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**Scott Michael Webel**

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**The Dissertation Committee for Scott Michael Webel  
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**The City of Living Garbage:  
Improvisational Ecologies of Austin, Texas**

**Committee:**

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**Kathleen Stewart, Supervisor**

---

**Kamran Asdar Ali**

---

**Janet M. Davis**

---

**John Hartigan**

---

**Allucquère Rosanne Stone**

**The City of Living Garbage:  
Improvisational Ecologies of Austin, Texas**

by

**Scott Michael Webel, B.A., M.A.**

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**The City of Living Garbage:  
Improvisational Ecologies of Austin, Texas**

Scott Michael Webel, Ph.D.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2010

Supervisor: Kathleen Stewart

“The city of living garbage” tours private houses in Austin transformed by their inhabitants into quasi-public places – art environments and permaculture systems made possible by urban waste. The creators of these micro-utopias collect and improvise with salvaged materials like roadside junk, greywater, unwanted animals, and half-forgotten cultural forms to cultivate habitats where undervalued things flourish. They revalue waste through a variety of practices like caring for, teaching, learning, enjoying, and tinkering. Becoming part of these relational patterns is a way to slow down and find wonder and pleasure in the ordinary, but also to act on ecological problems in the larger world. The landscape patches that emerge are lively but vulnerable assemblages that artists, activists, and their nonhuman allies belong to as local characters. By being open for tours, the places loosely connect publics that share modes of attention set on urban natures, salvageable garbage, and vernacular aesthetics.

These informal institutions, non-profits, and vulnerable for-profit businesses are caught up in Austin’s current sustainable and cultural development strategies, but also share in an informal economy through their use of valueless wastes. Some articulate with contemporary localization movements that seek to reconfigure water, food, and energy production to decrease their precarious dependence on globalized economies. Others refuse the boundary between art and everyday life by recasting houses as never-ending aesthetic projects. Similarly, as wildlife habitats and urban gardens, they are thriving examples of

cultivated places that disrupt an assumed antithesis between cities and ecosystems. These embodied critiques or dreams are small-scale manifestations of what urban natures might become.

Borrowing from Deleuze & Guattari, Haraway, Latour, and Thrift, I attend to these places' ecological and aesthetic relational dynamics that communicate directly through bodies, senses, and forms. This non-representational approach recognizes the contributions of nonhuman agents like plants, animals, microbes, and machines in composing affective landscapes. The writing strives to be a mode of research that is isomorphic with the phenomena it describes. It is impelled by a love of the places, people, and beings it researches; it aspires to preserve a little bit of them by redoubling their presence in the world.

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## INTRODUCTION

The city of living garbage is a tour of private houses in Austin transformed by their inhabitants into quasi-public places – art environments made from waste and models of do-it-yourself (DIY) sustainability. The creators of these little utopias collect and tinker with salvaged materials like roadside junk, greywater, unwanted animals, and half-forgotten cultural forms to cultivate habitats where undervalued things can flourish. They revalue waste through a variety of practices – caring, cultivating, teaching, learning, enjoying, healing, and inventively exploiting the accidents or unintended effects of complex systems. The assemblages resulting from these practices are emergent and improvisational, working with whatever is at hand and open to becoming whatever they will be. Forever in process, they take shape through a layering of time, materials, and life forms that change with the seasons and over the years. Their creators are folded into relational patterns with places, plants, and animals through practices of care and repair. Becoming part of these rhythms is a way to slow down and find wonder and pleasure in the ordinary, but also to do something about ecological problems in the larger world. By being open for tours, the places loosely connect a public that shares modes of attention set on urban natures, salvageable garbage, and vernacular aesthetics.

These idiosyncratic projects are caught up in Austin’s current sustainable and cultural/“symbolic economic” (Zukin 1995) development strategies. Some of these places fall under Red Wassenich’s phrase “Keep Austin Weird,” an anti-development slogan that became a catchphrase for local businesses and a projection of the City’s uniqueness. As informal institutions, non-profits, and vulnerable for-profit businesses, the places share a resistance to consumerism-driven economies in favor of a community meeting its needs and desires, making the most of things, and improvising with the City’s post-consumption wastestreams. They resonate with and borrow from broader American histories of folk art environments, roadside attractions, utopian enclaves, and back-to-the-land schemes. As fantasy worlds, partial utopias, and alternative public places, they refashion everyday spaces with process-oriented improvisations that have an ongoing impact on urban

waste. They refuse the boundary between art and ordinary life by recasting houses as never-ending aesthetic projects – ways to make the ordinary into a personalized cultural, political, and environmental habitat, a lively microcosm of what someone most values or desires. Similarly, as wildlife habitats and urban food gardens, they are thriving examples of cultivated places that refuse the long-held antithesis of cities and nature. Collectively, they elaborate alternative relationships between cities and the landscapes they occupy that unsettle a presumed parasitism of urban areas. They are embodied critiques or dreams, small manifestations of what urban natures might become.

Some of the projects explicitly articulate with contemporary movements for “localization of culture, economy, and decision-making” (City Repair 2010) and the emergent politics and ethics of future-oriented ecological limits. Localization marks a critical shift in urban placemaking where water cycles, food security, waste management, economies, and cultural production are being reconfigured to decrease their precarious dependence on globalized economies. Anxieties over ecological “affective facts” that conjure apocalyptic futures (Massumi forthcoming) like water and food shortages shape a present that re-values the category of urban waste as free raw material with which to create positive, immediate changes in everyday habitats. By remediating waste, practitioners deal with threatening futures using “reparative practices” (Sedgwick 1997) concerned with local solutions to ecological problems instead of universal, standardizing ones. Rather than criticizing dominant practices (or in addition to that), they move on and build little worlds of their own. Tinkering transmutes the constraining limits of sustainability into art forms and pleasures – not just something to be suffered in reluctant lifestyle changes or asceticism. Such practices result in process-oriented projects that generate new forms of value and new habits that connect people to a place. The home-based art environment takes on a *social and ecological life of its own*, such that it never stops emerging, surprising, and challenging its makers. It becomes a lively but chancy, vulnerable habitat that artists, activists, and their nonhuman allies *belong to* as local characters.

As art environments, gardens, and permaculture systems, these houses and backyards are “landscape patches” (Odum 1993:54; Grimm et al. 2000:579) that transform a small part

of the city's wastestreams into intensely living ecological habitats. They are held together by "refrains" – expressive patterns and rhythms that give the sense of an inhabitable world, a feeling of being at home (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:315-20). The concept of refrains does not approach aesthetics as the symbolic arts of people, but rather, apprehends arts as embodied expression or distributed somatic intelligence that communicates directly through the senses (Postrel 2003; Thrift forthcoming). This non-representational approach to the aesthetics and design of built environments recognizes the contributions of nonhuman agents like plants, animals, microbes, and machines living in urban landscapes (Haraway 2008, Latour 2004). These entities help transform waste into the mosaics of fragments and assemblages of junk that compose the city of living garbage.

This city urbanizes in a world caught in a garbage crisis. The mass phenomenon of anthropogenic waste has initiated a new geological era, the Anthropocene, characterized by a human-altered atmosphere and accelerating biodiversity loss. Beginning with Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer (2000), several teams of geologists have endorsed this new climatological period inaugurated by the industrial revolution and massive fossil fuel consumption. Its giant artifacts range from the sky, oceanic garbage gyres, and soil ecologies

**The Great Western Pacific Garbage Gyre** – a clockwise vortex of plastics half the size of the United States floating between Hawaii and California. Another gyre spins off the coast of Japan, and the Atlantic and Indian oceans may have them as well. Earth's largest landfills (Silverman 2009), these self-aggregating accidents collect drifts of flotsam set loose by coastal cities. At each gyre's heart, ever-tinier sun-degraded plastic polymers called "mermaid tears" outnumber plankton six to one (Pope 2009). The tears are sponges that soak up heavy metals and pollutants like DDT, while bigger plastics are turned into houses for life forms like bristle worms. Mermaid tears get mistaken as food and eaten, thereby concentrating toxins up the food chain (to humans). As bigger fish eat bigger plastics, their stomachs turn into mobile museums of trash that eventually kill them. Garbage gyres – molecular continents that dwarf Texas like Hurricane Ike – spin out of cities with a catastrophic surplus of threat that sucks us all into their centers. In a flash, questions like "Are humans killing the ocean?" throw together an anxious and pained "we" paralyzed by the staggering size of the accident, the meticulous engineering problems and monumental costs that *might* clean it up, and the guilt-ridden momentum of consuming plastic every day. Recent artworks respond to garbage gyres by bearing witness and raising awareness. Among them, the Institute for Figuring's "Rubbish Vortex" (2009) is a coral reef collaboratively crocheted out of plastic bags, Kim Holleman's "Trashnami!" (2008) assembles the gyre as a wave crashing down on us, and Chris Jordan's "Gyre" (2009; after Hokusai) is a collage of plastics from the gyre itself.

on every continent with trace radiation from atomic testing. Anthropocene discourses are variously saturated with apocalyptic threat, irreversible loss, or a longing for an Edenic return. Meanwhile, life goes on in the city of living garbage, in little bubbles made possible by the substances of the trashed world.

In what follows, this introduction briefly examines the relationship between cities and their wastestreams, and the improvisational aesthetic that offers one route to altering that relationship at small cumulative scales. Zooming in on Austin, Texas, I give a picture of how current cultural and sustainable development patterns leverage the city's longstanding creativity and self-emergent placemaking practices. We will then be led into the city of living garbage with a theoretical discussion of nonhuman agents, landscapes as ethnographic objects, and houses as life-preserving habitats. This introduction ends with a reflection on writing as a mode of research that is isomorphic with the phenomena it describes. This writing project is impelled by a love of the places, people, and beings it researches; it aspires to become a part of them, to preserve a little bit of them and help them proliferate by redoubling their presence in the world.

### **Salvaging and tinkering with what is already there: improvisational aesthetics**

Ecological crises like garbage gyres, climate change, and imperiled biodiversity (from “white-nose syndrome” among the bats to “colony collapse disorder” among the bees) whirl into our lives all the time now. As with “economic downturn,” the crisis-driven media coverage by which they usually whirl paints them as so monumental that individual efforts have little to no effect. It seems that only technological, governmental, and municipal fixes on massive scales can waylay catastrophe.

Ordinary habits like eating, getting around town, or watering the lawn become unhabituated by rising prices, sensitivity to environmental and social costs, and the moral contours of “ecological footprints” (Rees 1992). In response, people explore alternative modes of consumption – not only for big purchases like green houses and hybrid cars, but little things as small as the discrete fates of post-use plastics that aggregate as gyres. Small changes of habit – bringing bags to the grocery store, trading out light bulbs with

fluorescents, or growing some vegetables and raising chickens for eggs – are imagined as preserving a little bit of “the environment” one little thing and one day at a time. Of course, energy efficiency upgrades and home gardening are good news for Home Depot (Rosenbloom 2009).

Mainstreamed sustainability rehashes old-fashioned self-reliance, but in quirky or high-tech ways. You can crochet or knit your Ipod cover instead of buying more plastic. *Make* magazine’s annual Maker Faire in San Francisco and cities like Austin, Detroit, and New York gathers budding DIY, craft, gardening, and popular science enthusiasts into a sort of World’s Fair that celebrates people power, homespun ingenuity, and creative recycling. This popular culture movement steps out of economic/ecological crisis mode into the fun of making things, helping consumers to “build a sustainable future at home” by turning them into producers: “together, we’ll begin to make considerable progress on this giant, multigenerational DIY project, which we’re calling ReMake America” (Dougherty 2009). In addition to DIY everything, lifestyle changes have also been articulated as social movements for Slow Foods, Small Houses, and Simplicity.

More on the fringes, people are disengaging consumption by going without or relying on community networks to meet more of their needs. Some are giving up their cars, refrigerators, or air conditioners to get carbon neutral. Freegans avoid buying things as much as possible by dumpster diving or finding furniture on the curb. Clothing swaps and sewing circles like the “Swap and Chops” organized by the Greater Austin Garbage Arts abound. Websites like Craigslist or Freecycle Yahoo! groups are overloaded with free stuff. Internet networking fosters community events like Skillshare workshops, where participants teach each other computer programs, bike repair, gardening, and other daily arts. Time Exchange networks (or Time Banks) coordinate people in exchanging hours of skilled labor (say, plumbing) for hours of something they cannot do (like massage, or guitar lessons). These proliferating practices are animated by an alternative economy of gift giving and a salvage ethic aimed not only at things, but skills – what Rob Hopkins has called “the Great Reskilling” necessary to build post-carbon energy “Transition Towns” (2008).

**Salvage:** the desire to save something endangered or undervalued that you have some inexplicable love for and to keep it in the world. It is an impelling attachment to singular or irreplaceable things in the process of flickering out of existence. Even to save some small indexical part of a beloved mortal – a lock of hair, a photograph. You save the *-graphy*, not life itself. You can save the genetic lineage, but not the mortal being. You need to build a place to preserve life. There is no standing still, so preservation needs saving, too. At the extreme, this salvage ethic can slip into *collectiomania* or *disposaphobia*. You need to save *every one*, and the house becomes clogged with hoarded piles. Or paralysis sets in – how can I or we really save the ocean or sky? Salvage mixes joys of presence with sorrows of loss.

Little publics are gathering around salvage, gifts, and skills as if they were *places*; they bring people together. Along these lines, the nonprofit City Repair in Portland, Oregon, organizes community placemaking events like intersection repair parties to add gardens and gathering places to the city grid. They leverage the skills, time, and creativity of community members to localize maintenance of the city itself (City Repair 2010). These various responses to imagining what “sustainability” might be play on the impulse to tinker on labors of love, fiddling with small-scale, idiosyncratic, community-based solutions to looming ecological problems.

In Austin, artists and activists have been tinkering with two particular resources – houses and urban waste – through which they playfully reshape everyday life and consumption habits and begin to inhabit the city as an ecological landscape. Austin has a long history and a peculiar number of home-based art environments. Since the 1980s, Casa Neverlandia’s creators have gradually expanded a small turn-of-the-century house into a three-story A-frame using sustainable design and salvaged architectural elements. Since the 90s, tourists and urban wildlife have flocked to the Cathedral of Junk, a 70-ton, three-story backyard megalith made of load-bearing detritus. It is part of a scattered neighborhood of art yards like Spunky Monkey Ranch and Smut Putt Heaven in south Austin. Around the time the Cathedral came into being, the gardeners at Boggy Creek Farm started selling organic produce out of an old wooden garage next to their house. Also in east Austin, from 2000 to 2008, the Rhizome Collective taught DIY ecological designs like greywater remediation and composting toilets out of their live-in warehouses. Nearby, Biosquat’s makers began building airy structures out of bike parts for summer sleeping and cultivating

a landscape of edible plants. The Museum of Natural & Artificial Ephemera (MNAE), which my partner and I run out of our house, moved to Austin in 2001. MNAE recovers the abandoned cultural form of the dime museum and displays historical flotsam like quack medicine and ruined taxidermy; our backyard features greywater wetlands and gives home to a feral cat colony. Nearby, a blacksmith we met through the Museum cultivates carnivorous plants endangered by habitat loss. By opening up to visitors, these and other Austin homes serve as educational sites that inspire similar home-based projects.

The projects are only possible because US cities are as *rich in trash* as they are in creative improvisation. The city of living garbage taps wastestreams and mobilizes ad hoc knowledges of repair and recycling that thrive in different ways in cities around the world. AbdouMaliq Simone emphasizes the importance of recycling and repair in the informal economies of Dakar, Senegal, and other African cities, where “repair activities are relied on to employ at least a small proportion of the large number of youths who have no work and no prospects for it” (2004:46). Arif Hasan details solid waste recycling in Karachi, Pakistan, where every year 21,000 waste-pickers (mostly youths, as around half of the city’s population is under 19) and 55,000 families recycle over a million tons of paper, rags, metal, plastics, and bones (for soap factories and chicken feed) (1999:39; 108-12). Simone and Hasan emphasize that the informal repair and recycling activities that clean up and maintain these cities should not be seen as compensating for failed urban development, but as “a very different kind of sustainable urban configuration” than that imagined by contemporary

**New Liberty:** In 1996, the arts-based development group Dou’Art installed *La Nouvelle Liberté* in a traffic circle in Douala, Cameroon. Self-taught artist Joseph Francis Sumegn a composed this forty-foot figure out of scrap metal, car parts, tires, and other urban waste. It gave residents a chance to reflect on the improvisational resourcefulness that gives their city life. Some felt grateful “that the sculpture was an affirmation of a way of urban life that people had been reluctant, even embarrassed, to affirm: that recycled and secondhand materials can indeed make up a good life” (Simone 2004:113-4). The Mayor and other elites complained that the sculpture gave a “hypervisibility” to scrappy aspects of Douala they would rather forget or hide. Not only is the sculpture made of valueless materials of post-consumption (unlike the bronze and marble monuments of European cities); one of the figure’s legs remains unfinished. As placemaking tactics, public artworks and the very materials in which they are assembled can amplify the controversies and possibilities behind how cities are composed. Hide creative recycling away, or make it a monument to itself?

**Garbage City:** Karachi’s official solid waste management unofficially supports the informal economy of recycling in a variety of ways, accepting payments to dump demolition debris at squatter settlements as landfill, organic waste at kilns to feed fires, and leaving trash at neighborhood dumps so pickers have more time to sift. Hasan recommends institutionalizing this interdependence between formal waste management and informal economies of recycling by founding a “garbage city” that:

- Concentrates recycling activities close to the landfill to minimize urban pollution generated by the sorting process
- Gives the recycling industry land, water, wastewater disposal, electricity, and housing
- Establishes storage for sorted recyclables
- Provides technical support and capital to improve the recycling industry's operation

"If [this] can be achieved, Karachi's solid waste management problem will not only be solved but this process will become financially sustainable" (Hasan 1999:110-11). Plus, they can build the outer walls of the garbage city out of the city’s garbage itself!

Western sustainable development models (Simone 2005:4). Informal solutions that are already in action can be put at the center of new urban planning efforts – a challenging prospect of organizing what thrives on informality, adaptability, and improvisation into larger scales of relation with the city, its inhabitants, and its wastestreams.

These informal economies leverage breakdown, building an everyday out of what is becoming waste. Along these lines, Nigel Thrift examines the diachronic dynamics of urban forms to argue against an apocalypticism that sees contemporary Western cities as being on the brink of catastrophic collapse. Thrift notes, “cities are based in large part on activities of repair and maintenance, the systematic re-placement of place” (2005:135-6), largely ignored, underappreciated, and too mundane to captivate attention. Nitty-gritty problems make up the logistics of repair: where do you park the dumpster to dispose of old roofing materials that need to be torn off and replaced if fancy landscaping surrounds the house? Systematized knowledge bases only help so much; there is always a degree of improvisation involved – planks of wood from roof to dumpster. Thrift sees this improvisational capacity that adapts to particular situations spreading as repair and maintenance take on new territories like bioremediation, but also as more of the general public take on various DIY projects. Following Lefebvre, Thrift points to a “politics of small achievements” at work in this readiness (145). Catastrophe may strike, but a redundant improvisational knowledge diffused throughout the city will be able to rebuild.

Salvaging and tinkering with what is already there, arts of improvisation thrive in survival mode. They know how to make do. This capacity to make things work without means has long been racialized and maligned as underclass. Poor whites improvise “hillbilly fixes” (Hartigan 1999:102). Chicano have-nots get by with *rasquache* (Mesa-Bains 2008). Use of the taboo phrase “nigger rigging” persists in trade unions (Bass 1995) and even among public council representatives (Donze 2006). These terms point to improvisation as something *those people* do. In this pejorative mode, improvised engineering and construction practices take on the qualities of a bad aesthetic style by which middle class or professional experts differentiate themselves. At the same time, the resourcefulness behind improvisation can become a point of pride for marginalized groups. The popularization of DIY practices, Simone and Hasan’s suggestions that informal economies of recycling be taken seriously as viable waste management models, and Thrift’s arguments concerning working class improvisation and urban resilience all point to a valorization of this aesthetic of salvaging, tinkering, making do, and creating something out of nothing. Given corporate backing, improvisational aesthetics have grandiose names like Imagineering (which is what made Disneyland). The improvisational capacity underpins an emergent “creative class” (Florida 2002) responsible for generating “the affective register of cities” (Thrift 2004:58) through aesthetic labor and the social engineering of themed environments. While cities and corporations put improvisational aesthetics to work building regional sustainability and culture industries, these arts also thrive in informal and gift economies; they build lively local worlds with or without money. Improvisational aesthetics simultaneously drive and survive economic development based on perpetual growth and novelty.

Improvisational aesthetics are in no way limited to the specialized art discourses and commodity markets that are burgeoning in Austin and other expressive cities. Rather, “aesthetics is the way we communicate through the senses” (Postrel 2004: 6), the way the body is crossed by feelings or reverberates with sounds as it moves through environments. Places, objects, and practices attract or repulse various publics. Aesthetics, in this regard, is a social/interactional intelligence that communicates in sensations instead of (or in addition to) representations. Arts connect through touch, contact, exposure, and literal consumption.

Aesthetic urban atmospheres include built spaces like pedestrian zones, stadiums, and theme parks, but also the fleeting sensorial “refrains” composed by characters like musicians, birds, or graffiti that send sounds and images echoing through landscapes (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:315). ‘Improvisational aesthetics’ specifically points to an expressive shaping of environments in the mode of bricolage, mosaics, and motley medleys, cobbling things together in ways they were not necessarily intended to be used. “Turn a Rolls Royce into a chicken coop” (Waits 2004)!

Tinkering, DIY, and the like delight in (and stress out over) becoming able to, finding out how, or becoming symbiotic with something that needs tending to exist – that only exists through *you*, but that composes a *we* in the educational process of becoming. Improvisational arts like gardening, cooking, playing music, or building junkitecture are *habits* shaped over a lifetime of getting to know how to do them. They depend on muscle-memory, intuition, and ingrained knowledge based on repetitious practice to take form. They’re able to make do with what’s there and become part of what’s happening, like dancers slipping into rhythms. Vernacular arts blend into the ordinary, alternately giving it homely textures or otherworldly qualities (depending on where you come from). Urban areas or regional styles begin to feel unique through a layering of these micropractices of placemaking.

Builders of Austin’s city of living garbage use aesthetic (over technical, legal, or capitalist/consumer) approaches to *directly operate* on waste, their key transformational object. Cities pour out an urban wastestream of garbage through daily maintenance of architecture and mobility, much of it salvageable things like sheet metal, rebar, windows, bathtubs, bike parts, and the like. A river of biomass in the form of food wastes, greywater, excreta, and landscaping debris likewise flows through the city. Scavengers and tinkers siphon off a small portion of this wastestream as free construction materials for improvised building, raw materials for art, water for ponds, or compost for gardens. Apart from being freely available, taking responsibility for such waste and making something of it pulls the senses into an alternative relationship with ecological problems that can empower both human practitioners and a broader community of urban life forms. Improvisational aesthetics

build a microcosm or little habitat that helps shelter what really matters to inhabitants – creativity, community, food, and water. It results in highly processual, seasonally sensitive places that take time to unfold through slow accumulations and accretions of forms, layered processes that come to compose a dynamic habitat that is not driven by human purposes alone. Things get more complex, livelier, as time goes by and other agencies take over. The places take on lives of their own – assemblages in which their creators slowly turn into components or caretakers, trying to keep up with the habitats’ demands.

### **“Symbolic economy” and “the creative class” in “Keep Austin Weird”**

In the double shadow of a diffuse economic slump and global climate change, US cities like Portland, San Francisco, and Austin are adapting by developing place-making strategies that capitalize on their urban mystique and by supporting ecological awareness and conservation among their denizens. Following the advice of economists like Richard Florida (2002) and Daniel H. Pink (2005), cities are leveraging their auras as bohemian or countercultural capitals to attract creative laborers and stimulate growth in a regional “symbolic economy” (Zukin 1995). Becoming green cities only sweetens the deal, adding a feeling of kindness to urban habitats that consciously shelter wildlife (Thrift 2005). Austin implements aesthetic models of placemaking with its *CreateAustin Cultural Master Plan* that seeks to enhance the city’s ‘personality’ through cultural planning (Bulick 2008). Through neighborhood associations, the City promoted a contest to see which neighborhoods could register the most private properties as official wildlife habitats through the National Wildlife Federation. City utilities support conservation with free low-flush toilets and rebates on rain barrels and solar panels. This aesthetic and ecological turn in city-making takes place through planned municipal efforts, but also happens through unplanned improvisations, not all of them wrought by humans. A million migratory Mexican free-tail bats streaming from their accidental hibernaculum under a bridge downtown have become a summer tourist staple. Symbolic economic and sustainable development initiatives seek to preserve such spontaneous habitats, finding ways to package them to generate monetary value, hooking their affective impact into other city spectacles.

In the 1990s, urban studies scholars like Sharon Zukin identified the symbolic economy and cultural strategies of development as forces driving growth and gentrification in the urban core since the late-1970s. Richard Florida and other economists now routinely advocate *place* as key to the economic development and stability of US cities. According to Florida, “places provide the ecosystems that harness human creativity and turn it into economic value” (2002:*xix*). In the usual gentrification narrative, poor artists, musicians, and other ‘creatives’ who can only afford to live in economically depressed neighborhoods create cultural anchors by establishing informal art sectors. These in turn draw real estate agents who leverage cultural capital to redevelop neighborhoods, thereby displacing poor residents, including the artists themselves. Historic and emergent cultural sites become ‘Disneyfied,’ themed replicas of themselves – privately funded, highly policed public spaces tailor-made for class- and race-based tourist/consumer identities (Smith 1996; Zukin 1995). The nostalgic sense of losing something authentic creeps across the city. Instituting a kind of planned gentrification, Florida’s economic theory seeks to outpace these dangers of place by cultivating cities as ‘ecosystems’ that make welcome habitats for creative people through the promise of technology-based work opportunities, nature-based leisure spaces, and tolerance for difference.

The symbolic economy operates in city-planning vocabulary through a “creative” or “cultural sector” of affective laborers – Florida’s eponymous “Creative Class” (2002), or Pink’s army of “creators and empathizers, pattern recognizers,” and other “right-brainers” (2005:1-3). Cities now not only instrumentalize Florida’s place and class theory in their planning, but also use his case studies as buzz for cities themselves. For example, in the “*CreateAustin* Cultural Master Plan,” we learn that Austin “has been highly touted by economist Richard Florida for the presence of elements crucial to competing in the global economy... Dr. Florida ranks Austin second, behind only San Francisco, as a top creative, innovative city” (Bulick 2008:15). According to the familiar gentrification/development narrative in the master plan,

The region’s mild climate, low cost of living, the presence of the University of Texas at Austin, and the city’s reputation as a liberal, tolerant bastion in a conservative region

attracted successive waves of creatives. They in turn, put Austin on the map with their songs, films, books and plays, technology and business innovations... Just as the true impact of the creative sector and its critical role in attracting, stoking and retaining the talent needed to position Austin in the global economy – its creative climate is threatened. Austin is getting less affordable... The creative community has failed to unite and make the case for its value and impact. (Bulick 2008:16-17)

This perceived ‘failure’ points to how cities expect aesthetic improvisation to hook into a plan with economic value as its ends, or to take it to the next level by starting or getting involved in non-profit arts organizations. *Take It to the Next Level* is a workshop series for creative laborers sponsored by the City of Austin. It was also a phrase used by one of the curators who met with Jen and I as we negotiated an installation for the Austin Museum of Art’s “New Art in Austin: Twenty to Watch” exhibition. We were taking it to the next level by bringing our homemade museum to a real museum institution and using pieces from AMOA’s collection as part of our installation. By keeping the museum at home, we were failing to rise up through the levels of arts organizations to meet the full potential of our value and impact.

Multi-level forms of bureaucratic organization run counter to tactics of staying disorganized, loose, temporary, or unformed. These contrary modes do not cancel each other out; rather, the unifying of creative community, its stratification into levels, is being laid out by the City so that improvisational aesthetics have a habitat in which to manifest. Most of Austin’s cultural arts funding goes to established museums and galleries, theaters, and other spaces in which artists can show their work. Artists themselves are independent contractors. From the creative class perspective, failure lies in not making their artistic labor valuable to a regional tourist economy, and the City has stepped in to facilitate that process. Meanwhile, un-unified clusters of house-based places like art yards both bypass and strategically tap the symbolic economy under construction by the City. The city of living garbage is composed of homemade places that have intentionally avoided crystallizing as organizations, while still miming the institutional coherency of forms like museums, cathedrals, and farms.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The exception among the research sites is the Rhizome Collective, whose nonprofit status lets them receive funding from the Environmental Protection Agency and other sources.

This intentional dropping out of organizational systems runs with Austin's history as a bohemian city and liberal university town. Austin first drew 'waves of creatives' as the post-Vietnam place in Texas for music, easy living, and countercultural radicalism. But in order to make a living, as one musician from the band Wavy Gravy tells it, "hippies were left to find another way, an alternate reality. In the late Sixties and early Seventies ... Austin became a city full of hippies finding themselves, finding what worked for them. This included artists, writers, musicians – the whole range of fanciful spirits – besides your ordinary-but-longhaired folks" (Hattersley 1994). Today, the alternate reality of a town full of industrious, creative hippies has become a habitat in need of *preservation*: "Keep Austin Weird," the City's semi-official slogan. Red Wassenich coined the phrase and printed it up on some free bumper stickers "to stop the obsession with money and development that leads to the homogenization that makes every American city look alike" (2007:4). The phrase makes the city a habitat that encourages or expects unconventional and eccentric behavior. Austin is full of oddball collectors, colorful characters, and quirky amateurs that come out of the woodwork to bizarre events like Spamorama and Eeyore's Birthday Party. When we moved MNAE from Tucson to Austin in 2001, journalists like John Kelso and visitors drawn to the museum immediately lumped it in with weird places. Whatever our intentions, MNAE seemed to distill Austin's weirdness, so that Red sees us as "heroes in the ongoing struggle."<sup>2</sup> We have been conscripted in the weird wars.

"Keep Austin Weird" indexes vernacular practices and local characters perceived as threatened by corporate development and gentrification. The phrase refrains a feeling of countercultural expression through its varied circulations. Its repetition on shirts, mugs, bus tickets, and other commodities and ephemera invites variations (often in the form of bumper stickers) that play off or maim the phrase: "Make Austin Normal," of course, but also "Keep East Austin Shitty." But as a kind of brand that gives the city expressivity as a uniquely affective place, the phrase doubles back as a doppelganger that threatens what Red hoped

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<sup>2</sup> Red's inscription in our copy of his book *Keep Austin Weird* (2007). MNAE is included in the chapter on "Weird Places," along with the Cathedral of Junk, Smut Putt Heaven, Spunky Monkey Ranch, and other houses that figure in the city of living garbage. This "ongoing struggle" against the menacing forces of homogenization is only sort of a weird joke. Vince Hannemann, the Cathedral's creator, got J-U-N-K K-I-N-G tattooed across his knuckles: "my war paint for the culture wars!"

it would preserve. After being picked up by local businesses like BookPeople to fight chain stores, “Keep Austin Weird” was trademarked by Absolutely Austin for printing on mugs and burnt orange t-shirts made in China. Such ironies abound: on South Congress Avenue, police hassle the Yard Dog folk art gallery for their decade-old car tire planters because the store lacks a *flower pot permit*. South Congress’ success as a weird shopping district leads to its control as an increasingly monitored public space. The refrain “Keep Austin Weird” makes a double bind, with contradictory demands for countercultural creativity as an alternate reality-in-itself, and as a standardizing program that tames creativity with the bottom line of economic growth through local (aesthetics as) business. An unanticipated homogenization sets in once everyone is weird.

Of course, urban development driven by the over-determined value of money homogenizes the ecology of places as well. The growth of a Floridian city as an ‘ecosystem that harnesses human creativity’ threatens the organisms, hills, flowing water, and other environmental features valued in Austin as part of ‘the region’s mild climate’ that attracted its ‘creative climate’ in the first place. While Florida deals with metaphorical ‘ecosystems,’ the places that make up the city of living garbage proceed by shifting the focus of ‘human creativity’ from the economic to the ecologic and getting literal (and playful, and political) with the qualities of ecosystems. Ernst Haeckel coined the word “oecologie” to replace a more cumbersome phrase in natural history – “the economy of nature” – that gestured towards the co-emergent cycles and symbioses of life at work between organisms and their environments. Counter to economic value as the end point of the cultural strategies generated by the reified creative class, several of the sites resonant with “Keep Austin Weird” value the art environment, creative labor, and the cultivation of sustainable habitats as valuable in themselves. They are ecological habitats where different forms of agency come alive; they shelter various species, but also songs, stories, and arts, all flourishing in wonderfully un-unified cacophony.

As the story of “Keep Austin Weird” shows, something happens when a place is marked and its qualities are refrained as an ambiguous domain. A *somewhere* starts to echo and play off itself until it becomes an occupied place, drawing power from recursivity.

Walking into named houses like “the Museum of Ephemera,” you step over a threshold into a different little world already given consistency through its refrain. The *Squawk!* and bright green flight of monk parrots colonizing Austin and other cities changes the urban soundscape, altering how the sky feels by hauling the tropics north. This writing project works with refrains as a vocabulary for ecological landscapes and a theoretical model of worldmaking processes, but also as a methodology. We don’t *talk* about refrains without *making* them. “The city of living garbage” is a chancy refrain laid out across Austin, a place to inhabit and wander inside, a place to build. We’re entering an emergent city, where houses and their wastestreams begin to form altered alliances with their landscapes and where tinkering starts to transform trash into new forms of life and sensation. There are riches in wastes, untapped use-value in junk, alien energy forms worming out of rot. Roadside heaps could be reconfigured into musical instruments, retaining walls for gardens, fragments of a backyard Disneyland... Garbage glows with unknown potentials, not yet cobbled together into living machines. These houses are discovering how to occupy the City in a way that lets garbage come alive, learning to see in what was cast off a striking, untapped excess that can be refrained into habitats.

### **Ecology: Nonhuman agents, landscapes, and houses**

As wildlife habitats and urban food gardens, the projects that make up the city of living garbage are thriving examples of cultivated places that refuse the long-held antithesis of cities and nature: they elaborate “naturecultures” (Haraway 2003) that improvise with plants and animals as active agents in aesthetic labor and play. As landscape patches that recycle greywater, compost, and other household wastes, these projects involve various species as *collaborators* along the lines of Donna Haraway’s portrait of humans living and working with dogs (2008), or Bruno Latour’s call to “redefine the collective ‘we’ that is the new focus of the social sciences” to recognize “nonhuman” plants, animals, microbes, machines, and other entities as key actors in social worlds (2007). The human creators of these places collaborate with pollinating bees, mushrooms and bacteria that build garden soil, bamboo that holds together hills, cats that greet visitors in the yard, and like it or not,

mosquitoes that colonize standing water, or raccoons that tear up ponds hunting for fish and edible roots. As we learn from the cats and monk parrots in Part I of the city of living garbage, nonhumans independently tinker with Austin's infrastructure and wastestreams by laying down refrains and non-symbolic communicative forms I call *-graphies*. In this sense the city cultivates *itself*, and people are becoming part of that process.

This writing project picks up the idiom of 'habitats' and 'landscapes' from ecology. Deleuze and Guattari's writings on refrains and houses, with their layering of aesthetics and ecology, have been influential to me in thinking about home-based projects as habitat-building collaborations between humans and nonhumans. Before turning to the themes of landscapes and houses, I want to briefly characterize what is happening to the concept of "nature" in the Anthropocene, how this alters our understanding of what counts as social agents, and how this complicates the issue of teleological intention or means/ends relationships in anthropogenic designs.

Since Haeckel gave it a name in the mid-1800s, ecology has steadily widened its turf into the social sciences, the political sphere of environmentalism, and cultural forms of 'deep ecology,' speculative fiction, and other aesthetic worlds. Through the late 1900s, ecological research and ecologically based critiques of economy generally relied on the modernist sensibility that ecosystems were most natural/balanced/wild *without* humans (romantically excepting some indigenous groups). Recent writings on political ecology reject a clear-cut nature/culture (or put differently, representation/reality) divide in favor of a view that complexly weaves other species' flourishing into the human realm. In its widest sense, ecology has become an ethical and political project concerned with how different forms of life, sensation, and intelligence find homes in a common world with humans (or die trying), as well as how diverse bodies put each other to use by becoming house, food, and kin to one another. An ecological view of ordinary human worlds reveals myriad nonhuman agents involved in the collective composition of the habitats for life we experience as cities, houses, and bodies. The Anthropocene inaugurates a conceptual era in which humans are no longer considered to be unnatural or alien agents in the ecological realm.

By the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (or as early as the 1940s development of the atomic bomb [Worster 1994; Masco 2004]), nature had shed its naturalness as a place untouched by human beings. The environmental crises brought on by industrialization and urbanization, petrochemicals and weapons manufacturing, and the like galvanized an anti-modernist sensibility of capitalist economy as fundamentally against ecology, civilization as the sure death of nature (i.e., Foster 2002; Sepúlveda 2005; Zerzan 2005). With the dawn of global climate change, humans were accused of permanently messing up nature by making the entire Earth's atmosphere a sky-sized carbon footprint (for example, in journalist Bill McKibben's 1989 *The End of Nature*). Ecologists no longer consider nature to be a pristine wilderness beyond the human realm, but rather, localizations of more or less "human dominated ecosystems" (Vitousek et al. 1997).

***Nonhuman agents*** | Like it or not, nature is no longer isolated and parsed from culture and politics, no longer the antithesis of the artificial. Anthropocene humans are being pushed to reconsider themselves as part of nature, with an accompanying opportunity to rediscover aesthetics, culture, and social agency in ecological realms. What if rainforests or soil ecologies are urban forms of complex nonhuman civilizations? Entertaining this conceptual move involves demoting meaning, intention, and symbolic communication as the lynchpin of social and cultural processes. Following Bruno Latour, ecological entities can be reconceptualized as *active agents* in social events:

If action is limited a priori to what 'intentional,' 'meaningful' humans do, it is hard to see how [things] could act. They might exist in the domain of 'material' 'causal' relations, but not in the 'reflexive' 'symbolic' domain of social relations. By contrast ... any thing that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor... Thus, the questions to ask about any agent are simply the following: Does it make a difference in the course of some other agent's action or not? Is there some trial that allows someone to detect this difference? (Latour 2005:71).<sup>3</sup>

Along these lines, Latour characterizes environmental problems as trials that make a

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<sup>3</sup> Latour stresses that this in no way flattens nonhumans into *determining agents*, but that their participation in action is always an open question: "things might authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on" (2005:72).

difference in the teleological relationships between humans and other agential beings. Ecological problems amount to “*generalized revolts of the means*: no entity – whale, river, climate, earthworm, tree, calf, cow, pig, brood – agrees any longer to be treated ‘simply as a means’ but insists on being treated ‘always also as an end’” (Latour 2004: 155-6; italics in original). Connected to human diplomats, nonhumans revolt against their people-mandated purposes as raw materials or unfeeling machines and the destruction of their habitats through urban development and the like. Trying to live in this common world with beings like migratory birds or endangered salamanders leads people into new forms of political attachment to nonhumans in which a habitat’s *future species are at stake*.

In the instrumental application of human reason, intention, and agency to the world (perhaps summed up as “management”), nonhuman agents push back with their own surprising trials for humans. Timothy Mitchell describes agricultural and infrastructure development in mid-1900s Egypt as a messy mixture of war, dam construction, mosquito/malaria invasion, and DDT and chemical fertilizer manufacture that no modernist development schemes or capitalists could instrumentally master. Nonhuman agents “exceed the grasp or intention of the human agents involved. Human agency and intention are partial and incomplete products of these interactions. This incompleteness ... means that *no single line divides the human from the nonhuman*” (2002:34; my italics). These agencies improvise with unplanned, unanticipated qualities of anthropogenic designs and built environments. Further, in both Mitchell and Latour’s accounts, agents become *bundles* of agents, allies that speak for or muffle one another, or an agent can make a difference despite being composed of layers of contradictory agencies-in-conflict. No longer exclusively human phenomena, agencies can be reconceptualized as *emergent forces of the habitat*. Trials and events connect inchoate sensations and forces to particular figures and specific agential beings. The habitat is their point of connection.

An organism is one such habitat or connection point. For example, edible domesticated species link consumers, transnational industries, and emergent technologies while also delivering zoonotic pathogens to human hosts. To understand these messy transpecific connections, Sarah Franklin goes “sheepwatching,” her observations ranging

from the co-emergence of Dolly the cloned sheep with new forms of patent law and biotechnical reproduction (2001:8) to the 2001 outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in the UK that resulted in “medieval scenes of pyres of animal carcasses” (3). The difference between the two events “is precisely the difference between faith in biological control and its loss” (8). Dolly’s unprecedented virtual genealogy opens up unknown futures in the instrumental commoditization of life itself, while the health crisis of pathogenic sheep explicates the agency of viruses that used pigswill to move from Argentina to Britain in their own devious globalization (5). These reconfigurations of biological control by both humans and nonhumans are changing the categorical distinctions between species in catastrophic and absurd ways. This proliferation of ecological agents that compromise intentional human agency has led to increased governmental involvement in transnational food networks.

Similarly, the yeast, bacteria, and molds that culture milk into cheese fall under systems of governmentality that Heather Paxson calls “*microbiopolitics*: the creation of categories of microscopic biological agents ... engaged in infection, inoculation, and digestion” (2008:17) and their control by governmental agencies. Cheese microbes jump from production networks “into the body, into the gastrointestinal,” where the human “macrobe” hosts a jumble of biodiversity (18). By making Vermont Shepherd cheese out of raw sheep milk aged the legally required 60 days, Paxson experienced a habitat that nurtures all of the “various hosts that microbes connect: land, animal, milk, cheese, human” (27). This landscape of multidirectional symbiotic relationships is threatened by the Food and Drug Administration’s intentions to outlaw unpasteurized cheese in order to protect consumers, especially pregnant women, from exposure to bad microbes.<sup>4</sup> Such Pasteurian microbiopolitics indirectly control human bodies and choices by directly controlling microbes (36). In contrast, post-pasteurians trust in the capable probiotic agencies of microbes that make raw-milk cheese safe for humans without expensive machines. They embrace the potential risks of microbe power over human macrobes that comes with

<sup>4</sup> Microbiopolitics are on the rise in local food networks. On September 5, 2008, the FDA ordered the Austin juice bottler Good Flow Honey and Juice Co. to stop production of unpasteurized juices. Rather than pasteurize, the company will restructure as a retail provider to get around FDA requirements (Madgavkar 2008).

producing cheese the old-fashioned way.

In Part I of the city of living garbage, these microbe agents lurk as a hidden, invisible risk of dwelling with animals. Organisms are habitats, and living with cats could mean living with the zoonotic brain parasite *Toxoplasma gondii*. As social agency opens up to other species, how much of an influence on human behavior these other agencies have becomes an open question. Certainly, tending felines as pets makes a difference in their human agents' actions and responsibility – fill the bowls and clean the litter. Monk parrots are making a difference in how utility companies tend their power lines. And non-native cats and monk parrots in the city impact the mix of urban biodiversity, native or otherwise, through predator/prey relationships on the one hand and competition for food and nesting niches on the other. Pets and feral/naturalized animals lay down an affective landscape across the city, with people alternately acting as guardians or managers of these populations. And parasites find a home in interspecies urbanism, too!

**Landscapes** | As “nature” comes to be recognized as tied to humans by drifts of anthropogenic pollution, relationships of care and control, and technoscientific modes of governance and research, recent ethnographic works have offered fine-grained attention to landscapes and human-nonhuman symbioses that go well beyond the nature/culture dichotomy. They drop the concept of pristine, timeless nature and the positivist focus on taxonomy and biomechanical energy systems that long colored anthropology's portraits of indigenous people living off the land (e.g., Berlin 1995; Orlove 1980; Steward 1988). Likewise, they go beyond treating ecology as a metaphor for cultural and social relations – an approach that dropped interspecies symbioses as such (e.g., Garner 2005; Haugen 2001; Hawley 1986). Ethnographic writing on landscapes illuminates collaborations between people and ecological agents as they reshape life-sustaining habitats in response to each others' work.

Recent writing on landscapes resonates with a sense of nature that dovetails with an emerging research program William Balée calls “historical ecology” (2006). Balée differentiates this program from the environmental determinism of cultural ecology and historical materialism's lack of attention to recursive environmental agency: “historical

ecology answers the call for an anthropocentric as opposed to an ecocentric or geocentric ecology” (81). This view replaces the biomechanical ‘ecosystem’ with ‘landscape,’ “a place of interaction with a temporal dimension that is as historical and cultural as it is evolutionary” (77). For example, Hugh Raffles’ account of an Amazonian river hand-dug in cooperation with the tides in Brazil offers a rich ethnographic example of people’s involvement in what looks like timeless nature (2002). Balée intends historical ecology to aid restoration ecology by “determining reference conditions of past landscapes with the highest degree of authenticity for the period chosen for restoration” (91). He seems perhaps too certain about ‘authenticity’ and the effects of purposive human agency in both historical landscape formations and ecological restoration projects. How important is the mismatch between the intended and accidental results of deploying human agency? What improvisations will nonhumans make with human designs? Who decides *which* period should be restored/saved through terraforming – the late Pleistocene, the Subatlantic Holocene? *Anything but the Anthropocene!*

A more complicated implication of Balée’s anthropocentric landscapes lies in the kinds of agents that count in historical ecology. While Balée – an anthropologist working out of Tulane University in New Orleans – specifically recognizes uncontrollable super-agents like hurricanes and floods (82), a look at current ethnography shows that nonhumans, in their symbioses with humans, assert their own agencies that augment, transform, or undo anthropocentric intentions. Further, ethnographic landscapes wracked by political violence like those portrayed in William Shelton’s portrait of Alabaman dreamworlds (2007) and Eric Mueggler’s account of exorcism in Yunnan province, China (2001), swarm with *incorporeal diversity* like concepts, stories, arts, gods, and ghosts – nonorganic forms of life (Deleuze and Guattari 1994:179) that restoration ecology will not be able to identify, restore, or exorcise, assuming it recognizes them as agents.

Along with attending to supernatural forces within landscapes, ethnographic writing offers intimate accounts of relationships between humans and nonhumans of a lively, down to earth biological variety. Anna Tsing’s *Friction* tracks how universalizing concepts like ‘nature,’ ‘the global,’ and ‘the environment’ are not transcendental but *engaged* categories

that make future worlds by mobilizing people, knowledges, and species across irreducibly different intentions and needs (2005:8). Tsing argues that such concepts can render certain landscapes invisible, inauthentic, or valueless – for example, old swidden fields in Indonesia, gone weedy as secondary growth forests. After the fields have yielded rice for several years, the Meratus Dayak let the forest reclaim them, seeding in dense varieties of herbs, medicinal plants, tubers, bamboo, and fruit trees. So long as developers see such fields as wasted agriculture and conservationists see only weedy growth, “as long as both ... divide up the land into zones of intensive agriculture and zones of pristine nature, no such patches of regrowth and possibility will be acknowledged” (190). The “gap” between wild/domestic is much more of an unruly, slippery spectrum than a cutting boundary line, and the Dayak – “hill people” who are neither isolated indigenous people in mythic harmony with the land, nor city people cut off from nature (174) – occupy the spectral gap as well, cultivating and foraging food in the secondary growth.

This culinary cultivation of landscape biodiversity is at the heart of Barbara Kingsolver’s 2007 memoir, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*. Following a family move from Tucson, Arizona, to a Virginia farm, the book documents a yearlong vow to eat only local animals and vegetables and thereby “wring most of the petroleum out of our food chain” (10) – an experiment in localization charged by the new moral force of the carbon footprint. Put differently, the family tries to change their food culture habits by “[starting] a grocery store from seed” (44), fledgling chickens, and baby turkeys,<sup>5</sup> as well as by foraging for wild foods. They gather morel mushrooms on Old Charley’s Lot, named after a goat that lived there some seventy years before. Place name and mushrooms alike would have been

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<sup>5</sup> Kingsolver’s writing offers an interesting example of the unanticipated effects of anthropocentricity. She shares the conservationist’s quest to save endangered species, but with humor and pleasure over militant ire: “you can’t save whales by eating whales, but paradoxically, you *can* help save rare, domesticated foods by eating them” (56). To fight an industrial monoculture of 400 million Broad-Breasted White turkeys whose selective breeding for fast, meaty growth accidentally resulted in their inability to reproduce without anthropogenic insemination (90), the Kingsolvers cultivate a rare breed of Bourbon Reds on their farm. Only two thousand of these turkeys exist in heirloom flocks, making them an endangered domesticated species that reproduces *without* human help. Kingsolver characterizes the instrumental relationships between humans and turkeys, cows, and other livestock as one that grants domesticated species the “distinction of existing” in their present forms, however unnatural selective breeding unintentionally makes them (222). Like vegetables, they are here to kill (or as Kingsolver prefers, to “harvest” [220]) and eat – but this ultimate instrumentality in no way precludes relationships of care and concern for their well-being.

forgotten if not for farmer neighbors, “human symbionts with their ground,” who passed the knowledge along to the newcomers (79). Paying attention to when the morels fruit, slowly learning to spot what looks like dried up leaves, and harvesting the mushrooms in a mesh bag are all part of the process. “Mushroom ethics mandate the mesh collecting bag, so the spores can scatter as you carry home your loot” (79). Of course, scrutinizing morels to tell them apart from poisonous varieties is itself a crucial art – a discipline of seeing in which killing yourself is at stake. Old Charley’s Lot is made of an array of intimate practices that put care, knowledge, and spores back into the landscape.

While the literature on landscapes has generally been rural in focus, Part II of the city of living garbage encounters patchy habitats cultivated in the houses and yards of an urban zone. I approach them as vernacular ecological regeneration projects – not restoring some prior state, but elaborating new forms of urban nature through alternative modes of waste processing. The writing explores experiments in landscape formation like low-tech greywater remediation that reconnects houses with local watersheds, the regeneration of topsoil through labor-intensive composting, and earth-moving as an element of making environments like the “Bamboo Mountain” at the Cathedral of Junk. These DIY ecologists tinker with rare species of carnivorous plants, remediate polluted and denuded landscapes, tend soil microbes that grow healthier vegetables, and capture and channel flows of greywater and rain. They reshape junked rebar and car parts into soaring domes where birds choose to nest. Some have registered their properties as wildlife habitats with the National Wildlife Foundation, making the city a kind of patchwork of official preserves. The patchy habitats of the city of living garbage range from repurposed feed troughs and greenhouses made of salvaged windows to online forums. The people involved in this city come to know and change the landscapes their houses are folded into – and the landscapes change them, too. By becoming part of the landscape, Austin has become dotted with landmarks cobbled out of cast-off things – a sort of post-industrial nature preserve. Strange carved rocks surface along the railroad tracks that indicate a long inhabitation of these parts. We are trekking into the landscape in which the city of living garbage grows, into neighborhoods of houses that resolve in a fractal manner. Houses within houses, with more houses inside.

*Houses* | Never exclusively human homes, our houses are multispecies *oikos*, no matter how antiseptic we try to make them. *Oikos*, “house,” root of the words ecology and economy, expands in a dense rhizomal matting of interconnected homes, atmospheres, greenhouses, guts, wombs, museums that surround and preserve the development of living aggregates. They are nested in scalar arrays inside the biggest house of all – Earth, the biosphere, a fantastical superworld that contains all others – or can be *made to contain* them with photographs from space or computer-generated climate models. Outside the house is the *cosmic* world, turbulent with forces that sustain the house or sometimes tear it to shreds. The apocalyptic time of pollution and extinction we call the Anthropocene recasts humans as unrestrained cosmic forces, making landfill of one another’s homes and those of many other beings. A house is a world, depending on the scale you experience it from, and losing your house can be the end of the world. The difference between a house and a world like the sky, soil, water, or language, is that we *live and breathe* worlds. These worlds *precede* their inhabitants – whereas houses are the things built to mark off parts of worlds as ours for living in.

Deleuze and Guattari offer an ecological and aesthetic model of houses that does well in jumping between the multiplicity of agents that collectively compose habitats. The model runs with Le Corbusier’s old modernist maxim ‘houses are machines for living in’ – but these machines/habitats serve many different lives at once. While Latour and Mitchell discard an axiom of human exceptionalism by granting agency to nonhumans, Deleuze and Guattari abandon another by characterizing animals as the original artists.<sup>6</sup> “Art preserves, and it is the only thing in the world that is preserved... Perhaps art begins with the animal, at least with the animal that carves out a territory and constructs a house (both are correlative, or even one and the same, in what is called a habitat)” (1994:163; 183). It is the house assemblage, not the animal agent as artist, that opens, organizes, transforms, and mediates

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<sup>6</sup> In her ethological study of art as a biological force in human evolution, Ellen Dissanayake, for one, makes animal art impossible: “The fascinating activities of birds and animals that resemble art can be a source of pleasure and wonderment without one feeling the necessity to include them with human art as one vast universal creative or expressive or aesthetic urge... In my opinion, they have no direct bearing on a discussion of aesthetic behavior and its origin in human beings” (1988:102). For Deleuze and Guattari, aesthetics are *inhuman forces of life*, not limited to the intentional and symbolic behaviors of humans alone. Art is a way to make a plane of consistency out of chaos, and the plane’s function is to preserve life and sensation.

the sensations, perceptions, and affections of the organism within:

The body blossoms in the house (or an equivalent, a spring, a grove). Now, what defines the house are “sections,” that is to say, the pieces of differently oriented planes that provide flesh with its framework ... These sections are walls but also floors, doors, windows, French windows, and mirrors, which give sensation the power to stand on its own within autonomous *frames*... The house takes part in an entire becoming. It is life, the “nonorganic life of things.” (179, their italics)

The domestic specificity of architectural frames like *French* windows (with lace curtains?) could become bowers, hives, or burrows, not to mention computer screens or books or Earth. As “nonorganic life,” houses are a kind of keystone species without which bodies cannot blossom. Sections and frames domesticate flesh or define mobility inside the house, but also regulate how bodies and the house’s atmosphere connect with the forces of the landscapes and cosmos beyond (180). It is the house, not the fleshy artist, that blocks or captures “nonhuman forces of the cosmos... the ambiguous house that exchanges and adjusts [forces], makes them whirl around like winds” (183). “Everything begins with Houses” (189), inside of which animals start becoming something else.

Their house model’s strength and weakness flows from the same trait. The abstract concept is analogical, a scalable assemblage that does not rely on embodied situations or relationships – *the* house instead of *this* house. Like holographic fragments, the body/house/cosmos relations hold at whatever scale examined, folding into each other when the focus moves, so that *a body is itself a house with a cosmos beyond*. This fractal morphability lets every framing atmosphere double as cosmic forces, but also as a mortal blossoming inside a house. As Latour suggests, agents solve these abstractions of scale as they take form: “[agents] are the ones defining relative scale. It’s not the analyst’s job to impose an absolute one” (2005:184). Scales of time or space do not just exist; they are manifestations of inhabitation. Which is to say, nested habitats cannot be presumed to all be together in a macrospace like “earth.” Calling attention to such a space is a world-making political action, a question of refrains.

Rather than ‘everything begins with Houses,’ Donna Haraway might say houses spring from the encounters of the life forms inside: “all that is, is the fruit of becoming

with” (17). In *When Species Meet* she writes of the “ordinary beings-in-encounter in the house, lab, field, zoo, park, office, prison, ocean, stadium, barn, or factory” as caught up in an open process of “becoming with” each other (5). Houses in the city of living garbage are strange in that they are *also* labs, zoos, museums, farms, and other habitats. Houses are a particular kind of habitat where species meet, and where they have an opportunity to become worldly with each other – to help each other live in this world by forming both instrumental and playful relationships with one another. For Haraway, the process of domestication is the knot that ties humans and nonhumans into worlds driven by surprising forms of “encounter value” that emerge when sentient beings meet in habitats (46). Her “obligation of curiosity” about her companions leads her to research grisly worlds of South African wolf hybrids bred as attack dogs (36-39). Turning to laboratory habitats, Haraway encounters lab animals as *laborers* in the work place that deserve, more than the right not to suffer, human recognition and response to their suffering, work, and play. Rather than focusing on laboratories, houses, and the like, Haraway is interested in the affective and physical labor going on inside of them in “multidirectional relationships in which always more than one responsive entity is in the process of becoming” (71). Habitats host “multispecies human and nonhuman ways of living and dying” (297) that are never finally resolved by the mastery of human agency, nor locked into permanent relations through built structures of domestication.

However, house habitats are agential in the ways they structure the traffic between inner atmospheres and outer worlds. Like laboratories and their outgoing technoscientific products, houses connect worlds in myriad ways. Windows let in air that organisms cannot survive without, and pipes lead into and out of the house, connecting it through water with the “bacteriological city” of modern waste management (Gandy 2004). But glass shatters in accidents and storms, and pipes leak with age; the nonorganic life of things is always in process and in need of maintenance (Thrift 2005:136). Houses are built forms that displace whatever animal houses were in the landscape before them. Constructed out of dead trees, hooked on pesticides, waste water treatment facilities, electricity plants, landfills, Home Depots, and the like, houses cannot exist without a panoply of urban institutions

and altered landscapes. They sit on a standardized landscape of lots that might be a burn ecology, regularly swept by wildfire (Davis 1998:95-147). Houses might occupy watershed land, blocking rainfall's saturation into filtering topsoil so that dirty water comes up in springs (Dunn 2007). At the outer limit, houses connect with a vast *cosmos*, "the unknown constituted by ... multiple, divergent worlds and ... the articulations of which they could eventually be capable" (Stengers 2005:995). The inhuman forces of the cosmos take form in unbelievable surprises; it is not a sphere containing all worlds, but an overarching sky that could rain down something inconceivable:

Black rains—red rains—the fall of a thousand tons of butter.  
Jet-black snow—pink snow—blue hailstones—hailstones flavored like oranges...  
Tremendous number of little toads, one or two months old, that were seen to fall from a great thick cloud that appeared suddenly in a sky that had been cloudless...  
And from a "clear sky," fell hundreds of dead birds. There were wild ducks and cat birds, woodpeckers, and "many birds of strange plumage," some of them resembling canaries...  
(Fort 1974:19, 81, 252)

As the exhaustive accounts of strange rains collected in the 1920s by Charles Fort suggest, unknown forces cross the sky above houses. Insidious "chemtrails" and the apocalyptic threat of climate change's future droughts circulate inside the houses of the city of living garbage, connecting their atmospheres to the sky and cosmos beyond. Collecting rainwater and stories are parts of a related process: reshaping the habitat to become porous, ever more open to a surprising, inhuman cosmos.

Houses are more or less permeable boundaries that regulate the mixing of the world's sky with the private little air-conditioned realm within, a kind of frozen mobility that regulates movements of air, water, electricity, and wastes. For the German philosopher of atmospheres Peter Sloterdijk, Victorian greenhouses modeled a "new form of mobility" for uprooted plants and their tropical climates through the "technical reproduction of that habitat in alien surroundings" (2005:945). We are back at Deleuze and Guattari's house of domestication with blooms inside; the greenhouse lets plants escape their native habitats to take root in new encounters with alien life forms – provided no revolutionary like Edward Abbey, militantly dedicated to wilderness, shatters the glass, yelling, "bricks to

all greenhouses!” (1968:25). Beings-in-encounter need an atmosphere – at whatever scale, and no matter how ‘unnatural’ – in which to begin ‘becoming with’ one another.

Native nonhumans might be invited into house atmospheres by wild people like the poet Gary Snyder, who writes about his home in the Sierra Nevada mountains. His house atmosphere makes possible “a permeable, porous life” through unscreened windows and skylights, open all summer, letting in mud daubers, mosquitoes, stinging insects, bats, and occasional squirrels and deer (1995:195-196). All of this coming and going of nonhumans chimes with Snyder’s Buddhist ethic: “the literal ‘house,’ when seen as just another piece of the world, is itself impermanent and composite, a poor ‘homeless’ thing in its own right” (Snyder 1990:105). Snyder tries to open up the fleeting atmosphere of his house to the cosmos by giving home to passing lives, while recognizing that these animal visitors to the human realm may not be aware of him as a sentient being at all (1995:198). However, Snyder’s commitment to *native* ecosystems pushes some animals out of his atmosphere: “feral cats are not allowed” (1995:197). The indiscriminate power of anthropogenic atmospheres to help both native *and* invasive species thrive derails Snyder’s sense of wild homelessness. It seems that even houses open to wilderness need species management plans.

On the other hand, atmospheres heavily managed by human intention and destruction always have “gaps” between the wild and domestic (Tsing 2005:176). Much like species-hopping pathogens travel the globe in their human and nonhuman hosts, non-native animals hitchhike houses as their atmospheres for migration. The house mouse and cockroach are synanthropic species that have spread with humans from Asia and Africa, respectively (Wheater 1999:58-59). Exotic animals and plants break out of their greenhouse enclosures, like the African viper that has twice escaped its cage in Galveston’s Moody Gardens. And native and alien species alike re-migrate into urban ruins, brownfields, and postindustrial dead zones to flourish in unanticipated assemblages.

Urban geographer Steve Hinchcliffe learned to read “water vole writing” in order to document and protect that native species’ presence at an abandoned industrial site in Birmingham (2005:647). They peered in on a worldly cohabitation of voles and brown rats that rural ecology had represented as impossible (652). The multispecies relationships

active in the site exceeded what ecologists thought possible, the emergent habits in a “ferment of urban wild things” startling in their adaptability (656). Likewise, Mike Davis points to the remaining bombsites of post-war European cities as “deadzone communities” of surprising species diversity (2002:385-6). Hinchcliffe argues for protecting such sites from redevelopment, so that ruined urban areas can continue becoming wilderness.

The wasted, abandoned space of brownfields act as a *de facto* greenhouse for urban wildlife that might be managed as a more permanent habitats by recognizing them as preserves. The impermanent house, always decaying and in need of repair, generates wastestreams flowing off to landfills, greywater flushed to municipal treatment plants, and energy leaks that warm synanthropic species within and under the walls. The excess of the house wastes are untapped atmospheres for homeless creatures, surpluses that might open to worlds closer to home than expensive waste centers. Both trained architects and self-taught tinkers have collaborated with nonhumans to build these atmospheres into houses. Houses can be redesigned as a keystone species that support webs of nonhumans living off household waste.

For adventurous homemakers, greywater and the waste of human bodies can also cycle back into local living worlds. In hijacking the toilets, sinks, and showers of their rental apartments, Cleo Woelfle-Erskine and Laura Allen “set out to bring back the simple pleasure of watching the water [we] washed with grow [our] food” (Woelfle-Erskine & Allen 2007:139). As detailed in Part II, outdoor constructed wetlands that clean up greywater produce garden water recycled on-site, as well as habitats and food for urban wildlife. Woelfle-Erskine and Allen’s do-it-yourself designs are based on Yemeni architectures with built-in urine-diverting compost toilets and eco-sanitation projects in Central Mexico. Their altered toilets separate urine, “an amazing plant fertilizer,” from feces, which turns into a safe soil amendment after a year of drying out – provided people get over their “faecophobia” enough to save it (Allen 2007:121). When house sections are built to safely accommodate them, these forms of human waste can reenter local landscapes, folding our metabolic dissolution back into the living worlds around us. Through the garden, body waste can even become edible again. Ecological practices that reconsider everyday urban

homes as wildlife habitats treats the house and the different bodies blooming inside as *becoming wastes*. The process of cycling these wastes on-site to feed other life forms depends on remaking house sections capable of safely dealing with potential pathogens.

There are always *surprises* when humans deploy nonhumans as agents. Paul Stamets is a leader in ‘mycotechnology’ – the use of mushrooms in soil remediation, insect control, reforestation, and other instrumental projects. In an experiment to cleanse oil-saturated soil with oyster mushrooms, Stamets found that the fungus not only broke down fuel hydrocarbons and decontaminated the dirt, but that mushrooms initiated “rapid habitat recovery.” Flies laid eggs on the mushrooms, and birds and animals came to eat the maggots, seeding the soil with plant life. “That’s what these mushrooms are: keystone species that precipitate a catalytic, downstream reaction that invites other life forms” into existence (2004:38-39). And this is what houses in the city of living garbage are becoming.

### **On writing**

Following Gupta and Ferguson’s articulation of the “anthropology of place,” the city of living garbage “is not an attempt to polarize autonomous local cultures against the homogenizing movement of cultural globalization” or city-level cultural strategies of economic development. “Instead the emphasis of this line of research is to understand and explain how dominant cultural forms are ‘imposed, invented, reworked, and transformed’” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 6-7). My ethnographic practice is rooted in autobiographical writing and reflection on MNAE’s nine years in Austin and the people, places, and nonhumans with whom our quasi-public home has connected us. However, rather than trying to *explain* what animates these worlds, the writing seeks to manifest the feeling of a living place where humans and nonhumans alike are struggling with “dominant cultural forms.” They are falling in and out of “something that feels like *something*” (Stewart 2007: 2), an inhabitable, intimate world with a chancy and vague future that may or may not survive under dominant cultural forms.

This writing strives for a methodological approach to empirical description that displaces the imperative to explain with the ability to *feel* the lively something through

the reading experience. Rather than being analytical or interpretive, it is an experiment in description entangled and impelled by a love of the places described, and a concern to preserve in writing just a moment of their existence. It seeks to extend the self-published guidebooks with Jen Hirt for MNAE, non-explanatory collaborative texts formed inside of a place as one of its expressions. Like the city of living garbage, the guidebooks are refrains of the habitat that preserve an alternate world of stories and objects by flying away with them in pamphlet form. In this sense, the writing is an extension of the tinkering that forms the places I am researching.

Writing, in other words, is not external to the improvisatory aesthetic; it too captures waste, salvages lost and overlooked things, and communicates through the senses by preserving living affects in a habitat. This work is an example of the methods of composition practiced in the making of the research sites themselves. This “drift methodology” fashions a representation of research that is isomorphic with or an outgrowth of the object of research. It grows out of MNAE, which practices collective research into themes like “Crystallization & Drift,” “Ghosts,” and “Wondrous Instruments” through a call for loans to former visitors to the museum. Along those lines, this project is an accumulator and amplifier through which stories pile up and take on the consistency of a world. It is not a *finished* world, but one that you can inhabit as it comes together and falls apart around you.

Writing as tinkering slows down, accumulates fragments of text that can be twisted and interwoven using theory as wire, or narrative as gravity. Let things come and accumulate, turn them over in your hands, and let them show you how they fit together. Get out of the way. A drift methodology stays unformed, not snapping shut into preformed objects or preplanned routes, so that it can keep arriving in worlds through relationships that the methodology makes possible. The methodology behind this writing is the same that makes a pond, builds junkitecture, puts together a museum exhibition or monk parakeet nest. It makes a shambling thing that gets by doing what it needs to do. A pond where water gets cleaned up and fish eat mosquitoes, or a book that collects stories into a certain consistency of connections, either *works or doesn't*. It has functionality, but is irreducible to being a machine or tool, since it is foremost a habitat. It is self-organizing and surprises with what

happens, what it attracts and where it leads. It is permanently in process – the point of drift methodology is to let the writing and research stay open like that, even or especially in its final form. The challenge is to find or fashion modes of writing capable of sustaining such openings.

## PART I: ANIMAL PEOPLE

### CAT LIVES

This book is a cat allegory, in which the writer's past life is presented to him in a cat charade. Not that the cats are puppets. Far from it. They are living, breathing creatures, and when any other being is contacted, it is sad: because you see the limitations, the pain and fear and the final death. That is what contact means. That is what I see when I touch a cat and find that tears are flowing down my face.

– William S. Burroughs (1992: 70)

***One-Eye: Litter*** | Our house came with cats. The family before us had left behind a tame kitten we named Tiny. She shared the yard with a marble tabby, a tatter-eared tomcat, and six or seven others. They depended on scraps from the butcher two doors down. Almost every day, an employee fed them in the alley, calling out “Here babies!” to summon a half-dozen cats. The population was growing fast, thanks to steady food and no sterilization. We think the tomcat was the father of several of that spring's kitten litters.

Our second winter at the house, the tomcat lost his left eye. As the cold came on he stopped roaming the yard and just lay there. The missing eye suppurated a clotted yellow flow, and a long gash on his back wouldn't heal. Ants occupied the wound. Fleas and invisible parasites sucked his body of life. We were letting him waste away. My step mom asked, “Shouldn't you just put him to sleep?” Instead, Jen used holiday gift money to take him to Riverside Vet. Lured into a cat carrier with wet food, he was neutered, vaccinated, eye sewn up, side stitched, ears cleaned of mites. Doc Meyer said his one good eye



One-eye.

had been punctured, leading to an ulcer and near blindness. For three days he healed in our bathroom, saturating it with litter box smells and a polecat stench of spray from his oily coat. The missing eye healed well, stitched skin dimpling into a little bowl of fur.

We call him One-Eye – Jen’s “cat hero.” It’s his fierce will to live. She loved him even as an aggressive, infected zombie, imagining him healed and tame. He domesticated very slowly, often lashing out when we walked by, clawing the backs of our ankles. But being neutered changed his behavior – much less of a fighter and roamer. He first let us touch him over food, scratching or biting if you touched too long. Then Jen practiced some reverse cat psychology. She put her hand in his face and said, “Bite me, One-Eye.” He gently chomped down his slobbery mouth, and after that pretty much stopped attacking. When he started following us around making little chirping sounds, Doc Meyer said, “Sometimes those old toms turn into puppy dogs.” Now One-Eye even *purrs* in a deep, barely audible rumble, easier felt than heard. Pushing my ear to his belly (no longer afraid of being mauled), the purr rattles my head. Three years after becoming One-Eye, he sleeps with five cats, including a male, on our back porch, specially outfitted with cat architecture and winterized with a heat lamp and shower curtains.

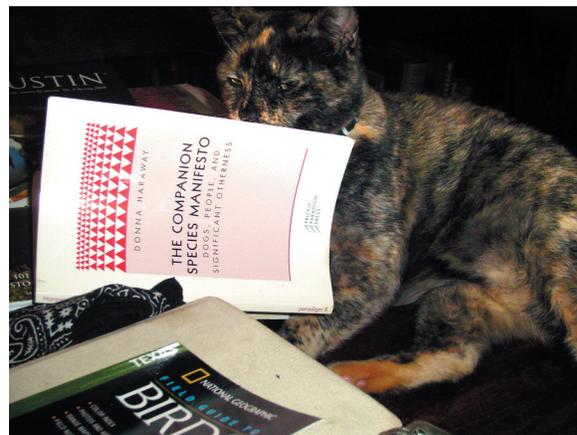
Seeing One-Eye’s transformation solidified our general sense of love and responsibility for cats – a kind of faith in the mutual learning process of living together. We now (technically illegally) care for seven indoor and around eight outdoor cats, and kittens tempt us to take on more. We love how affectionate and calm cats are, how they pick strange spots to nap. We love their furry company, their individual personalities and idiosyncratic tastes. At the curiosity museum we run out of our house, Mia jumps through hoops



Hoop jump.

while Delphi and Chama greet people in the yard. Sometimes visitors chatter to them in baby talk and tell us, “You have the sweetest cats!” They show up in museum displays like the “Feral Cat Family Tree” or the “Belly Duster for Cats” – a Japanese *Chindogu* or ‘unuseless invention’ that Delphi uses to sweep the Museum floor. We joke that these are ways of getting the cats to make a living and earn their keep. In short, we’ve become “crazy cat people.” Jen says that makes our feline family members “human cats.” I want to say they love us, but who can really say?

What is this love that transforms animals, mixes species, jumps between bodies, and moves us beyond ourselves into new life worlds? In *When Species Meet*, Donna Haraway writes of dogs, “to be in love means to be worldly, to be in connection ... on many scales, in layers of locals and globals, in ramifying webs” (2008: 97). It entails “knowing more at the end of the day” about the ordinary worlds of other beings (107) – a curiosity willing to look life, death, and killing in the face. As companion animals cohabiting the intimate space of houses, cats and dogs are historically woven into our moment of late capitalist technoscientific culture, as well as longer histories of individual breeds, legal histories of ancient Egyptian and Roman civilizations, and natural histories of invasive species impacting native populations. Haraway stresses the specificity of these historic lives in ecological microregions where (humans help) cats live – in her case, a forest home in rural Sonoma County. She asks point blank, in the ethical mode of ecological stewardship, “Would I kill my feral cats if I learned they were a problem for the local quail or other birds?” (280). (But aren’t there possibilities besides killing, like relocation?) These days, under the aegis of love and care, people subject cats to sterilization, euthanasia, microchipping, eartipping, and other operations that come with being, as Haraway says, “interpellated into the modern biopolitical state” (281). Our love for cats domesticates them into human histories, and in the resulting contact zones of dwelling together, alters all our



Delphi reading.

bodies in webs of political ecologies.

At the same time, loving cats subjects us to a peculiar domestication. Our houses clutter up with all the litter that cat lives entail: litters of kittens, of course, but also litter boxes and feline feces, litter that cats transform into beds, and in the end, the sad litter of dead cats. Litter's etymology indexes how life forms lie down



Litter.

to sleep, how they reproduce, and how they shed waste. The word derives from Old French for 'bed' and an Indo-European verb for 'lie down' (Hodgson 2008). 'Litter' referred to straw strewn on the ground for beds, but also all the animals born to a mother in a birthing bed. By the 1900s, 'litter' had become a synonym for trash, garbage, waste, refuse, and rubbish. In 1948, Ed Lowe marketed a clay-based product called Kitty Litter to replace the sand used in cat bathrooms. The name stuck as a generic one for all brands of litter box fill.

Like other aspects of cat lives, cat litter has become a worrisome ecological object. Around two million tons of kitty litter enters landfills every year (McNally 2009). Because the clay-based litter we used couldn't be composted, Jen and I put it in plastic bags and threw it in the trashcan, the heaviest part of our household wastestream. Online, numerous blogs like "Green Little Cat" evaluate new and expensive brands of eco-friendly litter made of biodegradable corn, pine, wheat, or recycled newspaper. By switching to pine litter that we compost in the yard, we cut the weight of our garbage roughly in half. While cat people like us switch to these brands to reduce our cats' "carbon pawprints" (Tse 2008), others are worried about the unknown effects of the clumping-agent sodium bentonite: what if my cats accumulate clay clumps in their guts by cleaning their paws?

The problems with kitty litter's final resting place only add to its troubling origins in clay and bentonite strip mines. The Oil-Dri Corporation sells \$170 million of Cat's Pride and Jonny Cat brand litters every year. In 2001, Oil-Dri proposed new strip mining

operations in Nevada's Hungry Valley to save on shipping 280 million pounds of litter from factories in Georgia, Illinois, and Mississippi to the western US. Their mine would be located 100 yards from the Reno-Sparks Indian Colony, prompting Paiute, Shoshone, and Washoe to fight the project with nonprofit environmental groups like Earthworks and the Sierra Club. Their concerns include respiratory illnesses caused by dust blowing in from the mine, potential groundwater contamination from arsenic used in processing, increased traffic, noise and light pollution – not to mention irreversible violence against the land. In the words of colony resident Diana Coffey, "I want my grandbabies to have this land, and a lot of this has remained untouched for thousands of years ... Our people never had written language, so everything was handed down from showing and telling in stories. That means it needs to be quiet" (Quoted in Wride 2002; see also Sonner 2001). The Washoe County Commission denied Oil-Dri the right to mine, but the corporation is suing for damages in federal court based on an outmoded 1872 Mining Law (Ronald 2006: 129). The Reno-Sparks Indian Colony remains poised to fight the kitty litter strip mine.

If cat litter connects us to clay mines and landfills, cat feces itself is the abject and bizarre link between the brain parasite *Toxoplasma gondii* and host mammals like rats and humans. A cousin to malaria, the pathogen infects humans through cat feces and undercooked meat. It can be lethal to people with compromised immune systems. Because the parasite can cause fetal brain damage, encephalitis, and miscarriages, pregnant women are warned not to change litter boxes or garden in potentially contaminated soil. Surprisingly, epidemiologists estimate that 40% of the world's population, or 2.5 billion people, are hosts to *T. gondii* (Boulter 2007: 35). And its ecological territories are growing: the parasite has inveigled itself through cracks in California's municipal sewer systems to reach new host populations in the ocean. The pathogen is turning up in dead sea otters and other aquatic mammals, but how? Researchers think that Californians who flush cat feces, or have trained cats to use toilets, unleash *T. gondii*'s egg-like oocysts into the region's wastewater systems and watersheds. Once they reach the sea, mussels, oysters, and anchovies ingest the oocysts, and mammals eat them, contracting often-lethal infections (Brahic 2008).

**Cat Parasites:** In addition to *Toxoplasma gondii*, cat bodies are host to a complex ecology of parasites within parasites, many of them zoonotic pathogens that can inhabit humans and other species. Some are visible to the unaided eye, while others require tests, microscopes, or symptoms to know their presence.

- *Fleas* – a major vector for worm eggs. Control populations of fleas by adding soil nematodes to your yard at the start of flea season. The nematodes are microbiological armies fighting the war on fleas.
- *Worms* – Intestinal and arterial worms spread through flea bites, infected hosts like birds or rodents, and dirty litter boxes. You can administer oral dewormers that target particular species, but keep fleas under control to avoid reinfection.
- *Bartonella* – causes “cat scratch fever” in humans and a compromised immune system in cats. May cause feline gum disease and upper respiratory infections.
- *Colds* – Upper respiratory infections in cats can be caused by a number of viruses, and swiftly spread among a clutter of kittens.
- *Ear mites* – chronic infestation can cause loss of hearing. Fight mites with ear-drops from the vet (if you can: cat’s don’t much like the inside of their ears touched).

While news coverage of this devious globalization has been cast in catastrophic terms, media attention to *T. gondii*’s effects on human behavior have a sci-fi, *Body Snatchers* flavor. Behavioral ecologists have shown that the pathogen alters risk avoidance in infected rats, making them curious about the smell of cat urine instead of running the other way (Zimmer 2000: 92-4). So what does it do to us? US researchers link the pathogen’s manipulation of dopamine levels to schizophrenia (Torrey & Yolken 2003). Scientists in the Czech Republic and Turkey suggest that infected people are more prone to car accidents, and “latent toxoplasmosis of drivers should be taken into account while developing strategies to prevent traffic accidents” (Yereli, Balcioglu, & Özbilgin 2006) – much like cell phones and text messaging. More controversially, the Czech researchers correlated toxoplasmosis with behavioral changes that differ in men and women. Australian epidemiologist Nicky Boulter sums up the research with what feels like a list of outrageous bio-determinist claims:

Infected men have lower IQs, achieve a lower level of education and have shorter attention spans. They are also more likely to break rules and take risks, be more independent, more anti-social, suspicious, jealous and morose, and are deemed to be less attractive to women. On the other hand, infected women tend to be more outgoing, friendly, more promiscuous, and are considered more attractive to men compared with noninfected controls. In short, it can make men behave like “alley cats” and women behave like “sex kittens”! (2007: 36)

Pushing this logic of parasitic agency further into netherworlds of quack science, Kevin D. Lafferty hypothesizes that the pathogen's alteration of individual personalities – neuroticism, uncertainty avoidance, and macho sex roles in particular – must alter “aggregate personality at the population level” (2006: 1). He then goes on to compare culture formations at national scales in correlation with differential rates of toxoplasmosis infection. For example, 12% of Americans carry *T. gondii* vs. 66% of Brazilians, so this must explain something about machismo in Brazil. By number crunching and jettisoning a good deal of contradictory data, he concludes, “the effect of *T. gondii* on culture could be broader than postulated here” (5). Science writer Carl Zimmer picked up Lafferty's dubious findings on his blog, extrapolating wildly: “What about other parasites? Do viruses, intestinal worms, and other pathogens that can linger in the body for decades have their own influence on human personality? How much is the national spirit the spirit of a nation's parasites?” (2006). Blogger comments ranged from outrage at another form of scientific racism to speculation that the parasite “is responsible for the condition known as ‘being a cat lover’” by recoding ‘child’ as ‘feline’ in the crazy cat person's parasite-addled brain.<sup>1</sup>

This specter of invisible parasites shaping populations of neurotic humans speaks to how new research objects like nonhuman agents have moved beyond assumptions of human agential purity and accompanying knee-jerk calls of “Determinism!” into murky realms of supernatural forces capable of manipulating people's personalities. While dead sea otters concretely point to the terrible potential of otherwise unremarkable cat poop as it enters urban water cycles, researchers wondering about *T. gondii*'s circulation in human bodies turn to car crashes, schizophrenics, dumb men, and promiscuous women as evidence of the brain parasite's nefarious domestication of people. Cast as the vector for crazy cat person syndrome, cat poop will never be the same! We handle it with fear and awe as the mobile home of parasites.

The cat people I know would insist it is love, not *T. gondii*, that attaches people to cats. Love infects our lives, making us clean litter boxes and witness cats suffering. Love

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<sup>1</sup> See comments at [http://scienceblogs.com/loom/2006/08/01/a\\_nation\\_of\\_cowards\\_blame\\_the.php](http://scienceblogs.com/loom/2006/08/01/a_nation_of_cowards_blame_the.php) about crazy cat people on August 5, 2006, and critiques of scientific racism on March 17, 2007, and August 6, 2007, in particular.

is the relationship in which we clean up after someone, nurse them back to health, but also risk sharing their suffering and death. And kitten litters, in their playful, furry frailty, incubate an excess of infectious love.

**PT: -graphy** | We moved into One-Eye’s house with four indoor cats, only to find a booming population out back. Our first winter saw a litter of three kittens: a black and white one with a moustache, and striped brother and sister tabbies resembling exotic ocelots with seal faces. Over a stretch of freezing weather, Mr. Moustache caught a respiratory infection. We brought him inside to heal, but he died wheezing on the bathroom floor the morning of his vet appointment – the first cat to die in our care, buried in the backyard over tears. In his honor we adopted the tabby brother, also sick with a winter cold, luring him into the house with wet food.

The tabby breed is named after a Moiré silk pattern originally spun in Baghdad’s al-’Attâbiya quarter and exported to Victorian Britain and France (Room 1988: 170). We named our scrap of silk PT (after Barnum). He joined our other tabby, Mia (who named

**Cat Senses:** Each of the feline species’ unique senses has a specialized organ, attuned to various environmental qualia.

- *Vomeronasal* – also known as Jacobson’s organ, it lets cats and other animals smell phermones and prey by sending information about chemical *-graphies* to the hypothalamus (seat of the autonomic nervous system) and amygdala (emotional response) – not the olfactory cortex connected to the run-of-the-mill mammal nose. The sensory organ is located on the roof of the mouth, so when cats smell with it, their mouths open in an expression of disgust called the Flehmen response (from the German verb for “curling the upper lip”). Cats’ sense of smell is said to be fourteen times stronger than humans.
- *Tapetum lucida* – iridescent lenses behind cat retinas that bounce light around their eyes, making for superior night vision but cloudy daytime sight. These give cats and other animals “eyeshine” as lucida reflect photons in the dark, making their eyes glow from within like ghostly phosphorescent orbs. In 1933, Percy Shaw of Halifax, Yorkshire, patented his Catseye road reflectors to divide traffic lanes: story goes, one dark, foggy night, he would have driven off a cliff except for a roadside cat’s eyeshine. So he designed road reflectors mimicking the structure of animal eyes. Divorced from feline faces, Catseyes line the center of British roads.
- *Vibrissae* – whiskers that extend touch such that a cat’s face and body is sensorially larger than what we see. The thick hair follicles are set in blood sinuses that amplify vibrations to the surrounding nerves. If you blow on vibrissae while cats sleep, they wrinkle their noses and move their paws in a dream trot.

herself), the black and white cats Mao (ditto) and Chama (named after a New Mexico town), and the tortoiseshell Delphi (after the oracle). I thought four indoor cats was enough, but according to Jen's philosophy, "When you have one cat, it's just as easy to have a bunch": an arcane mathematics where  $1 = 5, 6, \text{ or } 7$ . I reluctantly agreed to adopt cat number five. His sister, She-T, stayed out in the cold.

One night the next fall we spotted a big possum chewing something at the pond out back. We found She-T stretched out over the bricks and plants. Poor girl had been dead at least a day, eyes opaque, mouth and nose full of larva, back end a ghastly hole ravaged by the scavenging possum. We buried her in a deep grave near Mr. Moustache's, the backyard colony of ferals gathered around in shadows as I dug and Jen wept. She-T's body showed no sign of injuries, a mysterious death. Nothing in the alley, neither blood nor poisoned food. Out of three kittens in her litter, only PT is left, the only one who moved inside. Makes you want to let *all* the outdoor cats live inside, to save every last one.

But each cat that moves in changes the territorial dynamic. From the beginning, half-feral, furtive PT was trouble. He got along well with Chama, "the kitten ambassador," but was always hiding, slinking around, attacking the older cats with aggressive play. PT turned out to be one of those maddening males that spray despite being neutered. The spray smell pisses me off. It saturates the yard, graffitied across plants, metals, especially plastics. The wheelbarrow, bags of soil in the shed, shower curtains protecting our garden from freeze, sheet metal bolted to the porch as a windbreak for cats... After touching these things my hands smell like spray. And what I *touch* gets sprayed; I spread cat territory. Now, thanks to PT, there are rooms *inside* the house that smell of ammonia. Worse yet, Chama sometimes sprays over PT's markings. PT took to spraying my shoes, so I had to hide them. One day while writing, PT sprayed the wall next to my desk. This isn't our house; the males keep *their* territory thoroughly marked. Even Perla, a spayed female who lives outside, gets into the art of spraying.

Spray marks objects with pheromone messages about an animal's sex, age, and health that humans, lacking vomeronasal sensory organs, can't comprehend. It is an affective writing that is smelt and felt, not seen and read. In *The Practice of the Wild*,

Gary Snyder describes such markings as narrative forms. Animals do their own writing: “a literature of bloodstains, a bit of piss, a whiff of estrus, a hit of rut.” This realm of animal writing is “not a text, a system of symbols, a referential world of mirrors... This world in its actual existence is a complete presentation, an enactment... It stands for nothing” (1990: 112-3). Spray is the enactment of social relationships, written in molecules across surfaces – a visceral, non-representational writing. Cats write with spray, but also with claw marks, facial scent glands rubbed against legs, refrains of meows and purrs, and beautiful patterns of fur.

Something is written and communicated through vibrations, gazes, or genetic codes that lets the writer become part of the story. But it would be better to drop the textual metaphors and think of *-graphy* instead of ‘writing,’ with all of that word’s baggage as a special achievement of human civilization. I admire how clearly this animal *-graphy* communicates. Rather than trying to extend to animals our human symbolic capacities of reading/writing, *-graphy* goes the opposite route and sees human writing as a kind of spray – a sketchy attempt to become part of living worlds. As a suffix, *-graphy* is *half* a word, in process, ready to grab onto *bio-*, *geo-*, *ethno-*, *photo-* and materially mark, map, frame, or freeze them. The marks stand for nothing, but are *forms of contact* that convey and preserve sensations as sure as photography writes what was seen in light.<sup>2</sup>

For cats, ‘love,’ ‘aggression,’ or ‘territory’ are not words or things, but patterned behaviors and sensorial layers of *-graphies* that fashion and preserve relationships out of sprays, purrs, touches, and bites. Animal communications challenge human textual projections, mental abstractions, and symbolic linguistics that have a hard time letting *-graphy* stand for nothing. Getting away from these anthropomorphic habits of thought, Gregory Bateson writes, “the cat does not say ‘milk’; she simply acts out (or *is*) her end of an interchange, the pattern of which we in language would call ‘dependency.’ But to act

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<sup>2</sup> For ethnography, writing is *about* ethnic/folk/local worlds, but additionally, writing is a risky attempt to become *parts* of those worlds, and more important, to write those worlds into existence for the people who happen to read the text. Not to write people down, but to *write in people* – in *you*. Now we don’t know where writing stops and living begins. This moves writing’s forms and contents away from a fantasy of knowing or containing the world to just being another one of the world’s lively ephemeral parts. This is ethnographic writing with no “supplementary dimension” (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 6).

or be one end of a pattern of interaction is to propose the other end. A *context* is set for a certain class of response” (2000: 275; his emphasis). Bateson thought of this reciprocal and recursive co-production of contexts, this vast learning process, as ecology in its broadest sense. For Bateson, relationships between self/other or self/environment

are, in fact, the subject matter of what are called “feelings” – love, hate, fear, confidence, anxiety, hostility, etc. It is unfortunate that these abstractions referring to *patterns* of relationship have received names, which are usually handled in ways that assume that the “feelings” are mainly characterized by quantity rather than by precise pattern. (140-1; his emphasis)

Too bad we have a word for “love”! Having a name, it becomes a thing or subject matter or technique. We need to forget or forgo the word to grasp such feelings as beautiful relational patterns composed in living bodies through *-graphy*. These aesthetic patterns jump between things in ways that are at once historical, material, and magical – like the moiré silk patterns from Baghdad imprinted on Tabbies’ names and bodies that end up as patterns on Jen’s ceramics. And there are violent *-graphies* within the beautiful patterns – the flash of cat claws.



Tabby *-graphy*.

Cat *-graphy* lays down these sensory patterns in living bodies through messages *about* relationships that simultaneously *enact* those relationships by materially altering bodies and things. For example, cat purrs communicate something humans interpret as love and contentment, but what happens to bodies *vibrating* with purrs? Elizabeth von Muggenthaler of the Fauna Communications Research Institute in North Carolina studies the healing qualities of cat purrs. She patented a therapy device based on findings that frequencies from 25 to 50 Hertz – the cat purr range – help heal torn muscles and broken bones (von Muggenthaler 2009). Her research dovetails with claims that pet owners make fewer doctor visits and have lower stress levels. In a 2008 study, researchers found that cat people’s risk of suffering fatal heart attacks are 40% lower than those without cats (BBC News 2008). Could it be purr *-graphy* resonating from cat larynxes into human bodies?

Through purring, spraying, and other forms of *-graphy*, cats pattern social relationships into the places they inhabit. In *Cat Culture: The Social World of a Cat Shelter* (2003), an ethnography of a rescue shelter in Albany, New York, sociologists Janet and Steven Alger approach cats as social agents shaping a shared human-feline culture. The Algers stress the role that places play in shaping non-aggressive cat cultures. New shelter arrivals were first housed in big cages that free roaming cats liked to sleep on in a relaxed pile. Cat friendships formed through the bars, while seven or eight cats on top “washed one another, slept, and cuddled together” in a peaceful place solely dedicated to those activities (96) – a safety zone patrolled by a cat named Marquis, who took on a social role as the shelter’s “guardian” (112). One pair of cats, Lisa and Bibbi, liked to break away from the others and sit together in an empty litter box. When staff took the box away, their friendship dissolved and they ignored each other until getting sick and being quarantined together in a cage. Something about the cage and litter box nest gave home to their friendship. The Algers interpret such bedding and nesting places as being meaningful: a “symbol of their friendship, the site in which the interaction rituals they shared took place” (103).

What if the cage top, litter box, and other nests are not symbolic spaces of social interaction, but *ecologic* places (akin to atmospheres and habitats) built out of *-graphies* in which relational patterns called ‘friendship’ or ‘love’ can flourish? The difference is

that the spaces are more than referential symbols that stand for friendship; they are greenhouses for feelings of belonging, atmospheres of affective engineering that envelope bodies and make room for their patterns. Friendship and love are not symbols but relational patterns that need two cats and a litter box to survive.

Because their little bodies let them inhabit spaces at subhuman scales, cats can throw together forts, burrows, and bedding out of all kinds of litter and household surfaces. The bathroom sink serves as a perfect readymade hammock; perhaps Chama is seeking out the feeling of comforting pressure that Temple Grandin calls “squeeze machines” (2005: 114).<sup>3</sup> Or cats are looking for warmth: their nesting choices often exploit thermal capacities in the built environment, like the insulation of plastic bags, or passive solar architecture accidentally assembled out of cardboard and a broken window. Sometimes cats choose places to get away from the clutter of other felines and enjoy solitary catnaps



Cat architecture.

<sup>3</sup> After seeing the calm that comes over cattle when they enter “squeeze machines,” Temple Grandin decided to build one for herself (2005: 114-117). As an autistic teenager, Grandin used a plywood squeeze machine to calm her anxiety, then added soft padding that stimulated “feelings of kindness and gentleness toward other people – social feelings.” Immediately after her first experience in the soft machine, Grandin realized cats did not like the way she squeezed them. She thought, “I have to make the same feeling I have to the cat,” and learned to stroke cats “the way the mother’s tongue licks them.”

– like PT’s burrow under the kitchen sink where we accumulate plastic grocery bags. The cats’ pheromones drench their bedding, so when One-Eye sneaks inside, he sniffs at PT’s cabinet. Rather than thinking of these as parts of our house turning wild with animal use, I like to think the cats are making their own houses by domesticating human space with feline *-graphy*. Our thought and language about ‘feral, wild’ vs. ‘tame, domestic’ are locked into imagining humans as *one-way domesticators*. Against this, there are *-graphy* practices whereby animals and their parasites domesticate us, making secret rooms inside our houses and bodies. No wild/domestic dichotomy, only interdomestication in all directions.

If nothing else, it helps me start to appreciate the smell of PT’s spray.

***Units A & B, Lacy, Mao, and all the others: love*** | Cats reproduce so swiftly that a group of them is called a “clutter.” At its height, our backyard clutter numbered twenty. The year following PT’s birth, a litter boom mass-produced so many tabbies we started naming them Unit A, B, C... We got them fixed at Emancipet, an east Austin nonprofit that runs a mobile clinic with low cost spay/neuter, vaccination, and microchipping services aimed at solving the problem of “homeless pets,” companion species without companions (Emancipet 2009).<sup>4</sup> The Units are cyborg creatures, registered in City databases. Because we couldn’t pay for fixing so many kitties, we also reluctantly used Austin Humane Society feral cat vouchers involving mandatory ear-tipping: a *-graphy* practiced by snipping a quarter inch off the left ear to visually signify ferals that are sterilized, vaccinated, and part of a trap/neuter/release or TNR colony. As an Emancipet volunteer described it, TNR is a way to increase the value and quality of individual cat lives. People see them as a problem if there are too many. The fewer cats there are, the more care they receive, and more of them get adopted. Unborn

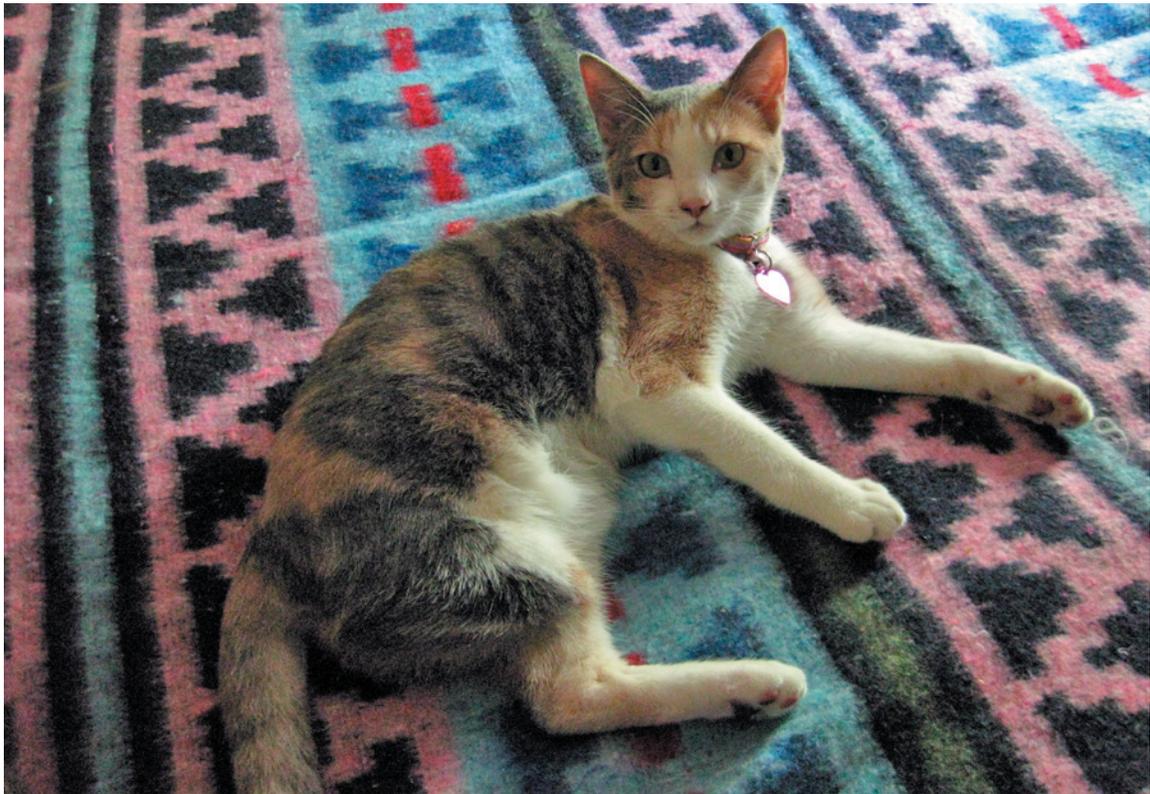


Adopt me!

<sup>4</sup> Emancipet recently celebrated its tenth year in Austin and its 100,000<sup>th</sup> spay/neuter. Their website proclaimed 2009 the “Summer of Love” with free spay/neuter services the first week of June.

kittens don't suffer, won't be taken to Town Lake Animal Shelter where they might end up unadopted and euthanized. TNR colonies also keep reproductive ferals from taking over new turf. The City of Austin helps TNR programs by supporting non-profits like Emancipet and the Austin Humane Society, but the majority of the funding and labor for TNR colonies come from volunteer crazy cat people and kitten fanatics like us.

When Unit B came down with a deadly winter respiratory infection, Jen asked if we could adopt him. But he was inseparable from his peach-bellied, snaggletoothed sister, Unit A; they came as a pair. I didn't want any more cats. I was already tripping over them at night, tired of cleaning up hairballs and cat puke. I was sick of PT spraying everything, plus, he gave me cat-scratch fever – a bacteria called *Bartonella* that made my left armpit lymph gland swell. A chain of reasons why *not* to adopt more cats clinked through my head, but I gave in to Jen's insistent love and the cuteness of kittens, resigned to becoming a crazy cat person. Maybe it was *T. gondii* in my parasite-addled brain. A year later, when the cat person at the butcher's asked for help fixing a three-legged calico kitten, I was



Lacy.

happy to adopt her as cat number eight. Living in a house that doubles as a curio museum helps: *See the Three-Legged Kitten!* Since then, Mao died of old age, bringing our indoor clutter back to seven.

The three-legged kitten was tinier and cuter than we expected – a dilute calico with gray, butterscotch, and white stripes, a big-eyed alien look on her tiny face. Her back right leg ended at a scabbed knob mid-femur. She spent most of her first day with us in my lap, face tucked under my arm, shaking with fear but purring, looking around frightened, then right up into my eyes. The look’s *-graphy* jumped in me, an unmistakable relational question: *Trust you? Protect me?* The leg’s scab came off, leaving bloodstains on my shirt. We called her Lacy for her frosty looking fur. Once you play name *-graphy* it’s all over: you belong to each other.

Next day at Riverside Vet, where by now the vet techs know Jen’s voice when she calls to make an appointment, Doc Meyer joked about Lacy’s leg. “Looks like she got caught in a bear trap. That bone fractured and the blood stopped circulating, so the injured part withered and fell off. Nature did it all without a vet!” He’s concerned that since Lacy rubs her half-leg while getting around, the wound might not close. It could get infected. Might be better to amputate the remainder. She plays rough with PT, and runs around the house, back leg centered between the two up front so she gallops at an angle. (The slower she moves the more you here the bumping of her back leg tucking under and springing forward again.) After weeks of daily vitamin E oil, the scab fell off, scar tissue encased the stump, and fur had grown up the back, but not the front. Then Lacy fell off the air conditioner into a potted plant and opened the skin again. A month later the leg had healed, but she snuck outside and scraped it open. Then it heals... We would rather monitor forever than amputate her little chicken wing.

Just a month after adopting Lacy, Mao died. He came to us as a stray, so we don’t know his age, but Doc said from the look of how his yellow eyes had broken green and brown, and from the look of his teeth, he could be fifteen. For the past year, twice a day I gave him liquid vitamins, hypertension meds, and a thyroid supplement. Mao had been dropping weight for months, barely eating his last week, refusing meds soaked in canned

food gravy. I had to force them into his mouth and get him to swallow. On Friday he went outside to drink water from our ponds like he enjoys doing. Took a nap out in the back porch under the shoe rack. Over the past few days his back legs had become rickety and stiff. I tried to feed him his canned food, but he just looked at it crying. On Saturday he stopped walking around and wouldn't eat or drink anything at his bed. He managed a faint purr. Sunday morning, we were surprised he made it through the night. All day he laid meowing, peed himself, and his eyes looked far away, clouded, already gone. He tried to sit up but



Mao.

just slumped over. His paws grew cold. He was starving to death. We would take him to be euthanized, but the vet was closed. I thought of strangling his neck (grown so thin) but could never do it. His paw flopped my way, like the old days when he'd rest his paw on your arm to get your attention, and then meow when you looked over – looking straight into your eyes. Monday morning he was barely alive, making a few last hollow sounds. Jen sat with him and after two heavy breaths his chest stopped. The heartbeat stopped. Jen got me out of bed to see the last flickers of nerves move his whiskers. We folded his tail and cold paws close to his body, left him wrapped in his blanket till we buried him that night. It rained, the first rain in a long time. Mao loved walking the yard after a storm drinking puddles. For weeks after his death I kept seeing him out of the corner of my eye. Strange to stop the habit of giving him meds twice a day. Something's missing. No more of the bellowing, pained meow he'd developed his last year. He would go under the bed to amplify his sad bawling. That's why we closed the bedroom door at night, to keep him out. After his death we sleep with the door open and cats all over the bed.

Seeing Mao in irresolvable chronic pain, I felt the troubling love that would kill pain with euthanasia. In deciding when cats die, we are “playing God,” as one Austin cat rescue activist put it. If ending life is one way to play God, prolonging it is another – one that unspools in future efforts and responsibilities. When it comes to cat lives, both modes of divine intervention are ordinary and taken for granted. The City is so cluttered with feral cats that my step mom (a self-professed cat lover) could lightly ask about One-Eye, “Shouldn’t you just put him to sleep?” Some vets that diagnose cats with feline leukemia or feline immunodeficiency virus ask, as common procedure, “Want to euthanize?” And the City of Austin’s Town Lake Animal Shelter still euthanizes unadopted pets, after years of trying not to. When is killing a cruelty and when is it a form of kindness? When is it an ethical response, and when a way to escape future responsibility?

The people at Riverside Vet practice animal euthanasia with delicate conscientiousness. When our outdoor calico Brownie dropped weight and stopped eating, we brought her in. Doc felt lumps in her stomach. The vet techs called to make sure we understood that as they went into surgery to see what was in her stomach, if they found an inoperable tumor, “it would better not to wake her up.” They called back with the sad news that her intestines were crowded with cancer. “She’s not in pain anymore.” The next day we picked up Brownie’s body in a black bag to bury in the backyard. The surgery assistant said things like, “This job is great but sometimes there’s nothing we can do. When we saw the tumors the whole room sighed. We were all crossing our fingers on this one, but there was nothing we could do.” Sometimes love leads to situations when there’s nothing you can do but witness and end suffering. He kept referring to Brownie as if we were *all* Brownie. “I know we weren’t eating much food... We’re in a better place now...” I hugged Jen against me as we leaned close around him at the desk, talking with low voices. He wore painting clothes since the vet clinic had just moved and he doubled as a painter. When he turned around, the back of his paint-speckled “American Tradition” shirt showed a flag with deer antlers instead of stars and guns instead of stripes – a land of skulls and killing.

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All the living and dying in these stories happened in just four years, a snapshot of the precarious life of outdoor cats in the city. (Some of you roll your eyes: *but what about homeless people?*) Indoor cats like Mao live two or three times longer. Last year a dog mauled China, who lived inside the two winter months it took to heal. Someone shot Figment's paw with a beebee gun, and after she healed, she disappeared. Space Boots, Small Face, Eyebrows, Mama, Marble Mom – all beloved cat characters that vanished. The four dead cats we've buried, the six missing ones, One-Eye's missing eye, and Lacy's missing leg are little parts of what adds up to tons of grim garbage every year. The bodies accumulate as a sad weight, the waste of life itself.

How does the City deal with these bodies, much less the lively weight of tons of kitten litters born every year? In 2008, City of Austin's Solid Waste Services collected 158 tons of dead animals out of 378 tons of urban waste (Solid Waste Services 2009). These figures do not distinguish roadkill from animals euthanized at Town Lake Animal Shelter. It's all one big landfill. Although the City has long sought to run a no-kill shelter, Town Lake operates with a 50% euthanasia rate – much lower than Texas cities with rates of 70 to 90% (Proctor May 2005). The rate is decreasing steadily, dropping into the 30% range with the combined efforts of Emancipet, Austin Human Society, various cat shelters, and countless anonymous TNR caretakers. In 2008, Town Lake Animal Shelter euthanized 10,916 sick, dangerous, or unadopted animals, and “the kill number for 2009 should be lower than 6,000” (Ruland 2009). Still, funds for sterilization campaigns and public education efforts that would turn no-kill aspirations into reality are scarce. Lately the City has been more committed to earmarking money for a new shelter to replace Town Lake's aged facilities.

In 2007, the City decided to move Town Lake Animal Shelter from central Austin to a \$1.5 million facility to be built in east Austin. Animal groups mobilized, arguing that fewer animals would be adopted there, leading to more euthanasia. Some Eastside neighborhood activists chalked the move up to an institutionalized racism that consistently puts undesirable jobs like killing animals, as well as polluting industries and facilities, into minority neighborhoods. Further, the City had decided on shelter relocation without

consulting the neighborhood association, who wants the land slated for the shelter to be used for affordable housing. One protestor's placard read "HUMAN SHELTER NOT ANIMAL SHELTER FOR EAST AUSTIN" (Dunbar 2007). Early in 2008, People Organized in Defense of Earth and Her Resources (PODER) and FixAustin took the City to court to halt the relocation, but the case was overturned. Like the Reno-Sparks Indian Colony and Oil-Dri's clay mines, it looms as an undesirable future tangled up in cat lives and litter.

Austin's plans for a new shelter are caught in contentious politics about what belongs in whose neighborhoods, conflicts that come spinning out of kindness. Activists portray the situation as a zero sum game – shelter for people *or* animals, not both. However, as urban geographer Nigel Thrift writes,

A kind city has to work on a number of dimensions, not all of which are conventionally 'human.' Kindness has to be extended to other kinds of urban denizen, including animals... More to the point this kindness has to be built into the spaces of cities. Think of kindness as a social and aesthetic technology of *belonging to a situation*, rather than as an organic emotion. (2005: 144; his emphasis)

Thrift seems to be asking, how can human shelter *and* animal shelter become parts of the same situation? He uses the term 'kindness' to get away from a language of 'love' he finds too romantic or demanding of purity. Cat lives muddy rhetorics of 'love' and 'kindness' alike: they sound sweet and innocent, but cross cats' bodies with violence and cities with gentrification politics. Public kindness to animals at the city level is tough, because kindness in the form of expensive shelters inevitably diverts money and land from the concerns of local (human) people. This is why private houses where animal people give home to TNR colonies are such small but effective forms of kindness towards homeless companion species. But what are the possibilities for a combined human/animal shelter, and how might they compliment each other?

***Saviors & guardians*** | Making a city kind to felines not only involves building spaces for cats, and not only letting cats build spaces for themselves, but building cats into spaces by making them non-reproductive. Cats are "fixed," as if reproductive capacity is something broken, churning out litter in the form of feral kittens. Much like *Toxoplasma*

*gondii* infection changes its host's behaviors, fixing cats alters the way they act, making aggressive toms like One-Eye a little kinder and more suited to the colony atmosphere. As Emancipet dramatically puts it, the goal is to "liberate pets from euthanasia," but we do so by subjecting them to sterilization (2009). Like euthanasia, sterilization is a technology of troubling kindness that deploys an irreversible form of surgical *-graphy* to prevent future suffering. Building cats into the 'modern biopolitical state' involves playing God with future generations by fixing individual cats in a genetic still life.

As Haraway writes regarding endangered species, saving unborn cats from potential pain in this manner involves "the ambiguous grace of salvation, specifically being saved through a regulatory and technological apparatus of ecological and reproductive management. Salvation is proposed in the time frame of barely secularized 'Western' science. Apocalypse looms" (Haraway 2007) – both in the loss of 'pure nature' riddled with pollutants and invasive species, and in the threat of extinction like that posed by cats eating up native birds. This is the teleological time of *The End*, a fantasy time facing a future of either fearful destruction or miraculous redemption in a "return to Eden." For Haraway, caring for species instead involves facing the past of a specific place, tending its present generations so as to reconcile or decolonize that place against the telos of how it should be. Beings that have survived into a place's present – whether human, nonhuman; technological, organic; native, invasive; or some mixture thereof – are the past generations that might benefit from human care. They came with the house, so how will the in-movers respond?

Facing a place's past and caring for its present generations in this manner makes us worldly, willingly connected with webs stuck to as yet unknown times, beings, and responsibilities. We never know the worlds love makes before getting tangled in them. In his cat memoirs, William S. Burroughs' love of felines ties him to an amorphous being that "partakes of the cat, and other animals as well: flying foxes, bush babies ... raccoons, minks, otters, skunks, and sand foxes" (1992: 4) ... rare breeds of tiny jungle cats ... flickering spirit familiars, alive in a "magical medium" that is being bulldozed away alongside rainforests (18). Loving *one* cat attached Burroughs not only to all the world's

needy cats, but cat-like endangered species and fantastical beings that Haraway would recognize as “speculative fabulations.” While Burroughs’ future is composed of ordinary apocalyptic scenarios – if civilization falls, so will its grocery stores; then where will he find canned food for his beloved cats? (2) – his dreams are cluttered with fetal human-cat hybrids that he doesn’t know how to care for, though he swears to protect and nurture them. An intense melancholy permeates the uncertainty of loving and caring for these vulnerable generations.<sup>5</sup> For Burroughs, only magic is up to the task – namely, the magic of “the Guardian, to create and nurture a creature that is part cat, part human, and part something as yet unimaginable, which might result from a union that has not taken place for millions of years” (3). If the Savior figure lures with a fantasy of future salvation, this Guardian peers into transpecies pasts and futures so remote they merge with dreams.

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Saving One-Eye’s life was no miraculous salvation, just salvaging a life from wasting away. He came with the house, and as cat people we felt responsible for him. Now it’s hard to imagine life without him. Now we’re his guardians, he’s the guardian of the TNR colony, and we belong to the situation of loving each other. We putter around the backyard together, wasting time with the other cats. No matter how domesticated into their humans’ biopolitical histories, cat lives sprawl out in timeless moments, luxuriating in eternal presents of endless cat naps.

As distinct from histories, these *presents* are when time feels to stand still in the presence of living, singular beings, or if not still, pulses with a cycle of purrs, relaxed breathing, or the tensions and frenzies of a good fight. Time of cat naps, cats in your lap, time of feeling sun on fur or skin that makes you take pause and *slow down*. Akin to the time

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<sup>5</sup> Allen Ginsberg felt that his misanthropic, untrusting, apocalyptic friend Burroughs finally learned to love and be loved through caring for cats. The depths of the Guardian’s sadness come across in *The Cat Inside* as Burroughs hears in a single cat’s cry the wailing of cat-like spirits everywhere: “The cry I heard through Ruski was not only his signal of distress. It was a sad, plaintive voice of lost spirits, the grief that comes from knowing you are the last of your kind. There can be no witness to this grief. No witnesses remain. It must have happened many times in the past. It is happening now. Endangered species. Not just those that actually exist, or existed at one time and died, but all the creatures that might have existed... The cry is very old. Very few can hear it. Very painful. The chance was there for an enchanted moment. The chance was lost” (1992: 89). With his cat familiars as company, Burroughs lives half in a world in which apocalypse already happened, half in the fragile magical medium of his own books.

of coasting downhill on bikes with wind in your face, moving but poised and still. Not that they're ahistorical, but presents feel like the first and last moment in time, little eternities. It is the moment of life contact, our immersion in sensual *-graphies* played out *now* in an 'always historicized' but peculiar moment. Cat lives help us enter this magical and vulnerable biographical time. Perhaps it is million year time awaiting as yet unimaginable unions. Or just that in making places for cat lives, we get attuned to seasonal ecological cycles – cold time, hot time, day time and night. Tender time humans take knowing we'll outlive the animals we love. What is this time of animals, and what becomes of history when we experience that time? The non-moment of just being with cats and looking them in the eye, feeling their fur and purrs?

## PARAKEET SQUATS

To stand in a lovely residential neighborhood in coastal Connecticut and be surrounded by scores of chattering, screeching, free-flying wild parrots, is to experience a fantasy. To look up into an immense 75 foot evergreen tree containing over 40 parrot nests and see two adult great horned owls roosting silently among the branches of the tree is to extend the fantasy. But to look closer and see firmly settled on top of one of the parrot nests a fluffy, white, baby great horned owl stretches fantasy to its outermost limit.

– Connecticut Audubon ornithologists Linda Pearson & Alison Olivieri (1995)

Of [all] kinds of Parrots, inhabiting the various regions of the globe, the Carolina Parrot is the only one found native in the United States... Their flight is easy and graceful; being much like the Wild Pigeon.<sup>6</sup> They fly in large, close, compact bodies, with great rapidity and with incessant loud screaming... They are extremely sociable and fond of each other ... always at night nestling as close as possible to each other and burying their heads in one another's plumage.

– *Guidebook to Barnum's American Museum* (Barnum 1864: 47)

***Colonizing Austin*** | Every neighborhood and time of day has a distinct atmosphere of sound. When we moved to east Austin, I started hearing raucous squawks across the sky, glancing up in time to catch streaks of green. Bird sounds I'd never heard before mixed into the refrain of prerecorded bells from the hilltop church and the twenty-four hour rooster crows of the neighbor's chickens (that I quickly learned to tune out). A friend told me I



*Myiopsitta monachus.*

<sup>6</sup> In the early 1800s, North America's wild (or passenger) pigeon population numbered in the billions. Mile-long migratory flocks blocked the sun in a bird eclipse while people fired shotguns below. Like the Carolina parakeet, the pigeons had been hunted to extinction by the 1900s.

was hearing birds of the same species as her pet monk parakeet that have naturalized in Austin. I later learned that monk parakeets, also known as Quaker parrots (*Myiopsitta monachus*), are a non-migratory species native to South America. They were brought north as exotic pets aboard aircrafts in the 1960s. Through multiple escape and release events, naturalized colonies flourish in rural Florida, as well as urbanized areas around Dallas, Houston, Brooklyn, New Jersey, Chicago, and cities in Connecticut and Washington. Urban monk parrots build communal nests on ballpark lights, cell phone towers, power poles, and other electromagnetic infrastructure, a squatting practice that sparks trouble when utility companies tear their houses down.

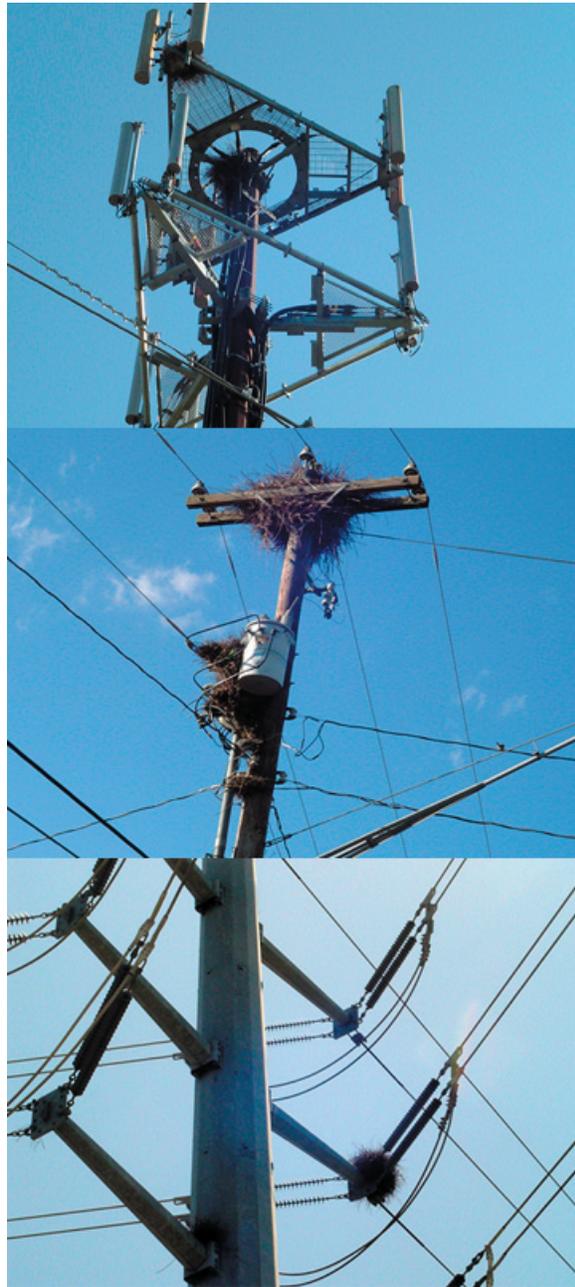
Drifting in chattering packs above Austin's cemeteries, rivers, and roadways, their overhead calls are propositions: "We can live here, too!" Are the city, utilities, and private households kind enough to make room for them? It comes down to a life and death question: do we humans decide they belong here in North America, or (try to) eradicate them as a dangerous invasive species? The City of Austin offers a snapshot of urban monk parrot colonization at an unproblematic moment, when the little bright green birds squawking across the sky are still a public secret, loved by those who notice them. The moment is virtually poised on conflicts foreshadowed by cities dealing with more advanced monk parrot colonization, a history of eradication programs in California and their native Argentina, and a North American sky haunted by extinct Carolina parakeets.

With increasing consciousness and intention, cities have started treating urban wildlife as things to be monitored, managed and kept under control; protected, preserved, and given home; or cultivated in eco-tourist traps and bioremediation zones. Meanwhile, urban monk parrots are deploying their own model of urban unplanning, playing surprises on the city's standardized grids. By squatting cell phone towers and power poles as their aeries, monk parakeets brave wasted spaces saturated with buzzing electromagnetic frequencies, parasitizing the telecommunications grid for their own ends. Their colonization radically alters "refrains" of urban rhythms that give places lively consistency (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:315). Loose publics of parrot people assemble around their nests, which are "greenhouses" in Peter Sloterdijk's multiple senses of that term (2005).

As aliens or recent immigrants to North America, their ecological niche meshes with the citified lives of cats, sparrows, and pigeons. Transpecific communities of monks, infrastructure, and parrot people spontaneously enact new ecological histories against the Apocalyptic time of modernist progress (Latour 2004). Complicating our sense of nature and the environment as ‘places humans haven’t muddled,’ such self-emergent urban ecologies are unique niches wherein species make new and surprising symbioses with each other in an ecosystem of becoming-natives that is never closed or finished. The monks’ propositions to humans concern our cultivating urban ecologies by accommodating nonhuman houses – opening the sky to new refrains and winged beings.

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Rumor has it Austin’s parrot colonies originate from Janet Gilles’ release of 19 monk parakeets along Town Lake.<sup>7</sup> As one reporter put it, “she thought the Carolina parakeet, the only native parrot to the United States, had left an ecological niche vacant after its extinction in 1914” (Brulliard 2003). Who knows how many of Austin’s wild parrot colonies originate from



Monk architecture.

<sup>7</sup> As with many origin stories, details vary. Charli Benedict, who does parrot rescue and rehabilitation in Austin, mentioned a woman who said she released either 17 Quakers or 17 pairs in Zilker Park in the 1970s. An apocryphal story in New York has it that a crate full of monks straight off the plane from Argentina broke open at JFK airport in the 1970s, freeing the birds that wound up in Brooklyn and other boroughs.

Gilles' release? Several pet owners seem to have gotten tired of the raucous birds and set them free. In effect, they become homeless pets like feral cats – “the bunny rabbit of the sky” (Menzer 2006), loaded with the affective qualities that made them popular companion species in the first place.

Quaker colonies have popped up all over Austin: multiple nests on the massive metal arms of a high-voltage tower stretching power lines over an eight lane intersection; four nests in a broadcasting tower and a giant one on a cell phone tower; nests on squat power poles and baseball park lights all over the Boggy Creek watershed where I live. If I get lost on my bike, at least at every wrong turn I encounter a few monks sitting on phone lines, gossiping. The green birds are high flyers and have migrated up and down the highway to other Texas cities. Parrot rescue people estimate that the Austin population peaked around 1998 at around 3200 birds. Austin's current population numbers around 1500.

Quaker parakeets are native to the South American lowlands and extreme climates of Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay, where their communal nests can weigh up to a ton. Monks prey on human crops. They colonize tall, non-native Eucalyptus trees cultivated on plantation borders as windbreaks – perfect aeries from which to launch pirate raids on grids of crops below! By appropriating human means (crops and alien trees) for their own ends, the parrots caused economic losses that justified a human war against the pests. In the 1970s, Argentina launched an eradication program against native monks, arguing that they “eat 30% of the corn crop” (Athan 2008). Although 64,000 birds were exiled to the US as pets and a government bounty “resulted in a return of over 400,000 pairs of monk feet in two years,” native monks are still at large in Argentina (Campbell 2000). Likewise, the parrots survived Uruguay's 1970s eradication campaign involving nests sprayed with endrin (an avicide) and experiments with 4-aminopyridine, a fear-inducing chemical that makes the parrots elicit distress calls before it kills them (Mott 1973).

In the 1970s, as the war on parrots raged in Argentina and Uruguay, the US Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) started their own eradication program to eliminate urban populations of feral parrots. In an effort to save native birds from being pushed out by

yet another wave of invasive avians, and to stop agricultural raids, from 1970-1975, wild parrots were captured and euthanized in California, Hawaii, Connecticut, and other states that also passed regulations making it illegal to keep them as pets. The USFWS was successful in eradicating monks in California and the Northeast, but stable colonies are back in New York and Connecticut. Monk parrots remain under scrutiny by ecologists and ornithologists leery of another generalist alien decimating native bird populations. The zero-sum ecosystem is as inflexible as an engineering equation: “the laws of thermodynamics dictate that the insertion of a new element (e.g., a species) into a biotic system must have some effect, however small, on that system” (Campbell 2000). There are only so many niches to go around – even if the city is producing them by the score as aeries on power poles, gaps under bridges, or holes in rubble dumped in brownfields all around Austin.

From an economic angle, the concern with urban colonies is that they will serve as centers for diffusion into rural areas where monks will eat crops. But American monks seem to *prefer cities* (and their ornamental gardens, cemeteries, and tower infrastructure), where parrot people fall in love with them and form a transpecific community that guards them in moments of human-induced danger. Of course, people have already found ways to offset the city’s minor economic losses through parrot-based local tourism. In Chicago, the Washburne Culinary Institute’s restaurant changed its name from the Bird Cage to the Parrot Cage in honor of the “wild [monk] parrot that inhabits the Hyde Park and South Shore communities” (Parrot Cage 2007). In Austin, “when Schlotzsky’s opened up at its 218 South Lamar location in 1995, they promoted the location as a place to watch parrots from the restaurant’s outdoor deck” (Mr. Smarty Pants 2008). At Café Mundi, you can watch parakeets building their cell phone tower nest and take one home on a coffee cup featuring a green bird in silhouette. However, given the species’ parallel colonization of other US cities, monks will probably never become an eco-tourist attraction on par with the Mexican free-tail bats living under Austin’s Barbara Jordan Bridge.

The bridge illustrates how urban ecological niches can become fantastical eco-tourist fixtures through conservation efforts like that of Bat Conservation International (BCI). After raising public awareness about the benefits of migratory Mexican free-tail bats

roosting under the bridge – namely, their massive consumption of mosquitoes and crop eating insects – the bridge itself became a downtown tourist staple, layering an economic boon on top of the ecologic. As one ornithologist notes, “though it is certainly unintentional, utility companies design and build wildlife habitat. Every right-of-way, every piece of equipment,” every flourish of patented design serves as an artificial resource for species seeking urban homes (Davey et. al 2004: 92). Now BCI is pushing for purposive design of bat habitat in bridges – *transpecific urban planning*. The endangered blind salamanders, invisible in the karst beneath Barton Springs, have become another celebrity species within the city, providing Save Our Springs lobbyists with living leverage to limit urban development above the Edwards aquifer. Wild parrots, clouds of bats, and invisible blind salamanders are spectacular species inhabiting Austin’s grid of urban novelties. Can’t you see some weird Austin restaurant called the Monk Roost building nest platforms, luring parrots from a nearby colony with daily offerings of fresh fruit, seeds, and berries? Live out your fantasy of eating amidst a flurry of green birds stealing food from your plate!

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Monk parrots build their globular nests out of sticks chewed off ornamental trees in clandestine logging operations. I’ve watched them at it in a busy grocery store parking lot, and in the crepe myrtle trees in Café Mundi’s garden in east Austin. A huge colony nests in a cell phone tower across from the café, saturating the garden with rowdy parrot babble from the top of the pirated aerie. Their chatter gives sound to the tower’s low frequency electromagnetic buzz that passes through their bodies and eggs, our cell phones and brains. The birds make purring sounds to calm their fledglings; perhaps the low hum of our communications grid has the same effect. The monks’ beautiful, perpetually built nests are woven architectures of twigs that capture solar and body heat like little greenhouses. As with sociable weaverbirds,



Cell site nest.

another builder of communal “animal architecture,” monk nests in trees can get so big that their supporting branch breaks (von Frisch 1974: 212). So far the cell phone towers are holding up to parakeet urbanization.

The nests remind me of yard artist David Lee Pratt’s description of his interlaced arcs of mangled rebar and other scrap metal: architectural forms that use no nails, no concrete, just intuitive balance to puzzle together a structure that gravity keeps from falling apart. Quakers build nests by sharpening one end of a stick with their beaks, then jimmying it into the other sticks. Each couple builds around four rooms. They defecate inside, then use their waste as stucco pushed into cracks so the house interior becomes sealed against wind and rain. The nests are constructed using the improvisational principles behind the Cathedral of Junk and the open-air rooms at Biosquat. They are composed by weaving things together, they are never finished being woven, and they are all built of *trash* – especially Quaker nests, given that word’s etymology of “fallen leaves and twigs.” If not fallen, scavenged from trees. Like Austin junkitects, monk parrots build something out of nothing, and in the process, pull together communities through their semi-public homes.

***Saving Pretty Boy*** | Both at their nests and in flight, alone or in groups, these parrots keep up a constant, boisterous chatter – worse than people on their cell phones! While wild monks ignore or avoid humans, they don’t mind mixed avian company, eating in parks alongside pigeons and grackles in a global gathering of South American, European, and native birds. Some say they have a taste for fermented chinaberries. My friend who keeps one as a pet describes them as scrappy little birds that walk like drunken sailors. Given their social nesting nature, she says,

They’re easily domesticated and motivated to please. They like to sit on your shoulder and will groom your hair, ears, and even your nose. They do have a wicked sense of humor: Piepmatz will bite and laugh about it, and I’ve heard of monks imitating their owners’ voices and calling the dog in for treats, or yelling ‘come in’ when someone knocks.

Companion monks can develop vocabularies of 350 words and live half a century. Parrots are long-lived learners that pick up habits and settle into patterns of relationships with

members of their multispecies communities.

As Jen and I learned with One-Eye, becoming part of one of these relationships can change everything. Piepmatz's caretaker introduced me to Charli Benedict, who helped found the Austin Avian Rescue & Rehabilitation Network. She got her start in the winged world in the 1990s, working the graveyard shift at a Florida parrot farm that raised exotic birds for pet stores with some rescue work on the side. One night while hand-feeding fledglings, she got a call from a Miami machine shop about an aggressive wild Quaker. Because the bird was sick with pneumonia, Charli quarantined him in a spare bathroom at her home, Saran wrapping the toilet to prevent drowning. Coughing, wheezing, and compulsively plucking, the bird was more skin than feathers – a plush toy with all the fur rubbed off. Before abandoning the bird, his previous owner had put a cigarette out on his back. One leg had been broken and healed with the bones overlapped. Given his abused body, no wonder he was traumatized and aggressive, squawking distress calls and trying to bite. Charli put a towel over the cage and right away his behavior changed. He pulled in the towel's corner, wrapped it around his head like a little shawl with a beak poking out, and chanted, "Pretty boy! Can you say he's a pretty boy? Pretty boy!" That's how he got his name. He started talking more and more, and said some terrible things: "He's going to kill us all! Call 911! He's going to kill us all!" Pretty Boy's former home must have been an atmosphere of domestic violence, and his aggression carried on those abusive patterns.

Before becoming Pretty Boy's guardian, Charli made a living doing animal husbandry with an emphasis on medical care, but her new companion pointed to the need for psychological healing. As she put it, "How do you reroute deeply ingrained behavior?" Studying under parrot behavior pioneer Chris Davis, Charli learned how to interrupt the pattern of aggression. Whenever the bird started ranting, she made tongue clicks and whispered, "I love you sweetheart... I love you sweetheart." "We did this till he

**Animal talk:** Unlike cats, Quakers and other parrots can literally say, "I love you." But much like cats, they are acting out a pattern of interaction: "Can you say 'Pretty Boy?'" Parrot talk captures the codes of human language as one way to enact relationships of love and care; another way is by grooming their human companions' faces. Refrains of "I love you" are music to our ears, not just symbolic utterances.

quit the argument.” A few years later, she could pick him up without gloves. Being part of this change, she was “amazed, honored, and overwhelmed,” and her attention moved from medical care to “fixing the heart.” She began to deeply question the ethics of selling long-lived, intelligent, social animals on the market as if they were any other commodity. Charli now feels that “we who make our living with animals” at some point have to have this change of mind... Not property or merchandise, but living beings that learn and often outlive their humans.

Charli reconstructed Pretty Boy’s past by watching his behavioral response to people, objects, and events. She thinks he was most happy as a fledgling in a nursery, hand-fed by a dark haired woman who knitted, based on watching Pretty Boy exhibit unique juvenile behaviors around Charli’s dark haired mom, a knitter. She interprets his chest feather plucking as an attempt to go back in time – to become a downy fledgling again. He has a habit of falling asleep wrapped up in a washcloth “like a long burrito.” Charli thinks he learned the wrapping behavior as a homeless bird sleeping in hamburger wrappers at the McDonald’s next to the machine shop. He survived off fries, unzipping their crispy shells to scoop out the soft potato inside. Now Pretty Boy’s voice saying, “I love you,” is the last thing Charli hears at night. Over the course of two years, she patiently taught him to sing “Yo Ho Ho and a Bottle of Rum.” Once he had that down, he made up his own song with its own melody: “I’m a pretty boy. I have a pretty voice.” He taught Charli’s younger rescued Quaker to build stick nests. Pretty Boy’s range of complex behavioral –*graphies* – nest building with twigs or cloth and paper scraps, vocalizing in interactive social patterns – reflect his past experiences, but are far from being instincts set in stone.

Charli’s coworkers at the Florida parrot farm were going through similar ethical transformations regarding breeding birds for the purpose of selling them as pets. In 1993, a huge Quaker nest the size of a 5-foot cube fell in a storm in Atlanta. Adult birds frantically circled, calling to the babies trapped inside. Charli joined a volunteer team that put the nest on a flatbed truck and hauled it to Miami. Wearing gloves to avoid infections, they cut through the nest to rescue 86 babies inside. For Charli, it was “one of our finest moments.” They raised and sold the babies, but lost money on the rescue operation, as it cost \$120 to

test each bird for bacteria like psittacosis. The older birds in the nest were tested, then set free. Charli describes the event in terms of changing consciousness. “We were changing from being capitalists to aviculturists,” from profiteers to guardians.

Around this time Charli’s job switched from supplying pet stores with exotic birds to *monitoring* them, developing standards and protocol for handling sick or aggressive parrots. Moving to Austin in the mid-1990s, she became increasingly involved in parrot rescue and rehabilitation, and by 2000 had stopped raising birds for sale and working with pet stores altogether. Now she runs Austin’s grassroots avian rescue network. In the late 90s, she rescued Quaker babies from nests on a YMCA’s field spotlights, removing them with gloves in a cherrypicker so the nests could be taken apart and lights changed. A crucial part of the operation involved having an *Austin American-Statesman* columnist describe what was going on with the rescue operations and breeding habits of urban Quakers. At the height of Austin’s Quaker population, Charli’s nonprofit rescued and found homes for about 40 Quakers a year; nowadays, they save just under a dozen Quaker babies annually. Charli’s current work also involves consulting with parrot people on all manner of physical and psychological care. Given their long life span, Charli advises that parrot owners write their birds into their wills so they have new caretakers if they outlive their current companions. She has a home lined up for her two Quakers, and her son will take her 25 year-old African grey parrot. They are family: born the same year, they call each other “bro.”

As knowledgeable as she has become, Charli recognizes “how little we know” about parrots. What we have learned comes out of living and dying together. Around 1970, hard learning came in the form of “the worst moment ever in Quaker history.” Some chicken farmers brought a monk parakeet back from vacation in South America. Soon after, the boy got sick... the mom got sick... then chickens started dropping. Psittacosis, a zoonotic pathogen, had spread from the parakeet to the family to the chickens, and in a by now familiar scene, all of the poultry had to be destroyed. Based on such dismal events, there are now regimented medical treatments and protocols to follow when bringing birds into domestic situations. Psittacosis remains a central concern for aviculturists. But we are also learning about life’s possibilities. When Charli became a parrot person around 1990,

African Grays were thought to live 50 years, and Quakers, 25. With human companions, an African gray lived to 72, and Quakers live to 50 (making Pretty Boy a venerated elder at around 47). An Amazonian double yellow head recently died at 108. As Charli puts it, we are learning “what happens to the life span of birds in the land of plenty.” Urban monk’s lives are going to be very different than their relatives in South America. We are just beginning to learn what happens to them in the city, in a world where everything’s up in the air.

*Expressive refrains & propositions* | Like the sonic envelopes of TVs, radios, automobile traffic, and airplanes, birds give worlds trembling contours, making them alive through sounds. Monks vibrate the sky with their surprise chatter, calling it down to our senses. Look up and see them in the busy blue nonhuman city among red cardinals, starlings, herons, vultures, migratory birds, butterflies, dragonflies... Just as much as colonizing local ecologies, monk parrots come to inhabit what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call *refrains*, the sensory worlds made by birds and other nonhumans in “an act of rhythm that has become expressive, ... become qualitative” (1987: 315). A consistency to sounds, “the ‘holding together’ of heterogeneous elements” (323) into “melodic landscapes” (318) that include consistency’s interruption from the overhead *Squawk!* The presence of naturalized monks radically alters the consistency of the city’s atmospheric, melodic, and electrical landscapes through the addition of an alien *signature* – “not the constituted mark of a subject, but the constituting mark of a domain, an abode, ... the chancy formation of a domain” through multisensory *-graphy* (316). The monk squawks: “Can we live here? We’ll eat your gardens and squat your towers, but feed your feelings!”

Throughout their written collaborations, Deleuze and Guattari elaborated the concept of ecological “refrains” as sensory habitats made through the artful *-graphies* of living things. They mined natural history and behavioral ecology to illustrate how nonhuman artists throw out “planes of composition,” territories of aesthetic consistency that make sense of chaos. They love “the magic bird,” the bowerbird (1987: 331), that flies

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<sup>8</sup> They also fly into Jill Noke’s description of the Cathedral of Junk’s domes as bowerbird nests (2007: 99).

into their writing to perform refrains.<sup>8</sup> These natives of Australia and Papua New Guinea create elaborate nests to dance around inside, their patterns of color and gesture resounding with songs, including those of other birds. The refrain moves beyond the bowerbird as the agent orchestrating or staging the event, a form of consistency made of synaesthetic “sounds-colors-gestures” that shuttles between bird and forest (1987: 333). In this way, “landscapes are peopled by characters and the characters belong to landscapes” (1987: 320). The expressive refrain is the becoming-forest of the bird, assembled through graphic forms: ‘the mark,’ ‘the signature,’ ‘the character’ – “not the constituted mark of a subject, but the constituting mark of a domain, an abode, ... the chancy formation of a domain” (1987: 316). Alive in vibrating air, sonic *-graphies* are vulnerable and changing; they can go extinct. They fly away, a nonorganic life of sounds coexisting in the forest with bowerbirds that is open to becoming something independent of them.

People like Charli Benedict know what life is like with Quaker parakeets and their humanoid vocalizations, but what might living around bowerbirds be like? While researching Kaluli ornithology in Papua New Guinea, Stephen Feld asked his informant Jubi to match up bird sounds with species until Jubi clarified things for him. “Listen – to you they are birds, to me they are voices in the forest” (1990: 45). Jubi’s remark helped Feld to understand why the birds and their sounds require separate taxonomies among Kaluli ornithologists: they are distinct beings. The bird artists of Papua New Guinea unleash songs into refrains, the sounds of which become nonorganic life forms captured by Kaluli songs and dances. The birds’ sounds and colorful feathers enter into a becoming-human through Kaluli ritual practices of “becoming a bird” or “man in the form of a bird” (236).

Music, melodies, and refrains make worlds, regions, landscapes, houses, and other territories resonate as singular habitats where beings belong. Recalling purrs, the affects of sound are strong sensory forces that jump between and vibrate sentient beings as their medium. “Researchers in virtual reality have found that sound is much more effective than sight in imparting emotional tonalities to their simulated worlds” (Hayles 1999: 219): sonic force uses the body as its resonator and puts you in space or makes you dance. “Music has a unique and striking relationship to the human body, surrounding, enfolding, and even

invading it within its own rhythms and textures,” opening up feelings of possibility, freedom, and belonging with such force that it can hold together social movements (Grossberg 1992: 152). The collective alliances that form in refrains might be characterized as *harmolodic*, in honor of jazz musician Ornette Coleman. “Harmolodics is the use of the physical and mental of one’s own logic made into an expression of sound to bring about the musical sensation of unison executed by a single person or with a group” (Quoted in Gioia 1988: 43).<sup>9</sup> Coleman understands sounds as belonging to landscapes (e.g., in regional musical styles), but also as ideas or logics released into refrains that recompose individual expression. The collective song is its own form of life or ‘unison’ that doubles back, endlessly, into and out of the musicians that collectively release its expression. This form of life needs musicians and instruments to shape its refrain, but the harmolodic refrain becomes the sonic landscape where musicians live and that gave them life and instruments in the first place.

Imagine if ornithologists and musicologists started writing refrain theory... Instead, the refrain migrates from the quasi-ecological territory of Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus* to a televisual and political one in the human realm. For Lone Bertelsen and Andrew Murphie, the refrain manifests as a red ship off Australia’s coast bearing over 400 political refugees, mostly Afghani asylum seekers (forthcoming: 153). Their text’s repetition of the red machine fashions a refrain theory that drops nonhumans in favor of an anthropocentric, mediated political world. But they keep the animals’ powers of non-representational expressions (e.g., *-graphy*): “we are not considering the refrain as a new kind of signifier” (150). Bertelsen and Murphie analyze the appearance of the red ship and its varied repetitions in media as “the emergence of territory via the refrain, the emergence of new functions within this territory, and the further refraining of this new territory and new functions” in the relationship between the Australian state and asylum seekers (154). The red ship on the horizon appears as an affective burst that kick-started the formation of

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<sup>9</sup> Coleman’s definition seems so obtuse that some people take it as gibberish, or as a joke played on those who need theory to appreciate improvisational music. James Blood Ulmer, who played with Coleman for a number of years, unpacks harmolodic theory with a landscaping story: “I went to France, and this artist took us way out in the country where he had created this scene that he painted. He made the hills and the valleys, he planted flowers on the water, and he put the pond there in the first place. He created that landscape so he could paint it – which is what separates the concept of harmolodics from other concepts” (Quoted in lone\_wolf 2006). Harmolodic monks squawk out a sky to live in.

a new territorial closure; the refrain cycled back into the state territory by “[providing] the ground for the implementation of harsher, better funded, and more secretive ‘new border control technologies’” (156). The red ship episode could have unfolded differently – for example, by slowing down the state response and putting ethics first (171). Bertlesen and Murphie urge an attention to events that can recognize affective surprises like the red ship of refugees *before* they snap into foreclosed political formations, so as to slow down and refrain them as ethical events.

Like the red ship approaching Australia, the aural and visual sky-writing of the alien monk parrots crash into seasonal urban refrains with the demanding proposition of belonging here. Following Bruno Latour, nonhumans like the monk parrots are making such propositions to the already existing collectives formed by humans, cities, machines, and native ecosystems – can we cohabitate? “What is in question is a new and unforeseen association, one that is going to become more complicated and more extended” (Latour 2004: 83). Like my elaboration of *-graphy*, or Deleuze and Guattari’s sense of refrains, “the use of the word ‘proposition’ simply allows us *not* to use the old system of statement, through which humans used to speak about an external world from which they were separated by a gulf” of symbolic linguistics. The proposition is “not a being in the world or a linguistic form but an association of humans and nonhumans before it becomes a full-fledged member of the collective” (Latour 2004: 247). The collective could be as small as the neighborhood or city or as large as the native species and ecological habitats of a continent. For people, what is at stake is yet another alteration of the sky’s refrains (like those made by the addition of airplanes and helicopters, or the extinction of the Carolina parakeet). For monk parrots, so long as they remain North American aliens, their squawking proposition can be heard as a political slogan: “*Give us naturalization, or give us death!*”

***Greenhouses*** | The very bodies of these bright-green, boisterous birds are a proposition to transport South America’s atmospheric habitat into North America in advance of the hypothetical jungle creeping north with global warming. With over twenty years in Austin, the monks already feel like “part of the local scene, giving a tropical air to Austin as they

fly over the city” (Fergus 2006). As one Washington resident put it, “we have eight months of winter. It’s like a little bit of tropical summer coming to our nasty Yacolt winter” (Buck 2008). And a Connecticut birder remarks, “they are fun to watch as they go about the business of making a living, and they add a patch of bright color to the tapestry that is the bird life of my yard” (Borders 2006). People swiftly latch onto the lively atmosphere wild parakeets give cities through their signature squawks and bright green bodies, to the degree of mobilizing to protect the new refrain when it becomes threatened.

Instead of chasing and fleeing climates like migratory birds, monk parakeets have brought it with them in their tropical bodies and greenhouse nests. Among over 300 parrot species, monks are unique in their communal living habits and choice of nesting sites. Rather than nesting in existing cavities (thereby displacing native birds), they gravitate towards alien aeries like non-native Eucalyptus trees in Argentina or urban infrastructure in North America. Scrappy monks are known to salvage other birds’ abandoned nests, using them as building bases (Campbell 2000). Nests keep out predators like snakes, possums, raccoons, and cats while keeping in heat, making them into *greenhouse fortresses* with which monks produce bubbles of warm, tropical air as far north as Montreal.

Peter Sloterdijk thinks of greenhouses as a “form of mobility” for uprooted plants and their atmospheres through the “technical reproduction of ... habitat in alien surroundings” (2004: 944-5). Sloterdijk places greenhouses into a long history of political projects beginning with the Greek *polis*, designed to resolve problems that emerge in

bringing numerous strangers together to coexist behind shared walls... The moral enigma of the city is that it rests on the creation of people who turn away from a certain natural phobia of neighbors and instead champion a highly artificial xenophilia in the most confined of spaces... The public sphere is not just the effect of people assembling but in fact goes back to the construction of a space to contain them and in which the assembled persons are first able to assemble. (2004: 946-8)

Monk nests are just such a constructed space that assembles parrot people, power poles, and utilities companies into emergent publics that put to the political test just how accommodating urban xenophilia can be.

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Winter 2005 – public protests broke out when Connecticut’s United Illuminating (UI) began dismantling monk nests on electricity poles, claiming the birds have caused a dozen power outages a year and four transformer fires since 2003. Following UI’s collaboration with the US Department of Agriculture to capture and euthanize 179 parrots, Friends of Animals president Priscilla Feral filed a suit to force the company to stop collecting birds and to respect their breeding cycle (Dixon 2005), and a bill has been introduced to outlaw collecting or killing the birds. In addition to rallying at nest removal sites and maintaining a press campaign against UI, people from neighborhoods where nests were being removed built fake nests for monks and installed them in their backyards.<sup>10</sup> Teams of women sawed down plywood in their driveways and wove stick nests in emulation of monk architecture. Of fourteen artificial nest platforms raised by Friends of Animals activists in winter 2005, only two were occupied a year later



(Save CT’s Quakers 2007)

(Smith and Johnson 2007). But with another round of UI nest removals currently underway

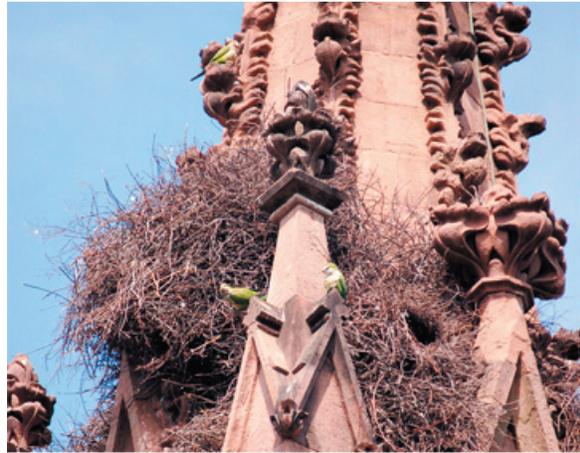
<sup>10</sup> A nearly identical story – of the evil servo-mechanism dismantling nests and euthanizing birds while parrot people protest and build alternative backyard aeries – unfolds in Yacolt, Washington (Buck 2008). These political struggles are foreshadowed by Florida Power & Light’s 2000 war on parrots that involved “[killing] baby parakeets by blasting them out of their nests with hoses” (Clifton 2006).

– accompanied by plenty of community outrage against UI’s interspecies violence – perhaps the artificial nests will fill up with their intended green public. Friends of Animals’ Donna Dwyer’s response to the news that UI is launching another nest removal campaign in the midst of breeding season stresses reproductive violence: “Nest removals need to be scheduled for before the breeding season begins and after it ends not while vulnerable eggs and chicks are in the nests. Those embryos and chicks cannot fly out and get away so they are thrown to the ground and killed” (2008). UI claimed to be removing nests before breeding season. The very habits of the monks are under debate, even as the multiple stages of their lifecycles become instrumentalized in control tactics.

Taking a cue from the battle in Connecticut, TXU Electric installed a 40-foot tower as an alternate nesting site for monks at the St. Francis substation in White Rock Lake, a suburb of Dallas. As a TXU spokesperson put it, talking on behalf of the servo-mechanism that repairs urban grids, “we do feel this is a community issue, and we want the community to take ownership of it ultimately... Our business is not birds. Our business is to deliver safe, reliable electric service” (Menzer 2006). While Friends of Animals lauded TXU’s approach, the monks have been less enthusiastic about the power company’s offering. TXU “disassembled the old nests, covered up the substation, and provided the birds with nesting materials. The parrots responded by taking the nesting materials back to the substation and attempting to rebuild their nests” (Forman Orth 2006). The season-less, impersonal servo-mechanism has come up against the anomalous proposition of thriving monk nests and their transpecies guardians, and seems to be slowly adapting to the invasive species’ needs and breeding seasons. As the monk parrots continue their colonization of Austin, the battles and collaborations that flare up around power pole nests are on their way.

The process of monk parrots squatting urban habitats is not always so fraught; sometimes their appropriations flourish in happy symbiosis with human concerns, as in the case of the historic Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn, New York. The parrots offer the unlikely signature of *inert shit*. “Unlike the pigeons which roosted in the gate before the parrots arrived, their excrement does not damage the structure. This is the first documented case of the monk parrots being used to displace another species for the benefit of mankind”

(Baldwin 2006). But even here the specter of displacements from limited ecological niches haunts the parrot's cemetery home. The pigeons are gone, but what if the parrots had not displaced a fellow invasive pest, but a native bird instead? Along with the dangers caused by the servo-mechanism's pragmatic agitation with nests, the parrots' other North America predator is the concept of *ecological purity*, the preformed collective that makes



(Baldwin 2006)

their alien presence here a fantasy or an aberration, but never a natural proposition within the functioning of a zero-sum ecosystem. Parrot people can't help them here; it is entirely up to the monks to show that they are skilful enough at cultivating bizarre symbioses, or just staying out of the natives' way, to warrant their North American naturalization.

Meanwhile, people are calling for parrot death with nationalistic glee: “eliminate the parrot's [sic] they are not native to this country” (Beardsley 2008)! Todd S. Campbell with the Institute for Biological Invasions remarks, “monk parakeets are probably not beyond control from a biological or logistical standpoint, but they are likely beyond control from a public sentiment standpoint” thanks to human guardians that mobilize against their eradication. Campbell is attuned to the “psychological and sociological ramifications of the myriad ways in which we must attempt to thwart the homogenization of our planet's biota” (2000). But his desire to ‘thwart globalized biota’ pictures a homeostatic nature of beings ‘native to this country’ that has already been rendered a fantasy by several centuries of urbanization, agriculturalization, deforestation, and dammed rivers in North America, alongside *Homo sapiens*' amazing capacity to unleash biological invasions like European starlings, house sparrows, and honeybees (to name only a few flying aliens that have naturalized across the continent).

Others fantasize on behalf of the monks that they are filling a niche left open by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century extinction of the Carolina parrot once native to the southeastern US.

The monks are the ‘plus’ to the ghost’s ‘minus’ in the zero-sum equation of predetermined niches. Indeed, Janet Gilles tells this reinhabitory story as her reason for releasing pet monks to go feral in Austin. Rather than being ‘ramifications,’ as Campbell suggests, the logic of public feelings attached to refrains of invasive and ghost parrots imagines a different kind of ecological time, in which the monks – refugees persecuted in their native bioregion – reinhabit the extinct Carolina parrot’s empty niche and *belong* in the North American atmosphere. Parrot people welcome these supposed ‘agents of homogenization’ as a shockingly heterogeneous part of the urban refrain becoming natural to the city’s residents – as natural as ornamental gardens, amusement parks, and greenhouses.

By being mixed into such themed urban amenities, the parrots’ signature further tinges the city refrain with fantasy, the distinct feeling of being in a Disneyland atmosphere amidst audioanimatronic avians. Even Audubon ornithologists are enchanted by their presence, and even more so by the surprise couplings that social monks make with other birds. Great Horned Owls habitually scavenge the nests of other species. In Connecticut, Audubon ornithologists monitoring monk parrots – policing their impact on the natives – observed these owls commandeer the top of a monk nest. They were relieved to find no monk feathers or bones in the owl pellets below the tree. “Who would have believed that the two species – owl and parrot – could live together so harmoniously” (Pearson and Olivieri 1995)? In another surreal case of spontaneous predator-prey cohabitation, “a 2001 confrontation between Friends of Animals and the city of Stamford ended when federally protected ospreys built nests atop monk parakeet nests at some sites” (Clifton 2006). Predators are not the only birds to squat the squatters’ nests. In Austin, I’ve seen sparrows inhabiting parts of power pole monk nests. The gregarious parrots seem to be making friends in all directions, and so far, ornithologists and ecologists monitoring these new collectives have not raised any warnings about displaced native birds. But the parrot propositions leading to actual cohabitations between monks and towers, monks and people, or monks and baby owls still transport ornithologists to ‘fantasy’s outermost limits,’ as if these emerging collectives were just flawed simulations of a native ecosystem riddled with the empty niches of extinct species.

The zero-sum ecosystem with its ghost niches is a fantasy that either welcomes monk parrots into the North American collective, or damns them outright as non-native aliens that humans should exterminate while we have time. But there is nothing fantastical about the *death of the refrain* brought about by anthropogenic extinction – signatures gone, forever. It is the nightmare Rachel Carson evoked in *Silent Spring*, “a spring without voices. On the mornings that had once throbbed with the dawn chorus of robins, catbirds, doves, jays, wrens, and scores of other bird voices there was now no sound; only silence lay over the fields and woods” (1994:2). Carson’s book sounded alarm bells about industrial pollutants’ deadly movement through environments, the potential of silenced refrains that must be addressed through making explicit the unanticipated effects of new chemicals (for instance, fallout from agricultural standardizations enforced with herbicides and pesticides).

Recalling Haraway’s misgivings about the time frame in which humans offer animals “salvation,” Latour argues that modernism’s brand of progress *had to end* in this apocalypse of rationalized control of all rhythmic refrains and life processes (2004:190). Indeed, as Carson and others documented, American progress through manifest destiny, industrialization, and agriculture decimated the pre-colonial collective, driving species like the Carolina parakeet to extinction through hunting and habitat destruction. Ornithologists themselves killed and stuffed ever-rarer specimens of that vanishing species. Though museums preserve their dusty feathers, the Carolina parakeet’s signature will never be heard again. Modernist progress produced these haunted landscapes, silenced refrains, and extinct species shot down by rational time’s unidirectional arrow, leaving only unwanted alien species, as they say, to ‘fill the niches.’

In the alternative, nonmodern time of political ecology offered by Latour – or by Haraway’s ethic of facing a place’s past instead of its future – holes left by modernist progress, as well as the horde of alien species mobilized by human globalization, enter an open refrain, their *-graphies* composing radical propositions to the emerging collective:

The future ... will attach us with tighter bonds to more numerous crowds of *aliens* who have become full-fledged members of the collective that is in the process of being formed... The

arrow of the moderns was the only thing that presupposed the end of history. Since gradually building a *cosmos* has no end, there is thus, for political ecology, no Apocalypse to fear: it comes back home, to the *oikos*, to ordinary dwellings, to banal existence (2004:191-2).

The role of ecologists and ornithologists is not to dictate the refrain or the ecosystem as a fantastical preformed collective (however badly marred it has been by extinctions), but to listen to refrains in new ways, to encounter species in ecosystems as always *becoming native*. Monk parakeets are making the proposition that they can flourish without endangering native species, that they can be natives with their own unique signature – not just filler for the ghost’s empty niche. Of course, the servo-mechanisms that perpetually repair urban infrastructure must adapt to the parrots’ presence, and the transpecific community of parrot people will agitate until the arrhythmic machine becomes seasonal in respect to monk reproduction. The monks have already altered the urban refrain and surprised us with their greenhouses and avian alliances, and now cities like Austin need to decide how to respond to their propositions. Will North American skies embrace this becoming-native?

## PART II - DREAM HABITATS

### LIFE IN THE MUSEUM



Arcades are houses or passages having no outside – like the dream ... Museums unquestionably belong to the dream houses of the collective. In considering them, one would want to emphasize the dialectic by which they come into contact, on the one hand, with scientific research, on the other hand, with “the dreamy tide of bad taste” ... This thirst for the past forms something like the principal object of my analysis – in light of which the inside of the museum appears as an interior magnified on a giant scale.

– Walter Benjamin (1999: 407)

We start off every tour welcoming you to the Museum of Ephemera, where you have been all along – inside this vast collection of plastic bags, medicine cabinets, digital archives, bioengineered food, landfills, and prepackaged mass-experiences. Welcome! Pick a ticket and step right in the dime museum. A panorama of electromagnetic novelties, a menagerie of biotechnocultural oddities awaits! *Ephemeral things* – see them before they turn to dust, melt into air, wilt like yesterday’s cut flowers! One thin dime gets you through the door... think I got a spare one in my pocket...

The Museum of Natural & Artificial Ephemera (MNAE) got its start in 1920s Tucson, when two European immigrants (one of them my Ukrainian great granduncle) pooled their personal collections to open a storefront attraction. They wanted to make a “zoo for endangered species of collecting” like highbrow aristocrats’ 18<sup>th</sup> century *Wunderkammern*, where art, minerals, and automata cohabitated, or lowbrow late 19<sup>th</sup> century dime museums driven out of business by penny arcades, their names sullied and hoaxes disowned by legitimate institutions.<sup>1</sup> The curators collected objects – bad taxidermy that other museums were trashing, sketchy offshoots of technology like quack medicine – but also antiquated and illogical modes of representation that professionalized, serious

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<sup>1</sup> For more on *Wunderkammern*, see Eilean Hooper-Greenhill’s *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (1992). Andrea Stulman Dennett’s *Weird and Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America* (1997) is an excellent book on the rise and fall of dime museums as a form of urban popular culture. For more on these historical modes of collecting, and the melancholic attachment to lost worlds of bad taste in general, see Celeste Olalquiaga’s *The Artificial Kingdom: A Treasury of the Kitsch Experience* (1998).



museums had abandoned. The Museum closed after its curators passed away in the '40s, displays boxed up for relatives, sold, or thrown away. In 1999, we reopened it in our Tucson rental house's utility closet that fit no more than four people at a time. Grandma, who first told us about her odd uncle, gave us a dozen things she'd inherited and told us their stories – a ruined butterfly collection, an ostrich egg, a shriveled human horn...

Moving to Austin in 2001, the Museum became a gathering place through which we met people drawn to quirky things. Families looking for fun, art crowds that attend gallery openings, students from the University working on class projects. Nature lovers, engineers, and occultists attracted to our themed exhibitions. Musicians who played vaudeville, klezmer, and jug band tunes, and local characters who had turned their yards or houses into art environments. People like Sharon Smith, whose house is a museum of folk art and bric-a-brac encrusted on every possible surface, in every nook and cranny. It makes MNAE look minimalist. Not to mention that Austin is home to the 999 Eyes Freakshow, the only traveling human oddities sideshow in the US since that form of entertainment was

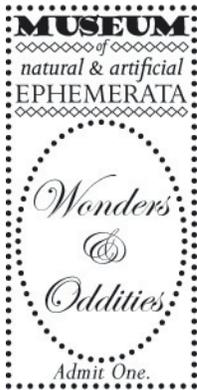
vilified in the 1970s by disability rights activists. Somehow, despite (or precisely because of?) our lack of any plans, the Museum took on a life of its own. Perhaps it was living in Austin. Things probably couldn't have gotten so out of hand in Tucson, where the local paper wouldn't run our event announcements. But in Austin, our creative obsession found an audience of weird connoisseurs and other creatively obsessed, house-hosted living experiments like the Cathedral of Junk, Smut Putt Heaven, and Spunky Monkey Ranch whose creators befriended and welcomed us, inspired us with a common atmosphere. Here were other habitual collectors, transforming salvage from the city's constant decay into junkitecture gardens and new life – making something out of nothing, *other worlds* out of junk. Here were homemade Dream Houses that didn't bubble up as private, but wanted to share the dream by opening to visitors for tours (at least sometimes).

For four years we gave Museum tours in our rented apartment, sharing the space with cats, their fur, and their accidents. They shattered many a cloche. In 2005 we bought our house in east Austin and installed all the displays as the “impermanent collection” – a little room packed ceiling to floor with tiny things like Elvis' hair, butts of cigarettes smoked by Marilyn Monroe and M. M. Bakhtin, rivets from the first Ferris wheel, a bottle of baby incubator air collected in Coney Island's Dreamland park, and other curiosities. A whirlwind panorama of the histories of collecting, from abject saintly relics, to Enlightenment ‘wonder cabinets,’ to urban phantasmagoria like world's fairs, dime museums, and Disneyland! In another room, we began installing temporary collections that went beyond the Museum's original project of preserving abandoned modes of collecting. The themes of the exhibitions might be *relationships between boundary forms* like “Skin & Bones,” “Crystallization & Drift,” and “Underground,” or *agential entities*, fuzzy ontological categories like “Machines,” “Wondrous Instruments,” “Animals,” “Ghosts,” and “Monstrosities.” We fabricated some displays, tapped garage sales, tourist stands, antique malls, and eBay for others, but mainly relied on asking Museum visitors for loaned objects and their stories – a method of collective research whereby we start to learn, just what *is* the relationship between our skin and bones? Just what counts as an animal or machine?

The city hosts many, many people who collect all kinds of things: circus gaffs; folk art; rocks of all kinds; all manner of kitsch; outmoded film and audio equipment; tiny bones; insects, dead and alive. The Museum seemed to collect the collectors as visitors. These kindred anachronists, collectomaniacs, and tinkerers answered our calls for loans with amazing, funny, and challenging story-objects. Is this really petrified pterodactyl poop like you say? Does the M. Ravi Archive that mailed us dried ectoplasm really exist? We were most wary about displaying an anonymous government employee's loaned piece of shrapnel from one of the 9/11 airplanes, worried it might be seen as a tasteless prank. And most enthralled by loans we'd never hoped or imagined to include in an exhibition – carnivorous plants, a salt shard that grew on Robert Smithson's "Spiral Jetty," a functioning player piano and a stuffed two-headed calf, both made in 1917. A lovely neon planet. A whole world of singular things we'd never seen before parade through the themed shows. Afterwards, we give it all back, keeping our collection minimal and realistic in our small house. Without the generosity of the Museum's visitors, themed shows could not exist.



When cell phone companies go under, where does their signage go?



Carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any difference between actors and spectators. Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance. Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time, life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom.

– M. M. Bakhtin (1994: 198)

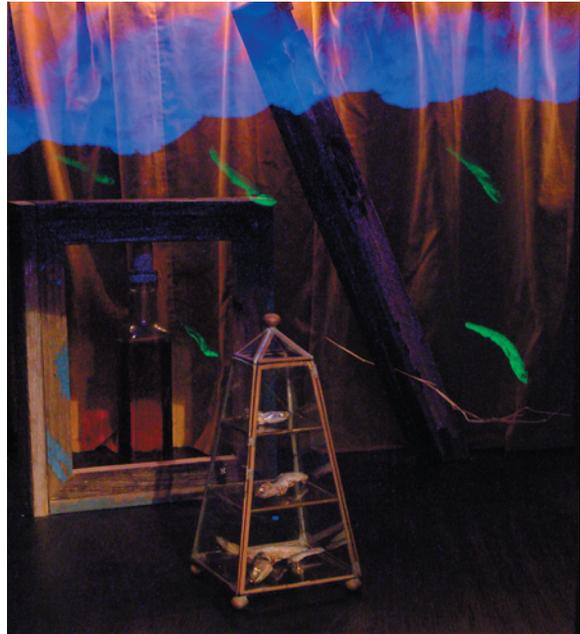
“The tour” has always been the Museum’s fleeting core experience.

This brief moment when we are all assembled in the exhibition is the only place MNAE really exists. There are no written labels here, so we offer face-to-face, improvised walks through the changing collections during which “The Tourists” often tell as many stories about displays as “Your Curators.” The tour is an event in which unanticipated powers of the collection emerge. Like cities or ecological habitats, tours are *emergent phenomena* – they “demonstrate powers at higher levels of organization which do not exist at other levels” (Thrift 2004: 62); “each component contributes to but does not control the form and behavior of the whole” (Alberti et. al 2003: 1170). A messy kind of organization, an incomplete whole. *Odd* behavior verging on the supernatural.

Tours try to go on as many detours through their themes as possible, to freely associate peculiar and counter-intuitive connections. If we linked displays with strings instead of stories, we’d turn the room into a knotty spiderweb. Like being in a theme park, replicas get mistaken as the real thing, and vice versa. Tours deliver us all into an enchantment or fantasyland just beyond the history, progress, and authority modern museums helped collect into being. And humor, practical jokes, are at the heart of it all – a critical rejection of the serious as the end all be all. Tours let us loiter between belief and skepticism, irony and sincerity, smack dab between science and kitsch, relishing the bizarre interference patterns resonant between objects and their stories.

By loitering in these gaps, we start to learn not to be afraid of, even to enjoy, embodied contradictions and myriad realities and natures. Not to flinch away from abject things, the bones and bits of preserved flesh museums collect. We shift from a world of givens, knowns, and laws into one composed of oddities, exceptions, and beings that break

norms – fish that fall from the sky. Your Curators are vegetarians with a taxidermy collection, feeding canned meat to cats. Abiding paradoxes leads to more life in the habitat of dreams. Jumping between scales lets us layer incommensurabilities into wobbly wholes. We whittle down complexities to feel simpler. Or draw out the incredible complexity of ordinary things. The Museum annexes giant entities we have no right to annex, like the Earth’s core, and in the backyard, at the top of an empty pole, the whole planet’s Anthropocene



Rains of fish.

atmosphere is on display! We operate by learning to tolerate ridiculousness in our practice, cultivating contradictions and tensions to mystifying effect. People often encounter what we do as ‘performance art’ or ‘culture jamming.’ We adopt tactics from conceptual art, but never identify the Museum as an art project. The speculative and imaginative power of art blurs into the parallel realm of hoaxes. Some tourists buy into what we say we are – a real dime museum full of fakes, another shabby roadside attraction. Is it all one big hoax or joke? After a decade of living with the Museum, we’re still not so sure. One thing’s for certain: *things are alive*, and they need habitats to live in – a shadow box or picture frame, an exhibition room, words, and *visitors*, curious folks like you who gather around their fragile, improbable existence. To bear witness to their brief manifestation and perhaps walk away with a feel for possibilities. Without you, displays are *mere junk on a wall*.

During tours, everything is becoming something else. Fluorescent pom-poms from the craft store turn into see-thru will-o-the-wisps in a Ghost Road diorama, inspired by a tourist brochure called “Ecology and Ectoplasm.” Recycling the Victorian era Pepper’s Ghost stage illusion, the diorama places us on an old logging road populated by carnivorous plants and glowing orbs that haunt the clear-cut old growth forests of the East Texas Big

Thicket. Things morph and shift: suddenly this unicorn horn is a narwhale horn; then, not a horn but a tooth that evolved into an organ that senses weather; then, not a real tooth but a cast replica. *One object, many layered displays*, only some of which are true or real in any concrete, scientific, objective way; they are lies, fakes, superstitions, fantasies, stories, made up, or something else. The actual and artificial are all pureed together. Like invisible carbon nanotubes in glass jars, the displays are right before your eyes, but you might not be able to see them without an elaborate apparatus. Got a scanning electron microscope handy? Fortunately, visitors are the only apparatuses we need for the Museum to come alive!



Thank Barnum for exploiting fabulosity to its full potential! It is very important for us to acknowledge our predecessors who have opened this venue in the psyche of American Culture.

– h.e.a Burns, “Lobster Girl” in the 999 Eyes Freakshow  
(Sideshow World 2010)

If we didn’t let MNAE live in our house with us and instead tried to rent it a place of its own, it wouldn’t exist. We’d be too busy earning money to pay two rents... we’d have to make the museum a money-making machine, like the old dime museums. P.T. Barnum’s legendary entrepreneurial hustle involved tricky stagings like *bad brass bands* playing on the balcony to drive everyone inside, or urban performance art like the *brick man* who moved masonry from one street corner to another, till a crowd gathered and followed him into the American Museum (Barnum 1888:102-5). They paid to see things like the club that killed Captain Cook and the Feejee Mermaid. Like Disneyland, Barnum’s existed to make money, a reversal of our predicament: to exist in a storefront, we’d need to make a lot of money. At any rate, the Museum has been *more effortless* to sustain out of our house, a path of least resistance that lets MNAE persist more or less *despite* money.

Sometimes there is a little money to throw around. Thanks to the nonprofit gallery Women & Their Work who took us under their umbrella, we’ve been able to tap the City of Austin’s cultural arts funding without needing to be a nonprofit ourselves. The extra



A real Feejee Mermaid below balls of hair from a cow's stomach.

money has funded the acquisition of pricy displays like the narwhal tooth replica, as well as paint, fancy wallpaper, and other touches for themed exhibitions. It pays for printing the programs listing displays that we give to visitors, as well as the guidebooks and t-shirts we sell as souvenirs. But we put together themed exhibitions without money, too. "Monstrosities" came together with a budget of zero. We salvaged a black cabinet from the side of the road, and otherwise already had all the frames and shelves we needed. Most of the monsters were on loan from Graham Criglow's collection of sideshow gaffs and the 999 Eyes Freakshow's "Museum ov Mutantstrosities." Lack of money leads to making do, improvising with what's at hand, teaching yourself things because you can't pay someone who knows. In short, moneylessness opens up a world "held together by duct tape and chewing gum," as a talker at the Coney Island Museum put it.

The nonprofit Coney Island USA assembled the Coney Island Museum as part of a constellation of offerings that revive the historic entertainment district's "honky-tonk subculture" – a Circus Sideshow and School, Creepshow at the Freakshow, Burlesque at the

Beach, an annual Mermaid Parade, and a variety of lectures, films, plays, art exhibitions, and festivals (Coney Island USA 2009). The scale and quality of their operation is on par with another project we admire, the Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles. They take the hoary form of wood-paneled natural history museum dioramas on an uncanny trajectory with displays of bats that fly through walls, mosaics of butterfly scales, hairs carved into tiny painted figurines, and an entire hall devoted to the 17<sup>th</sup> century Jesuit polymath Athanasius Kircher. While MNAE is inspired by these well-respected nonprofits, it seems to have fallen into the Texas tradition of sketchy little institutions that function under the radar. Barney Smith runs his Toilet Seat Museum out of his San Antonio garage. Harold Little's house in Tyler hosts a Model Train Museum with 2,500 toys. In Plano, Michael Bohdan's pesticide supply store features the Cockroach Hall of Fame and Museum, with Liberoachi and Marilyn Monroach on display. All of these big and small museums flourish as Barnumesque venues, tapping into an old American curiosity thirsty for displays of difference.

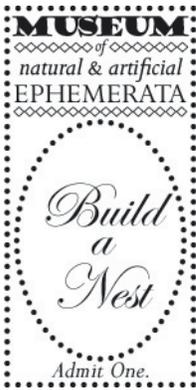
Alongside the fun of finding ways to put on a grand spectacle with small scales and tiny budgets, MNAE leverages a lack of time. Our curatorial projects are always rushed and slapdash, however elaborate they might seem. Themed shows are thrown together in leftover moments after work, school, cleaning up the house, and caring for the clutter of cats. We've taken this as a positive restraint – a condition of everyday life; we trust there's time/money enough to do what's essential; trust tinkering and intuition to pull us through. A week before "Animals" opened, displays were all over the floor in sub-themed heaps, and all the shelves, frames, and shadowboxes were in storage. We were just getting over collaborating with some flu viruses that left us groggy and slow. Animals hopped and slithered together, more and more of them, filling the room: can you put up three more shelves for us? Can you pack us all in? We made room for everything in a hodgepodge ecology. Animals lept up on the walls of their own volition, choosing their shelf-mates. Tours flowed out of their self-organized constellations. We're surprised and delighted by these moments of self-emergent composition – collections of life that just *happen*, when drifts suddenly crystallize into a dynamic whole.

With finite time and money, we rely on improvisational aesthetics in a flurry of manual and intellectual labor. Making the Museum involves a tactical patchwork of display

fabrication, framing, carpentry and electrical work, painting and wallpapering, graphic design of fliers, guidebooks, and other souvenirs, performing and teaching, research and writing, boring administrative work like maintaining email lists and filing City of Austin cultural arts funding – many kinds of practices, room for anything we want to learn to do or have to learn to keep going. As an un-institution, we can make it all up as we go along. Compared to real museums, everything looks a bit rough around the edges, tacked together, a little imperfect or amateur in its techniques. We're fond of this shoddy circus world of smoke and mirrors. (Just don't look at the mess backstage.)

We like MNAE to stay mostly imaginary, able to fold up and disappear, instead of solidifying into a financial, institutional being. Despite the odds, MNAE is still *almost not* here, after all these years! We can freely vanish at any time. Given all the hoops we'd have to jump through to make MNAE legitimate... in its own building... with a treasurer and janitor... we keep deciding *not* to firm up into an institution. "Taking it to another level" would demand a streamlined planning regime to become a profitable nonprofit, legitimate and professional, with paperwork documenting every object loaned by visitors, and more paperwork filed to return the loans. Everything would have to be insured. We would become accountants, like we do when compiling itemized budgets cross-referenced with spreadsheets, filed in triplicate for City funding, except *all the time*. Maybe we just don't know any better, but we prefer the shadowy realm of quasi-institutionalization and invisible paperwork.

Something like the crazy cat person's feline love keeps MNAE chugging along. The Museum sometimes feels like a parasite – life-sapping, demanding time-consuming unpaid labor and endless learning, one more thing to do, adding to a miasma of stress – but this parasite keeps its hosts very happy. So far, we can't (or won't?) make a living off it, though it lives off us. Like the cats, we based our lives around it like most people do their kids. We haven't been MNAE's curators so much as *followed its lead*, tried to keep up with its odd growth, getting a house where it could unfurl and colonize the yard. We fashioned the Museum out of our lives and home, becoming characters on its stage – till one day we couldn't imagine living without it.



GOAL 110.0 ASSURE THAT THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT IS COMPATIBLE WITH THE UNIQUE NATURAL AND CONSTRUCTED FEATURES OF THE AUSTIN AREA...

GOAL 120.0 PROTECT AND IMPROVE THE DESIRABLE IMAGE AND CHARACTER OF NEIGHBORHOODS AND DISTRICTS...

GOAL 150.0 PRESERVE THOSE ELEMENTS WHICH REFLECT THE VARIED HISTORICAL, ARCHITECTURAL AND CULTURAL INHERITANCE OF AUSTIN.

(City of Austin, *Austin Tomorrow Comprehensive Plan* 1980: 15-23)

The house that hosts the Museum is a display in itself, one that blurs into the surrounding neighborhood's patchy history. We were ready to stop lining landlords' pockets and cast off restraints of what we could and couldn't do to the walls. We wanted a place we could slowly layer with paint and wallpaper, experiment with ponds and concrete/bottle building, and put down roots by planting trees and watching them grow over the decades. For a year we looked for a house big enough to give a room or two to MNAE, plus an easy to find, central location that was accessible to people by bike and bus. We needed our mortgage payments to match or just exceed what we were paying for rent north of campus. Our real estate agent pointed east, past the interstate built in the 50s that segregated downtown and the University from African American and Latino neighborhoods and the industrial and agricultural zones that surrounded them.

The City's 1928 "Master Plan" that mandated segregation unintentionally set up the housing market we found ourselves exploiting along with other people in the "creative class." Artists, artisans, musicians, clothing designers, and other crafty folk have flooded the east side, presumably in search of the keystone of creative lifestyle, the privilege of *low overhead*. In 2003, the first East Austin Studio Tour event featured 28 participants. The 2008 tour coordinated 150 studios and galleries that opened to the public for a weekend, and in 2009 the event spanned 9 days of music, open studios, happenings, workshops, and speaker panels. As artists move in, so do developers, and east Austin's property taxes float up, buoyed by creativity.

We found a fixer-upper we could afford (for now): a house built in 1950 as part of the Chestnut Addition developed for Black middle class families. The house's original owners planted roses in the front yard that our eighty-year-old neighbor fondly remembers.

A creek ran through the backyard next to a giant old pecan. The Latino family that bought the house in the '90s put in a concrete courtyard where most of the rose garden had been; red, white, and pink roses are all that's left in the side yard, clustered under a fig tree they planted. By the time they moved in, the City had put the creek in an underground culvert. Making room for four kids, the family knocked out the house's back wall to extend the kitchen and bathroom, and built a long addition with a rough wood-planked floor along the house's side. The biggest room in the house, this addition was only accessible through a bathroom. We knocked a wide passage through the original house wall, finding a window inside whose frame we salvaged to embellish the new doorway.

Across the street were two little white houses, one with a bad lean and boarded up windows used as billboards for posters advertising new movies and hip-hop albums. Neighbors say it was a crack house. The other house was condemned, yellow paperwork stapled to the front, but its owners lived inside without water or electricity. Sometimes they



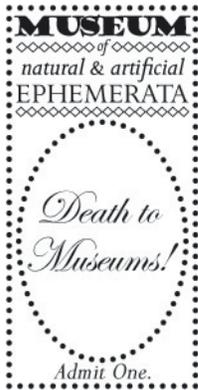
To the landfill.

asked for five gallon buckets of hose water to drink, or money for medicine or gas to run the generator. With property taxes in arrears, they sold the house to the person who owned the lots on either side – the slanting house and a green house rented to a Black family. Once the same person owned all three houses, they fell like dominoes. First the one with the lean was demolished, then the one squatted by its former owners, and finally the green house after the family was pushed out. The big plan was to build duplexes on all three lots, but the fields have been empty for over two years. FOR SALE signs occupy the space, occasionally hit by the falling branches of a dead hackberry tree where a woodpecker hunts for grubs.

Three new houses visible from the backyard balance the three missing houses we could once see from the front. Across the alley a multigenerational Latino family with free-roaming chickens makes churros to sell around the neighborhood. On either side of them, three two-story houses with two car garages now take up their lots with only a few square feet left over for yards. The in-movers blame all the trash in the alley on the family, and their dogs escape the tiny yards to roam the alley attacking chickens. Sometimes they go for alley cats.

Serendipitously, we can see the Statue of Liberty from our backyard. Retired math teacher Ira Poole installed the statue and created a cement map of the United States in his yard to celebrate the bicentennial. It quickly became an Austin yard art icon. A Sphinx with patriotic headdress guards the corner of the house, perched on a big map of Texas. The monuments greet people as they whiz by on Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard on their way to the airport.

At a neighborhood association meeting, someone asked why there was no line between Louisiana and Arkansas on the US map – was that a political statement? Mr. Poole said he just must have missed putting in a piece of rope at that state line when he set the concrete America. A week later I notice the state's line chiseled into the concrete and painted black, as if it had always been there.



The urge to collect objects, for individuals as well as societies, is a sign of impending death. One finds this need acutely manifested during preparalytic periods. There is also the mania for collecting – in neurology, “collectionism.”

– Paul Morand, 1929, quoted in Celeste Olalquiaga (1998: 67)

The Museum of Ephemerata playfully critiques *dead museums*, mausoleums of preservation that try to make time and knowledge stand still. The critique goes like this. Museums compulsively collect, organize, and catalogue a messy world that’s always falling apart, as if they were removed from that world’s thermodynamics. Such collecting is nostalgic and pathological. Museums have a secret pact with death, fixity, and closure from which their authority and expertise draw form and power. They preserve objects as *essences* – captured fragments of the bygone; indexical parts of a whole; *ideal types* of things. Really, the objects are *ghosts*, reproductions of absences out there in the world. A crystal in a geology display is also a damaged, empty space in a far off cavern, and the pottery shard is the hollow where the shard was unearthed. Museums are microcosms made up of ghosts from the macrocosm ... magnifying worlds in a way that mistakes them for the real thing. Museum habitats reproduce their treasured objects by meticulously *not* letting them express any further decay. Preservation is made possible by climate-controlled atmospheres that never turn off, such that you can’t have a museum without a power plant or solar panel array.

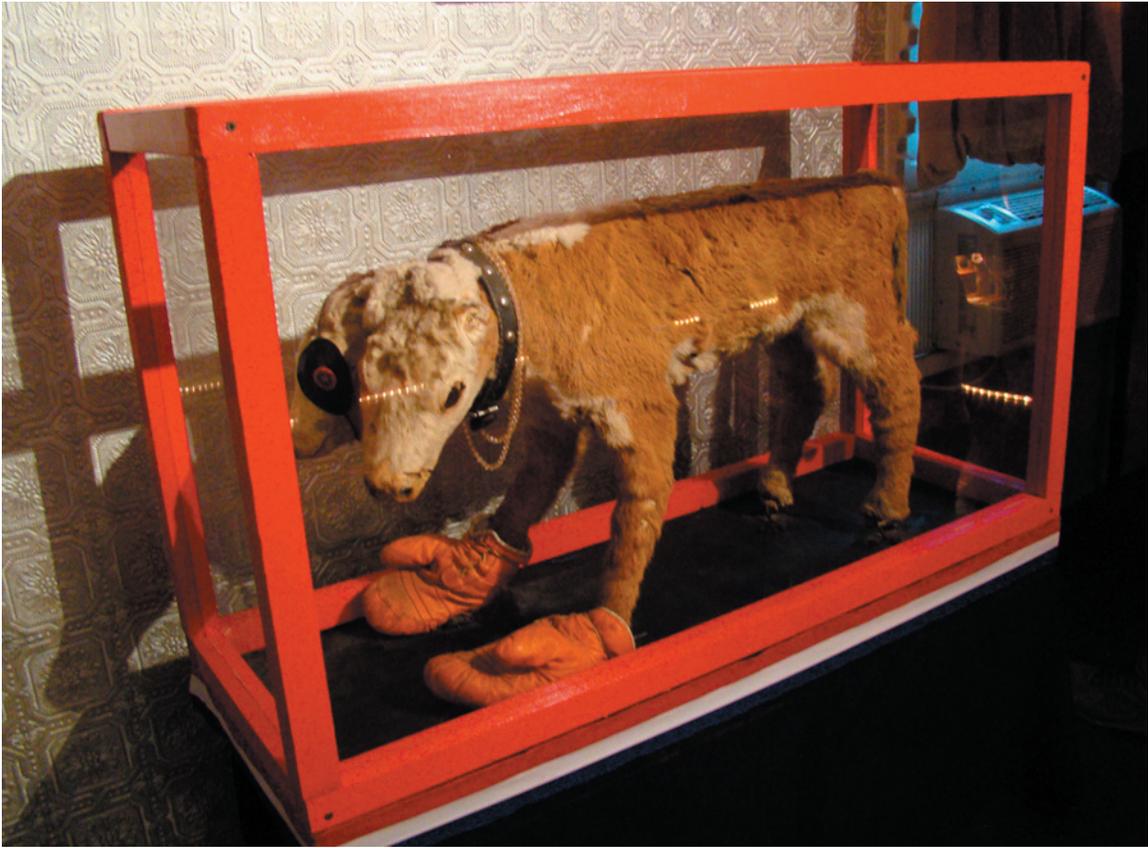
We set out to breath life into this pathological compulsion by demonstrating how collecting is not the end, but *just the beginning* of peculiar life processes. MNAE dreamily materializes a living museum, a superorganism that displays the ongoing vivacity of individual objects in various states of decadence and obsolescence. The strange life of museum objects amounts to their slow decay. As ecological habitats, taxidermy are potentially home and food to rodents, skin beetles, silverfish, and dust mites. The displays lurking in museums might not creep around at night, but they long to be seen, to hear their many stories, or maybe to burn, or dissolve in water, or to be *used* again. Things standing in for a lost past await their unformed futures, for their recognition or veneration as *alive*. (How can you forget treadle-powered sewing machines, hand drills, and other muscle-

powered contraptions!) Dwelling safe behind glass, the displays pull forth endlessly fresh wonder and curiosity from their beholders. They call down a free-floating immaterial haze of stories, as sure as iron filings are attracted to magnets, or toads and dragonflies to flowing water. All of the stories, fragments of time, and ghosts cross-contaminate in a rich, bubbling ferment.

MNAE's Kombucha Research Station literalizes this theme of a living museum-in-ferment. Visitors can see and smell tea, sugar, and a symbiotic culture of yeast and bacteria fermenting in big glass jars. The Museum's sterile environment makes a perfect habitat for controlling contagion by rogue molds. Originating in Siberia and Mongolia, cultural practices of tending kombucha cultures have carried on so long that the symbiotic organism went extinct in the natural environment (beyond the human realm) and can only survive inside civilizations. When we drink kombucha, microorganisms colonize our digestive tracts, so the Museum literally lives inside of us! Kombucha enthusiasts contact us to get starter cultures, and learn about the Museum on the side. In this manner, MNAE's displays colonize other people's houses and bodies by way of kombucha cultures, reversing the usual flow of other people's things into the "impermanent collection."

This lively flow keeps even shredded taxidermy in circulation. In the backrooms of New York's American Museum of Natural History, dead flamingos preserved with mercury around 1900 faded away as more life-like and safely preserved dead flamingos took their place. One day Barrett Klein found a pair of legs and a head with curved leathery beak and metal pole neck popping out of the dumpster. Barrett was fabricating painted toads from molds for the Hall of Biodiversity. As an entomologist, he has a large collection of preserved bugs and other naturalia, and saved the head for posterity. Wouldn't you? The head has been on display at MNAE since appearing in "Crystallization & Drift" (but the legs are lost in the Fresh Kills landfill). Time progressively shreds up whole objects into ever-smaller pieces, approaching the scale of dust.

Such was the fate of Patches the Double-headed Calf before being salvaged by 999 Eyes. The freakshow's founders Samantha X, Dylan Blackthorn, and h.e.a Burns stumbled on Patches rotting away in the trailer of retired sideshow proprietor Bobby Reynolds. Rats



Patches.

had dined on Patches' hooves and chewed out the stitches around one eye. Reynolds passed Patches on to a new generation of sideshow folk, bringing the old display out of retirement and back into circulation in the Museum ov Mutantstrosities. Patches new home was rat free, but life on the road was wearing the old cow down. When 999 Eyes loaned us this venerable oddity for "Monstrosities," we built the double-headed calf a portable box with Plexiglas sides. Patches' long and dreamy ab-life rolls on, preserved by the urge to collect and display peculiarity!



“... that planless hodge-podge, that thing of shreds and patches called civilization...”

– Robert H. Lowie (1920:441)

Clearly, a willing surrealist/dadaist/fluxus derangement of logic and desire animates MNAE, opening onto edutaining vistas of discombobulation! Wherever we saw a line (like that between life and death, or our collections and our visitors?), we tried to blur it. We trust in intuition and a cultivated faith in the unintended outcomes of emergence to pull us through. Also a love of the imperfect, the amateur, the makeshift, the “definitively unfinished” (as Marcel Duchamp said of “The Large Glass”). An important part of this process involves trying to get out of the way. Both in the research we do for themed exhibitions and in the story of MNAE’s development, we’ve actively tried to *not pin anything down* in addition to unpinning a lot of things supposedly settled and clear or based in common sense. The goal is to get lost in a territory that was supposedly all mapped out.

We never know what will happen when themes start collecting – what assembles by casting nets or weaving nests so that a certain kind of being or relational dynamic can manifest? In what other worlds will we find ourselves? Will-o-the-wisps ask, can you build us a way to become sensory? We patch a Pepper’s Ghost illusion into the Museum. Once they had materialized, it seemed that ghosts had always haunted MNAE – an immaterial haze of memories and stories hovering over our dusty displays. The questionability of ghosts’ very existence calls up the old dime museum dubiousness – real or not? Animals and machines blur together as technoculture increasingly treats one as the other, or both as design components that can be planned into larger systems. Themes flash up at gargantuan proportions, guiding us through congealing landscapes expressed in discrete narrative objects.

Themes themselves begin to pile up. With each new one, more dynamics and beings move into MNAE for good. They inhabit the “impermanent collection” in ever-denser relations, packing the walls in panorama, developing surprising connections we could never

have planned. At the same time, themed exhibitions are brief and vulnerable: guidebooks and some photos on our website are all that remains, incomplete documentation of all the stories and displays magnetized by the theme. At best, the guidebooks write themselves out of visitors' stories and loaned objects – a desire to facilitate emergent composition, a drift methodology whereby the *-graphy* of others does all the writing.

Over the years, the supertheme of “ecology” has come to light as a powerful attractor – not something that would work for an in-home exhibition, because it has become MNAE’s overarching habitat. That is how MNAE came to be surrounded by Ephemera Gardens – a quarter-acre landscape patch with displays like greywater ponds, kitty litter compost, and myriad exotic and native plant species. We graft fragments of other Austin yards into Ephemera Gardens through flows of things – windows, doll heads, morning glory – and practices – building junkitecture, cultivating tiny wetlands, excavating rain catches, making soil. Too enveloping to be stuffed inside the museum, an “ecology” themed exhibition jumps to the scale of a city. Welcome to the city of living garbage, where you have been all along!

## THE CITY OF LIVING GARBAGE

Ecologists follow embodiments of energy, information, water, animals, pollutants, and other flows through crazy quilts of “patchy landscapes” (Odum 1993:54). Patches are cultivated, fragmented, or abandoned places on the Earth’s surface that ecological thinking nests together in order to understand how flows cross relevant scales and give rise to emergent phenomena (Grimm et. al 2000:579). Along these lines, this “ecology” themed exhibition tracks habits of compulsive creativity and collecting, biophilic desires to regenerate the city’s landscapes and become surrounded by life forms, and post-apocalyptic responses to Anthropocene threats. These affective flows give rise to emergent phenomena like art yards, permaculture systems, and organic urban gardens. These places seek to preserve relationships and processes, rather than static *things*. This puts them at odds with institutionalized modes of preservation or restoration that aim at *not* letting places change, but also with economies of cultural development that produce things with price tags. As an alternative, these semi-public houses have taken access to valueless but bountiful urban wastestreams as the positive condition around which they form. By improvising with natural and artificial waste – never letting things remain what they were supposed to be – these landscape patches have become dream houses of the transhuman collective. Greenhouses, incubating urban natures!

The places we’re drifting through are green minded (reduce/reuse/recycle). Some have been made as works of art, or to demonstrate modes of sustainability, or to preserve cherished life forms. The act of assembling the places slows down time and expands space in magical ways. These places hanker for an inhabitable urban future, and they use aesthetics to make it. They are immersive environments in which human builders have settled into practicing a constant emergence of a landscape by refraining parts of the city’s

**Garbage:** a vast cultural category of entropic things, decomposing forms, and abjections. They have crossed the threshold of being discrete objects or entities. Valueless, no longer owned. Broken machines, shattered toys. Metabolic byproducts: urine, feces, and other biohazards. Moldy, melted vegetables. *Dust* as the ultimate steady-state attractor, where bodies blend together. Garbage is a dangerous and valuable substance, riotous with threats and promises, that cities try to regulate or vanquish. Toilets and trashcans suck it out of existence – someone else’s problem!

constant flow to the landfill. They are enchanted ecologies in which people facilitate the process of building, salvaging, and caring for places, but tourists, plants, animals, ghosts, and machines do their own home-making independent of the yardist's will and intention. An improvisational aesthetic infuses these environments with a restless, ongoing experiment with the ordinary that verges on utopian worlds, fantasylands. These yards are embodied dreams, and we are going to loiter in them.

Like South Street in Philadelphia, the city of living garbage inhabits a dream of junk art environments seeping out of confinement and taking over the city. Isaiah Zagar moved to South Street in 1968 and began what became an ongoing lifelong project to *mosaic everything* – first walls of alleys, then entire buildings. Zagar stockpiles ceramic shards of all kinds, then composes mosaic out of the beautiful fragments. Each fragment resolves into a busy composition at the scale of the mosaic, and then up a scale to the city itself – a mosaic of mosaics. Zagar writes on some of the tiles, and signs pop out of the



Magic Gardens.

swirling fragments: “art is the center of the real world,” names of jazz musicians or the builders of art environments. Body parts and mirrors dance across the surfaces. At Zagar’s Magic Gardens, a vacant lot transformed into a multilevel labyrinth, mosaic stairs take you down into an underworld. Zagar talks like a quack ecologist: “No one can predict where art will emerge. It’s like a mushroom, with roots that extend for miles and miles underground, unseen. If the climactic conditions are right, the fruit will emerge.” It might emerge without recognition as aesthetic, in the sculptures of monk parrot nests, jerry-rigged home plumbing, or the decompositions of compost heaps. In the city of living garbage, art is an aspect of ecology, and vice versa. When acts of survival become expressive, no one can predict what will emerge!

## DIYSNEYLANDS

Around the time Jen and I reopened the Museum in Tucson, we visited the Valley of the Moon on the outskirts of town. In the 1920s, George Phar Legler, a postman who raised rabbits on his land, built up hillocks of desert plants, foothills clustered with little fairy and gnome houses made of smooth river stones. A little dirt path through the miniature town leads to the Wizard's Tower, BunnyLand Theater, and the Enchanted Garden – a waterfall grotto with built-in seats. It opens into an underground house called the Cave Room that exits beneath a waterfall. Following his Spiritualist beliefs, Legler built the Valley of the Moon as a healing environment where people could go to rejuvenate their bodies and minds by exercising imagination. Every week he offered free guided tours – “Fairy Tours” that appealed to children's magical sensibilities and “Metaphysical Tours” that unpacked the mysteries of life to adults. After Disneyland was built in 1955, a reporter for the *Tucson Citizen* opined, “Should Disneyland cover the entire State of California, not one corner would speak to childhood as does this imperfect, perfect little theater” (George Phar Legler Society 2009). In the early 1970s some high school students found Legler, then in his 80s, living in the Cave Room, subsisting on vitamins and milk to appease his chronic stomach illness. The students' families adopted him and started the Valley of the Moon Restoration Association. Legler lived to 97, long enough to see his lifelong project listed on the Arizona Register of Historic Places and preserved by an association that would care for his environment into the future.

The Valley of the Moon's enchanted concrete structures recycled the fantasy architectures built on the estates of privileged Europeans. Elites of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century built grottos of ferns and fake stalactites, as well as landscapes dotted with follies – artificial ruins overgrown with plants, inhabited by gentle fauna. Aristocrats delivered tours of their estates and curiosity cabinets to visiting dignitaries – performances of power, of owning the whole world. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, these microcosms had broken away from the realm of the rich to become mass leisure spaces – Coney Island's parks, Disneyland, and a slew of knock-offs, second-rate theme parks, and seedy roadside attractions. Aristocratic fantasy forms also drifted into the yards of people like Legler, possessed by some vision of

an other world that manifested in gradual accretions of concrete and masonry work where fairies could live.

In *Gardens of Revelation: Environments by Visionary Artists*, John Beardsley makes the case that such “visionary environments represent a survival in popular culture of a form long out of favor in the institutional world” – the cabinet of curiosities (1995: 19). Some visionary environments (like Tinkertown outside Albuquerque, or the Orange Show in Houston) are built as mini-museums, while others cobble together and embed collections of wondrous objects into the environments themselves. “Survival” points to how Beardsley sees curiosity cabinets as genealogical origins in a line of cultural forms that went extinct as far as institutionalized collections are concerned, but that still survive in vernacular patches. In 19<sup>th</sup> century anthropology and folklore, “survivals” were cultural forms that should have been wiped out with industrialization and rational thinking, but that still existed among backwards peasants and uncivilized cultures as shreds of the past – living fossils that never went extinct (Stocking 1991: 164-78). The old practices and forms barely surviving civilization could be salvaged and preserved by folklorists and anthropologists (often driven by intense concern to save something unique from disappearing forever). They were seldom seen as survival tactics in themselves, struggles to recover ways of life from being trampled under a march of progress into a future that deemed them obsolete.

Beardsley continues, “both gardens of revelation and Disneyland involve entering another world” (1995: 19). In tours of the “impermanent collection,” we flow from *Wunderkammern* to dime museums and Coney Island, implying that the qualities of curiosity cabinets survive in amusement parks of all kinds. But for Beardsley, the overly-simulated, nostalgic, and sanitized environments of themed spaces rob the imagination by replacing local culture with corporate schlock. Disney worlds avoid and repress the countercultural sensibilities expressed in visionary art environments. Theme parks exist to profit off fantasy, whereas visionary environments exist regardless of money. As Tressa Prisbrey says of her Bottle Village, “Anyone can do anything with a million dollars – look at Disney. But it takes more than money to make something out of nothing, and look at the fun I have doing it” (quoted in Beardsley 1995: 7). Beardsley sets up Disneyfied spaces as

the anti-gardens of revelation.

But the well-funded tinkering of Imagineers directly inspires some homemade projects. As one Do-It-Yourselfer enthusiastically proclaims on his “how to” website, “You, too, can have the best of Disneyland in your own backyard. After all, Disneyland was essentially Walt’s backyard” (Shaw 2010). The Orange Show’s Jeff McKissack wanted his creation to rival Disneyland as a roadside attraction; he was in *competition*. In Hamtramck, Michigan, near Tyree Guyton’s Heidelberg Project, Dmytro Szylak started making his “Ukrainian Disneyland” on the roof of his two garages after retiring from the General Motors factory. At the Museum, we’ve deployed Disney tactics like hiding fences in plain sight, camouflaged as décor. Our Pepper’s Ghost illusion was partly inspired by the Haunted Mansion’s ballroom scene of transparent dancing ghouls. Rather than being the opposite of *bad Disneyland*, some vernacular environments consciously adopt the park’s aesthetics and tactics with admiration (albeit without the massive funding).

Such places are Do-It-Yourself amusement parks – DIYsneylands – created not to make money, but because habitats for dreams are wonderful places to call home. The immersive process of *making* them is better than *being* in any theme park on earth (not to mention, free). They become something to live for and belong to, a relationship of creativity, care, and upkeep that brings an inhabitable future into being at the humble scale of a small patch. They let you become a character in the landscape. They might attract tourists, and entertaining the visitors becomes another adventure. Once ‘discovered’ by popular/institutional/mainstream culture, things can change for the better or worse. Being made public can vault their makers out of their houses, into the official art world of gallery shows. Or ruin their privacy and make them want to tear it all down. Or threaten them with code violations and the dreaded bulldozer. Or it doesn’t matter and they keep on tinkering like nothing happened. Above all, what is happening in DIYsneylands is *play*, a kind of affective labor that immerses the players in a layered environment that is at once ecological, aesthetic, historic, without any of those layers being “the point.”

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The terms “amateur/outsider/folk/vernacular/visionary/self-taught/etc. art” try to categorize *categorical breakdown*. Institutional/dominant/official cultural discourses bifurcate aesthetic forms into an inside/outside of high art and low, and then scramble to incorporate things that fell outside. High art opens up a thirst for rawer expression, untainted by the knowing formalism of trained painters or sculptors. Some scholars and preservationists make careers out of bringing what was excluded into the fold. Their roving curiosity, longing for novelty, and desire to escape art genres’ limits pull local peculiarities into wider circulation. Regarding ‘vernacular art’ and how it has been reframed as a self-evident but still unfixing thing in art history and collecting – surprising it has the coherency it does, while the other vernacular practices of writing, gardening, carpentry, engineering, healing, etc. that compose the art environments lack special status as ‘visionary.’ Why haven’t the creators of these places been touted as *vernacular ecologists* or *self-taught group therapists*? Why does ‘art’ always trump the other things these people know how to do? Perhaps the DIY explosion stimulated by Make magazine, Home Depot, and the like is part of the same flurry of creative activity by self-taught or amateur people, without being unique or traditional enough to have the self-evident aesthetic gleam that catches art collectors’ eyes. Too commoditized.

Yard art environments are generally viewed as large-scale forms of folk art that express refined aesthetic and technical abilities rooted in class, ethnic, and religious identities, instead of the economically and academically established world of fine arts. Jill Nokes sidesteps this usual framing of ‘vernacular art’ by approaching such places as “vernacular landscapes” (2008:3). ‘Vernacular’ indexes amateur, self-taught, indigenous, or local forms, practices, and knowledges (as opposed to, say, invasive forms, standard practices, or expert knowledges). Nokes traveled Texas searching for peculiar homes and gardens transformed by their inhabitants into “powerful [gestures] of hospitality and sociability” that convey “the story of a person’s life” (2008:5, 13). She focuses on what vernacular landscapes mean to their creators, but how do these landscapes *work* as urban ecosystems? How do these patches compose the landscape of a city of living garbage? Some of the art yards in Nokes’ book operate as vernacular forms of urban ecological

restoration. They transform urban wastestreams into wildlife habitats, impact hydrological cycles through backyard patches, and as community gathering places, act as informal educational institutions. These patch dynamics are not planned so much as emergent.

Whatever you want to call them, and whatever these places do and don't have in common, the cultural form of otherworldly yards and houses has proliferated in hundreds of sites across America: some big, some small; some young, some decrepit; some well known, others as yet 'undiscovered.' There seem to be as many books, magazines, websites, and online galleries about these places as there are places. Self-taught photographers go on pilgrimages to see the work of self-taught artists and architects. Fans of these places make a life out of visiting them on roadtrips. I'm ready to retire, get an RV, and hit the road myself. Of course, being discovered and catalogued brings the people behind the places in touch, and some become extremely knowledgeable about their fellow art environments. They get caught in a spiderweb thrown across roadside America, trapping unwitting passers-by in DIYsneylands similar to something they've experienced before, but not as perfectly storybook and fastidiously engineered by teams of experts. These dream habitats are not as permanent as Disney's sturdy, constantly repaired facades, and much smaller – a city block or house lot. Not quite as sprawling as zoos, botanical gardens, or restored and preserved ecologies you may have visited, and not nearly as heavily monitored, but overgrown and crowded with plants and animals nonetheless. And most remarkably, made of cast-offs, bric-a-brac, junk no one else would touch. A million wandering forms of life gather and find a common home. As the venerable Reverend Howard Finster put it on a hand-painted sign of blocky letters in his legendary environment, Paradise Garden:

I TOOK THE PIECES YOU  
THREW AWAY AND PUT THEM  
TOGETHER NIGHT AND DAY,  
WASHED BY RAIN, DRIED BY SUN,  
A MILLION PIECES ALL IN ONE.

## THE CATHEDRAL OF JUNK

Arrayed up the inner tower of the Throne Room are all the controls and knobs and wires that make up the instrument panel of a crashed spaceship. It was delivering seeds, roots, water, toxic waste, and microorganisms to some other world but got lost along the way. This happened eleven thousand years ago, around the start of the Neocene, and the site of the Cathedral of Junk was ground zero: *Crash!*

For every piece of junk absorbed by the Cathedral's chaoststructure, a piece is wired out of Planet Landfill. It's an apocalyptic civilizational meltdown assembled into DIYSneyland, a *feng shui* junkscape coagulating out of trash and car crashes scavenged from the highways of Roadside America. A rusty grotto, a folly of an abandoned skyscraper! Yesterday's industrial progress transformed into tomorrow's wildlife preserve! Vince Hannemann grows this restorative landscape intuitively, aligned with magnetic north, with trees, rain flow, and the lay of the backyard in mind. People pop in on this utopian park, while plants and animals call it home. Although the Cathedral is never anything close to 'finished,' as a sacred



(Photo by Vince Hannemann 2007)

house it preserves both the junk it's made of and the tinkering process itself, the ways of life and improvisation Vince never wants to end. The house is very porous, open to the sky, weather, and cosmos. At the same time it makes a microclimate; its atmosphere is palpably different from the rest of Austin, a few degrees cooler in summer and warmer in winter. Somehow, more space is crammed into the Cathedral's intestinal folds than the yard could possibly hold. It takes its own time and makes its own space.

Anything and everything accumulates in here. Twenty years of Austin sloughing off parts, clotted into a hallowed landscape and garbology archive. Sometimes Vince hints at caches of money and buried treasure, but the Cathedral's value is itself, its form that engulfs you and digests time. Through play, it gives home to the possibility that we can treat the City's wastestream as if it were sacred, some kind of bountiful second nature. Walk into the cavern of rusty metals, plastics degrading in the sun, through halls of parts salvaged from housing teardowns. A fun jumble of leisure trash like TV tubes, bowling balls, tennis trophies, and skis. Traces of trauma like crutches and casts on display after miraculous healings. Relics of road rage, hubcaps and dented bumpers and mangled highway signs. Bicycles galore, beloved spokes and frames given a worthy resting place. Circuit boards and copper wires surge with noninformation, charged with electricity leaking from strings of lights woven into a luminous nervous system. As a crashed spaceship, the Cathedral needs the whole world on board, an ark of trashed technologies that come alive as patchy habitat. First bailing wire binds the puzzled-together junk. Then thick vines of creeping roses flow between the cracks, cementing objects with biomass. Wood and wires conduct currents of water and stray electricity that feed the Cathedral's living form. The whole thing trembles gently in the moonlight like a tidal system, datura blooming all around.

Think of Vince as part of the Cathedral. Characters belong to landscapes. He bought the house (and the Cathedral that had grown to dwarf it) in 2007, but this land really owns him. Like a runaway parasitic infection, the chaoststructure's used his life to build a life of its own. He's become a caretaker/cultivar of a semi-public park, open seven days a week, that's been toured by a million or more people from all over the world – around ten thousand visitors a year. Vince affectionately calls them “*touristas*,” forever in search

of exotic landscapes and quaint little worlds. Now junk appears in the driveway. Beloved machines people can't bear to relegate to the dump... belongings of recently deceased loved ones... you name it ... entombed in a mausoleum. Memories attached to things decay alongside the objects' forms. Junk needs Vince to tease out embodied memories in stories. He makes up or tells tales in improvised tours. I get the feeling junk talks *through* him. Every visit, you hear something different, but the *touristas'* questions are always the same: *How long did it take? Is it art?* And most of all, *WHY?*

Answers vary according to mood. Normally it's "for fun," but sometimes the truth slips out. Vince told a German film crew he's possessed by aliens who are getting him to build their spaceship – *and more of these aliens are on the way*. There will be more Vinces, more junkitects, yardists, and weirdos as the extraterrestrial virus infects new hosts. Maybe they've already started building. In this version of "why," yardists are just alien junk's way to escape landfills; trash is using us to build fancy habitats. An art environment is a classy necropolis, a mansion for living garbage. One day the crashed spaceship will resonate with earth energy and blast off, escaping our catastrophic era.

Telling this fantastical truth is Vince's way to eschew pinning down the Cathedral as anything but itself – an explanation from within the logic of carnival freedom. No green-minded saving of the world through repurposing and landfill reduction, although the Cathedral has much to teach about creative recycling. Calling it "art" doesn't add anything, although Vince's yard sums up the quirky aesthetic the City markets by refraining "Keep Austin Weird." It has illustrated a month in the City's souvenir calendar. This landscape precisely overlaps Austin's dreams of using creativity and sustainability as the means of making a living. But Vince insists on playing with junk for its own ends, and just seeing what happens next. Part of what happened is that the relationship between Vince and the Cathedral became a kind of play-therapy – a way to use up excess energy through hauling, a way to exhaust your jittery self, burn off anger, keep your mind off bad habits that need kicking. As an impromptu form of ecological restoration the Cathedral also became a therapy for a small patch of south Austin's urbanized landscape, regenerating life in the yard.

Some visitors pick up on these therapeutic qualities and encounter the Cathedral as

a *healing machine*, a deeply peaceful place resonant with mysterious energy. For around thirty years, Emory Blagdon experimented with what he dubbed the Healing Machine in a dirt-floored workshop on the family farm in Nebraska. Live currents of electricity charged intricate assemblages cluttering the room: hundreds of scrap wire mobiles, geometric paintings stacked like voltaic battery cells, and jars of chemical elements that toned the electricity with particular healing qualities. Visitors could sense “a tickling in your hair ... like electricity going through you; you could *feel* it” (quoted in Umberger 2007). Some described the spatial warping peculiar to this “panorama – even though it was a small room – it looked like a vast panorama.”<sup>3</sup> Others experienced an atmosphere as different as water is from air: “you must adjust from the terrestrial to the underwater silence, light; the shock of entering another realm.” In 1986, Blagdon died of cancer that had gone undiagnosed for ten years. Art preservationists working under the Kohler Foundation disassembled the Healing Machine from the workshop, uprooting the interconnected mobiles and paintings to climate-controlled storage and occasional exhibition in a gallery. Other parts were sold to collectors. Outsider art historian Leslie Umberger recognizes that the Machine’s components “were not meant to be gazed at or contemplated – they were meant to function.” The emergent powers of the atmosphere did not emanate from any particular part. Now that the disassembled fragments are frozen in time for future gazing and contemplation, can they still heal us?

**tension** | Objects embedded in concrete: a little plastic battleaxe, a cross-section of agate resembling an upside-down skull, a bathtub drain. None of the junk is what it seems. Vince points out how the drain holes line up in variously sized triangles of self-echoing Stars of David. “Carbon molecules link together that way, into triangles like that. It’s the structure that makes diamonds and geodesic domes so strong. Same with Bucky Balls and Nanotubes – it’s the natural structure in how carbon molecules hook together into triangles.” From there, he launches into water, surface tension, and bubbles. “Well, there’s

<sup>3</sup> Panoramas followed follies and grottoes as wraparound views of other worlds painted on canvases that surrounded viewers. The immersive effect was so realistic that early panorama tourists caught vertigo on stepping out of everyday life into monumental wilderness vistas or the chaos of historic battlefields (Oettermann 1997).

a *lot* going on in bubbles. They've found whole galaxies with the bubble shape – all the matter expanding like a surface kept together in tension around a big empty space.” These analogical structures replicate across scales, jumping between micro/macro without much difference in the working physics behind their compositions. They form around an emptiness at heart.

What keeps the Cathedral from falling apart? A little concrete and wire, and a lot of *tension* – the technique of building with gravity bubbles. Vince likes to tell how the rebar arabesques, bike frames, and other jetsam are “Chinese-puzzled” into place. It's a human-sized monk parakeet nest of rusty metal instead of sticks. This bubble's skin is tense; that's what makes it a bubble – irresolvable tension. Here tension is cultivated as an atmosphere (instead of something that bursts into violence). The Cathedral is a healing machine that surrounds you in the peaceful rest of gravity keeping things on earth.

The lively processes continually forming this environment are in tension with the institutions and philosophy of preservation itself. As Vince's friend and fellow yardist David Lee Pratt is fond of saying, “See, Vince's place is *alive*, and if he stops building, then it's *dead*. It's organic, like a reef or forest or something.” The place is tensely situated between life and death, haunted by junk ghosts. By being celebrated as a vernacular/self-taught/outsider/visionary art environment, the Cathedral is in tension with high art, art history and criticism, and whatever else sets itself up as official insider art. The transience and ambiguity of this experiential palace of living garbage is in tension with commodifiable art objects: the gift is not for sale, but donations are appreciated.

In tension, too, with regulations that govern how built environments should be. Like many other DIYsneylands, the Cathedral is vulnerable to urban standardizations. Even as the City trumpets the Cathedral as indexical of weirdness and creative recycling, it has threatened this improvised architecture as *not up to code*. Look at that huge junk pile – somebody call 311! City inspectors come around looking for standing water wriggling with mosquito larva, asking about permits for the port-a-potties in the side yard. Cops give warnings, then come back to visit with their kids. As a private home overwhelmed with public visitors, Vince gets complaints from neighbors about late night noise, cars parked

in front of their houses, and the like. But most of them love him. Something draws them to the Cathedral, where tension is used to vault junk towers into the sky.

These tense towers have sprouted up at other times, in other cities. As a kid, Vince saw a TV show about Simon Rodia's Watts Towers, and knew one day he would build something like that. An Italian immigrant brick mason, Rodia spent thirty years collecting broken tiles and ceramics, shells, and more to encrust soaring latticeworks of salvaged pipes and rebar with mosaics. One day in 1954 he just walked away from it all, abandoning the place to vandals, arsonists, and thermodynamics. Los Angeles condemned the spires and planned on tearing them down, but in 1959, art preservation activists bought the property and lobbied to preserve the Towers. By 1978, L.A., postmodern city of Disneyland and Hollywood, had preserved Watts Towers as a state park. Now the place is touted as the quintessential American folk art environment.

Inspired by Rodia and others, Vince started making art environments in New Mexico (left to their desert fates), then began "Yard Space 11" in his rented south Austin backyard in 1989. First it was hubcaps on the fence and shopping carts full of glass bottles. Then he agglomerated a sort of gazebo out of junk salvaged while working at Ecology Action, an early Austin recycling center. Pillars bubbled over with a dome of circuitboards, AOL CDs, and bright plastics like stained glass. Soon the garbage amoeba sprouted a staircase and towers and ponds. In 1992 someone asked what it's called and Vince threw out the name that stuck. Naming the place somehow made it public, and random people started dropping by. Against any churchly authority, it became a nondenominational sacred space. Ask Vince which God is worshiped there and he usually says "Your God." Along these lines, the Cathedral is your kind of art and your kind of garden. Vince doesn't help people decide what the place is, because its refrains aren't composed of his words or intentions; the way it engulfs you stands for nothing and speaks for itself. Like love, the Cathedral is a not a thing or idea, but a fluid way of inhabiting relationships or becoming part of something – both a reason and a way to stay alive.

**perfection** | As a teenager Vince worked at a pine farm in Idaho, making perfect Christmas trees. “It was all poor white boys working – there’re so few jobs up there, but not too much migrant labor. We’d all pile in the back of a pickup and go out to row after row after row of trees. Our job was to cut them to shape – that Christmas tree shape is *really* unnatural. We’d get machetes and walk right down the row, hacking at that Christmas tree angle. When this arm got tired I’d switch to this one ‘til it got tired too, then switch back. The boss said ‘Pretend you’re a machine,’ which was bad enough, but then he’d *race* us. He’d line us up at the rows of trees and see who got to the other end first. Of course there wasn’t any prize. Just endless rows of trees, rain, and sticky pinesap all over you.” These Herculean performances of masculine labor and becoming a machine seem to have stuck to Vince, who single-handedly builds the Cathedral, mysteriously hoisting a satellite dish to the third floor, shifting endless tons of metal around the yard.

Vince has made a living remodeling houses and working graveyard shift at a hopsice, but prefers tree trimming, landscaping, or masonry work. “With houses you have to get things lined up square and perfect. Me and perfect don’t go together. That’s why I like masonry – there’s no such thing as a perfect rock.” He built decks and patios part of the year and opened up the Cathedral on weekends. Then Bank of America booked his yard as a set for a commercial about savings accounts. They rented special junk like old bikes and typewriters and filmed Vince picking through it with the Cathedral as backdrop. The director kept yelling, “I need better junk! Bring out better junk!” Vince didn’t get to keep the outfit they dressed him in, or the better junk. But when the commercial aired all over America, the Bank started sending him royalty checks for every time he appeared on TV. With the windfall he stopped most of his masonry and landscaping work and opened the Cathedral six days a week. People drop donations in the box, sometimes rent the yard for parties or music events, and Vince sells t-shirts, bumper stickers, and wire chicken sculptures. Now that the checks have stopped coming, time to get back to odd jobs.

**learn your worth** | Like the Bank of America windfall, sometimes the Cathedral spontaneously attracts money and materials. One rainy spring the City rented the Cathedral

to celebrate signing an environmental bill about recycling. They thought it was the perfect readymade spot for the event. City people asked about spreading cedar mulch over the muddy paths. “How much should we get?” “I don’t know – you’re the ones who want mulch. So they delivered not just a dump truck full, but one of those *long* trailers. Even after helpers came over and spread it around, the pile looked untouched. I finally finished giving the last of it away just the other day.” He fed a lot of it to the Bamboo Mountain that will serve as a wheelchair ramp across a bridge to the Cathedral’s second level. Vince jokes, with characteristic political incorrectness, “People in wheelchairs need to get high, too!”

The woman who organized the City bill signing party critiqued Vince’s approach to money and (not) selling the Cathedral experience. “You need to learn your worth!” Monetize, get organized! Make a chart of rental fees for hosting different kinds of events. Have a standard head price to enter DIYSneyland (not just a sign reading “YOUR DONATION KEEPS THE CATHEDRAL OPEN AND FREE”). Imagine the conversation:

“How much to rent the Cathedral?”

“Oh, I don’t know. A couple hundred?”

“Don’t you have a set fee?”

“Mmm, no. Just – whatever. Make me an offer.”

“...would 400 dollars be okay?”

“Sure!” When they offered twice what he was thinking, Vince wondered, “What’s that say about me and my worth?”

When Vince decided to buy the house and property he had been renting, administrators from the Orange Show Foundation in Houston helped navigate the lawyerly maze of paperwork. As caretakers of the Orange Show and the Beer Can House, they are aficionados on yard art environments, experts in planning and funding their preservation and organizing cultural events like Houston’s annual Art Car Parade. After visiting the Cathedral, Vince brought them to “The Professor’s” house – so nick-named because he professes long ad lib lectures on Egyptology, spinning stones carved by Paleolithic people, the sun’s coronal eye... Both the Professor’s yard and house interior had been swallowed

up by thousands of rocks collected along the railroad tracks for a decade or so. Each rock is an archaeological relic that deserves preservation. But the Orange Show is on Vince's blacklist now. "It's the director. She sends out this newsletter saying she's moving on to another *career*. 'I've been the director of the Orange Show for twenty years, it's been so great, blah blah blah, but now I'm moving on.' So who's blood you gonna suck now? These vampires never make anything of their own but just feed off dead artists. It's like the Orange Show can't *wait* for me to die so they can step in and 'preserve the Cathedral.' Plus they got the Art Car Parade sponsored by *Penzoil* this year! I know you guys get money from the City, which I don't really understand either."

Valuing self-reliance and serendipity, Vince is puzzled why creative people would ally with parasites, but tries to be accepting anyway. For him, the realms of City money, preservation foundations, and the like are distasteful, even deadly, arenas. Independence is worth so much more – not needing to explain or justify creativity to bland market forces, not needing to analyze play. No paperwork. No need to interact with vampires who live off starving artists. Creative forces should only answer to themselves. Contorting these forces into marketable forms kick-starts Vince's "fight or flight" instincts. He runs back into the Cathedral's many nooks, where parasites can't follow. If they try, there's always bug bombs.

***regeneration*** | Around the time Vince saw the Watts Towers on TV, he dreamed of building a cloud chamber for a science fair. These chambers make visible the paths of radioactive isotopes from outer space as the particles ionize the super-cooled, water-saturated air inside. You see something like glowing spider webs as invisible cosmic dust crashes through our world. Vince couldn't make the cloud chamber, since it requires a little piece of radioactive material that he could never get a hold of (lest he was a child terrorist).

Although never planned as such, the Cathedral functions as a different kind of cloud chamber: a vapor condenser, or an *air well*. The best air well design would be composed of salvage bowling balls – say a thousand – piled into a pyramid over a cistern. At night, as moist air passes through the spaces between spheres, it dewes up and starts dripping.

Dewdrops at the top glide down, accumulating more vapor on the way, until they collect in the catch. The Cathedral might not be as efficient an air well as a pile of bowling balls, and it has no catch besides the earth itself, but the ivies, roses, tepin peppers, morning glories, datura, lambs' quarters, and other plants growing inside, up, and around the structure thrive on its air well water. Vince supplements his garden's hydration needs with water caught in 55-gallon drums off the house's roof, and multiple ponds catch water as well.

The Cathedral is built out of landfill, but also *on* one. Before Vince's neighborhood was developed and his house built, a creek ran through the backyard. The yard was made level by filling it in with rocky dirt, making the rain rush right on through. Vince has slowly reworked the landscape to restore its capacity to slow down and retain runoff. Over the years he has dug down through the fill, adding it to the Bamboo Mountain of railroad ties, broken palettes, and decomposing mulch held together with gravity and bamboo roots. The resulting bowls of earth integrate a stormwater surge system into the landscape by offering rain and runoff the chance to soak into the roots of a two hundred year old Live Oak. Through a combination of intentional catches and the unanticipated air well, the Cathedral restores urban hydrological functions at a backyard scale.

Likewise, the Cathedral works as a form of ecological regeneration by remediating a small portion of landfill into a National Wildlife Federation-certified habitat. Rather than restoring the yard to a prior state of nature, the Cathedral's aesthetic play makes a *potential* state of urban natures by lovingly localizing flows of commodities that have come home to Austin. Enchanted with the Cathedral's role in providing refugia to urban wildlife, Vince always has a story about the art environment's myriad nonhuman visitors. The Cathedral is a dense, porous thicket that shelters bird nests, snake burrows, insect nooks, and crannies for anoles. Up above, giant dragonflies circle the blue, as if the yard had time-travelled to a post-warming globe of hothouse Jurassic insects. Seasonal visitors like migrating butterflies, finches, and hummingbirds count on this landscape patch for food. Toads depend on the ponds to incubate tadpoles. Honeybees and native pollinators crowd datura, four o'clocks, and other flowers blooming around the yard. Appreciating how the Cathedral had become a busy nonhuman city, Vince decided to certify his yard

with the NWF, but found the certification form ponderous. Which best describes your property? “Home, workplace, farm, park/community garden, school/educational setting, place of worship...” He lives, grows food, and works there; neighborhood kids use it as a park; it’s a place where you can’t help but learn something; and of course, it’s a Cathedral. The landscape’s surprising multiplicity of uses complements what it unveils about the possibilities of would-be landfills becoming art environments. Vince’s land now officially counts as one of the yard-shaped patches of “wildlife habitat” certified by the NWF. He hung the certification sign at the entrance to his backyard wilderness.

The Cathedral is a habitat for wildlife and tamelife alike. Vince saw the “RABBITS ARE BACK” sign at Longhorn Meat and told us how he had decided to raise rabbits and chickens to eat. He didn’t want to buy into the meat industry and its “slaves” anymore, and decided to kill his own meat. But then he looked in the rabbits’ eyes: “It took me a few seconds, then I knew I couldn’t do it.” Plus, as de facto teacher at an impromptu community center, “people are always coming by, and I couldn’t be out there sharpening my knives.” In a flash he went vegetarian. He built the rabbits a home out of scrap wood and chicken wire from a coop he tore down on his sister’s ranch. The combo coop/hutch layers rabbits and chickens in a condo that folds in on itself like a puzzle box, with sliding panels for easy egg access. *Touristas* like to see the little menagerie of rabbits and hens, and maybe get inspired to keep their own egg-laying, fertilizer-producing pets. The rabbits strike sweet poses and look into your eyes.

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In landscape ecology, restoration is a goal-oriented, managed, and monitored practice facilitated by experts whose aim is “ecological fidelity”: reproducing, in a durable manner, “compositional structure” (e.g., of native species interactions) and “biogeochemical function” (e.g., of watershed processes) to a benchmark state prior to human degradation (Higgs 1997: 343). Eric S. Higgs complicates restoration by calling attention to the cultural, aesthetic, political, and moral dynamics that drive restoration projects (1997: 345-6). Andrew Light advocates public participation in restoration projects such that the very *process* becomes “an opportunity to restore first, some bit of nature, second, the human

relationship to that bit of nature, and third, the cohesiveness of the community itself” (2005: 18). Higgs attention to the redemptive moral quality of restoration as an act that works through environmental guilt (1997: 342), and Light’s hope that people can become “ecological citizens” by being part of restoration projects (2005: 14-17), point beyond ecological restoration to affective restoration – regenerating landscapes as relational habitats (between the city and nonhumans; between different groups of people; between urban waste and nature) that invite unfolding and surprising futures. In affective restoration, the measurable, goal-oriented end state is subsumed within an emergent relationship whereby people begin to *belong to* landscapes through embodied, hands-on contact and open-ended learning: not acting *on* landscapes but *becoming with and through* them.<sup>4</sup>

As the Cathedral took on a life of its own, these processes of affective and ecological restoration began to emerge, converge, and proliferate. As a way of life, the landscape is simultaneously learning and teaching about itself. As a public gathering place, the Cathedral positions Vince as an informal teacher: “You’re always teaching *something* one way or another. People are learning here, and whatever you do, you’re teaching.” As an immersive environment densely layered with ecological and aesthetic processes, visitors potentially learn new modes of attention to urban wildlife and salvageable garbage – the capacity to see and be moved by backyard natures, the prospects of mini-farming, the endless possibilities in improvising with junk. Perhaps visiting the Cathedral sets in motion a commitment to creative recycling, or making your yard into a rain sponge like I learned to do from Vince. “Kids get it. They’re the best visitors – and what I’m *really* excited about is that the more of them that visit, the more things will come from the next generation.” Some kids leave with the desire to build their own forts or install all the toys they’ve gotten bored of in an art yard garden. Impressionable minds sop up the impromptu teaching, although exactly what’s being taught is very unclear. Vince displays thank you letters from schoolchildren who visited on fieldtrips, including kids from the School for the Blind who fearlessly climb

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<sup>4</sup> This sense of affect is drawn from Deleuze and Guattari’s extension of Spinoza’s thought. They are concerned with the question of preservation, not just of things, or the characters that sense them, but the preservation of sensation itself. “*Affects are precisely these nonhuman becomings ... We are not in the world, we become with the world; we become by contemplating it*” (1994: 169).

all over the outside of the Cathedral. Right at the age when children are learning that art is supposed to be preserved, that you can't climb on sculptures, that inanimate objects aren't alive, the Cathedral offers a counter-education. "Kids get that everything is alive. Trees and animals, but also the rocks and deadwood. It all has an aura you can *see*. It's all alive, so of *course* it's ephemeral!" Who knows how many backyards and minds now host budding junk habitats? This is how the alien symbiont spreads!

***decomposition*** | As one visitor put it, the Cathedral's accumulated form embodies "just a grain of sand in the beach of trash" perpetually generated by the City's constant decay. Structured clutter inversely mirrors the tangled mass of landfill trash, and at smaller scales of time and space – just a *moment's* worth of Austin's wastestream. The clutter gets to some people, as if they're looking at their own packrat closet. They feel panicked until they get out. The barrage of trash is so engulfing that the mind locks onto details – the Pillsbury Dough Boy, a rusty pewter ship, a tableaux of neon green alien toys dirtied and weathered by life outdoors. Details pull all kinds of memories out of *touristas*: "I had this toy growing up!" "Grandma used an iron like that." Details suck eyes into scanning the barrage of decaying junk like a flickering TV. The Cathedral is composed of details, but from afar resembles some monstrous fungal growth erupting from the ground. It looks like something an earthquake or bomb hit. As a crashed spaceship, it never comes together with a *snap* as an overall structure. Instead you have to see it like a forest, content with multiplicity standing in for singularity.

Sometimes people cry in the necropolis. All the free-floating memories haunt the objects in a miasma of loss and morning, and sensitive people tear up. Something specific melts memory, starts them crying. Or tears of joy and wonder get pulled forth by the ruin as a *tear well*, harvesting moisture from the emotional atmosphere. The Cathedral lives in a time that is *already over* and the end of the world is old news. Walking into the Cathedral is literally walking into yesterday's everyday, the domestic world of toys, gadgets, lawn furniture, *after* their mass-produced homeliness and novelty have been thrown out, ejected, abjected, disappeared – crashed and alien in today's world.

Alien time: post-apocalyptic Cathedral built a hundred years from now ... Neolithic spaceship wreckage ... a big waste of time, life spent tinkering and daydreaming and just seeing what happens next. The yard devours time and excretes experience. Hours fly by wandering the caverns and skywalks, watching sparrows dive into hidden nests and anoles clamber the meshworks. Afternoons disappear listening to Vince discourse on water sustainability or chemtrails slashed across the sky. People complain that as an artwork the Cathedral's "too ephemeral," both too exposed to decay and too involved in the artist's upkeep to stand alone. *Too much process*, not frozen in time like timeless art should be. But Vince knows the Cathedral will survive much longer than him, his wood house, his neighborhood, maybe even the City itself. Someday alien archaeologists will unearth the structure and make something of it. *Crashed spaceship? Trash worship? Localization mutation?* Meanwhile, if a two-megaton hydrogen bomb destroyed downtown Austin, the Cathedral would fare well, melting into an even more solidly fused mass.

***sensory theater*** | Without being anything but itself, the Cathedral is an open habitat – not only for plants and animals and defunct machines to live in, but also a venue for cultural events, an outdoor clubhouse for parties, concerts, plays, weddings, and whatever else. While Vince scoffs at aesthetic judgments that flatten out exactly *what* the Cathedral is, he's very open to how creative people use this sensory theater.

MNAE has done two events there – MachinesMimesis and the Séance of the Senses. These collaborations tapped the chaoststructure's humbling excess, its yearning for emergent symbioses, its calling forth of swarms of ideas and approaches. Different cavities and bubbles inside jump out for particular scenarios. The quality of *stages* crystallize, different hollows more suited for intimate tableaux or theatrical scenes. There isn't much to decide as it all falls together. The first event positioned musicians everywhere, enveloping *touristas* in a sonic miasma of loosely arranged songs about machines. We became technical parts of the Cathedral – its extensions as a music box. We tuned in to a phantom radio, channeling broadcasts from the technosphere. Hearing was the privileged sense, sounds you moved through as spaces, a harmolodic song forming around every step through the Cathedral as

the relations between individual instruments and rhythms endlessly changed. You got to be *inside* music instead of listening to it from a given point beyond.

With the Séance of the Senses, the Cathedral became a haunted house. The Séance manifested the ghosts of our atrophied abilities to feel, a sensory deprivation brought on by our habituation to TVs, computers, and antiseptic urban spaces like white walled square rooms and giant gray parking lots. Jen and I threw some sketchy ideas on the table – invoke all five senses through objects like *smelling bowls* or *touch tests* – and the eight people helping us brought them to life in unexpected ways, throwing together whatever was at hand. Cheyenne acted out her lifelong dream of making a suite of pizza armor. Chad A. installed a circuit-bent video title writer hooked to a TV, flickering random patterns in primary colors. Angeliska played the waterphone to reverberate the Throne Room. Vince had found some huge rectangles of canvas at a church and talked about turning them into a house of horrors. The next time we came by, he had assembled a doughnut-shaped hallway, a one-way loop. Like some kind of carnivorous plant, people were lured inside by a strobe light, and then eaten by all the bugs hanging from the ceiling in spider webs. He'd installed a TV playing *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, painted a sign with the movie's name above the doorway, and sometimes chased people out of there revving a chainsaw (belt removed so nobody could get chopped). Kids battered open a bat piñata – a relic of the Museum's "Animals" show. Senses become more attuned in eerie atmospheres and places of tension. The suspicion that something is about to happen, something's around that corner – this is the Cathedral's liveliness we sought to amplify. A tickling through your hair. You could *feel* it.

***ghost trails*** | A few resident ghosts haunt this wildlife habitat. There are the myriad memories in decomposing junk. A pyramid memorial behind the Cathedral honors a friend who committed suicide. Some of his ashes are inside. Rising above it, the spiral staircase leading to the third level catwalks and back tower marks where Vince saw three phantom woman in black. They floated right where the catwalk now crosses the void. Vince only saw them once after its construction, dressed in lapis blue and white. While preparing for the Séance, I prodded Vince about seeing ghosts. "You can train yourself to see them, but

it's hard. You have to stop trying, relax your eyes, and *maybe* it'll happen. There's no way to force it. I've seen all sorts of ghosts out of the corners of my eyes, but once I turn around, they're gone." Alongside birds and dragonflies, the sky above the Cathedral traffics in invisible or barely observable things. Vince has seen the Northern Lights from his backyard towers. It doesn't happen often, you have to know what you're looking for, and can only see it out of the corners of your eyes where more light receptors catch faint photons. Such things are barely sensible.

Chemtrails, on the other hand, leave noxious white slashes across the sky. Vince looks up and mutters "Those bastards! They're doing it again." Planes are flying overhead leaving a grid of criss-crossed fumes that stick around much longer than the run-of-the-mill atmospheric garbage of jet exhaust called 'contrails.' We've heard Museum visitors debate chemtrails at our parties: is this secret government project designed to lower our immune systems for mass extermination, or just to make American citizens even more apathetic and apolitical than we already are? People pick up this occult knowledge on the internet and talk radio shows like Art Bell, then pool their data while gathered at the Museum, the Cathedral, and other weird places. This ominous skywriting is connected to other nefarious conspiracies. Chemtrails might be dusting cities with bioengineered pathogens (like mycoplasma, the bug behind the Gulf War Syndrome) or microfilaments to be activated by some other weapons system (like ELF waves). One thing is certain: seeing and talking chemtrails solidifies a collective sense that something's wrong with earth's atmosphere. They're ghost trails, haunting our Anthropocene skies.

## THE PROFESSOR'S ROCKS AND WINDOWS

Some time around the Séance of the Senses, Vince brought me by the Professor's house – a south Austin old-timer who collects special rocks from the railroad tracks down the street. He likes old things and preserves them from oblivion. Over the decades a landslide accumulated: cairns in the yard, smothering steps and porch, covering the house's floor, stacked around the bed in a nest. Then the water heater burned a hole in the house's center. Rain soaked the sheetrock, which melted down on all the rocks below. The Professor was living on the back porch with his red dog surrounded by piles of stones. The porch overlooks a drained pond once full of tropical fish and water lilies. We went over to get some windows stacked against the house for forty years, salvaged from the University of Texas' Mary dormitory before its demolition. The Professor says they looked out on Town Lake before it was dammed, when a waterfall flowed where the pedestrian bridge now stands. He lives in and salvages fragments of this lost landscape, buried under the present. Traces of the past no one else wants or can see engulf the house, awaiting scavengers who can archive or make use of them. That is how dorm windows that looked out on the city that vanished came to peer in on the dream habitats of art yards.

Rock pile couch – geological territory – take a seat. We watch grackles dig for bugs in the ruined pond's roots while the Professor pours out stories in a creek talk of whirlpools, grabbing things from the rock pile to illustrate meandering lectures. He pulls animal bones and skulls from a black suitcase. "See how the antler was scraped away to make it balance? It's weighted to your hands. Put it around your neck. The Apache and Comanche who lived here must have used this as a tool." He shakes a piece of glass and a little bulbous stalactite from a pill bottle: "This is a piece of fulgurite, from lightning hitting sand. Lightning makes glass. And this calcite formation has been altered. Someone carved it into Ixchel, Mayan Goddess of the moon, who walks with a rabbit on her shoulder. You can see her when the moon is three-quarter's full, and the rabbit is very clear on her shoulder." Hanson earned the nickname Professor for this constant stream of learned discourse. But he thinks of himself as a smart aleck scholar, ready to deflate expert knowledge – all those experts who don't take his relics seriously.

According to Hanson, this neighborhood was one of the first spots in Austin colonized by the Spanish. They built a narrow-gauge railroad steam-powered by a wooden locomotive – forgotten history down the block, right under your nose, where the railroad still runs freight into town. “The Spanish found this populated area and took over.” With a big pre-invasion native population having lived around the modern-day tracks, he finds hand-hewn rocks everywhere down there, and hauls them back up on his motorized wheelchair. Every rock, bone, and piece of metal salvaged from the tracks carries some trace



Fossil mammoth bone and tuned limestone.

of human impact. Some stones have been hewn and weighted to spin perfectly, to stand upright on ledges. Some have exposed pockets of glimmering geodes, others, concave fishscales from flint napping. You can see whirls of amber in what might be a piece of fossilized palm wood. There are animal forms and profiles of women wearing elaborate headdresses, slowly carved in by women otherwise constantly grinding on *matate*. He passes around a fossil mammoth bone excavated in the backyard while digging a well. Someone tuned a fifty-pound, sitar-shaped limestone rock to produce two notes. See the wear marks where drumming fingers slapped the stone thousands of times?

Like the rocks and relics, the drained pond embodies what could have been. It traces a lost ecology of relationships between characters and landscapes. Anoles, geckoes, spiny lizards, and the bugs they eat burrow in the rock cairns’ million caverns, but the pond habitat manifested the animal realm most intensely. “It was one of the most successful things I’ve ever done. It just *worked*: I built it, and all the animals came!” Two kinds of native tree frogs live in Austin, and one of them moved in to the habitat. Sometimes they visited

Hanson's bedroom. Once a Great Blue Heron came down to eat frogs. Vince remembers blooming lilies and insect dramas. "There was sort of an arms race, where the spiders built big webs over the pond, and the dragonflies would come down and cut the webs where they joined the trees. They learned to cut all the right places." Now, not so many animals, since the pond's been drained. Now the pond's a concrete ruin, awaiting mortar patchwork and resealing with paint. Papyrus, pickerelweed, and dehydrated water lily roots survive in shallow puddles. Every day mockingbirds come pick for bugs. Like the bamboo grove behind the pond, the patchy landscape is in ruins, gone wild and overgrown. Sun spears through bamboo blades to magenta and sky blue wood planks leaned against the back of the pond. More salvaged materials are propped against a little hand-built house beside the pond. The scene draws out a feeling in me of wanting to get to work, see it unfurl.

But what Hanson really needs help with is moving all the salvage wood, windows, rocks, and relics way from the burned-out house so it can be repaired. One day we work on relocating rocks to clear a path to the house. Another day, Vince gathers David Pratt, Susan Maynard, Scott Stevens, and Jen and I to make human chains and get some windows out of there. A good crew of six – we could start a moving company. While Vince hacks a path through the bamboo shooting up alongside the house, Jen and I offer Hanson a Museum t-shirt illustrated with a Moontower, the City's first public lighting from 1895, now preserved as historic landmarks. He reminisces, "I lived right under a Moontower at San Jacinto in west campus. Back then a lot more bugs clouded around the lights, and they fed flocks of nighthawks." The bugs are gone now, so the birds are in decline, but the Moontower is preserved as a historic landmark. "There used to be a lot more bugs all over Austin – and butterflies!" Like the Colorado River waterfall that disappeared with the damming of Town Lake, this is the City that vanished. In the face of all this ruin, he sobs, "I identify with critters more and more, because the same people who want to crush critters want to crush *me!*"

With the bamboo cleared, we form a line to pass windows and wood planks to the front yard. "Look out for that nail. Another nail. This plank's got one too." We move about a dozen windows leaning against the house, then tackle another cache behind the little

structure by the ruined pond, then a third behind the pond itself – two pick-up trucks worth of old dorm windows. Susan and David take about twenty to Further Farms, Scott brings a half-dozen to Smut Putt Heaven, and Vince swings by the Museum with a dozen for us later that afternoon. The others seem to have the same rush of feeling I had about the ruined pond waiting a little work to rebloom. The wealth of junk, the potential it embodies... the phantom values of future forms. Everything seems to glow. The windows are poised on the threshold of assembling into something else: museum, dorm, or greenhouse, maybe a carnival funhouse, syncretic Shinto shrine, or some other alien habitat altogether. Salvage materials plus bricollage equal what Susan thinks of as “the future of architecture.” Somehow, junkitects have one foot in this possible future, and the other in what most people call trash.

Of course, junk piles already house nonhuman beings. Hanson points to a Chinaberry tree in the front yard’s corner. They wouldn’t be in this neighborhood if it hadn’t been for the “junk ecology.” On the hill at the street’s dead end, branches spread across the sky, bare except for the shriveled yellow Chinaberries. Hanson watched the grove grow about forty years ago out of a now-vanished junk pile that sheltered saplings from the mower. “It’s good wood – they used it to build China cabinets,” professes the Professor. I complain about Hackberries at our house constantly dropping branches. Planted for fast-growing shade during Austin’s 1950s housing boom, now you see them falling apart all over the city. But the smart aleck scholar argues, “It’s a *food* tree. People lived off hackberry pies in the Depression. Lots of birds eat them, too.” Now invasive Chinaberries and short-lived native Hackberries provision monk parakeets and migratory birds like cedar waxwings flying through town.

By the time we start loading the trucks with wood planks and windows, the Professor had broken out a red-bound book of translations of 4,000-year-old Egyptian papyrus texts. He recites a tale of the *Book of Thoth*, the phosphorescent tome mummies used to light their tomb. Bathed in the book’s magic light, the undead live suspended in a different time, perhaps a different medium from time altogether. He reads the story of a lost traveler who lands on an island of serpentine people. Among the king’s guests is a young girl who fell

to earth in a star. The snake king rescued her from among the corpses and wreckage of the crashed spaceship. Though we've made plans for Hanson to come by the Museum later that day, he won't let us leave, bringing out a copy of the *Fortean Times*. There's a mud hole in England that bubbles up giant ammonites, the coiled fossils of an extinct octopi ancestor. No matter how much concrete people poured in the hole, it wouldn't seal, and to this day disgorges snakestones. I offer Hanson twenty bucks for the windows and we part ways, to see him that afternoon for a tour of "Ghosts."

We use the windows to build a makeshift winter greenhouse in our carport that doubles as a Museum entrance. The dirty panes make a fittingly creepy entrance to "Ghosts." We picked up a few oversize windows from the Habitat for Humanity ReStore – a hodgepodge of differently sized frames painted hot pink, lime green, ochre, electric blue. Plus a mirror that came with the house. You can never use enough windows.

## SMUTT PUTT HEAVEN

The old English word *geard* lives on in our words *garden* and *yard*, but also meant *house* and more generally, *enclosure*.<sup>7</sup> Domestication in a little paradise, life within fences. As a microhabitat nested in the world, yards are little greenhouses, aquaria, zoos, and museums. Life inside artificial enclosures can escape and colonize the surrounding landscape. But the gardens are also tiny, fragile reserves that can be crushed by the surrounding world. The gardener is at once jail keeper and guardian of domesticates.

In the City of Austin and elsewhere, people who cultivate art yards sometimes call themselves *yardists* growing delicate enchanted ecologies out of found junk, paint, wire, and the nonhumans that make these yards their home. These peculiar habitats become populated with flora, insects, urban wildlife, tourists, and whatever repetition of junk the yardist has picked out to hold the yard together. Inside each yardist's brain is another small garden where the yardist symbiont dwells. Through some mysterious transmission, if the climactic conditions are right, these symbionts spread to other human hosts. Like *T. gondii*, the parasite



Smutt Putt Heaven.

makes its hosts *do things* and behave certain ways. Most notably, yardists can begin to feel unsettled and uncomfortable *anywhere but their yard*.

How does it spread? At first, I imagined a mycelial matt camouflaged as ordinary sewer pipes and fiber-optic cables spreading out from the Cathedral of Junk beneath the rest of Austin. Working in the garden one day, the yardist-to-be extracts a small twist of wire from the soil and contracts the symbiont. Over the course of a decade, structures like the entry arbor at Smut Putt Heaven or the East/West Gate to the Garden of Eden at Further Farms agglomerate on a multitude of rusty taproots emerging directly from the earth. More realistically, the vectors are not underground, but the environments themselves. Just setting foot there you run the risk of contracting the symbiont. It's been known to transmit over TV. Perhaps it spreads through tainted gifts, like the doll arm, head on a stick, and mullein pups Scott gave us to live at MNAE. Before you know it, an art environment takes over your yard and life. You start eyeing roadside junk piles, compulsively collecting body parts for the yardist organism to assimilate into its ever-creeping form.

***decapitation*** | For a dozen years, Scott Steven's yard has been filling up with body parts. A crowd of decaying doll and mannequin heads look in all directions at once. They are held up on crutches and metal poles. Each is in constant movement, bowing down after rain softens the soil or leaning back to peer at the sky. Heads from the haircutting academy, each given a maniacal buzzcut before being tossed in the dumpster, shed their fuzz in patches. The eyes in decapitated dolls loll around, gazing after their torsos dangling in the pecan tree. As the sun decomposes polymer chains, plastic crackles into branching patterns like leaf veins or rivers. Fungus and mold spread across the humanoid faces – various states of decay that look abject, but are profoundly non-violent. They are the material world's slow unraveling, given time and visibility in the garden. Smut Putt Heaven is a retirement home where bodiless heads and headless bodies can decay in peace. A dignity to the dissolution of things as they move from form to dust.

People see the decaying heads and doll parts, and start to wonder ... is my neighbor a serial killer? After all, in one of Scott's favorite movies, Rob Zombie's *House of 1,000*

*Corpses*, the Mansonesque family has doll heads nailed all over the porch. Scott's Heaven is other people's ideas of a horror show, a backyard stuck in Halloween. But the corpses here are only human simulacra and vegetables. He puts veggie scraps in plastic kitty litter tubs where they can stew in the sun. Give them a few days to liquefy and steep in their own putrescence. The scraps transubstantiate from discrete forms into a liquid that makes a great amendment to the compost heap. Rhythms of decomposition compose Smut Putt Heaven.

Day-by-day rhythms in the yard match Scott's online writing, which bounces from stories of job boredom to small surprises like blackberry blossoms. Scott counteracts frustrations with friends' troubles and addictions, his parents' fading health, and cedar fever with the therapy of cultivating Heaven. He started building his healing machine around the time he stopped drinking. Time piles up as cumulative junk and labor slowly transform the yard, attracting life like goldenrod and orb weaver spiders, anoles and skinks, and stray kittens. Scott's a cat person and adopted two of them – Willie Nelson and Alice Cooper. At first the soil was cluttered with chunks of caliche. Scott crushed and mixed the caliche into a makeshift mortar that cements half-buried green and blue bottles lining his vegetable and cactus patches. They echo the bottle tree of blue glass stuck over hackberry branch stumps. He's working on a bridge of mortared metal junk to cross a drainage ditch that delivers water to the alley – a technique learned from his neighbor's yard.

As Scott explains in an interview on his friend's blog "Deep Fried Kudzu," "Originally my place was called 'Horseradish Dunes Proving Ground, Mannequin Farm, and Smut Putt Course.' I consider Smut Putt to be surrealism with a hillbilly twist" (Ginger 2009). Scott's a fan of Alice Cooper, horror movies, and art yards like Wade Wharton's near his hometown in Alabama. Along these lines, psychedelic putt putt is an amalgam of botanical gardens, landfills, and mall window displays. aA obelisk made from numerous golf clubs, an AC turbine, and skis occupies a corner of the yard. After all, this is a putt putt course, and Alice Cooper loves golf.

The yard's other name is "Holiness Church of Wonders and Signs Following" – a nod to Pentecostal churches in Appalachia that coil faith with risk by handling rattlesnakes

and fire. The pecan tree at the yard's heart is cluttered with plastic bottle cap snakes for serpent handling. A road sign in the crook with a decrepit life-size child doll reads CHURCH. One day Scott brushed against a bottle cap snake and got bitten. The serpent had become a house for wasps: "I saw them flying around afterward and then duck back into the cap. To do what? Read the sports page?"

***praying for junk*** | If you think Scott's yard is weird or creepy, duck into the house and see his paintings. The living room is a makeshift gallery – acrylic paintings of psychedelic cartoon people with orifices on their foreheads, eyes on stalks or melting from their sockets, and mouths that are smiling, fanged gashes. Some of their limbs float in boneless loops, or as umbilical cords connected to other people's faces. Flames and ants consume their homes. Another wall is covered in a grid of "Keyhole Girl" paintings. Peek through the universe's keyholes at alien ladies from all walks of otherworldly life: hobos, musicians on bizarre tentacular instruments, detectives and nurses and dominatrixes. The paintings are scattered with paper maché American flag crucifixes, painted casts of doll faces, and a furry pod with a baby face. Some of these characters came to Scott in dreams. He's fond of circus freaks and enjoys 999 Eyes shows. The artwork is his collection of human oddities.

The paintings parade out of the house into the yard. Lately Scott has taken to painting cast-off ironing boards, and a larger than life Alice Cooper face leans against the pecan. A Keyhole Girl lives on a hackberry log. Scott also hand-letters signs like the one at the backyard's entry gate listing Sunday open hours. A red box reads, "we like people who make donations." PRAY, says a painted shovel leading to the "Inner Sanctum," a little brick sitting area hidden by cacti taller than people. Methods of praying include painting, yard work, digging out caliche, building bottle borders, and assembling bottle cap snakes/wasp houses. Prayer can dissolve a bad day without turning it into a *House of 1,000 Corpses*: "Cutting on trees is a good way to vent my frustration in life. It's much better than cutting up a dead body." At the least, this kind of prayer encounters dealing with ordinary things like broken shovels or deadwood as little opportunities to purify or reach a stillness. At best, prayer is a kind of magic that aligns the one praying with the rest of the world in a

way that opens into more life.

Sometimes it's the opportunistic life of wasps or mosquitoes. Other times it is desired manifestations of junk. Scott is a firm believer in attracting things by holding them in mind. "Whenever I needed something for my yard it would appear at the thrift store dumpster or elsewhere, almost like magic." Scott was searching for windows when Hanson was giving his away; now they compose a winter cactus garden disassembled every spring. Yard art supplies materialize on the side of the road: "The pole lamps are bread and butter building supplies, the metal post plugs are perfect armatures for totem poles, the iron board (solid, no mesh) is great for painting on, and the curtain rod is screaming for a doll head to be put on it." Keeping something in mind is a mode of attentio to the world that makes things jump out, like when you learn a new word and suddenly read and hear it everywhere. This manner of following signs – selective scavenging – is best done riding a bike around the neighborhood on large trash day in a state of readiness to haul off good junk at a moment's notice. This is one of the secret powers cultivated by the yardist symbiont: an intuitive alignment or resonance between the world as it is and a desired world to be.

As Scott puts it, "I feel most in tune with the universe when building something in my yard" – a universe where Keyhole Girls dance behind the stars. Where tourists experience the novel DIYsneyland of art yards as weird little worlds, the yardist encounters *vastness* – the universe in a quarter acre, swirling with all of its ethereal beings and inhuman forces, magnetizing the right junk to the scene. Seasonal rhythms cross the yard, and sometimes it's too hot to work. Although yardists tune in to the universe through manual labor that most people try to avoid, they get to choose when to work and when to take a break. Moving large piles of junk can strain your back. Hitting caliche with a shovel jars the bones. But just sitting watching plants grow or lizards live resettles you.

Tuning in to the universe like this, something happens to the perception of time. Just as art yards warp huge panoramas of alien worlds into tiny spaces, moments can turn into eternity. It is the same timeless-time that Scott describes as bike time:

Sometimes when I go riding my bike time is totally elastic. I think I've been out for an hour...but the computer says 35 minutes. All of a sudden two miles have gone that I have no

memory of. I am lost...in thought. It's not as if I am solving some great personal problem... my mind is empty. Is this akin to meditation? (Stevens 2009)

A way to pray? Why does turning into a cyborg connected to a shovel or bike induce this sense of timelessness? Computer time, being on the clock, and “time is money” are just as invested in cyborg body parts. Perhaps it is *purposelessness* that helps eternity slip into time. Rhythms of peddling and coasting, not rushing to a destination but biking just to bike. Stopping to pick through roadside piles. Building something in the yard, working to work and then resting. No grand plan directs future development. Puzzling together pieces of junk, lost in thought, the mind empties and the forms assemble themselves. Everything just *happens*.

Back in the universe *without* Keyhole Girls, nothing happens without grueling attention and effort that solidifies in *ruts* as tough as caliche. Scott's day job at a medical supply company involves working on computers and manufacturing the control samples for urine tests, among other things. Sometimes he donates pure urine and cannot take drugs or medicine, even Benedryl for wasp stings. Having worked there so long, nothing is new or surprising, only repetitious and routine. Making a living sacrifices timelessness to computer time, but getting home to the art yard rejuvenates the feeling of *living*. As Scott's refrain for his yard goes, “Get out of your rut, enjoy Smut Putt!” The dynamic between deadening work and enlivening artwork becomes clear in Scott's story about when “clean room blues meets garden dirt ecstasy”:

Clean room time again for the production gang with a total of 360 trays to be filled and put either into a cold room or a lyophilizer. There were two lots of 180 trays apiece. Multitudes of vials to have a stopper lightly placed upon them, but not deeply inserted... I will swear on my favorite mannequin head that some of my coworkers deliberately do a poor job of stoppering so that they are not re-recruited for these big fills...

We finished the 2nd lot around 5:30 and I came home to happy cats and a beautiful late afternoon sky. I planted lettuce seed and did more tilling of my vegetable garden, tossing in well composted material from compost bin 1. I moved some of the multitude of young mulleins to new spots and considered the configuration of a new sitting area. There was lots of dirt to be enjoyed after being clean the entire work day!!!!

Perhaps the best part was following tweeting to find a bird nest built into the west side of my entry arbor. Though I couldn't see the feathered infants I could certainly hear them. It really makes me feel good to know that once again there is new life in Smut Putt Heaven. (Stevens 2008)

Unlike multitudes of vials needing stoppers, lettuce seeds, mullein pups, and fledglings have a life of their own. Unlike coworkers, their activity is enthusiastic, spontaneous, and self-organizing. The yardist collaborates with these life forms without controlling them. They are not subordinated to the purposes of the art environment. Rather, the art yard is their habitat. Dirt is their atmosphere; the clean room would kill them as sure as landfills smother body parts.

Following signs of life in Smut Putt Heaven leads to otherworldly symbioses between wasps in bottle cap snakes, molds on doll heads, and the yardist symbiont in Scott Stevens. When Leslie Stern transplanted herself from Zimbabwe to San Diego, "the garden for me became a refuge, an escape, a way of constructing domestic space as a barricade against the foreign. A way of being there, rather than here... This was a dream, a private dream" made public by writing (forthcoming). For Scott, Heaven constructs itself against the repetitious normal world out of its wasted and worn out parts. Any given Sunday, the public at large can escape into this dream of Heaven, too – a refuge where prayer has been proven to work, and Alabama is close to home.

## SPUNKY MONKEY RANCH & FURTHER FARMS

In August 2007, Susan Maynard and David Lee Pratt packed up the Ranch and left for the Farm. Moving on from South Austin to outside town near Elgin, they left behind a dozen years of tinkering that had taken form as Spunky Monkey Ranch and began the slow cumulative process again at Further Farms. Art critic Rachel Koper bid them farewell with a little homage in the local paper: “This husband-and-wife team has given a lot to the art scene over the years and is proof that artists are good for the economy. They helped make that area on South First a cool, artsy spot” (2007). Familiar story: starving artists price themselves out of town. Also familiar: left behind art environment falls apart. Less familiar: the dogged persistence behind David and Susan’s elaboration of creative habitats, the sense that *doing* has always been enough – victory in itself. They seem to have made peace with the fact that places that are alive will die as part of their mortal condition. If art is a way of life as Susan and David say, how do you preserve the *process* that brings art environments into being?

Before Spunky Monkey Ranch, Susan and David ran the Alternate Current ArtSpace in a rented building on the same lot. Opening in 1991, this live-in art gallery hosted unjuried gallery shows that art critics and careful curators described as “cluttered.” It was a hodgepodge place where anyone could show art. Themes for group shows were inclusive and quirky: “The Mojo Show,” “White Trash/Black Helicopter,” “He Said/She Said.” Their last show in 2002 focused on 9/11 only nine months after the event. By 2003, more US artists were working along those lines; a little distance had made the catastrophe safe as a



Susan’s mosaiced bottle house at Spunky Monkey Ranch; the studio at Further Farms.

topic. David wonders about the lag. “What is art for? It can be for beauty but there’s more to it than that. Art can’t be totally out of touch with everything that’s happening. What is art for?” It can respond immediately to collective trauma, a way to process destruction and volatile political situations. Or aesthetics can amplify sparks of life when everything else seems to be putting them out. Alternate Current aimed at being a place for that to happen, a habitat to encourage and support south Austin artists and connect them to an older generation of creative people. Both the gallery and the Ranch were places that gathered an eclectic public of artists, musicians, gardeners, filmmakers, and their kids into a welcoming intergenerational social network.

By 2001, Susan and David had closed the gallery and focused on a patch of land rented on the same property, calling it Spunky Monkey Ranch. The narrow lot starts at the bamboo grove at the creek, rolling uphill to a little row of handmade Old West-style wood buildings with tiny porches. The mini-street echoes nostalgic simulations of public space like Disneyland’s Main Street, USA. David and Susan reused the buildings as installation nooks, little shrines, places to store scavenged raw materials like doll parts, fragments of signs, ceramic shards and tiles, wood scraps, and bones. They cultivated the shady outdoor space as a garden with concrete and wine bottle planters, a pond, mosaic mushrooms, and modified mannequins popping out of the jungle. The monkey king on his throne presided over it all. A gay pride rainbow flag and hubcap disco-ball invited you to be however you want here. At the end of the mini-street, a sheet metal structure with a sort of hayloft served as their studio. Whoever assembled the small hand-built house next to the studio used raw juniper trunks to hold up a flat roof of shipping palettes and a reclaimed arched door for the main entry. Over the years Susan embellished the kitchen walls with mosaic plants, animals, and geometric patterns. All of the structures on the land were porous, shared with crickets and spiders, prone to mold in the rainy season. David and Susan nurtured and repaired these readymade homemade structures, working on them over years of leisurely and playful accretions.

Every surface in Spunky Monkey Ranch became permeated with art. Visitors entered the land through a twelve-foot arch cobbled out of deadwood, skis, and crutches, held

together with wire and tension. Scavenged wood panels painted with a bright monkey face and vibrating letters marked out the named place. A smaller arch spanned the path down to the creek. The arcs bristled with gravity's potential, poised on falling apart; they want to *move*. They match David's body – a shaky livewire, hands and boots tapping out excess energy. He likes to work fast to override making too many decisions, swinging lengths of wide transparent tape over a pile of collage scraps so static electricity sucks up an image. Slapped directly onto picture frames, compositions emerge with a depth of multiple layers, some obscured. Art lives off the frame, swallows it up, the same way Susan's mosaics live on house walls and garden paths. They match her, too – still and patient. Susan has a quiet presence that blends in then pops out with simple joy and generosity. Spunky Monkey Ranch embodied Susan and David's still and jittery ways of being.

Art forms and artists' active bodies became inseparable in this living habitat. It makes sense that David thinks of affordable housing as the key to arts development in creative cities. "If artists have a place to live they will create art around them." Without a home base, nothing much gets made. But given a place to live, habitual creators pour out art with whatever is at hand. They can become magic bubbles expanding out of the living space. Art is a way of life that spreads out in layers, potentially bringing other things to life through contact. Or lighting them afire. "If you keep your candle lit, other people can light their candles off it. You have to start right *here*." David points at his heart beneath his shirt, top three buttons down, a USB gadget hanging around his neck on a blue cord. Or here, the row of little wood buildings and the junk in the street surrounding us as we talked. After their move, *here* is still here – an unmowed field of grass and a circle of pine trees, the open question of what might happen at Further Farms.

That's *Homo sapiens*, the Spunky Monkey – always has to mess with everything! Sometimes composing surrounding clutter into something beautiful and better, other times muddling it up even more. Then waking up and muddling or recomposing the muddle. This art of ordering chaos and vice versa pours out of the monkey, whose home is always changing, shifting through layers of pattern and decomposition.



Spunky Monkey Ranch.

***Don't chunk the funk!*** | Spunky Monkey Ranch's going away party assembled a crowd of familiar faces: visitors to MNAE, Austin yardists, plus artists who had shown their work at Alternate Current from the beginning. People brought beat salsa and apple pie to the potluck, Vince made a chicken vegetable soup using lamb's quarters growing at the Cathedral, and I brought some bottles of kombucha fermented at the Museum. Dream conversations unfurled around the fire as David threw in juniper berries and branches that crackled out sweet smoke. Wider landscapes swirled into the little patch of the Ranch.

Around the fire, one of David and Susan's friends talked about the waters of the Llano uplift. A giant granite shelf spreads under this region of Texas. Parts are visible as the batholith dome that settlers called Enchanted Rock, as empty quarries, and as the state Capitol and other buildings around Austin. The red granite forms the rock bottom of the Hill Country region's aquifers, above which the karst landscape soaks up and stores water. The granite makes the aquifer possible, and springs as well, by pressurizing water

between permeable limestone and impermeable igneous rock. Before Europeans colonized Tejas, the multitude of springs clustered around Enchanted Rock was known as *Yanna Wanna* – a vocable that evokes this sacred landscape. Water pushes up through places like Barton Springs, or “the blue hole” in San Antonio, where people saw a woman in lapis blue long before missionaries arrived and called her Virgin Mary. *Yanna Wanna* is a very old relationship between water, granite, limestone, and the sky that bubbles up in unexpected places like the campfire at Spunky Monkey Ranch. Water pools and dries up again, like the spring was never there.

Some people were shocked that David and Susan could abandon the art environment and just leave everything to its fate. For David and Susan it was part of the place’s lifecycle. David wondered, “How can I take it with me when it all *lives* here? It’d be like dragging a heavy load around by my neck. I’ve never stuck around anywhere long enough to build a foundation like Vince has.” He keeps moving, starting over. Maybe Further Farms will emerge as a foundation, maybe not. While their “everything must go” yard sale moved as much art, plants, and materials off the Ranch as possible, the rest stayed or got tossed. Vince helped move the monkey king. What about the small portable pond? “Well, if it looks like it belongs here, it stays.” It belongs to the place, and maybe some other artist will tend to its life there (which is what happened to the mini-Old West town at Spunky Monkey Ranch in the first place). If not, it goes the way of all mortals and falls apart. Like any garden, it needs tending to exist. Art environments take on a life of their own, but need a spunky cultivator to keep tending things as gravity, weather, rust, plants, and animals shuffle forms around. Aesthetic patterns materialize through processes of constant *recomposition* – tending a place’s emergence, laying down layer after layer of care.

Rising rent motivated the move to Elgin. Over the years, their creative presence helped make weird, arty South Austin a place people wanted to live. Housing consumption increased, property taxes rose. After a few years of the landlord raising the rent to match his taxes, David and Susan decided to leave it all behind. Low overhead and a willingness to live and work in the same place make their experiments possible. Trying to keep up with the rent – why bother? Adapt, move out of town, do what you need to keep your candle lit.

Moving on and starting over becomes a pattern in itself. In the early 60s David lived in New York's east village until the low rent got too high. He calls it "riding the dragon" of gentrification that bankrolls local artists up to a certain tipping point when they're priced out of the ability to be local. His anti-development rallying call became "Don't Chunk the Funk!" Different from the will to preserve behind "Keep Austin Weird," David's motto calls out willful acts of destruction that bulldozes what is old or unique, then constructs buildings that could be anywhere or leaves a scarred, empty lot. David spins a 'two kinds of people in this world' scenario out of this repetitive action. "There's people who are creative and others who don't know how to be creative, so they destroy. When I move away from a place sometimes people can't *wait* to come in and destroy it. They can't create so they have this gleeful urge for destruction."

In-movers could become an art environment's new cultivators, or kill it and make the space normal. Or they can take the middle path of just letting the funk die and fall apart, which is what happened to Spunky Monkey Ranch. The garden and landscaping store that moved in as new renters used the little Old West shacks to feature potted plants, wrought iron stands, glass and porcelain knickknacks. Shabby antiques add just the right touch. They loved the mosaic interior of the kitchen, the junk arches, the funky feel, and generally left things alone. Weather takes over the Ranch's compositional patterns: a windstorm knocked apart the entry arch; David might have cobbled it together again, but the new renters put the scraps in the dumpster, back in the waste stream to the landfill. Without the Ranch's sign across the yard's entry, the refrain of the named place grows hazy. The garden



The arch then and now.

store's name takes over as one of the City's junkscapes falls apart forever. But the garden store moved on and a motorcycle mechanic moved in, festooning the remaining arch with Mardi Gras beads and artificial blooms. And Susan's bottle house with mosaic Mary looks miraculously untouched by time. Who knows what will happen?

Meanwhile, out at Further Farms, Susan's mosaic and collage patterns begin to encrust the kitchen walls. The trailer's living room offered plenty of wall space for a gallery of David and Susan's work, as well as the art they've collected over the years. The sunny open spaces outside called for gardens, and the farm is taking shape as veggies in raised beds of cinder block and car tires. With last summer's drought they didn't do much gardening. Vince is helping to assemble fence wood and Hanson's windows into junkitecture walls for the carport turned studio workshop. Where the Ranch's little street offered a readymade form for installations, a circle of lean cedar elms suggested a sundial at the Farm. Every equinox and solstice, David is out there at sunrise calibrating a solar calendar out of metal poles and mortar chunks gathered from the land. A skeletal arch unfolds near the sundial with a chair up top like you could sit there and enjoy a fine view. David calls it the East Gate to the Garden of Eden, or the West Gate, depending on which side you're on. The potluck gatherings that connect generations of creative people and families continue with Thanksgiving dinners and Easter egg hunts, when people come together to catch up, share home-cooked food, and play some music. And then there is the new pattern of driving from the exurbs into town, where Susan works for the City, and David has seasonal work with the IRS or as a movie extra. Life is quieter out there, stars brighter, and the art of wildflowers, deer, and hawks graces the fields.

*lost worlds* | Like Alternate Current before it, Spunky Monkey Ranch reveals the fluidity of places, how *fast* they change, the inescapable vulnerability of aesthetic patterns in time. In "The Vulnerability of Outsider Architecture," Roger Cardinal laments the loss of vernacular art environments as an almost inevitable fate. Given their improvised aesthetic compositions like mosaics or structures held together by gravity, these singular places share an in-built precariousness of form. Without their perpetually tinkering creators (who

abandon them in pursuit of lower rent, or are institutionalized, or die, or commit suicide), the places swiftly fall to pieces. Often built of junk, the public can see them as eyesores or rat farms; arsonists and vandals assault some places, while municipalities dismantle others on the grounds of code violations or health hazards. Very few are preserved by nonprofit institutions (like the Orange Show Foundation in Houston). As an art historian, Cardinal mourns not only their ‘extinction,’ but “that extinction should lead to oblivion: we can only guess at the number of outsider sites which have vanished across the years. The only consolation is that a number of demolished structures enjoy an afterlife” through visual documentation (2000:172). A powerful mode of melancholic narrative presents itself in vanished or decayed expressive forms. The affective pull of *lost* places, or their potential loss, motivates preservation – the avoidance of ‘extinction’ of forms that will never grace earth again.

While I can’t help but sympathize with Cardinal, I wonder if there is really any way to freeze these places. Aesthetic patterns in vernacular landscapes cannot be preserved without preserving the process of perpetual emergence, the *relationship* between spunky monkeys and their homes. If ‘outsider architecture’ takes form through the pleasures of unfolding *processes* – tinkering, gardening, creating, scavenging, dreaming, partying – preservationists should follow by shifting attention to the vulnerability of *action*. This reframes preservation and destruction as generative actions in themselves. Rather than a melancholic vision of the loss of place, what if the vulnerability of art environments helps us to see these landscapes as momentary triumphs of *doing* or *living* against the odds? At the same time, animating places through historical narratives helps us understand what drives the pattern of vulnerability itself. It is no surprise that economic development patterns recognizable as gentrification bring about the abandonment and destruction of these precarious patches in urban ecosystems.

In *Keep Austin Weird*, Red Wassenich comments on Spunky Monkey Ranch, “Austin should declare this area a city monument” to the counterculture and creativity (2007:18). Monuments are solid and permanent. Only two years after the book’s publication, not much of how Spunky Monkey Ranch used to feel is left. Red is passionate about *keeping*

the City a certain way in the face of standardizing forces of big money, chain stores, and homogeneous architecture and aesthetics. The city's history slips away as places like the Ranch fall apart. I'm supportive of this will to preserve beloved things, but also to David and Susan's sense of "moving on" as its own process-sustaining pattern. As David put it, "How can I take it with me when it all *lives* here? If it looks like it lives here, it stays." Like all mortals, that means it dies here, too. The vulnerability of 'outsider architecture' might be better considered part of that form's life-cycle and conditions of existence instead of an element of melancholic history; the creative *process* is not only preserved but lives on as people move on and as the spark of lively creativity proliferates in other projects and patches of urban landscapes. Perhaps the 'afterlife' of outsider projects that Roger Cardinal sees in images of no longer existing places is a misapprehension; Spunky Monkey Ranch lives on at Further Farms!

## BIOSQUAT

Legend has it Biosquat began as a home for a sculpture, an as yet half-carved block at one of the high points on an east Austin hill. David Santos had been commissioned for a giant stone carving to grace the new airport, but things blew up – he rejected the whole layout of the airport and refused to take part. Meanwhile the landscape around the block became a bicycle magnet, broken wheels and frames drawn there as spare parts for something. Santos, Ed Sapir, and others began slowly building low-impact housing integrated into permaculture gardens. In the early days, since the porous homes had no gas or electricity for heating and Austin gets cold in the winter, they biked south in the fall, mimicking species that follow warmth across continents. They led autumn caravans of Bikes Across Borders to deliver sustainable transportation to border towns. The caravans doubled as traveling clown circuses in the spirit of the Cycloclowns (who started off with US/Mexico border trips before getting lost in Europe and Asia). A series of squats and traditional domiciles of family and friends make a chain of safe houses for the bike nomads' journeys. Biosquat became a homestead, a gathering point in the bike cycles of a seasonal city stretched out across what Santos calls “the New World Twilight Zone.”

Santos elaborates possibilities for otherworldly sustainability in the Zone in his online epic *Wheeliad*. The Zone is a north-south flyway for migrating monarch and snout nose butterflies, Mexican free-tail bats, hummingbirds, and hundreds of other beings of the sky who taught Santos to become nomadic. The Zone is an hourglass with supernatural anomalies at its tapered heart – “a geographic singularity of weirdness centered loosely on Mexico” (Santos 2006). This danger zone became a countercultural gravity well attracting artists and writers like Breton, Artuad, Borges and Burroughs. Austin, Oz-Town, “a prime node in the twilight zone,” incubates mutations for survival in the ecological catastrophes wracking the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

One home of many strung across the Zone, Biosquat is an experimental station and model for future junk-permaculture eco-villages. This dream habitat is a post-apocalyptic paradise, built in advance of petroleum civilization's collapse and out of the riches of its detritus. Ed Sapir gave me a tour both times I visited in the fall and winter, Santos having

followed spring south on his bike. Once I came by to pick up a bike-drawn mobile puppet theater, and another time, with Vince, Scott, David and Susan, and Jen, to walk the little maze of paths between hobbit holes, gardens, a treehouse, and bamboo sleeping platforms. Sometimes a dog wandered with us. We started up in the bike shop, where a mechanic with big dark eyes quietly repaired bikes – a silent nod when we say hi. He has a special way of splatter-painting the frames.

The shop is made of welded bike frames in a dugout hilltop – salvage architecture developed out of cast-off parts. Bike frames interlock in tessellated patterns that structurally mime Fuller domes and carbon nanotubes, becoming skeletons for mortar work to compose the outer walls. Salvaging from the post-abundance wastestream brings in piles of bikes and surprises galore, fodder for emergent forms. Biosquat gives you the feeling we could stop producing new bikes today – close the factories and dig through landfills for parts. Grow bamboo to make bike frames. Metalsmiths rework old gears for reuse. Irreparable parts become bikitecture, or puppets.

From the bike shop we walk to the Eastside Eiffel welded of scrap metal and bike junk. It remains in two halves: “How will you hoist the top up here?” “Haven’t figured that out yet.” (I imagine something that looks like a giant difference engine or mountain top removal machine engineered of bike parts that doesn’t calculate or decapitate peaks, but effortlessly hoists the top halves of homemade Eiffel Towers, giant blocks of uncarved stone, or excavated spaceships. How many people would need to pedal together to make it mobile?) I climbed up the welded peg ladder on one of the tower’s three legs to the top platform – a good twenty feet up and only half the tower’s height, once assembled. The top

**Quiet Power:** Hanging in the shop is a sign, written in green marker on black plastic: “The most revolutionary form of alternative energy? Your lunch! Human energy is still the most efficient form of energy!” Sun feeds plants, you eat them, and ride your bike: indirect solar power. This is why Biosquat is so quiet. Solar, wind, and muscle power silently drive its engines. Biosquatters hook up all kinds of sustainable machines, making their ex-lunches into compost and broken bikes into hauling carts and mobile solar ovens. As engines, bicycles can be hooked to food blenders, coffee grinders, and even table saws. See some of the machines built by Bikes Not Bombs <http://bikesnotbombs.org> and Maya Pedal <http://www.mayapedal.org/index.html>.

will have a wind generator.

Ed takes us downhill to the cistern next to the Mothership, a trailer that serves as winter lodging and kitchen for Biosquat's non-migratory caretaker. The trailer is the only recognizable standard architectural unit on the land. Its roof fills the 600-gallon cistern with a single good rain. The tank is built of political candidate signs and thick metal remesh wrapped in a circle, held together with a band of rebar in a tensile hug strong enough to resist the pressure of a small swimming pool. Heavy black plastic lines the inside, and it has a lid. Water flows out a solar powered electric pump through hoses strung up like vines down the hill to various garden tiers. So long as it rains and shines, the self-sufficient little solar pump/rain harvesting system offers localized water security. Ed says the cistern is holding up well for being four years old.

Next we visit a yurt-shaped house with a sheet metal roof. Short cedar posts are drilled and wired up with rebar – another tension ring – and bamboo poles hold up the roof. There's a hole at the top so you can have a fire inside, and a big open umbrella blocks the rain. Just lift it past the roof, close it, and take it out on sunny days. Only thing is the umbrella fabric decays after a year in summer sun. There's a poured concrete table and a bamboo bed covered in netting. On the table, the novel *Parable of the Sower* and the first book of *Memories of Fire* await their readers with fraught survival tales.

Paths wind by a tree with a small sleeping platform. We pass a portable composting toilet poised over a pit. After a year, they move the toilet a few feet forward over a new pit and plant a tree in the old one. A row of food trees slowly forms – an orchard with human fertilizer laid down in years of use. Bodies' metabolic cycles are folded into the permaculture landscape.

We all climb up into the treehouse Ed designed as an egg, with its pointy end north and its wide side south, open-ended to the sun's arc and cooling wind. Built for air-conditioner-free summer sleeping, the treehouse lets you slumber in the sky. We had already been through the little egg-shaped dugout "hobbit hole" with a dome of welded wheels and curvy benches made of red clay mixed with sand. (By now the land's clay quarry is about eight feet deep at the hilltop side.) The treehouse's rough cedar plank floor

comes from a factory outside of town. The egg's pointy end is half of a satellite dish with an over-arc of bike rims wired to aluminum sailboat spars bought cheap – surplus junk. Political candidate signs make up the roof, but Ed wants to replace them with metal tiles. He envisions an elegant vernacular architecture where the makeshift signs, crumbling in the sun, no longer fit in. A beautiful curvy banister made of more bike rims and metal poles is held together by strong wire running in a circle all the way around in another architectural hug. Ed says you could charge at it and just bounce off, it's so strong. It's the tension. The treehouse offers a downtown view, but nowadays the Capitol and UT tower are less visible because a hill of trees has grown. Downhill you can see a big crescent of undeveloped scrubby land.

Ed talks about the gully down there, filled up with fifty or so years of dumping. All the concrete chunks and shards of brick walls used around Biosquat as building blocks come from there. People used to just drive out and dump. An oil pipeline used to cut right through the land (or still does, empty underground). Even after the pipeline was decommissioned, the City annually mowed a band above it running across the property. The sides of the band were made of bulldozed garbage – lots of car tires, rusty metal. When Biosquat took over, they put up a fence and the mowers stopped coming. They imaginatively reused some of the garbage and sent the rest to the landfill. Some junk really is garbage that improvisation cannot transform.

The invisible pipeline now runs beneath a wind tower in the making – a fifty-foot pole with three sets of poles coming out perpendicular to the center one.<sup>5</sup> They end in halves of bike rims that hold a band of wire, and more wire runs between each of these rings. The top will be connected to three heavy lines that run to a circle of big mounds where Ed has wrapped their ends around giant concrete chunks, buried counterweights. He calls these shattered pieces of modernist architecture “urbanite” and the name sticks with everyone: *of course* it's urbanite! Someday soon, the tower will rise, with a wind turbine at the top feeding a battery to charge your cell phone or computer, or power a radio or string of LEDs for night parties. I ask why the three sets of perpendicular poles are able to move around the

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<sup>5</sup> See Ed's design and photos at <http://people.virginia.edu/~ds8s/ed/tower/tower01.html>.



The windmill.

center one. Ed answers, “The whole thing’s designed to be taken apart and moved – if we ever need to leave here, or want to move it somewhere else. So the center pole breaks down – see how it’s bolted together?” Many things around Biosquat are like that – on wheels. Temporarily articulated, disassembleable, impermanent. Over the eight years they’ve lived there, they’ve moved from welding to wiring. It makes things more nomadic, able to pick up and migrate. That’s why they built a walking windmill.

Everything at Biosquat is just hatching, all the time. Ed sees the bike wheels and red clay mortarwork as archaeological sites – readymade ruins or follies, overgrown with flora. Like Santos’ online writing, they are devoid of any illusion of closure, permanently in progress, and alive. Any visit here, you’ll see half-born forms accumulating for however long it takes for them to come together. Salvage building takes patience in a slow accretion of puzzle pieces. There are finished and inhabitable projects like the treehouse, and there are things in more elementary stages of coming through the pipedream bottleneck – a

longboat made of Styrofoam blocks and some thin pieces of salvage metal. “The plan is to finish it and float right out of Austin, down the Colorado River to Mexico.” It will be pedal powered, but the journey is downstream anyway. The Eastside Eiffel remains in half. The windmill is coming along – but getting wind electricity is just the beginning! In Santos’ *Wheeliad*, it becomes:

Towering Life-  
Wind turbine gen. at top,  
odd antennas; wi-fi, ham, pirate  
elsewhere mobile, crow’s nest, bat  
and bird houses, bee hive,  
water tank, solar panels.  
Lower, habitat for spiders,  
At bottom lizard caves and toad cellars.  
Bat and bird guano rain washes as  
compost tea to a garden bed. (Santos 2004a)

Everything is many things at once, and nothing is what it was. Machine in the garden no more, since the machine has become ecological *techne*, and the tower, a vertical landscape full of nonhuman houses and information flows. Biosquat plays out how cities might finally catch on to the bounty of the post-industrial age – the trashed world – that cockroaches have long occupied as habitat. Beautiful houses can be built of waste. This radical tinkering revels in the surplus of decomposition, innovating new and wholly unanticipated forms out of what has fallen apart. Like a circus of scrappy novelties, it is an alternative, temporary urban zone that gets on with celebrating life in the face of chaos. Rolling with the cyborg bicyclist/bike body, it keeps human muscle power and feats of endurance like bicycle migrations at the center of possibilities. Carnival sustainability is “victory-in-advance,” as David Santos sees it – “victory-in-the-attempt” to bike out of peak oil collapse into the paradise of DIYSneylands (2004b).

## THE RHIZOME COLLECTIVE

Like Biosquat, the Rhizome Collective aims an ethical imagination at standard urban forms, redesigning them for maximum autonomy and exhaustive use of the richness of city wastestreams. Something celebratory drives both places – not just rejection and critique, but a sort of romantic hobo minimalism, the joy of figuring out myriad alternatives, and a delight in cultivating life. Before being condemned by the City in 2009, their warehouses served as cooperative housing, space for grassroots organizing, and an urban permaculture education center.

They used their warehouse home as a classroom for weekend-long Radical Urban Sustainability Training (RUST) workshops taught by Scott Kellogg, Stacy Pettigrew, ecological engineer Lauren Ross, and assorted guests.<sup>6</sup> RUST showcased the warehouses' permaculture systems for a hands-on introduction to “autonomous technologies” aimed at locally meeting basic needs of food, water, shelter, energy, waste management, health, and the bioremediation of urban toxins. Because “sustainability” had already been co-opted by neo-liberal capitalists, Scott used the term *radical* sustainability to insist on the entwined *radix* or roots beneath social and environmental injustices. Healthy ecosystems and healthy humans are not mutually exclusive. RUST doubled as a crash-course in environmental and climate justice issues, with a critical analysis of contemporary sustainable urban development as a new form of gentrification. The permaculture systems showcased at RUST were designed as “Do-It-Yourself” projects that cost as little as possible, recycling free urban waste in a variety of forms – a way to make sustainability and local production economically accessible to everyone; a way to save a bit of the world by changing your house and habits. Responding to global climate change catastrophes, peak oil and peak fishing, the threat of water scarcity, the loss and pollution of topsoil, and the like, RUST workshops teach how to start living in the post-apocalyptic future, today!

Tinkering with integrated microsystems at the warehouses was a way to gradually disengage collapse-bound production systems by incrementally altering existing architecture

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<sup>6</sup> Kellogg and Pettigrew's book *Toolbox for Sustainable City Living: A Do-it-ourselves Guide* (South End Press, 2008), wonderfully illustrated by Juan Martinez, goes into many of the environmental justice arguments and sustainable systems featured at RUST.

and infrastructure. When Scott and Stacy moved in, they depaved the asphalt loading bay, tearing up impermeable cover to make a thriving food garden where bees, butterflies, and migratory birds came to eat. As they salvaged mulch from landscaping companies and added homemade compost tea, the once compacted soil grew rich, shot through with white threads of mycorrhizal networks. With time, the landscape became increasingly productive and healthy. They bought a solar panel system for the roof. They raised chickens in the scrap yard next door until the neighbor complained. They grew shitake and oyster mushrooms on logs, raised tilapia fish, practiced vermiculture, composted humanure – anything for food! They hoped to gradually transform the warehouses into an off-the-grid homestead – a zero-waste, closed-loop life support system. Then the building was condemned, repeating the pattern of vernacular landscape patches that have taken on lives of their own suddenly being crushed by outside forces.

The City's eviction of the Rhizome Collective warehouses came after nine years of supporting and praising their projects while officially overlooking their code violations. Scott Kellogg owned the property and was working on selling it to the Rhizome Collective nonprofit. Building inspectors cited a dozen violations including exposed greywater, illegal composting toilets, and a second story addition built on the warehouse roof without a permit. Homespun electrical wiring didn't help. The City gave a two-week notice of eviction to the nonprofits that operated out of the warehouses—Bikes Across Borders, Inside Books, and Food Not Bombs. The Collective fought to extend the eviction to a month, and then everybody moved out, struggling to find new homes for the bike shop, prisoner's library, and kitchen. It was the end of an experiment in post-petroleum collapse urban futurism. The experiments continue on the south Austin brownfield deeded to the Rhizome Collective as part of an Environmental Protection Agency cleanup grant. Scott and Stacy moved on to Albany, New York, to found the Radix Ecological Sustainability Center, where future RUST workshops will be held.

As part of a work exchange program for the 2008 RUST workshop, I volunteered a day at the brownfield property, helping to hand-build Austin's first city approved, code compliant public composting toilet. We used rubble dumped on the land from past

demolition for the toilet's walls, held together with 11,000 pounds of concrete mixed with shovels in wheelbarrows. The design is divided in half so that humanure in one side can cure for a year while the other side is in use. The resulting pathogen-free nightsoil feeds the garden downhill from the toilet. The system produces free fertilizer while saving water (and the energy used in water's production and treatment). This kind of bundled multiple solutions approach is a standard design principle at RUST. At the warehouses, the improvised composting toilet consisted of an outhouse on top of bales of hay around a big trashcan. Located within 100 feet of a sewer line, it was barred by City code – an anarchist toilet with “Give a shit for the revolution!” graffitied inside.

Being radical, many of the propositions at RUST were not up to code. It depends on where you live. Austin has lax chicken laws, but recycling anything but washing machine greywater in your yard is technically illegal. So is harboring plants like water hyacinth that are instrumental in bioremediating greywater. (Pouring urine on your compost pile is a gray area.) Catching rainwater is actively supported by Austin Water, but was illegal in New Mexico and Colorado until recently. But houses are private lairs, so as long as you don't let your greywater pond turn into a stagnant, mosquito breeding wreck, and don't let the scent of humanure waft into the neighbor's yard, you should be able to fly under the radar.

The more benign permaculture systems at RUST had to do with growing and raising food, composting organic matter, and building machines that run on alternative energy forms like solar or muscle power. Scott led workshop participants around the warehouses and grounds to aquaculture ponds full of tilapia, duckweed, and shrimp, a scavenged satellite dish arrayed with mirrors that focus photons to ignite cardboard or boil water, and a homemade wind generator that needed some work. The tour's tableaux let you picture doing the various DIY projects, living the urban homestead life. Round the corner of the “microlivestock” pen and see Scott posing on a milk crate with the beautiful turkey. Dim the lights and watch him demonstrate lighting a torch of homemade methane gas produced by rotting water hyacinth. One by one, a slew of little projects, performed and described, kick-started a self-educated learning process that might not ever stop (or start).

One thing blurs into the next as we run through far too many DIY projects to cram into one weekend.

Although RUST workshops are free to people of color and the DIY designs taught there are intended for the urban poor, the bulk of the seventy participants were twenty-something white women and men from middle class backgrounds – creative class people from around Austin, the west coast, and the northeast. A single Black man participated, asking in a discussion session what it was about the concern for urban sustainability that draws mostly white people. In keeping with the critiques of broader social and environmental justice movements, workshop leaders kept open a self-reflexive inquiry about whiteness and the issues of who has access to land, who is exposed to urban industrial pollutants, and how sustainability and organic food have been capitalized as privileges. RUST mutates middle class tastes for gardening and home improvement into ways to get sustainable. At the same time, workshop leaders problematized the individual, the “you” in Do-It-Yourself, and promoted collective political action as a necessary foundation for water and food security in cities. Appropriate technologies, animals, plants, and microbiological life forms serve as the technical means for collective security.

*nonhuman collectives* | Dogs, a turkey, chickens, machines, and all sorts of other nonhumans swarm at RUST. I hear roosters and someone playing piano while Lauren talks about water security. We’re learning about a wormbox Tupperware vegetable waste processor that makes “black gold” for the garden when Scott’s daughter gets one of the worms and tries to feed it to the dog. When Ignacio from Bikes Across Borders demonstrates a bike-powered blender driven by a modified roller skate wheel against the back tire, you get to taste the smoothie. RUST learning happens with multisensory events going on as parts of the scene. Whistling volunteers make lunch in the kitchen at the back of the big room where another presenter, Rafter Sass, extols “liberation ecology” – a mode of production that moves from extraction and exploitation to intense cultivation and connectivity. Having a kitchen without walls at the back of the lecture room complemented his ideas, keeping you in touch with the smells and sounds of cooking. What might be considered interruptions are nurtured by

how spaces overlap, the kids playing in the nursery somehow adding to a multifaceted sensory education.

RUST tunes the imagination to the invisible. Lauren Ross offered lectures on chemicals in urban water and soil, the possibilities of bioremediation using wetlands or compost tea, and the microbe agents in healthy soil ecologies. Illustrations in the workshop handouts zoom in on earthworms with bacteria in their digestive tracts clutching napkins, forks, and knives, eating decomposition – a giddy scaling of beings within beings. Using a backlit microscope we peered in on nematodes, bacteria, and fungal mycelia in a slide of worm box dirt. Lauren warned of deleterious health effects of chemical pollutants in the food and water cycling between our bodies and urban landscapes. Chlorinated tap water sterilizes the soil in your garden, so we should all use rainwater. But you need to ensure that your rain catchments are not contaminating the water. Be suspicious of urban soil toxicity: homegrown organic veggies could carry loads of lead or heavy metals. Lauren promoted testing water and soil to mitigate these risks. As an ecological engineer, she



Composting toilet, aquaculture system, and microlivestock.

has designed several wetlands around Austin that detoxify water through bioremediation, and worked with Scott on a community based project to break down oily soil in post-Katrina New Orleans using bacteria- and fungus-rich compost tea.

The ecological home improvement projects enacted at the Rhizome Collective are not as simple as replacing a filament light bulb with a fluorescent – something you can do and forget about. Instead, they fold the individual into the processes that make houses work, amplifying and reframing the house and city as a living ecosystem, inviting new species into the mix of machinic components. Since *you* are their keystone species, these systems of beings require you to do things like tending water gardens or worm boxes. Rather than promising a final emancipation, altering the house with patchworks of DIY sustainability pulls you into relationships of dependency, as if parts of your house had become pets. Your garbage disposal turned into chickens. The compost heap needs fluffing again. But you also depend on these entities to keep the house going. Cultivation becomes the sharing of vulnerability, the individual body and its habits redistributed among interdependent life forms in a living machine.

This intense cultivation hinges on localization. The RUST workshop teemed with dreamy possibilities of an emergent probiotic urbanism – a sort of DIY superorganic bioindustrial revolution. Like Portland’s City Repair Project, they yearn to re-localize everything at autonomous community scales (independent of statewide scales of governance or globalized scales of multinational corporations). Similarly, Agents of Change, a London design collective, imagines what could be done if vacant lots in Granby were treated as “Special Cultivation Zones” for food and cultural production using the skills, knowledge, and creative play of community members instead of money-driven redevelopment. British economist Colin Hines thinks of localization as necessarily redesigning legal systems and trade agreements to “[discriminate] in favour of the local” while encouraging flows of information and technology “that *further* localization” (2000:4-5). In Cancun, Lauren met the *globopositivos* who celebrate positive aspects of a globalized world like learning from successful localization solutions and DIY designs instead of re-inventing the wheel. Re-localization and de-centralization are strategies of cultivation that cobble together futures

out of abandoned ways of doing things (like composting human manure), mixed with expert ecological and epidemiological knowledge to monitor and test for toxins and pathogens in soil and water.

In addition to an overarching strategy of re-localization, DIY skills taught at RUST stressed *preparedness* by familiarizing myriad alternatives to status quo sustainability. Another guiding principle: *the problem is full of solutions*. Why poison your kitchen with pesticides when you can make a roach trap out of a soda bottle and molasses, and feed the bugs to chickens? Why pay the landfill to take a dead refrigerator when you can transform it into a solar water heater? Focusing on improvisation and salvage to solve particular problems disinvests water and food security from money so that low-income communities can meet their own needs in the event of *total systemic breakdown*. The Rhizome Collective's urgent task is to (learn to) construct sustainable systems while we can, as Scott grimly puts it, "to avoid catastrophic die off and suffering." Spaceship earth is crashing.

## TINY WETLANDS

A few summers after RUST, a little catastrophe crossed the sky. Not chemtrails or hurricanes, but *nothing* – no rain. Lake Travis, the reservoir formed by damming the Colorado River to supply the City with water, was fifty feet below average levels. With the mini-crisis of the 2009 drought, the environmental group Save Our Springs sent out a mass-email urging conservation: “We can no longer take water for granted.” Drought makes this ‘we’ – a community gathered around the possibility of vanishing water. A population drop in endangered Barton Springs salamanders set off a fresh wave of worry over their extinction. ‘We’ are a hierarchized community of humans and salamanders, one rendering the other vulnerable. No longer taking water for granted is posed as an ethical responsibility to change the relationship between an entire city and the landscape it occupies.

In response to the drought, the City enforced conservation by restricting automated watering to one day a week and creating a dozen new jobs — water cops — to enforce restrictions with \$500 fines. When droughts pry open the taken-for-granted form of urban water, its consumption takes on moral tones: last summer, Lance Armstrong apologized for using 333,000 gallons of water in a single month. This summer, Austinites helped police their neighbor’s water use by calling 311 if they saw sprinklers running on the wrong day. Conserving water through simple things like *fast showers* took on the moral quality of doing something good for both the City and “the environment.” Little differences are supposed to add up – drops that fill the bucket for the good of the collective. As with oil consumption and other environmental issues in the public sphere, an almost messianic, salvational ethic begins to course through everyday practices, charged up by worrisome affective facts. Suddenly entire cities seem to be rendered vulnerable, caught in the tenuous future of apocalyptic discourses.

***apocalypse!*** | The potential catastrophes of global climate change, future water scarcity, and the like settle on the present in a nebulous temporality of threat. These Anthropocene forces are “affective facts” (Massumi forthcoming) – virtual objects (at once real and/or imaginary) that demand response and preparedness. They drive new anxieties, changes

of habits, and emergent moralities and ethics. They saturate RUST workshops (and environmentalist discourses more generally) with what Susan Harding and Kathleen Stewart recognize as a “pervasive apocalyptic sensibility” – a voice in American politics and publics that “mixes horror and hope, nightmare and dream, destruction and creation, dystopia and utopia” (1999:286). As Meg Mundell writes in the grips of the apocalyptic sensibility hitting Australia after a ten-year drought, “running out of water carries a visceral kind of fear” (2007). Affective facts generate shared bodily states of anxiety and stress (Stewart 2007: 43), as well as sensory attunement to apocalyptic signs of climate change like dry summers or odd weather. The DIY projects and community organizing taught at RUST are ways to tinker with the material contours of catastrophe, to get a grip on something in the midst of a world that seems to be falling apart, fast. Crucially, the small-scale solutions to big problems draw individuals into new social networks and ongoing relationships of caring for living things. Fear, anxiety, and the gloom of future catastrophes might give way to the surprises and pleasures of habitats bursting with life.

If the future threat of water scarcity precipitates a shared sense of anxiety and worry, it has the potential to transform another transpersonal bodily state – the urban hydrological cycles coursing through clouds, rivers, pipes, sewers, treatment plants, and our bodies. The future-ordinary of scarcity puts a pressure on the everyday, a verdict of damnation and misery (at least for some) if we don’t change. New political struggles, public feelings, and self-shaping moral forces are welling up in this pressure zone. People start feeling guilty over long showers, worrying about the salamanders. Sometimes urgency mobilizes, sometimes hopelessness settles in. Then it rains and worry shifts to a more pressing ecological risk.

While the affective fact of a dehydrated world might settle into a general fantasy of doom, the messianic side of the apocalyptic sensibility might also shape a re-valuation of urban waste as free material with which to create positive, immediate changes within the ordinary domestic world, the private realm of individuals. The future-ordinary of water scarcity that has arrived in our moment might serve as a vantage point into a post-apocalyptic world that survived the end of water as we knew it. As an affective fact, future water scarcity illuminates urban wastewater as a *surplus* full of utopian potential.

This is a story about how drought anxiety and a love of tinkering with ponds transformed my kitchen sink into a wetland junk ecology. And then the shower. And who knows what next?

*Status quo sewerage* | To meet the ever-expanding city's water needs, Austin is building an \$849 million treatment plant that will draw 50 million gallons a day (mgd) from the Colorado River by 2014, assuming the reservoir's water levels hold. But the City also pursues ways to conserve water. Like other public utilities, it tries to save money by encouraging consumers to consume less. Austin avoids water use by spraying pre-treated greywater on municipal lawns, giving away low-flush toilets, and offering rainbarrel rebates. Customers are expected to install new toilets and rainbarrels with DIY skills. Along these lines, decentralized solutions are popping up whereby consumers have partially disengaged from municipal water grids. In Oakland, California, self-appointed "Greywater Guerillas" built DIY wetlands to remediate wastewater "before it was lost forever down the evil sewer" as they put it, with dramatic moral flair (Allen & Woelfle-Erskine 2007:146).

The taken-for-granted historical forms of potable urban water and wastewater management crystallized in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Matthew Gandy describes how producing clean water and "handling ... waste water posed an immense technical, fiscal, and political challenge" to what he calls the "hygienic" or "bacteriological city" (2004:364-6). Maria Kaika tracks the accompanying emergence of the moral/epidemiological binary of "*good water* (clean, processed, controlled, commodified) and *bad water* (dirty, grey, metabolized, non-processed, non-commodified)" (2004:267-8). Kaika examines how household water can become *uncanny*. Following a drought in Athens, Greece, "taps inside peoples homes refused to provide their services as expected; they became a form of domestic uncanny: familiar objects which behaved in unfamiliar and disrupting ways" (280). Kaika's analysis highlights how houses "alienate" us from material realities of hidden infrastructure. Like the Greywater Guerillas' war on "evil sewers," Kaika gestures to possibilities of "emancipation" from our alienated relationships with water. Adding to the uncanny, I think of bad water is *abject*—a decomposition of the border between living

and dead matter, a dangerous vector of impurities. Taking the remediation of bad water into my own hands by building DIY wetlands brings me into contact with this abject realm. Rather than emancipation, it leads to a pattern of dependency – the wetlands and I need each other. I may no longer be alienated from parts of my house’s sewers, but I’m tied to aliens – microbes, larval forms, rhizomes that take over.

To produce ‘good water’ on a citywide scale, Austin currently pumps up to 285 mgd from the Colorado River to two treatment plants where it goes through technical stages of “screening, disinfection, coagulation, flocculation, sedimentation, and filtration” (Austin Water 2010). The Colorado River then flows through 3,600 miles of pipes into houses, where multiple forms of bad water are produced. Kitchen taps, showerheads, and washing machines pour out *greywater*. Toilet bowls fill with *blackwater*. It all muddles together in sewers as *wastewater* mixed with *sludge*, an abject collection of excreta, toxic household cleaners, pharmaceuticals, gold rings, skin and hair shed in showers, and everything else that goes down the drain.

Gravity and pumps then pull Austin’s wastewater through 2,600 miles of sewers to two plants that treat 150 mgd. Screens and grit basins remove trash, sticks, and stones that are trucked to landfills. Organic solids settle out as sludge in clarifier basins. Pumps suck sludge to a biosolids management plant to be mixed with yard debris from curbside pickup. After months of composting, it is bagged and sold as DilloDirt—an uncanny product partly made of the consumer’s own excrement. Meanwhile, wastewater enters aeration basins full of microorganisms that metabolize the last traces of sludge. Finally, it flows into chlorine basins where bad water is officially killed. More chemicals remove the chlorine before the City delivers the inert water back to the Colorado River. The pumps involved at multiple stages in these processes require large-scale electricity production. Squadrons of workers tend power lines, pumps, pipes, roads, and all the rest of the subsystems. The water network is full of cracks and leaks that can be altered at various scales. Partial solutions like catching rain or selectively disengaging from sewers begin to patch together urban water futures in the present systems’ gaps.

*improvisations* | Soon after buying a house in east Austin, my kitchen sink stopped draining. I'd read about DIY wetlands in the Greywater Guerrillas' book *Dam Nation: Dispatches from the Water Underground*, and thought, "This is free water! Why pay the City to take it away? I can reuse it for plants, instead of the hose." The licensed plumber couldn't fix the sink drain without replacing everything, so I asked him to just put a pipe out the back of the house. He was dubious. Every few days for half a year, I hauled buckets of greywater from beneath the drainage pipe to a feed trough full of pea gravel and elephant ear. The plants withered and mosquito larva infested the water. The galvanized metal tub killed the gambusia minnows introduced to eat the larva. Rat-tailed maggots also colonized the bad water; their breathing tubes tangled in the pump and stopped it up. (But the maggots become hoverflies – bee mimics, pollinators, with an amazing ability to float at a single point in space.) The greywater stank in the summer sun, a rotten egg smell that stuck to my hands after cleaning dead rat-tails from the pump. The wetlands' learning curve took me through an abject realm of decaying organisms.

Eventually I patched together pipes connecting sink to wetland—no more hauling buckets. Incoming greywater now displaces remediated water to a fig tree, rose bush, and bog salvia with violet-blue flowers. At the RUST workshop I learned to hide the water's surface under pea gravel to stop mosquitoes from breeding. Next, I hijacked our shower, inoculating the new ponds with bacteria-laden sludge from the kitchen wetland. Carrying much less sludge, this greywater offered a readymade habitat for fishes. Gravity pushes shower water to a buried Jacuzzi shell. A pump pulls it to a bathtub so it aerates by falling between ponds. Gambusia flourish, devouring mosquitoes, while goldfish control algae. That first spring, hundreds of tadpoles hatched, and fingernail-size baby toads colonized the yard.

DIY wetlands take form through improvisational aesthetics – hands-on encounters with things that push back and teach as they emerge. Improvisation involves ad hoc engineering, making it up as you go along, and all kinds of idiomatic solutions. Following Nigel Thrift, aesthetic forms like ponds “[generate] sensory and emotional gratification” and “shared capacity and commonality” (forthcoming: 315) – the pleasures of being around thriving habitats or teaching people about greywater remediation. The improvised aesthetic

forms of DIY wetlands are spreading in Austin partly through their cultivation in semi-public houses like the Rhizome Collective that act as impromptu educational facilities. Transmission of self-taught knowledge happens during tours of these places, in the presence of living models.

*Living machines* | In DIY wetlands, urban waste feeds little worlds of nonhuman agents – populations of plants, animals, and microorganisms cultivated as the human means for wastewater management that thrive as autonomous ends. In the 1970s, permaculture architects John and Nancy Todd started designing what they called “living machines” that integrate organisms as components and mimic ecological processes and structures by organizing species in linked greenhouse habitats. While most machines are designed to meet a single purpose, living machines “can be designed to produce food or fuels, treat wastes, purify air, regulate climates, or even to do all of these simultaneously” (1993:167). As “both garden and machine,” the Todds’ designs run mostly on sunlight that feeds plant and bacterial assemblages responsible for metabolizing sludge.

If architecture exteriorizes bodies and metabolic processes as Gandy suggests, the kitchen sink wetland extends my intestines. Shower water pond tadpoles eat bits of me in the form of shed skin. Such cyborg living machines are uncanny and abject figures, to be sure, but also fascinating, surprising, and loveable. They invite species into emergent micro-ecologies made possible by the city’s excesses.

These patches do much more than function or survive; they tinker, bloom, and flourish. In the kitchen sink wetland, cannas introduced from the yard explode into giant stalks with droopy orange flowers. Water hyacinth – illegal non-natives from South America – spread across pond surfaces, feathery roots catching sludge for bacteria to eat. Invasive elephant ear from the Colorado River unfurl rhizomes and colonize the tubs. Raccoons who lost their homes when the City buried a neighborhood creek raided the wetland in winter and ate most of the elephant ear tubers. This gave the native arrowroot from the Rhizome Collective a chance to spread in the spring. Hummingbirds sip nectar from their arrays of bright blue flowers. Dragonflies dip eggs into the water, and the growing nymphs

eat mosquito larva. Gulf Coast toads hop around the yard at dusk, their trilling refrains overlaying bubbling water. The pond overflows to hydrate an avocado and peach tree, soaking into the Boggy Creek watershed that feeds the Colorado River. Just how big is this backyard living machine?

As the probiotic machine takes on a life of its own, multispecies create beautiful sensory worlds through their refrains. Water management on micro-scales involves time/labor/attention intensive practices, but the nonhumans that call wetlands home do most of the work. Inside the living machine, greywater and I became part of a long-term process in collaboration with plants, microbes, and animals. These symbioses make a strange collective ‘we’ out of the ‘I’ promised freedom from labor and disease by the bacteriological city’s waterworks. As Bruno Latour writes (or perhaps hopes), “We no longer expect from the future that it will emancipate us from all our attachments; on the contrary, we expect that it will attach us with tighter bonds to more numerous crowds of aliens who have become full-fledged members of the collective” (2004: 191). This collective doubles as an art yard.



Shower wetland from the roof.

## RARE CARNIVORES

Colin is a metalworker who cultivates carnivorous plants as a hobby and out of a concern for conservation. Just a few at first. Then a friend offered his plant collection for free: the friend had started collecting poison dart frogs instead. These South American amphibians eat ants and transfer the toxic alkaloids to their skins. Chemically related to nicotine, caffeine, opium derivatives, and various psychotropes, the frogs' alkaloid poisons inhibit nerve transmissions, causing paralysis and even stopping the heart. Under captivity, dart frogs consume a non-toxic, alkaloid-free diet, so lose their power to poison. They still *look* wildly dangerous – skins of pure, bright colors warning deadly toxins. A terrarium of poison dart frogs looks like a shattered rainbow fallen as blobs on plant leaves.

But a collection of carnivorous plants resembles an alien jungle, or some kind of fireworks display exploding in flora instead of gunpowder. Cobras hissing. Poison dart frogs require less maintenance and electricity. You can keep frog tanks somewhat dark, like their homes in the lower canopies of rainforests. But carnivorous plants cultivated indoors



Feed trough bog.

require artificial light about eighteen hours a day. Tap water's mineral and chemical traces (accumulated during water treatment and by traveling through old city pipes) kills the delicate plants, so you need to give them store-bought distilled water, or better yet, rainwater caught on site. As one plant person I talked with at Spunky Monkey Ranch's closing party complained, "carnivorous plants are just about the most demanding things you can grow. What a pain – they die with no warning. The water has to be absolutely pure. And they're useless – maybe the worst plant you can grow!" The plants require a finicky life-support system; they are extremophile organisms adapted to highly specialized habitats. They filled a niche by colonizing nutrient poor, acidic soils, supplementing their diets by eating bugs. Endangered by habitat degradation, the landscapes they now inhabit include feed troughs, terrariums, and online forums through which their cultivators trade the plants' seeds and self-cloned side-buds.

The bulk of Colin's collection lives inside his house. He used to grow them at the metalworking studio, but when he moved locations, decided to take them home. Now they're packed onto three metal shelving units with a dozen or so fluorescent lights. Plant tanks line the floor at the foot of the shelves. The little room crammed with bizarre flora is humid with evaporated water and an acrid smell. The plants grow in individual plastic pots arranged in glass aquaria holding a few inches of water. Some of the tanks are roadside finds with cracked glass. Colin keeps a few representatives of around sixty species in cultivation. But he periodically loses some as they mysteriously take ill and wither. He replenishes lost species by purchasing or trading seeds and side-buds from online forums.

The collection thrived at the well-lit studio, but at the house, the rigged up lights offer too little photons. Some of the plants have already desiccated. Colin explains, "the plants go through periods of dormancy, where they look dead but are just waiting for the right conditions to grow again. Sometimes they shrivel up like that for no reason, and sometimes they never come out of dormancy." He points out what looks like a greenish-red rose with chubby petals. "This butterwort's one of my favorite species. It goes into dormancy very easily. It's really hard to bring back. I've almost killed it several times."

Carnivorous plants' leaves are tongues and mouths, trapping insects on sticky dewdrops or behind one-way alleys of backwards-pointing hairs. Butterworts (genus *Pinguicula*) catch and digest bugs on their leaves. Many varieties are prized for their flowers, and most can reproduce through lateral offshoots, so they can be cultivated from both seeds and tissue cultures. Venus flytraps (genus *Dionaea*) work like bear traps, snapping shut from stimulation, and the five species of pitcher plants work by mimicking the welcoming, sweet smelling nooks of flowers. Bugs fall down into vats of water made deadly with digestive enzymes and symbiotic bacteria. The tiny bladderworts (genus *Utricularia*) suck up microorganisms through the mesh of trapdoors that have replaced their root systems. Specialized glands on the tentacle leaves of sundews (genus *Drosera*) secrete an insect attractant and sticky mucilage that adheres to inquisitive prey. Some species bend around their food to maximize contact with the deadly dew. Struggling bugs clog their exoskeletons' breathing spiracles, dying of suffocation while plant enzymes produced by the same glands dissolve them into a "nutritional soup." Finally, the glands then sop up the soup.

These five genera of carnivorous plants have colonized every continent except Antarctica. As extremophile species, they evolved in microhabitats where very few other plants can survive. Venus flytraps only grow in the nitrogen- and calcium-poor bogs of North and South Carolina, except for those plants cultivated under human agency. Sometimes Do-It-Yourself megastores like Home Depot sell flytraps and other carnivorous genera, but without telling you to give them distilled water. The plants seem to die as soon as you get them home. Colin has found pitcher plants and *Drosera* in the swamps outside New Orleans, and seen these habitats wiped out by the city's spread. A purposive preservationist project is built into his collection. His house doubles as an ad hoc, ex situ microhabitat that simulates landscape patches fragmented or destroyed by urbanization. Colin muses that the carnivorous plants' otherworldly forms give them a selective advantage by seducing humans into becoming their guardians and cultivators.

In addition to his indoor habitat and its life-support system of artificial lights and rains of distilled water, Colin built a more self-sustaining bog in a big round cattle trough in the backyard. He lined the trough with plastic, put some rocks and charcoal at the bottom

as a filter, and filled the rest with nitrogen-poor peat moss and sand. There's a foot-deep wedge in the top surface lined with slate stone where you can add water until the waterline becomes visible. Since it was such a wet spring, rains watered the bog. *Drosera binata* sundews twirl out their long bifurcated tendrils, glistening with dewdrops and peppered with little gnats. There are some delicate clusters of Venus flytraps, the tiny blades of bladderworts and their sub-soil vacuum jails, and some foot tall pitcher plants. "One of my friends collected the pitchers from her family's land outside New Orleans. I was reluctant to accept them since they were removed from the wild, but I think they're naturalizing in the bog." Then they died in the summer drought.

The feed trough is the prototype for a pitch Colin wants to make to the Austin Botanical Gardens. The Gardens always strike people as sub par, and Colin says "every big metropolitan area needs a great botanical garden. Ours just doesn't have anything unique enough yet." He hopes to be involved in setting up a big garden of carnivorous plants there. Rain catches could water the plants. No need for artificial lights if cultivated in a big glass greenhouse outside.

What else grows in the backyard? Fruit trees, taro, mint varieties, a compost heap with a few avocado trees sprouting out the top. A half-enclosed greenhouse growing hanging baskets of pitcher plants and tray-bound plastic planters of butterworts, bladderworts, and sundews. A little hillock garden lined with karst stones that spirals up like a seashell, a pond made out of a free Jacuzzi from Craigslist that's colonized by hyacinth, and a wetland for kitchen sink graywater bioremediation that could be made to feed the Jacuzzi pond. Fuzzy yellow caterpillars are bad this year. Angeliska tears them off the plants and squishes them underfoot, face twisted in mock disgust.

Like the pitcher plants in the bog, Colin's partner Angeliska moved from New Orleans. She has family in Austin, and was planning on moving anyway, but Hurricane Katrina pushed her migration a year ahead of schedule. Her New Orleans home had lost its roof, so she bought this old drafty house in East Austin with Colin. They've been exhaustively fixing it up, tearing out walls in one room to make an entry foyer, putting a higher ceiling in another. Sometimes they throw big parties Once they decorated with

upside down Christmas trees hanging from the rafters. Every time I go by, the house seems to have a different configuration, as if the walls are randomly shifting, doorways disappearing from visit to visit. Their house is a honeycomb, with mutable routes from cell to cell. Sometimes a cell disappears for a while into private inaccessibility. Sometimes a cell sprouts carnivorous plants and the life-support systems that make the microhabitats possible. Only the kitchen on one end of the house and the bedroom on the other remain fixed points. They covered the old walls of exposed wood plank with lacy cloth, dolls, framed posters of circus performers, natural history keying guides in German and French. In the bedroom, the dressers are topped with big assemblies of two-headed stuffed animals, vampire Cupies with bloodied mouths, monstrous cloth dolls with baby bodies and wolf heads. Carnivorous plants round out this ecology of natural and artificial anomalies and gothic monstrosities, saturating the house with a boggy smell, a decadent humidity.

Colin loaned his first terrarium of sundews and bladderworts to MNAE's "Animals" exhibition. He had cut them all back to the roots, so we watched the sundews unfurl. The *D. adela* had thrived in low light, but the *D. binata* were small and green – they usually take on a reddish hue and grow taller. Carnivorous plants ruin Miguel DeLanda's idea of saintly green vegetarian flora that soak up the sun and selflessly give the energy to the animals (1997: 105). Carnivorous plants are species of becoming-animals. The specialized organs, glands, and enzymes carnivores use to eat and digest each other seem to have floated free and attached to plant structures. Charles Darwin's last book, *The Power of Movement in Plants*, explores the sensitive nervous systems of his beloved Venus flytraps. Plants that eat bugs, plants that feel – what next, plants with civilization?

## **BOGGY CREEK FARM**

Carol Ann talked to the crowd from her front porch. “I know why you’re here. Things are tough, and we’re all worried. We need *true* homeland security.” Around sixty people gathered for a tour of Boggy Creek Farm, most of them in their later years unlike the twenty-somethings drawn to the Rhizome Collective. The homes we feel we need to secure are bodies in cities, and plants can help us. Edible plants *are* security. But growing a farm has a steep learning curve. The first step is securing water and land, and then comes learning how to make soil.

The house in the middle of Boggy Creek Farm where Carol Ann Sayle lives with her partner Larry Butler is one of the three oldest structures in Austin. Built in 1840 in the bottomlands of the Colorado River with its rich alluvial soil, the house has been surrounded by farms for most of a century and a half. Carol Ann and Larry bought the place in 1992 and gave it its current name in honor of the creek with concrete banks a block away. They lifted the lid off the 150-year-old well to find “Boggy Creek” etched on the underside. Now three other organic farms share the neighborhood. Archaeologists from the University have come to dig for 19<sup>th</sup> century debris like kitchen garbage, pottery, and horseshoes. On the Farm’s website, Carol Ann recognizes the house itself as “a physical testament to the labors of the African slaves who undoubtedly had a hand in its construction, and who worked the fields of this antebellum plantation. This page is dedicated to their memory” (Boggy Creek Farm 2009). Memories in the landscape keep popping out of the soil, preserved in the form of the house itself.

The soil here has good memories of twenty years of caring cultivation. It is the Farm’s main product. As Carol Ann says, “Focus on the soil and forget about the plants.” Our tour began in the front garden, where the gravel driveway and rocks in the soil soak up heat and keep the field a few degrees warmer than the back garden. Next we visit the compost heaps – twenty foot long rows as tall as a person. There are several rows in different stages of decomposition. They are metabolic digesters that reach 150° F. Every few days they need to be turned with a front-end loader to keep the temperature right and replenish the oxygen inside. On cold days they steam when turned. Carol Ann describes



Trash turning into soil.

soil production as “not an exact science ... more of an art or common sense.” Science labs are involved, as they send soil samples in to find out how to amend the compost before adding it to the beds. While soils cultivated with chemical fertilizers and pesticides are composed of only .3% organic matter, the labs say 3-4% of Boggy Creek’s soil is rotting plant matter, manure, worms, fungi, microbes, and the like.

Based on lab results, they add molasses, green sand, sulfur, and other amendments to the compost before putting it in the gardens. Depending on the plant, the bottomlands’ alkaline soil might call for acidity: add bat guano or cottonseed meal. But getting the right ratio of 1 part nitrogen to 20 parts carbon begins with the compost heaps. Green plants and chicken manure make for good nitrogen, while fallen leaves, twigs and branches, dry grass, and other brown and brittle trash bulk up the carbon. Carol Ann sees the compost heaps as a form of carbon sequestration. They’re good for balancing the Anthropocene sky.

*trash* | Boggy Creek Farm used to collect the neighborhood's curbside bags full of trash -- Old Norse for "fallen leaves and sticks." Sanitation workers appreciated their free labor. Now landscapers drop off their trash instead of paying the landfill to take them. Microbial agents do all the work of transforming trash into a rich soil amendment. The compost heaps need to be kept moist as a wrung out sponge to "keep the microbes happy." Carol Ann pictures them in their giant home, "eating and pooping, mating and going on vacations.... there's animals in there!" People stick their hands into the warm heaps as we walk by to the back garden beds.

Behind the 200-foot long beds is a small orchard of fig and citrus trees, and some random compost piles of slowly decomposing rhubarb stalks. Because the bottomlands' high clay content leads to bad drainage, the beds are raised, but not by building them up in containers. Instead, paths have been dug down between the rows of plants. Before seeding new crops, the farmers walk the rows with a machine that gently fluffs the top few inches of beds that had gone flat over the growing season -- the no-tilling method. Carol Ann cautions not to do this with a shovel because the beds are home to thriving civilizations. "Those civilizations *die* when you throw them up in the air like that. That's what's happening in Iraq and the Gaza Strip." Suddenly the peaceful soil civilizations that grow homeland security at Boggy Creek Farm are directly connected to conflicts in the Middle East. The connections could be drawn through this organic farm's rejection of petroleum intensive status quo agriculture. Instead the connections form through practices aimed at facilitating civilizations to thrive in a self-emergent manner, to disturb their sovereignty as little as possible. Carol Ann points to the chicken coop next to her house. She feels that the egg hens know they won't be killed, so they have "a sense of peace about them" that harmonizes with the microbe civilizations in the raised soil beds. Maybe this sense of peace rubs off on visitors to the farm.

To disturb the beds as little as possible, the farmers harvest plants by cutting them off at the base. Their nutrient-rich roots can decompose in the soil, and bacteria, nematodes, mycorrhizae, and other organisms are not yanked out of their civilizations. Then the machine fluffs the top few inches of soil, and people use hoes to pull decomposing

mulch in the footpaths up onto the beds. Finally, they add an inch of compost to revitalize the topsoil. A mulch of dry leaves or hay laid down on the paths holds in moisture and marks where to step. Now the rows are ready for planting seeds.

The cultivation of trash into soil takes time, machines, and knowledge. To get an idea of the labor involved, replace the front-end loader that turns compost heaps with human-powered pitchforks. Skilled labor accelerates the production of rich soil that otherwise takes hundreds of years. The “bottomlands” and “blacklands” of east Austin are centuries old alluvial beds that settlers exploited for growing food and cotton. The soil growers at Boggy Creek Farm are trying to close the loop of replenishing topsoil by cultivating its ecology of microorganisms and macroinvertebrates. Caring for the autonomous soil civilizations predetermines what plants can grow in the landscape. This soil is living dust. Under the right conditions dust can become the growth medium for microbe civilizations, and then an understory, and trees. So much for “ashes to ashes, dust to dust” mortality.

**civilization** | In *The Final Empire: The Collapse of Civilization and the Seed of the Future*, William H. Koetke narrates an apocalyptic history of agriculture’s relationship with soil. Koetke forecasts that the relationship will end in mass starvation as civilizations destroy topsoil through deforestation, erosion, and topsoil degradation. “The topsoil is the energy bank that has been laboriously accumulated over millennia... This points out a simple principle: *Human society must have as its central value, a responsibility to maintain the soil*” (2005:159; his italics). Far from the details of turning compost or revitalizing garden beds, Koetke’s sweeping argument about human civilization unfolds in a cosmic realm between the rock of human extinction and the soft place of heaven on Earth. “*Creating a utopian paradise, a new Garden of Eden is our only hope*” (161; his italics).

An alternative to the sectarian salvational discourse at work here and in other environmental arguments<sup>7</sup> might be redefining “civilization” following Carol Ann’s

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<sup>7</sup> For more on sectarian discourses see Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky’s *Risk and Culture: An Essay on the Selection of Technical and Environmental Dangers* (1982). The authors argue that the dynamics of sectarian or religious splinter groups charge the secular issues of environmental risk in US discourses. Attributions of the dangers and innate corruption of large organizations color Koetke’s portrayal of “civilization” and the idea that localization is automatically better or safer than globalization.

description of topsoil ecologies. Picture civilization from the ground up as teeming multispecies relationships – not a human thing at all, *nor* something that will necessarily flourish without humans. Now imagine a reversal of the universal, grandiose, macroscale entity “civilization” as not existing in itself but instead only through the relationships between particular earthworms, mycorrhizal networks, plants, herbivores, and people. Now we’re getting somewhere! A world to cohabit.

These collectives of humans and nonhumans captured by one another’s improvisational refrains might be characterized as *allies* in becoming-with each other as symbiotic characters in the landscape. The ethnobotanist and poet Dale Pendall writes about medicinal plants that alter human metabolism as poisonous “allies,” here to help and heal humans in exchange for our alliances. Pendall figures plant species as powerful agents accidentally and intentionally cultivated alongside humans making their territories. Some can go weedy at any moment, while others depend entirely on people or anthropogenic atmospheres to flourish. When we cohabit with plants, “we are both transformed. That’s just what happens when plants dance with human beings. We still hear about it in the old stories. Metamorphosis” into plant people or naiads (178). Plants “have agendas of their own, however” (10). Allies can habituate people into mistaking their poisoned states as natural. Entering their refrains involves substantial subject-changing alteration of human consciousness and metabolism. Alliances are refrains that have solidified into a territorial codependence between beings that can no longer live without each other.

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I bike to Wednesday market. Got a head of broccoli, a bunch of beautiful red lettuce, and basil chevre. Tried to pay with my credit card, but they only take cash or check. “I don’t know what to do...” “We can do an IOU and you can bring it next week.” He wrote out IOU 11\$ and the date on a scrap of paper and handed it to me, joking about there “very high tech” credit system. It is high tech social networking software with no database or computer. The trust folds me into a future of coming back, paying back, and spending money on new veggies at the same time.

I walk by the late broccoli patch, the lettuces in a hundred foot row, and think of the nanny goats at a nearby farm that made the milk for chevre. The bees go about their free labor of pollinating, drawn by the wildflowers and moving on to food flowers. Are they on some kind of credit system as well? Some of these bees live at the farm, and some must come from the hive of a woman I met through the Museum who lives around the corner. Money feels sweetly erroneous – some old ghost haunting the house.

The martin houses, the noisy chicken coops, and the old white house where work gloves are pinned up on a clothesline.

## EPHEMERATA GARDENS

Nothing exists that is not in the form of life because life is eternal with or without people so we are grateful for life to be here at this very moment ... I would like to live until I learn what [life] is and what it isn't...that is, how do we kill death since it kills everything? ... No one can know anything that life creates since no one is life itself. And it's obvious, at least I believe, it's obvious the one reason why we as human beings get there and do things that seem to be valuable to us in relationship to intelligence ... creativity and love and all the things that have to do with waking up every morning believing it's going to be a better day today or tomorrow and yet at the same time death, life, sadness, anger, fear, all of those things are present at the same time as we are living and breathing. It is really, really eternal, this that we are constantly being created as human beings to know [life] exists and it's really, really unbelievable to know that nothing that's alive can die unless it's been killed. So what we should try to realize is to remove that part of what it is so that whatever we are, life is all there is ... (Coleman 2007)

DIYsneylands, improvisational permaculture systems, landscape patches of organic vegetables, and backyard wildlife preserves have been flourishing in Austin for several decades – with and without city planning. The more there are, the more there will be as the yardist symbiont spreads. These patches are many things at once: ecological regeneration projects, edible yards, private fantasylands and little utopias, public gathering places. Like the Museum's "impermanent collection," what they are emerges in encounter. Being there, you come up with various answers to wondering, "Just what is this place and how does it work?"

Like urban wastestreams, they are overabundantly rich in possibilities that exceed their intention and purpose. They cultivate themselves, while people facilitate their self-emergence. They enact a magical and imaginative materiality of living garbage, an aesthetic transformation of waste into beautiful and vivacious patterns. "Living" is a word or music of uncanny intelligences, senses, bodies, and forms entangled in relationships by a common habitat. You never know what living things will do with dead things kept present instead of buried in a landfill.

Sometimes I wonder about the soil ecology at the Cathedral of Junk, where bacteria and fungus have lived with metal for many years. A civilization of extremophiles adapted to bioremediating rusty dirt. Or the microorganisms acclimatized to Styrofoam and plastic on the mannequin heads at Smut Putt Heaven. These invisible agents know how to thrive in the trashed world, to make a living out of garbage. Vince and Scott have been

unwittingly cultivating maladapted urban microbes that restoration ecologists might enlist in remediating other landscapes. The aesthetic forms dwelling in improvisational ecologies might colonize other parts of the city, like Zagar's mosaics slowly encrusting parts of Philadelphia.

When we bought a house for the Museum, we suspected it would seep out into the yard. The fig trees and rose gardens planted by two generations of the house's former owners got us started. Ephemera Gardens has become a certified wildlife habitat and veggie patch with fruiting trees. It is a mosaic of forms learned and gathered from other projects in the city of living garbage – a junkitecture trellis made of bike wheels and salvage poles that you might see at Biosquat, a planter of bottles and cement inspired by Susan's work at Spunky Monkey Ranch, greywater wetlands in tubs based on RUST workshops. The greenhouse/Museum entrance and a small hothouse for starting seeds are composed of windows Hanson saved. Datura, lamb's quarters, mullein, morning glory, and other flora have migrated here from the Cathedral of Junk and Smut Putt Heaven. The compost bins and food garden's raised bed are partly based on techniques at Boggy Creek Farm.

Like these other landscapes, Ephemera Gardens collects things – neighbors' leaves for compost, hubcaps and metal scraps from the street. We've laid down paths built of bricks and blocks found in our yard and empty lots around us. I needed bottles to build with and started saving them five years ago. Now the little mountain of glass makes people worry. Did you drink all that yourself? I stack the bottles against a metal mesh fence to make raised beds, filled in with soil from a local organic garden store. The surplus bottles saved for future building border on hoarding. I feel compelled to keep saving although I suspect there are enough already. What is the tipping point between salvaging and hoarding, creation and compulsion?

Meanwhile the yard collects life. Walking sticks with dark striped backs moved in to the logs around the garden. Gulf coast toads flourish around the ponds. European bees pollinate flowers with metallic native Texan blue flies. Last winter, monk parrots announced their presence, squawking while picking at dried up hackberries. Spring brings

cedar waxwings to drink from the pond. Migratory birds haul seasons of sounds and feathered crests through the yard. This is their food garden, too.

Last year the figs we didn't pick were eaten by clouds of butterflies. About twenty of them at once, hovering around the rotting fruit, sticking in their curling tongues to drink. This year the birds are eating the figs before the butterflies have arrived. An adult mockingbird brings a fledgling down to eat. The cardinal sits on a bike wheel on a pole and dives down to a low, fig-heavy branch once he knows cats aren't around. A male blue jay and a baby grackle both make loud raids on the trees.

Even the figs we harvest have been feeding bugs. Squeeze them to test their ripeness. Sometimes two or three tiny beetles crawl out of the little hole at the fig's end, sometimes a sugar ant. When ripe, the maroon skin splits a little, and fruit pops off the tree with a gentle twist. While you're picking, look out for wasps licking up oozing nectar. When you eat, split the figs in half to make sure no more beetles or ants are in the house. The best figs taste almost like caramel, the sugars inside having been slowly baked by the sun. The ones that are a bit under ripe – maroon skin breaking green at the tree end – make a good smoothie.

The fruits start to ferment as soon as they're picked, making them good for local eating and bad for market export. This year, when there were so many figs that birds, bugs, and we couldn't eat them all, Jen made chutney. Boil the figs with seedless oranges, diced skin and all, and cider vinegar for a half hour, then let it cool and puree. The concoction keeps well and you can give some to friends, too. Someone told us to cut up figs, seal them with vodka, and in a few months you'll have brandy. Drying them is another possibility – I hear a cookie sheet and the dashboard of a hot car works well.

Figs' flowers are *inflorescences* hidden inside the fruits. The folds of sticky nodules and vegetable hairs resemble electron microscopy of interior organs or an alien landscape of miniature genitalia. Some species of figs reproduce in symbiosis with fig wasps that crawl inside to pollinate and lay eggs. In rainforests, figs are keystone species that feed swarms of big and little animals, even fish in rivers below the fruit-shedding trees. The oldest known human-planted tree is a holy fig in Sri Lanka, put in the ground in 288 BC, and Buddha's enlightenment bloomed under a fig tree. It is the first plant mentioned in

the Bible, leaves picked to cover human nakedness. The ficus family grows planet-wide and long predates the emergence of *Homo sapiens*' ancestors, for whom I imagine figs were sweet and easy pickings. The inflorescences enfold the figs' seeds, pollinating insects, biodiverse flourishings, and early hominids – a vast natural historical garden inside a small fruit. Worlds enveloped in tiny places.



Ephemerata Gardens in the snow.

## CONCLUSION

We might just as well rename environmental ecology *machinic ecology*, because Cosmic and human praxis has only ever been a question of machines... We need new social and aesthetic practices, new practices of the Self in relation to the other, to the foreign, the strange – a whole programme that seems far removed from current concerns. And yet, ultimately, we will only escape from the major crises of our era through the articulation of: a nascent subjectivity; a constantly mutating socius; an environment in the process of being reinvented... (Guattari 2000: 66; 68)

In *The Three Ecologies*, Félix Guattari rethinks Western foundational binaries like subjectivity/objectivity, nature/culture, and machines/life forms in terms of three kinds of interwoven ecologies: the biophysical environment (from which the ecology concept emerged in the mid-1800s), social relations, and human subjectivity. Guattari opposes “the logic of discursive sets” whereby things are represented as discrete *systems* and *structures* (like the individual psyche, or ecosystems as nature devoid of humans) with an “eco-logic” concerned with *processes* that “capture existence in the very act of its constitution, definition and deterritorialization” (44). Far from the objective Newtonian machine of a closed, zero sum system (winding down with thermodynamics), Guattari’s world-making processual machines are virtual entities of distributed subjectivity<sup>1</sup> that relate through the intensities, expressions, and improvisations of sentient components. Guattari asks us to rethink machines (and systems/structures generally) as extremely open and full of surprise, never finished (as far as our intentions go), forever connecting together and generating emergent worlds in unprogrammable articulatory chaos. These machines might be characterized as *living, alive*.

Guattari’s vantage on “machinic ecology” skews the taken-for-granted ‘thusness’ of objectivity and biophysical realities, preparing us to imagine urban natures as involutions

<sup>1</sup> For example, see the “desiring-machines” and “bodies without organs” that populate Guattari’s collaborations with Gilles Deleuze, *Anti-Oedipus* (1983), *1,000 Plateaus* (1987), and *What Is Philosophy?* (1994). Subjectivity concerns sensation, the ability to feel, and by arguing that machines generate feelings and desires, Deleuze and Guattari fold them into ethical relations with their various engineers, designers, and components. The centrality of machines in their thinking decommissions any *a priori* distinction between nature/culture. Guattari’s distinction between processes and systems is a way to resist literalizing or concretizing machines, as well as a conceptual rejection of means/ends hierarchies. He avoids reproducing ‘dominant subjectivity’ in the process of thinking. Guattari might say that there are no systems as such, only abstract machines drawing subsystems into forever-fluid relations.

of minds, desires, and socializations – all kinds of entities learning to exist together. His ethical/political/aesthetic thought (which he called “ecosophy,” or transversal praxis) opens up the possibility of changing cities on three related axes at once. No social change without environmental and psychic transformation... no ‘individual’ without machines and social relations regulating needs and capacities...

Cities are intentional and accidental bio-machinic assemblages of interdependent houses. Ecologists, environmentalists, and social scientists encounter them as *problems* (or ‘parasites’) in their deleterious effects on geological scales of landscapes and climates bent to human purposes, their mass consumption of resources and mass production of waste, or their crystallization of social inequalities in the form of segregated city sectors and homelessness – often, as in east Austin, in the proximity of industrial pollutants. Gentrification moves across cities in a repetitive pattern, generally resulting in racially and economically homogenous neighborhoods. Meanwhile, the standardizations of urban infrastructure grids required for smooth flows of water, electricity, information, and the like flatten out the earth’s surface and codify behavior. Guattari characterizes such situations as “the entropic rise of a dominant subjectivity” (2000:68). Everything seems overplanned, subject to sameness, regularization, or systematization for a universal consistency – the old model of a machinic system.

Against this litany of problems, cities might be approached as “real-world laboratories” (Grimm 2008:759) that offer ethical and aesthetic opportunities for engineering *heterogeneous houses*. Cities are full of potential solutions, ways to pull possible futures into the world that stimulate and thrive on relational differentiations. How might regulation and planning (making dominant subjectivities) be put in the service of irregular and surprising self-emergences? As ornithologist John Marzluff put it regarding species homogenization, “*not doing the same thing everywhere requires planning*” (2005:172; my italics). Improvisational aesthetics can help us cultivate embodied systems that invite surprise and heterogeneity.

In the city of living garbage, people are tinkering with making little habitats in the landscape patches where they live. In addition to deflecting expert knowledge through

vernacular practices like DIY home modifications aimed at sustainability, such projects invite multiple species into daily life, manifest sensory and aesthetic pleasure, and can be therapeutic or empowering to create. In altering their homes and showing it to neighbors, family, and friends, people become both students and teachers. These healing machines restore people, publics, and urban natures. They counter anxieties about urban vulnerability in the Anthropocene with forms of care and love (however flawed or misguided) that alter at a personal, intimate scale the pre-personal atmosphere of ‘the global’ in which houses are nested (or made to nest). As Guattari writes,

Subjectivity is able to install itself simultaneously in the realms of the environment, in the major social and institutional assemblages, and symmetrically in the landscapes and fantasies of the most intimate spheres of the individual. The reconquest of a degree of creative autonomy in one particular domain encourages conquests in other domains – the catalyst for a gradual reforging and renewal of humanity’s confidence in itself starting at the most miniscule level. (2000: 69)

The intimately miniscule level of *homes* becomes the arena for environmentalist concerns regarding the exploitive relationship between a city and the landscape it occupies, or waste processing via landfills and wastewater treatment plants. At the same time the private place begins to territorialize social/political relations generally confined to the public arena – particularly, access to healthy food, clean water, or green spaces more generally. At the same time social processes like gentrification fasten onto private houses, infusing them with political affects of belonging or displacing. The individuals or subjectivities that live in houses fall into various pressure zones within budding living machines, as shifting practices of being a self in relation to others are called into question by relationships within and between the eco/social/psychic patterns out of which cities emerge.

The improvisational aesthetics that recompose houses in the city of living garbage express an imaginative ethics – an idealistic decision-making framework guided by caring for and about other lives, intending to do the least harm, responding to others’ needs and critiques, and remaining open and vulnerable to *possibilities* within particular, embodied relationships and situations. Ethics asks ‘the way things are’ to remain open to modification. It involves the labor of tracking how common burdens are distributed: who is made

vulnerable, and who is made secure; how means/ends relationships are *made to emerge* from different actors' or entities' situations in relational networks, technical (eco)systems, and nested scales. Ethics demands or desires diversification – an insistence that difference is good in itself, that no entities should be subject to being the means to other entities' ends, but should be self-determining – with the resulting contradiction or strength that there is no way things 'should' be, including 'ethics' itself! Following Guattari, ethics are also, inseparably, *aesthetic*, having to do with expressive forms, engineering, habitat-making, and above all, a redistribution of subjectivity. Shared feelings, capacities, and vulnerabilities.

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Sticking with the density of lived worlds, writing in the thick messiness of life and out of love for these places and characters, helped me avoid forms of final closure that kept trying to snap into place around two catastrophic forces – gentrification and climate change. These two narrative refrains tried to take over as explanatory devices behind the city of living garbage. On the one hand, a judgment of these places and people as agents of gentrification (or victims). On the other, an apocalyptic threat that reorders the present such that these places are relegated to being responses to ecological collapse. Instead, the art environments and DIY permaculture projects are buffeted around in these unfolding storms. Rather than getting a grip on them, the writing and the little worlds are in their grip. Instead of becoming better understood, they loom and threaten inside the writing – nonhuman forces whirling around like wind inside the houses. We're left not knowing what they are, exactly.

Likewise, the writing undoes the refrained form of “vernacular art environments” by putting together places intended as such (like the Cathedral of Junk), places that were not (like the Rhizome Collective), and places that involve no human intention (monk parrot nests). Arts are something that *happen*, infusing places with imaginaries and possibilities of inhabitation. They hold in common a remediation of waste into lively habitats through improvisational aesthetics. They are post-apocalyptic in that they start off with the substances of the trashed world and end up with a relationship of care and repair. That

relationship takes form as a habitat that doubles as a home and a public place.

Alongside my struggle to keep gentrification, atmospheric apocalypse, and vernacular art from congealing as things in my accounts, good/bad binaries between the authentic and fake, anti-monetary action and capitalism, localization and globalized economies, or standardization and improvisation kept firming up in the writing – a process of ideology formation that staying messy let me better avoid. DIYsneyland helped. There’s clarity that comes out of arguing how and why something is *wrong* or *pathological* – the view from a moral high ground. Instead, the sometimes mind-numbing microscopic detail of specific cats or wetlands or otherworldly gardens preserves the irreducible singularity of embodied places and beings in a written moment (and in photos, and other kinds of *-graphy*). Elusive and playful writing helped me avoid ideology or strong binaries in favor of the amorphous, mixed, impure quality of lived life. I have tried to stick with singularity and the backyard scales so as not to get vacuumed up into explanatory devices or a valorization of the way things *should* be (for example, *you* should start an art environment, if you haven’t already!). Let lived presents dwell and squirm in tense descriptions.

Rather than moral criticism, the writing works along the lines of Stephen Muecke’s articulation of “ficto-criticism” that “[seeks] rather to perform a kind of ethics by asking, *what can that thing do that it couldn’t do before? What can that sentence say?* and in consideration of these things, *how has my place in the world shifted?*” Writing like this involves “having the confidence that the problem characterizing the situation . . . will surprise [writers] into *changing* their practice” (2008: 15). This way of writing works precisely through an improvisational aesthetic. It emulates the practices that animate the places, people, and beings that compose the city of living garbage. The prose long to remain parts of those worlds by preserving them, adding to their momentum. The writing is *guilty* in this way of whatever crimes are written down (like compulsive collecting or living in a dream world). It adopts their ethics as well; it is ethically and aesthetically contaminated.

The overall effect of the city of living garbage (and the idea that urban natures are composed of three layered kinds of ecologies) is that of mosaics and patchy landscapes. Tours of the city are given with John Law’s sense of actor-network theory in mind:

Theories usually try to explain why something happens, but actor-network theory is descriptive rather than foundational in explanatory terms, which means that it is a disappointment for those seeking strong accounts. Instead it tells stories about ‘how’ relations assemble or don’t. As a form, one of several, of material semiotics, it is better understood as a toolkit for telling interesting stories about, and interfering in, those relations. More profoundly, it is a sensibility to the messy practices of relationality and materiality of the world. Along with this sensibility comes a wariness of the large-scale claims common in social theory: these usually seem too simple. (Law 2007)

Applying pre-formed social aggregates of class, race, and gender would have explicated what is going on in these places in ways more familiar to social theory and cultural anthropology. Most of the human characters here are white men with working class backgrounds. Why have they disinvested in classed trappings registered in consumption and standard housing forms in favor of curbside junk collecting and art environments composed of landfills? How does the odd whiteness of Keep Austin Weird work as an aspect of cities undergoing symbolic economic development, with the expansion of a precarious “creative class” of laborers whose weirdness gives an economic edge? What is it about urban sustainability that attracts white people? How does this all feed back into gentrification? These are good questions, but I suspect you can imagine the answers. Instead, I wanted to loiter or get lost in the places, to try to describe them from the inside, in terms of their carnival laws and intimacies. Resist treating them as examples of something (gentrification processes; environmentalism) and encounter them in their detailed singularity as *sui generis* worlds.

Re-encountering details in the *-graphy*, I’m surprised how *fast* everything changes – the ordinary’s truly fleeting and vulnerable qualities. Everything is hurtling into an uncertain future, and capitalism or ecological collapse has only something to do with it. During the two years this was written, the creators behind two of the places – Spunky Monkey Ranch and the Rhizome Collective’s warehouses – had to move on. Perhaps it is too obvious and self-evident what did their projects in (rising property taxes... gentrification... code violations). Less obvious, less of a refrained force, they were done in by their own mortality. Just by coming into existence in the world, one day they need to leave it; just because a project begins, one day it will be abandoned. “That is what contact means”

(Burroughs 1992:70). That is the vulnerability of places composed of living individuals, with human components as their caretakers and guardians.

Just as mortality gives rise to an end, improvisation and informality entail that the lurking threat of code enforcement can come snarling like a dog in the night. As I write, the Cathedral of Junk floats in limbo, threatened by bulldozers. The code inspector last called in on a complaint about port-a-potties now demands a “permit of occupancy” and gave Vince a few weeks to pull it together. This quasi-public place got a little too truly public. The people putting on a play there this month rallied volunteers. Because the Choir Loft and the Heart Tower were within the five foot easement to neighboring property, Vince and helpers tore them down – destroyed to preserve the whole. I wonder if the ghosts in blue will return where the catwalk disappeared. Some of the metal was hauled across the scales and sold as scrap, making the Cathedral a sort of savings account. Threat has summoned up a community to “save the junk!”

Now it’s winter, and with a record low of 20°, all the cactus at Smut Putt Heaven flopped over. The kitchen sink wetland froze solid for a few days. Curious to see how or if it bounces back this spring. For now, I added more pea gravel to cover the putrescent stalks of elephant ear. The bathtub pond fared much better – although the surface froze, the fish survived; incoming hot shower water helped. No raccoons tore up the pond roots this winter, so in the spring I’ll need to move excess plants to give things room to grow – give them away, or add a bathtub to the pond’s chain of waterfalls.

One night in a November cold snap, a dog came in the yard. I was out of town, and Jen saw it through the window. The dog gave an excited growl near the cat porch. That morning One-Eye was missing. We posted fliers around the neighborhood, checked for him at Town Lake Animal Shelter. He just vanished.

The biggest change to hit MNAE, our clutter of cats, and various gardening projects is that Jen and I now have a son. Hard, from here, to imagine how much life in the Museum will change now that Kai is here. I’m ending up here not in the personal or self-reflective realm, but because it opens up an unknown “we,” another ongoing mutual education in all directions. Once again, new life in the city of living garbage!

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This partial tour of the city of living garbage misses several important houses – Sharon Smith’s collection of curbside junk like ironing boards, bed springs, wheel barrow shells, baby pools tidily stacked in her backyard, while the house’s interior is encrusted with all kinds of folk art. She could open a museum. I had intended to write about her and Casa Neverlandia, a south Austin house transformed by its owners Kay Pils and James Talbot into a three story A-frame with playful sustainable design. They are on a fixed income, and as the property taxes near Town Lake have increased without end over several decades, they are struggling to stay. Kay initiated a bill to pass a “circuit breaker” tax law that would cap property taxes at a certain percentage of a homeowner’s income. This strategy to short circuit gentrification would benefit many people in Austin, but so far the state senate has voted the bill down.

Also missing is an account of the Greater Austin Garbage Arts project started in part by Lisa Vickery. GAGA opened as a gallery on South First that featured arts and crafts made from recycled materials, but closed a year later because they were losing money paying the rent. GAGA now hosts kids’ craft events and clothing swaps with sewing machines on hand for quick alterations; all of their materials are up-cycled from post-consumption sources. Lisa is trying to push Austin to stop shipping curbside recycling materials to Houston and to process them in the city. Treasure City Thrift is also working along these lines and organizes a monthly “Really Really Free Market” where people give each other things and teach each other what they know – from knitting to computer programming to gardening. Finally, accounts of the bike scene with the Yellow Bike Project and Austin Bike Zoo would have complemented the stories in the visit to Biosquat.

Future urbanization in the city of living garbage can take these places into account, as well as tracking the City of Austin’s response to self-emergent habitats. Will Austin Energy respect the monk parrots’ nesting choices? Will wetland builders and humanure collectors run into trouble with code compliance, like the Cathedral? Will the Botanical Garden start cultivating carnivorous plants? And has an art environment popped up in your backyard?

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## **VITA**

Scott Michael Webel was born in Phoenix, Arizona, in August 1976. He received a Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology with a minor in creative writing from the University of Arizona, Tucson, in May 2000. In August 2001, he entered the Graduate School at The University of Texas at Austin and completed a Masters of Arts in Anthropology in December 2003. He reentered the program in August 2007. Scott and his wife run the Museum of Natural & Artificial Ephemera in Austin.

Permanent Address: 1808 Singleton Ave., Austin, Texas 78723

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