

frieze

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Fritz Haeg's home,
the Sundown
Residence and
gardens,
Los Angeles
2005



Border Control

Over-determining the function of an art practice can limit its power to transform, illuminate or respond to a given situation *by Fritz Haeg*

Destroy art, eliminate artists; we know what dictators do when they assume power. All great art has the capacity to speak subversive truths, and can become a visible threat to a repressive regime. And yet how is it that during the devastating eight-year regime of George W. Bush – a man constantly at war with the truth – there was no meaningful campaign by his administration to bring down the arts? While it went to extreme lengths to silence critics, remove dissenting voices from positions of authority and rewrite the work of scientists to suit their agenda, artists were virtually ignored.¹ It may be comic to imagine the government

actually going after an artist, but tragic when you consider our irrelevance – we were not even perceived as a worthy threat to the Bush administration's deceitful agenda. Or worse, has art become simply another tool of mass distraction at the service of the consumer-entertainment culture that blinds us to the truth of what is really happening in the world around us?

Our community of art – and by extension, dance, poetry and theatre – has done an effective job of marginalizing itself into virtual irrelevancy for the general public. We are in a self-imposed exile and the Bushes and Cheney's of the world couldn't have done a better job of it. We carry out our business

safely out of view. We sequester ourselves in the quarantined cell of the studio, at exclusive gatherings in white cubes, and at clandestine performances in black boxes. We talk to ourselves in an endlessly self-referential hermetic discourse – like a snake eating its tail. When we're on the radar of the mainstream, it tends to be empty entertainment or record-setting auction prices, a sensational but ultimately hollow spectacle. We patrol our own borders, making sure nothing unworthy is allowed to enter and that everything inside is too precious for the rest of the world to participate in. When we do



invite participation, it's on our own terms, and we've already decided what will happen anyway. I don't want to sound hostile to the communities that I love, but I speak here using hyperbole, generalizations and partially unfair characterizations to make a point.

Politics is short and art is long. Things feel different now that Bush has gone and the global economy is recalibrating for a new age of austerity, although neither event seems to have had any impact on the way we are contributing to the gradual collapse of our natural environment. It's not the job of art to solve problems, but the artist who responds to his or her time can help us feel the truth of the moment, which may be an end in itself, or the start of something else. I don't pretend to have a revolutionary response to any of these issues, and have yet to figure out how to adequately address them in my own work. I do have a general feeling, though, that I want to see art that questions the systems and structures that we have inherited, in particular our sociological, geographic, and – especially – our disciplinary borders. These can be fortified divisions or porous membranes that give and take, responding to changing conditions. The borders between home and 'not home', city and 'not city', art and 'not art' have been particularly on my mind in my work lately.

We say we are home when we arrive back in our motherland, neighbourhood, car or favourite chain store. Our mobile phone numbers and email addresses follow us wherever we go. For many today, especially young people, I imagine that the homepage of their social networking site elicits stronger

sensations of being at home than the physical structure that shares the name. Many of my projects take place in an actual private homes, or on the land around it – planting vegetable gardens in front lawns from London to Salina, or hosting a salon or a school at my geodesic dome residence in Los Angeles.

I recently made an open call to residents of Miami interested in starting a series of public gatherings in their homes. Keith Waddington and Mindy Nelson of Coral Gables responded, and the entire contents of

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their living space was reinstalled in the same arrangement in the galleries of the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami. For the newly public homes I designed an environment with floor cushions and pillows conducive to its role as a welcoming civic gathering space. Back at the museum, visitors could make themselves at home on the sofa in the transplanted living room and watch a video of Keith and Mindy hosting events for neighbours and members of their community, many of whom they were meeting for the first time.

To be territorial – to define the borders of our occupation – is not just a human trait, but is found everywhere in nature. Animals may not recognize our political borders, but they have their own. The few top males in a herd of Ugandan kob each preside over a 20-metre-wide grassy stamping ground where they mate. The male cicada-killer wasp will stake out a perch on his territory above the burrow of his subterranean colony and attack trespassing creatures. The male bowerbird will make a clearing, decorate it with colourful objects and use it as a performance stage, dancing to attract a female. Humans are one of many territorial creatures that occupy the planet, but we are the only ones who, when establishing territory, preclude the existence of most other life forms that we have not domesticated.

How does our perception of 'not city' change when we get five bars of mobile reception, smog alerts and a 747 flying above us? Is a city defined by the presence of people or by the absence of wildlife? I have become interested in loosening our tight-fisted grip on our urban centres, strategically welcoming the wild back. In 2008 in the Sculpture Court in front of the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, I installed homes – entitled 'Animal Estates' – for 12 animals that lived at that precise location 400 years ago. They included a huge nest for a bald eagle, a wood wall with holes for solitary mason bees, and a nestbox for a barn owl on a 10-metre post at the corner of East 75th Street and Madison Avenue. Bronze plaques, printed materials and a series of weekly animal talks and performances accompanied the 'Estates', along with movements throughout the museum choreographed by 12 New York dancers – one for each animal. At the end of the exhibition most of the 'Animal Estates' were donated to Swindler Cove Park at the northern tip of Manhattan, where they have been permanently installed, encouraging those animals to once again take up residence on the island.

In her 1979 essay 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field' Rosalind Krauss analyzes the slippery, evolving nature of what was being referred to at the time as sculpture by artists including Carl Andre, Walter De Maria, Michael Heizer, Robert Irwin, Sol LeWitt, Richard Long, Robert Morris, Bruce Nauman, Richard Serra and Robert Smithson. Krauss talks about sculpture, and its relationship to 'not architecture' and 'not landscape'. Recently the term 'expanded field' has been revived to help make sense of the work of a new generation



Lenape Edible Estate:
Manhattan
2009

Garden featuring plants that the original dwellers of Manhattan, the Lenape, would have eaten.
New York



Sundown Salon #12:
 'L.A. Masterminding',
 a gathering of leaders of
 Los Angeles' non-profit
 cultural organizations
 2005

of artists (including myself), whose legacy can ironically be traced directly back to artists from the 1970s whom Krauss does not mention in her essay. These include: Ant Farm, Buckminster Fuller, Anna Halprin, Joan Jonas, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Yayoi Kusama, Gordon Matta-Clark, Ana Mendita, Adrian Piper and Yvonne Rainer, to name just a few personal favourites. They were working at the borders of what was known as sculpture, and some were outside what was even considered art. With our generation growing out of theirs, I would argue that the field has not expanded at all, but rather the ossified borders that previously separated it and other fields from each other are becoming more porous.

When I visit art students to discuss their work, I am often guided into a studio full of stuff. Sometimes, before they have a chance speak, I try to demarcate the border between art and 'not art' in the room. Once they have identified what we should be looking at and talking about, my eye is inevitably drawn to the 'not art' side of the room, which often seems more alive to me, more fun. Is it possible to make things, do things, before they are categorized? Is it possible to build a life's work as a free-range human, freely meandering and trespassing without regard for the borders? Would it be helpful or liberating to live in a world where we could make what we want to see and do what we want to feel, only later deciding or understanding what it is, or how it should be classified? Ideas and impulses would be the motivation, and only later would the discipline be revealed. 'Oh, I've been writing "poetry", that's what that is?'

'Hey, I've been doing "theatre" all this time!' 'Wow, I make "sculpture"?!' 'So this is "dance"?'

Children naturally operate this way, but it's the opposite of how most formal education works. We are introduced to borders, decide which ones we want to surround ourselves with, learn what happened within them before we got there, and are then expected to perform within their narrow perimeters until we die. Though I found this sort of training helpful, some go deep but others go wide, and I soon began to wander. If I am interested in gardening, I don't want to make work *about* gardens, I become a gardener, and go out into the city and make a garden. If I am interested in dance, I don't want to make work *about* dancing, I enter into the dance community, and make dances in the streets. Animal homes, urban parades, domestic salons, compost piles, impossibly modest spaces – all are forums

for life playing itself out. To be able to make the work that I am aiming to make – alive and engaged in a broader dialogue, straddling fields, disconnected conversations and discrete communities – I need to be prepared to make 'not art'.

Why am I so ambivalent about identifying myself as an artist? Perhaps because it feels so presumptuous. Let others decide if what I am doing is indeed art. Even the act of writing the word 'art' is making me uncomfortable. It has such privileged and rarified connotations in our society, but at the same time everyone seems to be an artist. Maybe



Animal Estates 1.0:
 New York City
 (detail)
 2008
 Homes for the bald eagle, the purple martin and the beaver
 Whitney Museum of American Art,
 New York

identifying myself as one limits my freedom by implying that everything I do aspires to be art. I'm not aiming for art, I'm aiming for life, and if art gets in the way, that's fine. As the writer Annie Dillard finally realized when she was learning to chop wood, you have to aim for the chopping block not the wood.

When you enter United States, customs officials ask what you do. The last time I returned to the US from London, I made the mistake of hesitating.

'Well, um, yeah, ummmmm, let's see ... like uhhhhh.'

Getting confused answering simple questions raises red flags at border control.

I finally mumbled something about art.

'Well, do you make art?'

'Uh, I guess so, sort of, um, yeah.'

'So you're an artist?'

'Um, OK, sure.'

'Well what kind of artist are you?'

I was tired and caught off-guard and not sure if this was an official line of questioning related to national security or if he was actually curious about my work. I flattered myself, thinking it must be a combination of both, but I couldn't dismiss his question with a vague small-talk response as I normally would as this was an official enquiry from a federal agent. I became more flustered, and started rambling incoherently.

'Um, well, I uh, make gardens sometimes. And, um, organize gatherings, parades sometimes? Dance and clothing ... or like, uh, make homes for um, animals? And uh, books and videos? Sometimes teaching. And um, like also installations ... '

By now he seemed bored *and* confused.

'What's an installation?'

'OK, well, it's like something you arrange in a space, um, maybe like a big sculpture or something?'

'Oh, so you're a sculptor?'

Hearing the exasperated relief in his voice, I sensed a way out, and eagerly affirmed that yes indeed, I make sculpture. I am a sculptor. Yes, what I do has a name that you know and understand and can write down on your form!

'OK. That is all. Welcome back to the United States, sir. Next!'

Fritz Haeg is based in a geodesic dome in Los Angeles, USA, when not on the road organizing projects across the USA and Europe, most recently 'Lenape Edible Estate: Manhattan' produced by New York Restoration Project with Friends of the High Line; 'Dome Colony X in the San Gabriels' at X Initiative in New York, and the publication of The Sundown Salon Unfolding Archive (2009), Evil Twin Publications. In 2010 he will have a solo show at The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, USA, and Metropolis Books will publish the expanded edition of Edible Estates: Attack on the Front Lawn.

1 The most publicized case was against Steve Kurtz and Critical Art Ensemble, though the connection to the sciences – a frequent target of the Bush Administration – is notable here.



The dance collective
 Bodycity performing
 at the book launch for
 The Sundown Salon
 Unfolding Archive,
 Schindler House,
 Los Angeles
 2009