

**Disappearing Acts:
Making Things + Making Things Go Away**

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The world will not evolve past its current state of crisis by using the same thinking that created the situation.

--Albert Einstein

In a knotted world of vibrant matter, to harm one section of the web may very well be to harm oneself.

--Jane Bennett, Vibrant Matter

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Introduction

In the text *Food of the Gods*, Terence McKenna remarks, "our need to feel part of the world seems to demand that we express ourselves through creative activity. The ultimate wellsprings of this creativity are hidden in the mystery of language." Furthermore, "reality is not simply experienced or reflected in language, but instead is actually produced by language." Artists are the speakers of a metaphorical language that often takes material form and, as such, develop a vocabulary of material engagement and conceptual embodiment simultaneously. If it is true that, to quote Marshall McLuhan's famous phrase, "the medium is the message," then the message is encoded in not only the product, but in the syntax of the production, and the approach to production is reflective of one's attitude towards life.

My over-arching project in graduate school has been to align my creative language with the personal ethics that define how I aim to conduct the rest of my life: to be as direct and natural as possible, to live slowly, simply, and mindfully, and to cultivate a sense of reverence and care for the infinitely complex network of networks that all earthly things are inextricably bound into. My worldview has been shaped both by my personal experiences as well as other artists and authors who seem to share the perception of a palpable connectivity among all things, both organic and inorganic, human and decidedly non-human.

Influences

One of the most significant works that has shaped my thinking about what art can encompass is Jae Rhim Lee's Infinity Burial Project. It is a notion that exists at the creative intersection of mycology and poetry by exploring both the possibilities of mushrooms' abilities to break down toxins (a process called bio-remediation) that are present in the human body while also opening up a conversation about personal engagement with death and corporeal decomposition. By cultivating a mushroom tissue culture, Lee is growing a strain of mycelium, referred to as the infinity mushroom, that she is "training" to digest her own body tissue and excretions in order to acclimate them to consume the human corpse once it is returned to the soil upon burial.

One of the components of the project is a "mushroom death suit" that each "decomponaut" dons upon burial (fig. 1.) This suit is made of a biodegradable fabric that sustains the mycelial culture of the infinity mushroom and allows it to spread over the entire body, breaking it down and reintegrating it with the earth harmlessly, as opposed to traditional methods of embalming or cremation that return countless toxic chemicals and substances into the soil or air. What makes this a poignant work of art as opposed to a slightly off-color science project is the promotion of the sentiment that by embracing one's own mortality through the acknowledgment of one's role as a material substance in decidedly non-human. the world, that the participatory relationship that exists between the self and

the planet does not end with the conclusion of consciousness as we experience it in our currently animated configuration. In many ways, it is simply the beginning of a new state of matter and activity. The concept of positive “decompiculture” breathes life into a cyclical and mycelial perception of one’s place in the cosmos, and fits into a “cradle-to-cradle” schema of perceived reality.

The works of Buster Simpson have also played a critical role in my conceptions of not only what art has the ability to convey, but how it can—and should—operate outside of the discreet sphere of the art world as products to be traded, lauded, displayed, and criticized. Simpson’s portable Composting Commode (fig 2.) for homeless people in downtown Seattle served the double service of providing a private space for homeless individuals to answer nature’s call as well as supplying “humanure” for urban tree wells. The project was never brought to fruition because city legislators never permitted it and immediately had it removed lest public defecation get wildly out of hand. The fact remains that the interdependent systems of mutual need are there: for the urban vagrant to have a private place to defecate and for the domesticated trees that need fertilizer. The commode provided the conceptual opportunity and physical space for two organisms, one human and one botanical, that had been stripped of their agency by hierarchical social construct, to enter into a symbiotic contract to fulfill mutual need. It was a creative proposal for a social dilemma that nobody wanted to handle, a hilariously ridiculous idea, and a brotherly gesture of compassion. A significant portion of Simpson’s work is marked by a series of poetic, often humorous, social actions whose goals are in service of bringing attention to a trampled population without a voice, such as plants (First Avenue Tree Guard, the figure participatory (fig 4) strip that exists between the Silver and

Purge (fig. 5), pH Indicator Umbrellas (fig 6) in addition to the neglected human sphere.

The body of work by artist Felix Gonzales-Torres has also provided a working model for material engagement and conceptual narrative for my own practice. Torres implemented commonly available found objects and materials in his quiet, minimalist sculptures that often referred both to the process of dying but also of rebirth and regeneration through the ongoing replenishing and replacement of elements, such as lightbulbs that gradually burnt out, candy that was consumed, or clocks that eventually stopped running. His work also attempted to dispel the notion of an artwork as the discretely original product and creative progeny of the artist. To quote Gonzales-Torres, "the stacks of paper, or piles of candies are indestructible because they can be endlessly duplicated. They will always exist because they don't really exist, or because they don't have to exist all the time. They are usually fabricated in different places at the same time. After all, there is no original, only one original certificate of authenticity. If I am trying to alter the system of distribution of an idea through an art practice, it seems imperative to me to go all the way with a piece and investigate new notions of placement, production, and originality." In his piece Untitled (Perfect Lovers) (fig. 7) Gonzales-Torres paired two generic, commercially-made wall clocks and set them side by side and in synchronized time with one another to symbolize the harmony of two individuals in partnership with one another, as well as the fleeting ability for any two entities to maintain that stasis of flawlessly coordinated perfection. This particular piece has made a lasting impression on my regard for how an artwork can be constructed, what authorship means, and the underlying poetics of what are often considered the banal objects of the everyday landscape. His Tree Guards (fig.3), Host Analog (fig.4) or a body of water (Hudson River works are assemblages that occur over time as opposed to outside of it as an

eternally balanced equation. Many of his pieces demand participation from the viewer by participants either removing or ingesting elements of the work from the installation site and the de-compositional nature of material components to activate the "life" of the piece, granting authorship to seemingly inert material by collaborating with objects or media that have a palpable lifespan and will of their own. Gonzales-Torres' work is constantly in a state of becoming by diminishing, swelling, and providing the opportunity for replication even after the death of the artist himself.

Methodology

In *Vibrant Matter: a political ecology of things*, Jane Bennett outlines a political philosophy of "vital materialism" that lends agency and resonance to all matter that contrasts with the familiar guilt-motivated adage of contemporary environmentalism. She remarks in the chapter entitled the force of things:

"American materialism, which requires buying ever-increasing numbers of products purchased in ever-shorter cycles, is **anti**materiality. The sheer volume of commodities, and the hyperconsumptive necessity of junking them to make room for new ones, conceals the vitality of matter...vital materiality can never be thrown "away" for it continues its activities even as a discarded or unwanted commodity... For me, Thing-Power arose from a pile of trash: the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle."

This description of art that locates a vitality for objects that participate in the an

world-- that there is no such thing as "away" in the concept of "throwing things away"-- has greatly affected the manner in which I approach my own material engagement as well as my appraisal of how all things are made and the conceptual validity of a work of art is no exception to this valuation.

My reevaluation of what can be considered intelligent design and a successful studio practice has been heavily influenced by the text *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things* by William McDonough and Michael Braungart. In this book, which is itself a durable object made from "upcyclable" polymers, the authors aim to explicate a new paradigm for industrial practices that uses nature itself as a model for production in order "to eliminate the concept of waste [by designing] things—products, packaging, and systems—from the very beginning on the understanding that waste does not exist."

"Nature operates according to a system of nutrients and metabolisms in which there is no such thing as waste... The Earth's major nutrients—carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen—are cycled and recycled. Waste equals food.

This cyclical, cradle-to-cradle biological system has nourished a planet of thriving, diverse abundance for millions of years. Until very recently in the Earth's history, it was the only system, and every thing on the planet belonged to it. Growth was good. It meant more trees, more species, greater diversity, and more complex, resilient ecosystems. Then came industry, which altered the natural equilibrium of materials on the planet. Humans took substances from the Earth's crust and concentrated, altered, and synthesized them into vast quantities of material that cannot be safely returned to the soil.

This is the ideal of materials' capability for being, participating, and

than that of humans. Ants have been incredibly industrious for millions of years, yet their productiveness nourishes plants, animals, and soil. Human industry has been in full swing for little over a century, yet it has brought about a decline in almost every ecosystem on the planet. Nature doesn't have a design problem. People do."

The challenge that is presented both to large corporations and individual makers alike is to consider creating objects and "products that, when their useful life is over, do not become useless waste but can be tossed onto the ground to decompose and become food for plants and animals and nutrients for the soil; or alternately, that can return to industrial cycles to supply high-quality raw materials for new projects."

I have asked myself if a sculpturally-based studio practice could fit into this specific mode of creative thought, and how this form of material engagement can serve as not only a philosophical vocabulary for addressing my personal reverence for the natural world and its mutually dependent systems, but uses them as a model for production. The answer appears to be embedded in the voluntary adoption of a methodological framework—a set of rules for engagement—that challenges the conception that true self-expression has no restrictions. However, as opposed to regarding these parameters as limits, I embrace them as a code of behavior that lends my efforts a depth of meaning because these directives exist at the kernel of every idea and provide an elemental building code for each thing I make. To cite Andrea Zittel, an artist who champions an aesthetic of simplicity and small-footprint living in her prolific bodies of work, "the creation of rules is more creative than the destruction of them. Creation demands a higher level of reasoning and draws consideration both to the material and the effort. The best of us are never stables or greater

permanent, but evolve naturally, according to content or need.”

My personal rules for material engagement (for now) are as follows:

No new structures built that cannot be dismantled with relative ease and minimal tool usage, or put to other practical use other than the work itself

Everything that constitutes the work can go back to where it came from unaltered or can be consumed or used so that there is nothing left behind.

No storage required, all elements of the work are either reuse able, returnable, recyclable, or biodegradable

There is virtually no waste generated by the creation of the piece other than the expenditure of human energy.

Components of the work have the potential to function as actants to improve the conditions of the immediate environment once the work is disassembled.

These rules necessitate what McDonough and Braungart refer to as a “design filter: a filter that is in the designer’s head instead of on the ends of pipes.” This “filter” is simply a criterion to base materials choices and production practices on, or a map to refer to as one moves forward as opposed to a tracing of what has come before.

“Nothing goes in and out of the planetary system except for heat and the occasional meteorite....the system is closed, and its basic elements are valuable and finite. What is naturally here is all we have. Whatever humans make does not go away.

What would have happened, we sometimes wonder, if the Industrial Revolution had taken place between societies that effected the best rules, reversible, individual, and

where people believed not in a cradle-to-grave life cycle but in reincarnation?"

It is my project to participate in this theory of material engagement as a sculptor. If sculpture is in fact considered a material language, then the adoption of this methodology provides my creative expression with a grammatical structure based in reverence for the materials' constant vitality that inevitably extends beyond my will exerted upon them as a maker of things. That vitality—the "thing-power"—is inseparable from a work's ultimate substance and forms the conceptual underpinnings and functions of any work that is generated in that idiom:

"If matter itself is lively, then not only is the difference between subjects and objects minimized, but the status of the shared materiality of all things is elevated...Such newfound attentiveness to matter and its powers will not solve the problem of human exploitation or oppression, but it can inspire a greater sense of the extent to which all bodies are kin in the sense of inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations."

had taken place in societies that emphasize community over the individual, and

Concepts

The structure of Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical theory *Capitalism and Schizophrenia: a Thousand Plateaus* has provided insight into the ontology of my own conceptual interests, particularly the non-hierarchical architecture of the rhizome and its repetitive presence in the binary of nature and culture. The conceptual description of the rhizome is paraphrased from *A Thousand Plateaus* as the following:

"1 and 2: Any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be. A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles.

3: Principle of multiplicity: only when a multiple is effectively treated as substantiative that it ceases to have any relation to the One as subject or object, natural or spiritual reality, image and world.

4: Principle of asignifying rupture: A rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old line, or on new lines.

5 and 6: Principle of cartography and decalcomania: a rhizome is not amenable to any structural or generative model. It is a map, not a tracing. It fosters connections between fields...it can be drawn on the wall, conceived as a work of art, constructed as a political action or a meditation. Perhaps one of the most important characteristics of the rhizome is that it always has multiple entryways. A map has multiple entryways, as opposed to the tracing, which always comes back to the same."

I see my work not as discreet objects or actions, but to borrow directly from

Deleuze and Guattari, as a series of assemblages or multiplicities whose methodology of construction and temporal arrangement reflect the archetypal pattern of the sprawling network that can be observed in mycelium, neural pathways, galactic configurations, and computer-generated images of the internet (fig 8-11.) Bennett explains assemblages "as never a stolid block but an open-ended collective, a non-totalized sum. An assemblage thus not only has a distinctive history of formation but a finite life span." I think of the elements that comprise the work I build as distinct components of a transitory configuration that have their own cosmology, agency, and energy force that does not belong to me, but is mine to play with for a temporal amount of time. The materials I choose and subject matters that coalesce from their interaction all point back to the formal and conceptual infrastructure of a rhizomatic model of overlapping energy and information flows. In addition to this formal superstructure, all of my work invites outside participation in some form so that the piece is never a fixed configuration but is always in a state of becoming by seeking activation from connective forces.

This body of research inspired the thinking behind Composting Confessional (fig. 12), which was built entirely out of locally reclaimed materials and assembled with easy disassembly in mind. The structure itself was modeled after primitive composting toilets in the Quinault River valley located on the Olympic Peninsula of Washington State, a sauna, and a Catholic confession booth. These sites are all locations of various ways of purging toxins from the human body and soul via excretion of bodily fluids or the professing of one's sins. My goal in the conceptual combining of these divergent spaces was to illustrate the potential for human effluents, both spiritual and corporeal, to be the source of positive energy flows between willing participants, and that there is no such thing as waste when one's object takes responsibility for one's activity from

engaged and direct manner. The Composting Confessional is not automated, which is to say that each participant can only use the facility if one brings their own bucket to excrete into (composting material is provided at the site) and one brings their own confessor. That way, when an individual leaves the booth satisfactorily “purged,” they leave with exactly what they arrived with, but in a new form that does not simply “disappear” from view. In the name of self-interest, participants are responsible for making the best use of that material as possible. Systems that are often considered as linear and based in waste without possibility for redemption are folded back upon themselves into cycles of reuse and renewal.

The writings and research of the mycologist Paul Stamets have had a significant impact on the direction of my research and the possibilities of organic substances like mushroom mycelium as sculptural elements and actants. In his comprehensive book examining the potentialities of mushrooms as progenitors of biological agents for ecological remediation, *Mycelium Running*, Stamets describes mushroom mycelia as “nature’s internet:”

“I believe that mycelium is the neurological network of nature. Interlacing mosaics of mycelium infuse habitats with information-sharing membranes. These membranes are aware, react to change, and collectively have the long-term health of the host environment in mind.

Enlisting fungi as allies, we can offset the environmental damage inflicted by humans by accelerating organic decomposition of the massive fields of debris we create—through everything from clear-cutting forests to constructing cities.”

During my first year in graduate school, I began my responsibility for one’s actions in an

silicone rubber molds with coffee grounds that were inoculated with oyster mushroom spawn to see if the mycelium would take on the shape of the mold. Surprisingly, small-scale trials of this method worked and I “grew” several objects that referenced architectural access points for energy, such as light switches and power outlets (fig. 13) out of a single culture of oyster mushroom spawn. [HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pleurotus_ostreatus"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pleurotus_ostreatus) *Pleurotus ostreatus* is a vigorous strain of bio-remediating mushroom and flourishes in even the most unsanitary of conditions, such as an oil spill or a community art studio. Once the mycelial culture “ran” thoroughly through the coffee grounds, the object could be removed from the silicon mold and placed outside to reintegrate with the earth to nourish the ground soil and re-enter the biosphere.

The physical construct of the human mind and behavioral patterns also echo the mycelial archetype of networks that organically coalesce and activate the material world to specific ends. At the Henry Art Gallery’s Test Site in May of 2013, I constructed an experiment to explore the rhizomatic conceptual design of the custom of economic activity and social exchange. I developed my own “coin” out of glass and copper powder (fig. 14) that I minted at the ceramics building on campus (fig 15.) I then installed myself along with my store of coins in the Test Site for the duration of three weeks. (fig. 16) Visitors to the Henry Gallery were invited to be participants in the genesis of a new economy, to trade goods for a currency without set denomination, and to engage in a conversation about what value means as an ideal and in regards to the material world. I made the production method of my currency readily available and transparent to the public through the display of the raw material in the space as well as a set of illustrative literature to accompany the exhibition that detailed the time invested as well as material wasted in the lost-wax process of small-scale mass production. Conversations she began to explore the with parking, ~~Scale mass first year. Conversations she began to explore the with parking,~~

what an artist's time is worth, and the cost of production of the handmade versus the "ready-made." What emerged after a relatively short period of weeks were the beginnings of a commodity-value base for my currency (called "works") that was loosely based on matches and lighters as the main good traded for my efforts. Although the reason for this is most definitely due to the fact that lighters and matches are two of the most common objects that people randomly have in their purses and pockets and are willing to part with, I interpreted the reciprocal trading of glass baubles for tools for making fire as poetically just, and order—a kosmos-- began to emerge from the chaotic collection of goods and services that were brought into the gallery for the purpose of trade and conversation (fig. 17.) Moreover, I considered each "work" to be a spore-- a carrier—of the ideas that were at play during each interaction and exchange in that space between myself and the individuals who engaged with my experiment, specifically that economic behavior is a learned exercise in reciprocity that exists simultaneously in the material and symbolic realm. The organic theory of the evolution of ideas reverberate with Stamets' assertions of the abilities of mushroom spores to be the long-range carriers of their mycelial origins to far-flung locations, perhaps even throughout the universe:

"...It is possible that protogermplasm could travel throughout the galactic expanses riding upon comets or carried by stellar winds. This form of interstellar protobiological migration is known as panspermia...NASA has considered the possibility of using fungi for interplanetary colonization. Now that we have landed rovers on Mars NASA takes seriously the unknown consequences that our microbes will have on seeding other planets. Spores have no borders."

While this production was based on the handmade, it was also based on the ready-made, and the exchange was based on the value of the work.

available to the public in exchange for a nominal donation—in real dollars—to the Henry's educational fund for continuing support for experimental projects. The ultimate goal for the experiment was to disperse all fictitious funds and real goods to willing participants, and to give back to the system that enabled the experiment in the first place: the Henry Art Gallery and the University of Washington.

Harkening back to the work of Felix Gonzales-Torres, I also have a desire to completely divest my studio practice of the fabricated object and the transmutation of raw material to service my conceptual ends. The composition *A to-scale model of the [known] universe* (fig. 18) was my attempt to expend solely my own energy (and the fuel for my truck) by foraging for analog bathroom scales at every Goodwill and Wal-Mart store location along the I-5 corridor from Stanwood to Tacoma, Washington. After gathering and zero-ing one hundred and twenty-eight scales of varying sizes, colors, and brands over the course of two weeks, I arranged them in a large mandala-like formation in a round gallery space and invited participants to gently walk across the scales so as not to tip them. The quiet space allowed for the sound of each footfall across the analog scales to register audibly as each person's weight was distributed across the expanse of the floor, one could disperse one's weight by lying down (fig. 19-20) across multiple scales at once, or "play" the scales like an instrument by shifting the distribution of one's weight from one appendage to the other when exerting force on the scale-scape. The visible variety of that specific commodity was somewhat staggering to behold, and I chose the bathroom scale not only for its weight-registering abilities, but also for its intensely personal connotations as an object that measures an individual's weight in a culturally agreed-upon denomination behind the closed door of a private space, the currency was spent and the goods it purchased were made

The final phase of the work was to bring all of the scales back to the stores I originally purchased them from (fig. 21) to refund my purchase or return the scales to the multi-verse of the Goodwill chain outlets so that they re-enter the economic cycle of being bought and sold as commodities. In the occasion of the re-creation of the piece, the plan of action would be to source scales from whatever locality the installation would occur; in this way the components of the assemblage resonate with the site of its creation, can easily return back to it, and makes the work a local event possible only in that moment in space and time. There is no storage necessary for the piece to exist and the work has what Bennett calls "emergent properties:" that each element or "member and proto-member of the assemblage has a certain vital force...with an effectivity proper to the grouping as such." The amalgamation draws from its immediate environment of consumer commodities and it illustrates the homogenous landscape of a ubiquitous tool of personal measurement.

private space.

Conclusion

For my thesis exhibition, my objective was to unify and implement many of the themes and processes that my research has been pointing toward in one comprehensive, collaborative project. Gegenschein (fig. 22) encompasses my personal interests in foraging and the archetypal visual patterns of overlapping information-sharing networks comprised of nodes, lines, and clusters, as well as adheres to the leave-no-trace ethic of wilderness exploration and my overarching goal for a work of art to function as a bio-remediator and hub of communal activity. Gegenschein, or “counter-shine,” is an astronomical term for the very faint patch of oval light that is sometimes visible in the night sky in the position opposite the sun. It is thought to be the image of the sun reflected from gas and dust particles in full-phase outside the Earth’s atmosphere. For my purposes, Gegenschein is a visual representation of the superstructure of the Internet that was formed through the collaborative application of different kinds of organic dusts into a visual network. Each powdered material was selected for its color saturation and scent, but more importantly for its cultural content in spurring global trade and travel. Substances were either sourced locally by my own hand, such as cherry blossoms, wolf lichen, and cedar bark, or others such as cocoa, tea, coffee, sugar, indigo, cardamom, tumeric, and paprika were purchased from local markets or ordered over the world wide web. All material was rendered into fine powder that was methodically sifted through cardboard stencils that were derived from a digital image of the world wide web that I found while surfing the internet. The unifying background, or understory, of

the 23' x 17' space is a fine layer of powdered activated charcoal. The dark richness of the charcoal provides a stark background for the colored dusts, as well as a composting medium to facilitate the decomposition of the work once it is removed from the space and returned to the earth. "Biochar" is a soil amendment that has potential to mitigate climate change through carbon sequestration and to increase soil fertility through the retention of nutrients due to its high surface area. Gegenschein (fig. 23-30) was installed over the course of five ten-hour days by the work of twenty individuals, resulting in the culmination of approximately one-thousand labor hours. The resulting image had no road map per se, but was the organic culmination of individuals building a structure out of a given set of characters in a visual language derived from the original abstracted image of the Internet. All components of the work, including the stencils themselves, are compostable, biodegradable, or consumable. The work will leave no trace of its existence once it is removed from the space, and has the capability to improve environmental conditions wherever it is disposed of properly. It is a work that references the ancient tradition of Navajo and Tibetan sand paintings, and also attempts to give shape and material form to the ethereal web of communication that weaves all of contemporary humanity more tightly together as the internet grows and becomes more accessible and unavoidable for every human being on Earth to be part of. It speaks of the human quest for sensual experience through material engagement and the desire to communicate ideas over vast distances, cultures, and time, and ultimately, how these efforts are simultaneously grand and transitory.

My mission is to be a facilitator for the message of creative conservation. There was a time when I believed that making art and making waste were indivisible, and that in order to advance my studio practice that the sacrifice of four ecological suffering the internet. The vanishing black group by is seen to like fa

built-in feature of any creative endeavor whose ultimate goal was to promote the preservation of nature as something that is not separate from advancing culture because the traditionally understood mode of making is an essentially anthropocentric gesture, freed from ethical ties to the sustainability of material practices. I was constantly asking myself the question: is what is being destroyed justified by what is being created? However, what my research over the past two years has yielded is a shift in focus of what defines a holistic approach to process and material: that the formation of content begins with the materials list and a plan that employs a theory of action and responsibility that crosses the human-nonhuman divide.

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