow-up reporting. During that time I researched the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) and found that the reports were extremely difficult to find, written in nearly indecipherable language, that acronyms utilized were not de-

77 Halifax, 88.

78 Dave Bartkowiak Jr. and Nick Monacelli, “E.coli Hot Spots Found in Warren: Human or Animal Waste May be Draining into Red Run Drain,” Click on Detroit, 20 December 2017 <clickondetroit.com/news/e-coli-hot-spots-found-in-warren> (29 April 2019).

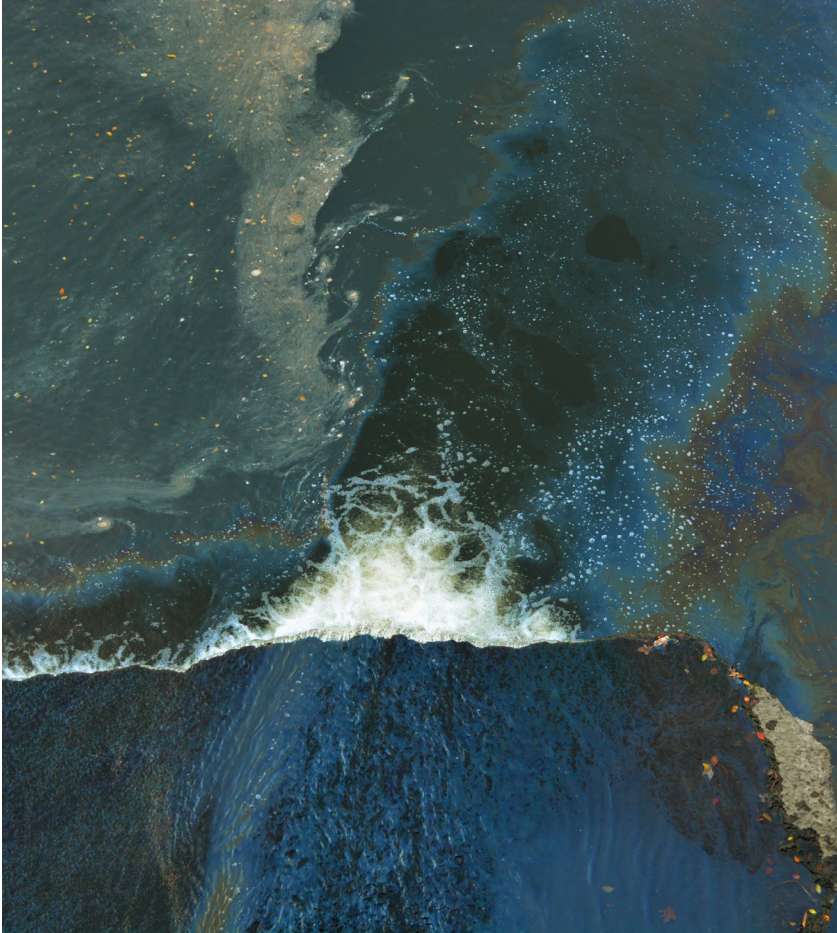


Fig. 24. Documentation of the oil sheen entering the Red Run

fined within the documents themselves, and that testing requirements were so lax and penalties so minimal that no significant deterrent existed.

Despite the fact that citizen complaints have been the impetus for a majority of actionable pollution control⁷⁹, all of our local creeks are littered with “No Trespassing” signs that set out to prohibit citizens from coming into actual contact with the water. The creeks in Warren

⁷⁹ Dan Beauchamp (NPDES supervisor with the MDEQ), Interviewed by Bridget Quinn via telephone, 2 July 2018.

are inaccessible, both physically and dialogically, and these barriers, both spatial and conceptual, are undermining our ability to protect our resources.

It turned out that the source of the sheen was from a decades-old illicit connection between the sanitary sewer line of an industrial building and the stormwater tunnels discharging into the Red Run.⁸⁰ While this specific problem is violative of laws and regulations, much of the water pollution is discharged within the limits of the law--citizens are largely unaware of the sanctioned threats that this poses to our collective wellbeing. The pollution that enters the Red Run from the combined sewer system of Oakland County,⁸¹ Warren's inadequate Wastewater Treatment Plant,⁸² and from the many known and unknown illicit connections throughout the area--all eventually enters into Lake Saint Clair, which is upstream from our drinking water uptakes in the Detroit River.

These explorations revealed how important it is for people to establish a connection to their everyday ecologies, and maintain their ability to effect the governance and management of local ecologies. We have increasingly outsourced our care for our common resources to experts in underfunded and hamstrung government departments, resulting in a trend of increasing privatization and a lack of citizen engagement in the oversight of our water, land and air. Considering the Flint water crisis, the rise of PFAs (a legally discharged contaminant), the increasing beach closures due to bacteria, and the rampant privatization of our water, I argue that ordinary citizens must reconnect with their local

80 *City of Warren*, "City Council Meeting - January 9, 2018," TV Warren, <vimeo.com/250662110> (29 April 2019).

81 *Elizabeth A. Katz*, "Drain Overflow Alarms Macomb County Officials," Red Run Drain, 14 February 2014, <<https://redrundrain.wordpress.com/2014/02/14/redrun-overflow-via-kuhn-drain/>> (29 April 2019).

82 *Willi G. Gutmann*, "Warren Begins on Stormwater Storage," Red Run Drain, 16 August 2018, <redrundrain.wordpress.com/2018/08/16/warren-begins-on-storm-water-storage/> (29 April 2019).

ecological communities. The degraded urban creeks, the patches of emergent wilderness left in the city--these are places that desperately need our collective care and imagination, places that have the capacity to restore our ability to be attentive to the world, places that can reinvigorate our natural instinct to care.

On January 9, 2018, two months following the discovery of the oil sheen, but before the source of the pollution had been repaired, I spoke during the audience participation segment of a Warren City Council meeting. During my statement I requested to know if the source of the contamination had been found and rectified. I suggested that the city government should go beyond the state-mandated minimum standard of simply dry-weather monitoring at each outfall once per five years.⁸³ Council members' responses demonstrated an extreme lack of care. They spent several minutes confessing their ignorance and debating whether the source of the E. coli might be "human or animal," before James Van Havermaat, Warren's Head Public Works Engineer, finally stated:

Just today in fact, we found, we kinda [sic] suspected it from
⁸³ Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, Municipal Separate Storm Sewer System (MS4) Program: Illicit Discharge Elimination Program (IDEP) Compliance Assistance Document (*Lancing, Michigan: MDEQ, 2014*), 15.



Fig. 25. Screenshot from public television recording of Warren City Council Meeting Jan 9, 2018

some testing that had been done previously, but today we have positively, I think, identified, that somewhere along the line they made a plumbing connection. And they have a plumbing connection that has to be corrected. The owner is aware of it and we are working on the problem.⁸⁴

The referenced building is an industrial facility whose wastewater line had been installed in this fashion for decades. When a council member asked if its bathrooms would be closed until the problem was fixed, the Engineer responded:

I don't think that'll be a problem. I think they should be able to stay in business and we can correct it. If nothing else, they can chlorinate, put bleach in when they use toilets or something, until we get the problem corrected, but it shouldn't take more than a few days to get the problem corrected.⁸⁵

City council member Robert Boccomino then spoke:

From the national, state, to city, county level, people use fear to try and stoke the fires, and that's [pause] no. I've always said I'm against that because you can't base science on fear. I need facts. I'm a math science [sic] teacher. Now I understand the political world out there loves to create fear, but like Mr. Stevens just said, man, people cut into their basements all the time illegally, and put a toilet in, we're not going to find that out for a long time--you're going to get these types of test results. So I'm going to go with facts, not fear. And E. coli scares everyone to death, but Mr. Stevens and everyone here just said, our water is safe for drinking.⁸⁶

84 City of Warren, "City Council Meeting - January 9, 2018," TV Warren, <vimeo.com/250662110> (29 April 2019).

85 City of Warren, "City Council Meeting - January 9, 2018," TV Warren, <vimeo.com/250662110> (29 April 2019).

86 City of Warren, "City Council Meeting - January 9, 2018," TV Warren, <vimeo.com/250662110> (29 April 2019).

The city council meeting trafficked in at least two false binaries that I hope to interrogate with my work. One is a sense of separation in which humans are considered other than animal and other than environment. Clearly the debate about whether the source of the contamination was human or animal could have a functional reason, but in this case the absurd length of the debate functioned instead like an epistemological tragicomedy. It is difficult to understand how the engineers, knowing at this moment that the source had been identified, would allow the absurd questioning (“Is it human? It is animal? It could be a chupacabra!”) to go on for so long before finally interrupting to reveal the source of pollution as “human.” The confusing dialogue, comprised primarily of flailing binaries, proved to be sadly insufficient.

The other binary in play which I feel needs to be interrogated is that of fact vs. fear. This binary positions emotion as an illegitimate driver of action. In my statement, I simply asked that the City of Warren perform more environmental assessments of our local creeks because my research into NPDES requirements, the history of non-compliance, and the absence of effective deterrents, all revealed a lack of diligence and overall care. I proposed for the city to collect more data. Boccomino responded, however, that my request for objective data was motivated by subjective fear, and therefore, in his mind, it was to be dismissed, as he quickly reduced the broader issues to a conclusion that “our water is safe for drinking.”

This episode reveals the very sense of disconnection between humans and ecology with which my art is concerned. His response was premised on a conceptual separation between surface water and drinking water, as if no connections exist between the safety and cleanliness of one and the other. This flawed epistemology permits the deferral of significant issues. The water flowing through Warren runs into the Clinton River and into Lake Saint Clair, eventually into our drinking water uptakes in the Detroit River, and according to the City of Warren 2016 Annual Water Quality Report, “[t]he susceptibility of our Detroit

River source water intakes were determined to be highly susceptible to potential contamination.”⁸⁷ Cryptosporidium, for example, which is a single-celled protozoa found in sewage, is one of the many potential hazards resulting from our current infrastructure deficiencies. Cryptosporidium is particularly concerning because it has been shown to persist, albeit in reduced numbers, despite the efforts of our modern filtration systems.

Since 2015, the Flint water crisis has been linked to the corrosive water chemistry of the Flint River. What needs to be explored, however, is how the Flint River came to be so corrosive in the first place. The change in chemistry was due, in part, to an influx of road salt entering into surface water via stormwater runoff.⁸⁸ While official negligence at multiple levels is undeniably abhorrent, the lack of conversation around how the river water became so corrosive demonstrates collective denial of the behavioral and infrastructural changes that are necessary to generate and preserve health in our environment. It is true that affordable anti-corrosive chemicals could have prevented the problem in the pipes and the subsequent lead poisoning--but one might ask how far we will go to ignore our more fundamental relationship with the world around us as it becomes less and less hospitable to life, both human and non-human, and whether our best wisdom is demonstrated when we neglect the source, the environment itself, and rely so heavily upon filters and systems that have proven themselves inadequate repeatedly.

As the boundaries of my creative engagement with Warren widened to include not just the weedy margins but also the politics of the city government, I looked for ways to connect these places through body and voice and to represent a connection between the resonant tunnels and the empty city council chamber. The political aspects of this project bring to mind the work of Tania Bruguera, whose work transcends

87 *City of Warren*, “*City Of Warren 2016 Annual Water Quality Report*,” May 2017.

88 *Brian Palmer*, “*Could Road Salt Have Contributed to the Flint Water Crisis?*” *Pacific Standard*, 15 February 2016. <psmag.com/environment/could-road-salt-have-contributed-to-the-flint-water-crisis> (11 April 2019).

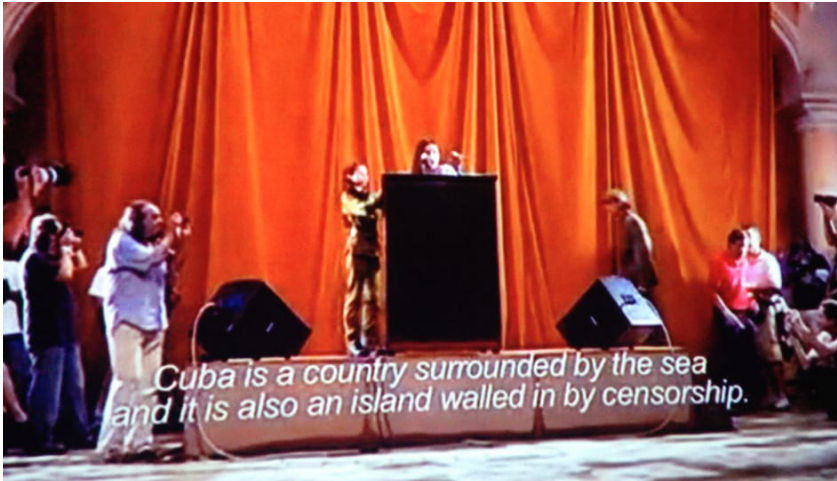


Fig. 26. Tatlin's Whisper #6 (Havana Version)

classification but, put simply, seeks to reveal and transform political injustice. In her work, *Tatlin's Whisper #6 (Havana Version)*, Bruguera invited ordinary Cubans to share their visions for Cuba's future from an amplified stage. Rather than being a celebratory event, the work revealed the government's true stance on free speech through Bruguera's subsequent arrest. According to curators Lucia Sanroman and Susie Kantor, Bruguera's work proposes that "to be an artist is to be a type of worker, one who functions as a transactional subject meant to produce and circulate new symbolic paradigms, not solely by the aesthetic or formal characteristics of her work, but rather through the politics created in the process of experiencing it."⁸⁹ As my creative engagement within the marginal wilds compelled me to expand the sphere of my action to include the civic sphere, where decisions about the shape the city are made, new meanings emerged as the binaries I sought to disrupt became absurdly evident. This led me to create an installation and limited-edition book and flexi-disc phonograph record to convey a perspective on the project that goes beyond the duration

⁸⁹ Lucía Sanromán and Susie Kantor, "Transitional Institutions and the Art of Political Timing Specificity," *Tania Bruguera: Talking to Power / Hablándole al Poder* (San Francisco: Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 2018), 16.

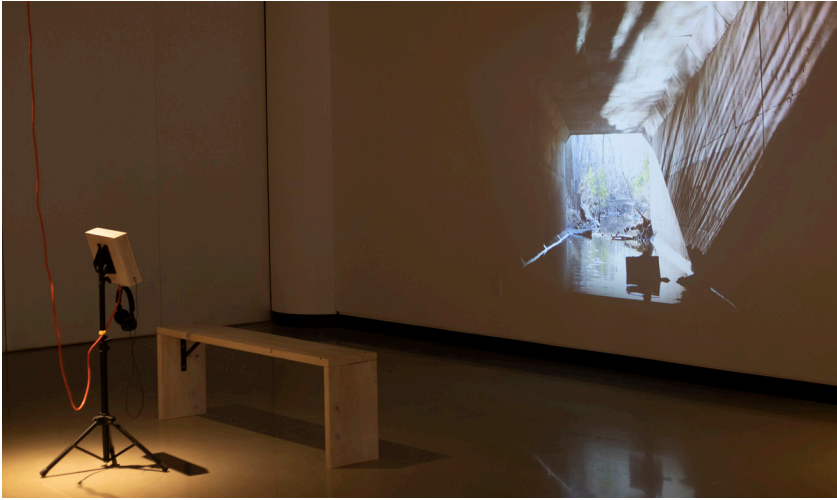


Fig. 27. Installation view of The Resonant Underbelly of Suburbia

of these events themselves. The installation is comprised of a video taken from a stationary camera within one of the stormwater culverts in Warren, projected onto the gallery wall. Audio from the vocal improvisations fills the exhibition space. Adjacent to the projection of the tunnel, a small video monitor displays excerpts from the referenced City Council meeting. The viewer is invited to occupy, within the four corners of a single sensory experience, the space between the resonant tunnel and the City Council chambers.

The book, (Fig. 36 and 37) the most complete artifact of the full sequence of events, narrates the intersection of my creative practice, my research into local ecologies and infrastructure, and the political resonance of the work. It includes the meditative prompts used during the event, as well as newspaper articles and didactic text. The book ends with a story written by a Warren resident (Baillie Jackowski, aged 10) entitled “The Night I Went Down To the Red Run”. The main character, a young girl, discovers a monster that is hurting animals that live along the creek. She wakes her sister, and they team up with coyotes and foxes to defeat the monster. Importantly, her story positions the main character and the animals of the creek acting in relationship with each



Fig. 28. Artist book with flexi disc

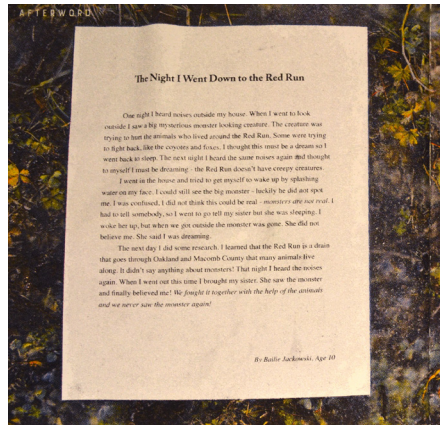


Fig. 29. Detail of artist book

other, cooperating as allies in the fight against the monster. Reading her story, I could not help but see her monster as a symbol of pollution and the story overall as an allegory of the ecological relationship that I hope to help us envision.

These explorations into the resonant culverts, as well as the documents of the state and the events within the civic sphere, revealed the many ways people are increasingly separated from ecological commons through private property laws, technocratic jargon, and other-



Fig. 30. Detail of Resonant Underbelly of Suburbia limited edition book

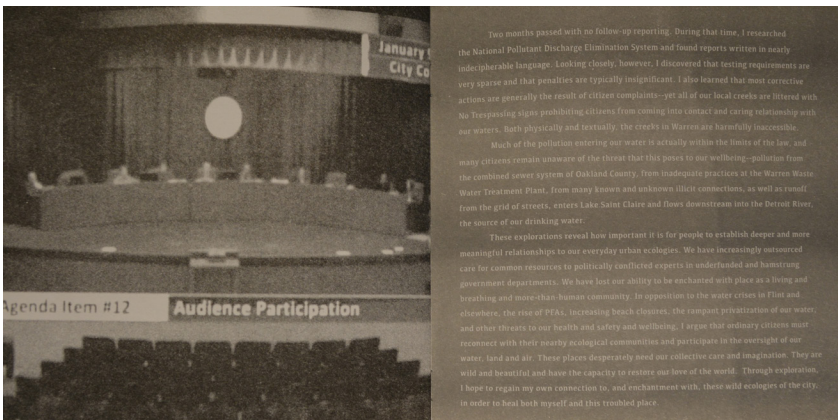


Fig. 31. Detail of Resonant Underbelly of Suburbia limited edition book

wise--physical and dialogic barriers to understanding. Disconnection has resulted in growing apathy and lack of care for local ecologies. *The Resonant Underbelly of Suburbia* reveals the potential of trespassing as a connective strategy, as well as the purifying capacity of human presence as a counternarrative to human destruction. The work reveals what can happen when we come into physical contact with urban wilds and when we connect those places to the civic centers of our city through voice and language and sense.

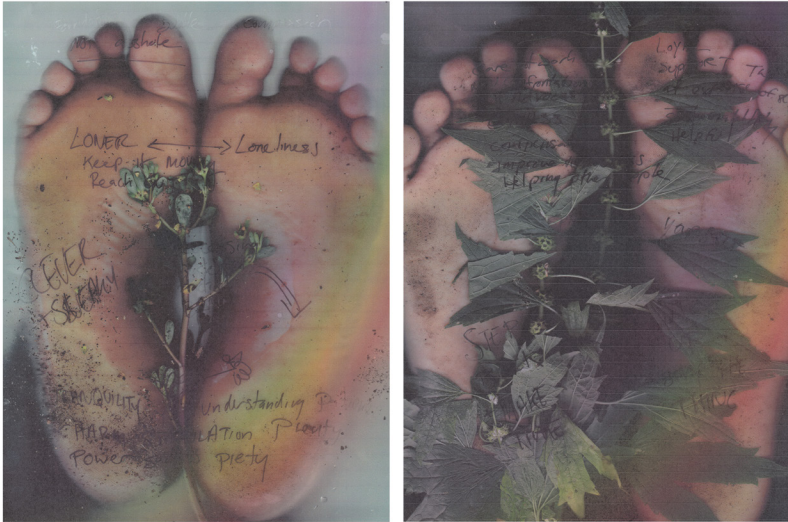


Fig. 32. Images produced during How the Earth Sees Us

How the Earth Sees Us

Place: The backyard

Action: An eco-therapy spa that invites us to reflect on a struggle and find support in the nearby ecological community:

- Identify common backyard weeds that serve as our allies
- Immerse your feet in the community of “old friends” (soil bacteria) while reflecting on a struggle
- Conversation and chromo-therapy pedicure

Time: July 15, 2018

In Collaboration With Emmy Bright, Motherwort, Daisy Fleabane, Lambs Quarters, Wild Carrot, Pineapple Weed, Plantain, Purslane, and the “Old Friends” of the Soil



Fig. 33. Detail of weedy allies

How the Earth Sees Us was an experimental ecotherapy spa created in collaboration with the printmaker and performance artist Emmy Bright. The participatory project was set up in the backyard of an experimental music and art venue in Warren, Michigan. The event was staged as a pedicure pop-up. Participants were treated as both clients of a nail salon and as if they were signing up for some sort of psychic reading. Upon expressing interest in a pedicure, participants were instructed to select a plant ally from a collection of backyard weeds. I assisted them in talking through what attributes they might need in an ally and which



Fig. 34. Detail of weedy allies

common weeds might be particularly helpful as partners. Prompting participants to see common weeds as animate allies positioned the surrounding environment not as a setting but instead as an active participant.

After participants selected a weedy ally they were invited to the waiting area, comprised of a couple of lawn chairs and a paper copy of “The Microbiome of the Built Environment and Implications for Emotional Health and Wellbeing.”⁹⁰ The scholarly article was printed with a custom cover and hand-bound. The contents of the paper spelled out the link between decreased contact with soil bacteria and increased inflammation, as well as a link between increased inflammatory responses and depression and anxiety.⁹¹

When ready, participants were invited to reunite with their “old friends” (soil bacteria) through immersing their feet in a pail of muddy backyard soil. During this foot bath, participants were asked to wear headphones and listen to bird sounds as they completed an open ended questionnaire that simply asked participants to define a current life struggle that they would like to reflect upon with the help of their plant ally and the “old friends” of the soil. Once completed, participants signaled that they were ready to proceed, at which time their feet were rinsed and an interview was conducted to determine the proper colors for the pedicure. The interviews were simply friendly, free flowing conversations about the struggle expressed by the participant. During these conversations, the book *Practical Colour Magic* by Ray Buckland was used as a reference to determine which nail polish colors would be supportive to participants as they grappled with their life struggle. As Emmy and I conducted the interviews, we took notes on a piece of acetate. The color selection was treated like a psychic prescription. Corresponding nail polish was applied to the participants’ toenails, and then we used a home-office scanner to create portraits of the soles of participant’s feet, along with their plant ally and the notes produced during the

90 Stamper et al.

91 Stamper et al.



Fig. 35. A participant fills out a questionnaire while soaking her feet in mud

interview. The scanned and printed foot portraits were provided to the participants as “receipts” of their experience. The images themselves were intended to represent the earth’s perspective of us; hence the title “*How the Earth Sees Us.*”



Fig. 36. *Untitled Rabbit, (1988) Painting by Michael Luchs*

Constructed Realities & the Never-ending Painting

Place: Inside and outside of the art museum

Action: Walk and contemplation between the internal and external

Time: July 21, 2018

Constructed Realities & the Never-ending Painting was an A.W.E. Society event that took place at MOCAD (Museum of Contemporary Art in Detroit). The event kicked off within an exercise related to the paintings of Michael Luchs. Luchs' paintings are enigmatic and layered, gestural, thick with detail, mostly abstract, with some recognizable forms such as the silhouettes of frogs, rabbits or guns. During the event Art historian John Corso Esquivel led an activity in looking which incorporated "visual thinking strategies," a method for promoting engagement with

art founded upon close observation and viewer interpretation rather than a more art-historical or contextual reading of artworks. During the activities, participants were asked simply: "What do you see? What is going on here?"

After engaging in conversation about two works of art, we convened in the entryway, and my portion of the event began with a fifteen-minute walk around the facility. I proposed for participants to utilize the same sort of attentive awareness but with respect to the outside world. I asked them to notice the marks on the surface of the ground and other living forms that we typically overlook as we walk through a city. I asked them to collect two objects from the landscape--one that reminded them of human activity, one that reminded them of non-human activity. I asked them to engage in a focused manner, to direct their attention to the landscape itself and away from social interactions. The group of thirty participants walked along the sidewalks and in the weedy margins along fence lines that surround the museum, concentrating their gaze downward.

After fifteen minutes, we reconvened in a screening room inside the museum. Three tables were erected, and participants sat in groups of seven to ten with their objects in front of them. I informed them that we would spend a total of twenty minutes observing the collected objects, each group passing a small set counterclockwise in two-minute intervals. I encouraged oscillation between observation and imagination; inviting participants to observe the physical characteristics of the objects, while allowing themselves to imagine where the objects came from... what they were made of... how they got there--blending observation and daydreaming. I asked participants to refocus their attention on observing the collected objects if they found themselves worrying or making lists in their heads. I suggested that resting their minds might cause them to remember something that required their subsequent attention, or might cause them to think of something seemingly more exciting, in which case they should write that thought down but



Fig. 37. Objects collected outside MOCAD

then return to the objects in front of them. Pencils and paper were provided for documenting and externalizing things that they otherwise might ruminate on or anxiously obsess about. During this exercise, I played a field recording of environmental sounds that were recorded in my backyard with a chime sounding every two minutes in order to mark the intervals and signal the passing of the objects.

After the activity, we talked through the experience. Several participants stated that they could not help but create narratives connecting the objects in front of them. One participant said that she could not

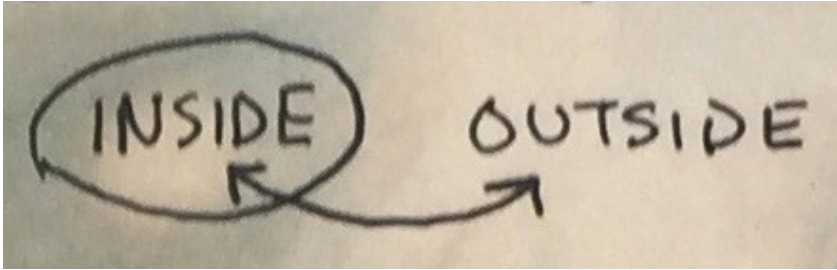


Fig. 38. Detail from score for *Constructed Realities & The Never Ending Painting*

recall having been so relaxed in recent memory; several others agreed. Another person stated, “I didn’t know I needed that, so thank you.” Another participant expressed frustration at the visible lack of care in certain aspects of the environment, while another participant, a volunteer with a historic preservation committee in a small town in Connecticut, wondered if an activity like this could help student groups feel more connected to the histories of built environments. I shared in her wonder and encouraged her to test it out.

With this event, I sought to blur the line between interior and exterior spaces: museum/not-museum, inside/outside, observation/imagination. In essence, the invitation was to trespass that dividing line and thereby activate an ontology of connection. Margins, being borders, reveal the boundaries of both sides of a binary. For example, the Western viewpoint has been deeply influenced by thinkers like René Descartes, whose theory of substances asserts that there is a fundamental separation between mind and matter. According to Descartes, mind and matter are completely independent of each other; in a philosophical tradition leading back at least as far as Plato, the mental form is deemed the essence of perfection, an ideal against which all physical matter is a relatively degraded representation. In opposition to this tradition, the philosopher and educator Heesoon Bai warns of the dire consequences of this way of seeing: “Moreover the qualities that would elicit and evoke our feelings of gratitude, respect, or even reverence, fondness, care, sympathy, and so on, do not belong to ... the objects themselves. All this has grave implications for the way we relate to

the world.”⁹² By inviting people to explore freely in both their physical and imaginative worlds simultaneously, we begin to see that mind and matter are not separated but rather engaged in a perpetual (and potentially evolving) feedback loop: our mental constructions profoundly shape the realm of matter, while the environment in turn significantly influences our psyches. With one foot on either side of the margin, so to speak, we are permitted a place in which to synthesize previously separated perspectives.

After the event I asked participants to provide feedback, I asked “use one word to describe how this experience made you feel” (refer to figure 39). The responses suggested that participants experienced some degree of attention restoration and heightened curiosity. Their conversation pertaining to narrative indicated that they were constructing meaning in relationship with the environment.

⁹² Heesoon Bai, “Reanimating the Universe,” *Fields of Green: Restoring Culture, Environment, and Education*, edited by Marcia McKenzie et al., (Cresskill: Hampton Press, 2009), 137.

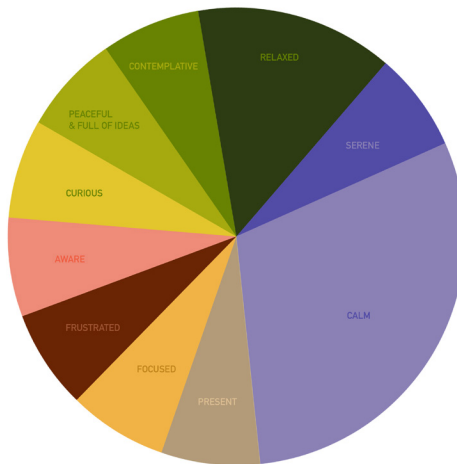


Fig. 39. Participant responses



Fig. 40. Video Stills from The Skin of the Earth Cinema

The Skin of the Earth Cinema

- Place:** The common skin of the Earth
- Action:** A series of live-feed cinematic projections that bring the tiny, unseen worlds around us into luminous focus (upcoming)
- Transform a sidewalk crack into a deep canyon
 - Reveal a macro-invertebrate to be a beautiful dragon
 - See a decaying leaf as the grid of an unknown city
 - Even our own skin becomes a landscape awaiting exploration
- Time:** May 25, June 15, and July 13, 2019

The Skin of the Earth Cinema is a platform for hosting participatory public workshops that engage citizens within nearby ecologies in ways that promote wonder, social connection, and the making of place-based meaning. It utilizes an industrial trike outfitted with a digital microscope and projector in order to capture and display a live video

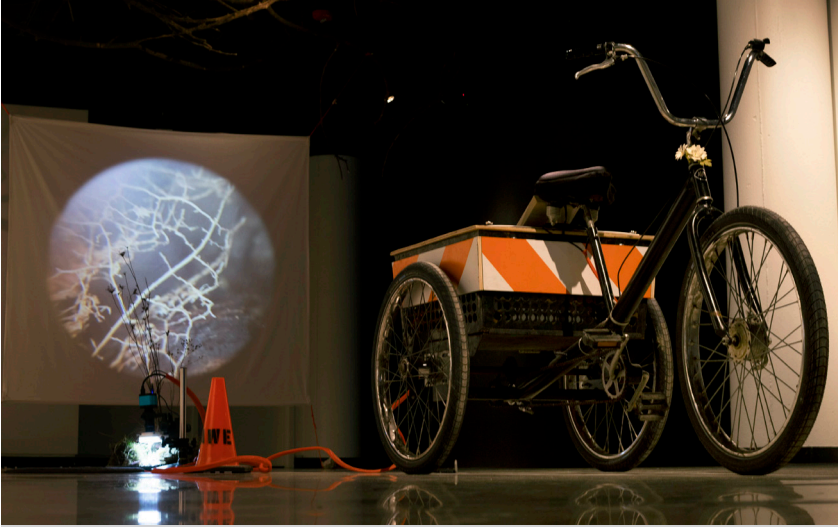


Fig. 41. Skin of the Earth Cinema on display within the Stamps Gallery

feed of the tiny and oftentimes overlooked details of a place. The tiny details of a landscape are projected on a screen or on architectural features within urban nature. The shift in scale transforms a crack in the sidewalk into a deep canyon with a lush forest of moss. A macroinvertebrate becomes a beautiful monster. A decaying leaf is transformed into the grid of an unknown city. The magnification inspires renewed curiosity about places that we encounter daily— even our own skin becomes a landscape awaiting exploration. The apparatus uses a solar panel which, over the course of several days charges a battery, which powers the projector.

Exploring landscapes with others has helped me become aware of their hidden dimensions. Julia Sosin, an environmental scientist, helped me see how landscapes change over time and how disturbances create new ecological niches. My friend Jerry Mangan, a naturalist, showed me how different plants support different insects and birds. Anne Elizabeth Moore, an author and experienced urban forager, persuaded me to actually taste the landscape. This project will enable new collaborations with a wide range of people across various disciplines and

sensibilities. The simplicity of the digital microscope makes it possible for a child to operate, which opens up the participatory potential of the project. Anyone can operate the camera and become the “guide.”

The *Skin of the Earth Cinema* will be used in three upcoming collaborations, the first being a performance with ambient sound musician Dominic Coppola, entitled “This Place is Infinite,” which will occur in the overgrown backlands behind a Marathon gas station in Warren, Michigan on May 25, 2019. In the two months following, I will be collaborating with Julia Sosin on two events entitled “The Ecological Lullaby of the Rouge River,” in which we plan to facilitate inspection of the riparian habitat of the Rouge River and the macro-invertebrates within the urban waterway.



Fig. 42. Kids inspect a patch of earth with The Skin of the Earth Cinema, inside the Stamps gallery



CONCLUSION

With the stated goal being uncovering our relationship to the environment within the context of marginal wilds, my creative inquiry reveals that physical and textual barriers reduce access to urban ecologies and mirror the industrial worldview that humans are separate from nature. This sense of separation contributes to degradation in the environment and reinforces citizens' inability to monitor aspirational ecological commons. It is an epistemology that reduces people's ability to connect



with the environment in the context of their everyday lives.

My ongoing work with the A.W.E. Society reveals art's profound potential for healing through the creation of moments of reconnection within nearby urban nature, even in the face of existing spatial and cultural barriers to access. Lucy Lippard discusses how the effects of modern nomadic lifestyles have led to a prevailing sense of placelessness and indifference: "Unlike deep identification with place ... is the kind of placelessness engendered by sheer indifference, which has reached

such a point in this country that there are teenagers whose daily routes run from home to school to mall to television. They have never climbed the hill immediately behind their town.”⁹³

The A.W.E. Society is a project that seeks to disrupt this prevailing sense of placelessness--by physically climbing that hill together. The healing potential can be seen as personal (psychologically restorative), social (community building), and environmental (as citizens regain the ability to monitor the environment). This generalized healing works on what Joan Halifax refers to as “The World Wound”⁹⁴--the complex interrelationship between personal trauma and environmental degradation. I see my work as part of a large project of relearning how to live well within our local ecologies.

People have also shared with me that these events are memorable and change the way that they see ordinary landscapes. *The Resonant Underbelly of Suburbia* has been the most successful in demonstrating the potential of this type of creative practice to actually transform our ecological relationships, as it resulted in the actual discovery of a source of pollution which led to its repair. In effect, my artistic engagement triggers processes that can transcend art. The work leads to my engagement in a struggle that transcends traditional artistic venues and conventions. It requires the synthesis of two discrete purposes--the making of evocative art and the moral imperative to realize important change in the perception of, and relationship to, the environment. According to Claire Bishop, relational art that bends towards social change must “[a]t a certain point ... hand over [the work] to institutions if social change is to be achieved: it is not enough to keep producing activist art.”⁹⁵ I have found the balance between aesthetics and ethics to be a truly fruitful one, though sometimes fraught with

⁹³ Lippard, 44.

⁹⁴ Halifax, 1-20.

⁹⁵ Bishop, 283.

tension. According to Toni Cade Bambara, “[t]he role of the artist is to make the revolution irresistible.”⁹⁶ Art can be a window into the potential of our realities. The boundary between art and ordinary life is a matter that each person must decide for themselves. I have found that the artifice of art can offer a clearer view of current conditions as well as operate as a portal to potential new realities; however, once one steps fully through the portal, the artifice must be discarded in order to progress the work of living into those realities. Discarding that artifice does not make the work less valuable or creative; it does make it more difficult to discuss in aesthetic terms.

An attentive reader may have noticed that while my stated goal has been to focus on local environmental relationships, my work has been quite geographically dispersed. Starting with a focus on Warren, Michigan, I ultimately produced events in Detroit, and Ann Arbor. This dispersion occurred largely because I have remained committed to direct experience as an antidote to disconnection from landscape. As a graduate student within the University of Michigan, I wanted to learn as much as possible about the impact of events that utilize direct experience, as opposed to focusing critical conversations solely upon representations of the events after their occurrence. With this strategy in mind, I have engaged the people around me in the various places that I occupied. My insistence on focusing my learning around the use of direct experience has helped me to become much more creative and confident as a guide of experiences generally, but as a result much of the social and political potential of the work has remained unrealized due to the fact that effective communities of care tend to sprout organically within specific places and must be fostered through repeated engagements over longer periods of time. David Bollier, an activist and scholar of the commons, states that the commons are “a resource + a community + a set of protocols. ... Seen from this perspective ... the question is whether a particular community is motivated to manage

⁹⁶ Toni Cade Bambara, *Interview with Kay Bonetti, The American Audio Prose Library Inc, June 1, 1987.*

such a resource as a commons.”⁹⁷ The A.W.E. Society connects people to place, but can that lead to the organization of protocols for the protection of local ecologies? Large hurdles to civic engagement remain, and the development of durable social commons around the care for nearby ecologies, many of which remain aspirational commons, is potential that has yet to be activated in my work. This means that my secondary research question (“How can participatory art within marginal nature facilitate moments of reciprocal care between people and local environments?”) remains fertile territory for future exploration.

In envisioning future directions of this work, upon completion of my formal studies, I will resume long-term engagement within my local community. To that end, I plan to continue to invite people to trespass with me and to reconnect with their senses. I will continue to seek collaborators within my local area in hopes of developing a robust community of care within the aspirational commons.

I am currently volunteering with the Clinton River Watershed Council to become a water quality educator for local school groups. I hope to develop a more well-rounded approach to place-based inquiry that includes aesthetic, relational and political dimensions rather than merely scientific approaches to understanding landscape.

I am also participating in a six-month training program with the Association of Nature and Forest Therapy Guides. My goal is to strengthen my understanding of how direct experiences in nature can provide healing moments. I am particularly excited to apply the concepts of forest therapy to urban nature and generate additional creative actions.

I am participating, as well, in a two-year study entitled “Dreams of Nature, Health, and a Balanced Life: An Exploration of Women’s Art, Writing, and Lived Experience” with Dr. Sara L. Warber, University of Michigan Professor Emeritus and former Co-Director of the Integrative Health program; along with Emmylou Rahtz, a qualitative researcher

⁹⁷ *Bollier, 15.*

from the European Center for the Environment and Human Health among others. This study will explore a gap in knowledge about how art can transform our social constructions of the environment and aid in imagining new ways of living in a balanced relationship with the environment. I have seen glimmers of the capacity of performative art for transforming the very nature of these relationships, and I am excited to be a member of a cross-disciplinary team exploring the potential to heal “The World Wound.”⁹⁸

My practice is guided by the core belief that inadequate knowledge is not the only impediment to transitioning towards a more lively, sustainable and just habitation of the earth. Instead, this work is concerned with developing our capacity to hear the muted messages in our environment, to develop a sense of belonging, and to carve out spaces for reimagining our relationships to the places where we live. Art can serve as the fulcrum to tip us from the world in which we live to the world to which we aspire. To get there, we will need trespassers guided by an enduring sense of love for this beautiful and troubled world. This is the purpose of my work.

⁹⁸ *Halifax, 1-20.*

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