

## City of Living Garbage: Art, ecology, and junk habitats in Austin

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I want to start off in my backyard, with a brief cautionary tale about *pond addiction*. This ornamental pond lives under an old pecan tree. It's mostly assembled from things like the seashell, rocks, and bricks we found strewn around the backyard of the east Austin house we bought in 2005. We got a baby pool shell, pond pump, and concrete at some mega-stores. Drank the beer and collected the bottles. In this photo the pond is two years old.



And here it is, newly built. I'd seen bottles used as salvage building materials at the Cathedral of Junk here in Austin and Tinkertown in New Mexico, but wanted to wait till I wasn't renting a backyard to try it out. After building the pond, I watched it *build itself*, the shoreline roots making thick mattes that turn fallen leaves into soil. What's so addictive is seeing how the pond takes on a life of its own, forms a thriving habitat out of junk.

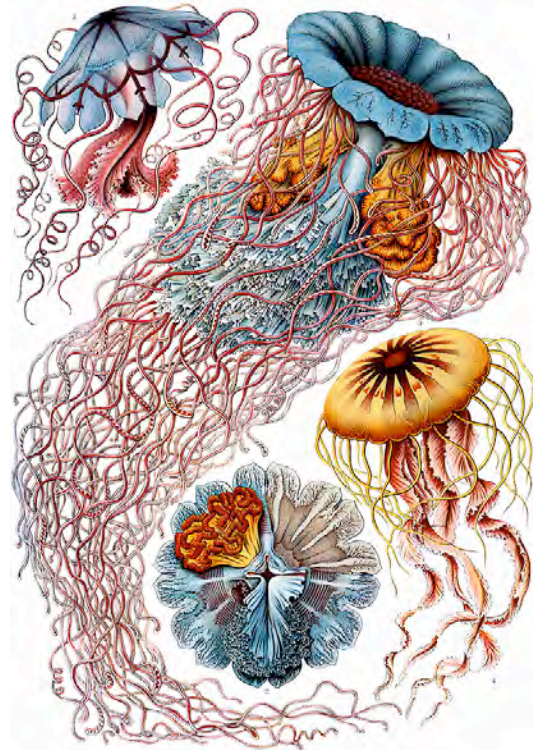


Since then I've built four more ponds, little wetlands that attract urban wildlife, bringing new sounds and beings into the yard – frogs, dragonflies, bees, and hoverflies visit, and night herons sometimes sit in the branches above the gurgling water. There are problems with mosquito larva and invasive plants that double every week – *And the elephant ear roots are tearing my first pond apart!* The pressure of the rhizomes slowly cracks the concrete structure. Can't wait till I have to rebuild the whole thing. Until then, I've promised myself not to build any more ponds!



“Pond habit” is only *sort of* a joke. I start with habit to forefront the house as a habitat that holds everyday routines – TV watching, writing, reusing/recycling, eating, collecting, loving – all forms of habits. We’ve all become habituated to *making death and garbage invisible*. These ponds, and the other places I’m discussing today, are parts of houses in Austin that have shaken up habits of privacy by becoming quasi-public, community places open to urban wildlife, aesthetic and educational agendas, and *tourists*. They’re locked in symbiotic and parasitic relationships with the City – its wastestreams, its marketing slogans like “Keep Austin Weird,” its University and students that keep theorizing and politicizing the places themselves. The people behind these places collaborate with nonhuman agents like plants, animals, commodities, and concepts to assemble habitats and reform consumption habits. To amplify the *independence* of nonhumans making the City, I also bring in naturalized monk parakeets that build nests on phone poles to the annoyance of utility companies and the alarm of ornithologists who see them as an invasive alien species.

All of these homes are in their own ways ecological – concerned with nonhuman systems and sustainable urban living on a day-to-day scale. The German scientific illustrator Ernst Haeckel<sup>1</sup> made up the word *oecologie* in 1866 to specify a subfield of natural history that studies relationships between organisms and their environments (instead of Darwinian organisms vs. organisms). The Danish ecologist Eugenius Warming translated the word as “house theory” in 1909. The concept was fated to overflow its disciplinary boundaries and blur divides between humans and animals, nature and culture. The British Ecology Party (later, the Greens) formed in 1973, inaugurating political ecology as a mainstream concern. And the first Earth Day in 1970 was celebrated as ushering in the “Age of Ecology.” It has been taken up by social scientists in generational waves of subdisciplinary formations – first in the 50s, then the 70s, and perhaps it’s happening again. Gregory Bateson, in particular, stands out as a wayward anthropologist whose thought and research veered towards ecology as a form of cultural critique.

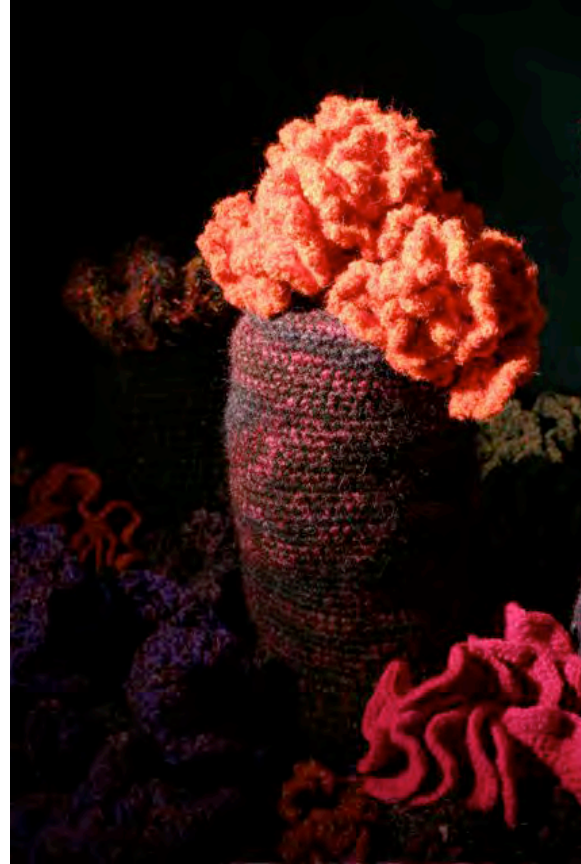


**The social sciences try out ecology:**

- **1950s** - Human Ecology (Amos Haley), Ethnoecology (Harold Conklin), Cultural Ecology (Julian Steward), Social Ecology (Murray Bookchin)
- **1970s** - Language Ecology (Einer Haugen), Extrasensory Ecology (Joseph Long), Ecological Anthropology (Roy Rappaport)

<sup>1</sup> *Right:* Haeckel’s *Discomedusae*,  
[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Haeckel\\_Discomedusae\\_8.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Haeckel_Discomedusae_8.jpg)

“A redwood forest or a coral reef with its aggregate of organisms interlocking in their relationships [teaches that] the unit of survival is *organism plus environment*... Ecology, in the widest sense, turns out to be the study of the interaction and survival of ideas and programs (*i.e.*, differences, complexes of differences, etc.).”<sup>2</sup> And now there’s an explosion of politically engaged art/ecology projects. In 2005, the Royal Society for the Arts in England started “Arts & Ecology, a program “informed by the notion of ecology as the study of relationships between an individual and their cultural, social, political, economic and natural environments.”<sup>3</sup> Far from its specific scientific and biological flavor in Haeckel’s day, the word “ecology” now seems to encompass *everything*, and artists have been running with it as a framework. For example, the Institute for Figuring gives testimony to the endangered Great Barrier Reef by making a replica “Crochet Coral Reef” out of yarn and post-consumer plastics. Their website evokes a dreamworld of ecology: “Ernst Haeckel ... hovers over the crochet reef as a guiding spirit for us all. His enchanting, hyperbolically detailed drawings ... remain one of the most beautiful ... bodies of scientific illustration ever created.”<sup>4</sup>



Since 1990, the Artists in Residence program at the San Francisco Recycling and Disposal dump has invited over 60 artists to create art out of landfills. And in 2006, L.A. artist Fritz Haeg launched an “attack on the front lawn” with his “Edible Estates” project that replaces a private home’s lawn with a street-front garden to be forever tended by the residents. Haeg wants us to “act where we have influence, and in a capitalist society, that would be our private property. Here we have the freedom to create in some small measure the world in which we want to live.”<sup>5</sup> At an everyday, unmonumental scale, Haeg’s art project tactically interweaves what Félix Guattari theorized as “three ecological registers (the environment, social relations and human subjectivity)... The only true response to the ecological crisis is on a global scale ... [taking] into account molecular domains of sensibility, intelligence, and desire... Now more than ever, nature cannot be separated from culture; in order to comprehend the interactions between

<sup>2</sup> Bateson, Gregory. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. 1972. Fwd. by Mary Catherine Bateson. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000, p.490-493.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.thersa.org/arts>.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.theiff.org/reef/index.html>. The illustration (*right*) is also from this source.

<sup>5</sup> Fritz Haeg, “Edible Estates,” <http://www.fritzhaeg.com/garden/initiatives/edibleestates/main.html>

ecosystems, the mechanosphere and the social and individual Universe of reference, we must learn to think ‘transversally.’”<sup>6</sup> Along these lines, the Beehive Collective in Maine creates anti-globalization and anti-biotech “graphic campaigns [that] cross-pollinate the grassroots, by creating collaborative, anti-copyright images that can be used as educational and organizing tools.”<sup>7</sup> The transversal seeks transformation through connecting publics and forging common concerns in the name of natures or educations in the process of becoming. What emergent worlds grow out of cross-pollinating private lawns and semi-public gardens or landfills and art studios?

Back in Austin, the newly opened “Greater Austin Garbage Arts” or GAGA gallery showcases artwork with “a 95% reclaimed material content” and strives “to create a cooperative community which will enhance not only the general neighborhood ... but will also serve as eco-ambassadors for the greater Austin area.”<sup>8</sup> The South Congress gallery doubles as a house where one of GAGA’s founders lives. GAGA joins a scattered neighborhood of Austin houses that resonate with Haeg’s call to create public community places from within the private sphere. When Jen and I moved the in-home Museum of Ephemera from Tucson to Austin in 2001, we were welcomed by these “yard artists” who saw that we were up to the same thing as them – inviting people into our private space to share trash transformed into treasures through habitual tinkering.

The Museum started as a playful critique of *dead museums*, mausoleums of preservation that try to make time and knowledge stand still. Since we set out to make a *living* museum, with living displays like kombucha fermented tea, ecology has long been a strong attractor. Our last exhibition – Ghosts – included a Ghost Road diorama based on a tourist brochure called “Ecology and Ectoplasm.” Using the Victorian era Pepper’s Ghost stage illusion, the diorama places us on an old logging road populated by carnivorous



<sup>6</sup> Guattari, Félix. *The Three Ecologies*. 1989. Trans. by Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton. London and New Brunswick: The Athlone Press, 2000, p. 28; 43.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.beehivecollective.org>. The illustration (right) is also from this source.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.gagablahblah.com>

plants and glowing orbs that haunt the clear-cut old growth forests of the East Texas Big Thicket.

We made gravestone rubbings from our neighborhood cemetery, where foxes live. A video loop of the backyard pond shows the “ghost creek” that manifests in a strong rain ever since the City buried the seasonal creek that ran through our backyard. The watershed now funnels through storm drains into an underground culvert directly beneath the pond.

Animals, which preceded Ghosts, cobbled together some of Disneyland’s tricks of what Nigel Thrift calls “affective engineering.” Just as the Ghost’s graveyard doubles as a Diseneyesque *invisible fence* to keep tourists from stepping in the wrong spot and ruining the Pepper’s Ghost illusion, Animals deployed *visual overload* to make a dense jungle out of a tiny room. Through this do-it-yourself Disneyland, we’re drawn into an alternate reality along the lines of the Dream Houses Walter Benjamin wrote about in the Arcades project: “In a dream... a ghost appeared to me in the window of the ground floor of a house to our right. And as we walked on, the ghost accompanied us from inside all the houses... The path we travel through arcades is fundamentally just such a ghost walk.”<sup>9</sup>

As with Ghosts, displays in Animals were on loan from the Austin community. To open up the curatorial project, we make a call for loans for each themed show and are always surprised and delighted by what rolls in. Animals included a loaned display of carnivorous plants that mix up the qualities of plants and animals – part of a thriving collection cultivated by a



<sup>9</sup> Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999, p.409.

blacksmith who’s turned part of his backyard into a bog. Other displays connected with our daily lives – especially the dozen or so feral cats that came with our house.

We live next to Longhorn Meat, and everyday one of the workers feeds the alley cats. Once we moved in, Jen got busy fixing them up with help feral cat networks, including Emancipet and the City voucher program. Our backyard’s become a cat preserve, and we’ve adopted seven indoor cats – me, reluctantly, and Jen, with motherly enthusiasm. It’s a world of drama, a feline soap opera. There are sad stories – of death and disappearance, of a cat shot in the paw with a beebie gun. There are ad hoc interspecies architectures made of shower curtains and sheetmetal scraps that shelter cats from winter cold and rain.

There’s big personalities like One-Eye, the patriarch, who fights off dogs in clouds of fur. There’s a complex ecology of parasites within parasites, like the fleas that transmit worms, and cross-species infections like the bartonella I caught from getting scratched by one of our adoptees. There’s a daily regime of chores that fast become habits: feed them morning and night, take in the bowls, give Mao his medicine – Jen and I have it all worked out between us. In short, *we’ve become “cat people,”* becoming-cats in a transversal operation. Jen says that makes our furry family members “human cats.”

Through cat habits and salvage architecture, we’ve engineered a habitat for strays, a little pocket of kindness. 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.”<sup>10</sup> Like our fridge magnet



<sup>10</sup> Thrift, Nigel. “But Malice Aforethought: Cities and the Natural History of Hatred.” *Transactions of the British Institute of Geographers* 30:2 (June 2005), 133-150.

says: “owned by a cat.” So cat-people build cat preserves, and plant-people like our friend the blacksmith make backyard bogs for carnivorous plants. His 6-foot diameter steel tub flourishes while wetlands like those in the Big Thicket keep on vanishing under cities.

The plant and animal communities belonging to the household are valuable as beings in themselves – but also because they transform house habits. The nonhumans benefiting from urban ecological kindness sometimes give back as much or more than the humans build in. For example, greywater wetlands make garbage *alive*, taking household wastewater that would be sanitized (or killed) through chlorination and cleaning it on the spot. They’re a do-it-yourself solution to the everyday problems of wastewater management, and a partial solution to looming crises of urban water and energy shortages.

**The Rhizome Collective** in East Austin offers a yearly workshop called Radical Urban Sustainability Training (RUST) that’s overloaded with such DIY projects. At RUST, Rhizome resident Scott Kellogg stresses how greywater wetlands “relocalize and decentralize” the energy-sapping process of city-level wastewater treatment, while environmental engineer Lauren Ross gets us to “think about water as *living*.” Under Lauren’s microscope a drop of homemade “compost tea” becomes a busy city of nematodes, bacteria, and fungal mycelia, all of which make up a healthy garden’s soil ecology.

The workshop showcases the Rhizome household’s greywater wetlands and rainwater catchments, “micro-livestock” chicken run, composting waterless toilet, bike-powered blender, worm box, a permaculture garden blooming where they tore up an asphalt road, and many other nonhuman assemblages. Their interconnected aquaculture ponds turn fish waste into plant nutrients by cycling nitrogen-rich water from a tilapia and catfish pool into four stages of bioremediating plant communities, then back to the fish. Scott described it as a very compact food production system that maximizes vertical space – perfect for



cities, saving energy otherwise wasted in shipping non-local foods. RUST’s vision of sustainability is inseparable from autonomy and social justice. As Lauren put it, “Imagine if we could all sustain our health throughout our lives, without getting sick from cancer.” Her talk on cancer-causing urban soil contaminants stressed their concentration in poor and minority neighborhoods, and Scott reframed gentrification as a crisis in keeping *community itself* sustainable. The political ecology at work here stops differentiating between social and environmental justice by stressing their common roots in a globalized economy “designed on perpetual growth in a finite-resources world.”



Perhaps the only thing that becomes infinite in capitalist economy is *garbage*. While the Rhizome Collective teaches ways to disengage from standardizing economic grids, the **Cathedral of Junk** in South Austin takes grid garbage as the starting point – a wealth of *unnatural resources*. Like Watts Tower in LA, the Cathedral’s received a lot of international tourists as a “folk art environment.” Its creator, Vince Hanneman, says that as a kid he saw a TV show on Watts Tower and always new he’d build something like that himself. His favorite Cathedral tourists are kids: “What I’m *really* excited about is that the more of them that visit, the more things will come from the next generation.”



It’s a labyrinthine wildlife habitat for bull snake, birds, bugs, rodents, and company, and a garden where water lilies, morning glory, roses, pequins, lamb’s quarters and other flora thrive. Vince started building in 1989 (long before he bought the house!) and has incorporated over 70 tons of junk and 700 bikes into the structure. The Cathedral’s open to the public every weekend, and he welcomes performance events, weddings, parties and the like.



Like the Rhizome Collective’s practice of living in tomorrow’s post-oil, post-apocalypse future today, *time’s already over inside the Cathedral*, where the end of the world’s old

news. Stepping inside is literally walking into yesterday’s everyday, a ghost walk through the domestic world of toys, gadgets, lawn furniture, etc. *after* their mass-produced homeliness and novelty have been abjected.

For every piece of junk that’s woven into the Cathedral’s chaoststructure, a piece is wired out of Planet Landfill. Anything and everything goes in here. First phone cords and dead strings of lights wire everything together, then thick rose vines flow between the cracks and cement objects with wood. Wires and wood interweave, conducting flows of water and stray electricity. Vince grows the Cathedral organically, intuitively, aligned with magnetic north, with weather systems and the lay of the yard in mind, with the flow of people etched into the space itself.



Nearby the Cathedral, Vince’s friend Scott Stevens cultivates another sacred site – the Church of Wonders & Signs Following, better known as Smut Putt Heaven, a cactus/zeriscape garden centered around a pecan tree. Scott and his wife Lisa – one of GAGA’s founders – were married in the yard, as witnessed by their wedding guests and hundreds of mannequin heads-on-sticks. Scott has been collecting them from a hair cutting academy dumpster since 1995. It’s a junk habitat for anoles, bugs, possum, birds, and snakes (some of them made of bottlecaps). Scott’s cats Willie Nelson, Alice Cooper, and Cat Stevens also call the yard home.



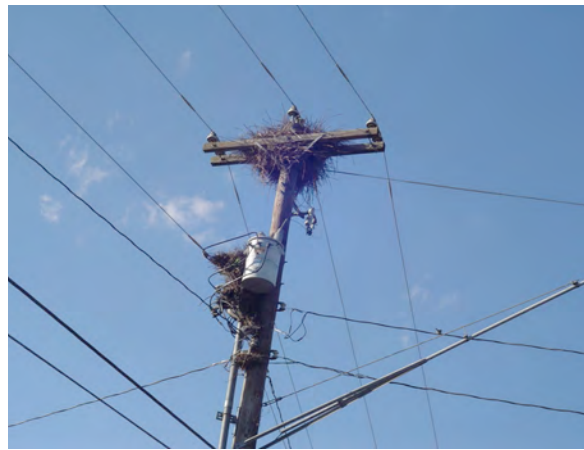
Scott writes a blog<sup>11</sup> about working on his yard art: “ April 4, 2008: I moved some of the multitude of young mulleins to new spots and considered the configuration of a new sitting area ... lots of dirt to be enjoyed after being clean the entire work day!!!! Perhaps the best part was following tweeting to find a bird nest built

<sup>11</sup> <http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendID=26690280>

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.”

Birds make places alive through sounds, even when we don't see them. When Jen and I moved to East Austin, we started hearing squawks across the backyard sky. A Museum visitor with a pet monk parakeet told us we were hearing feral birds of the same species that have naturalized in Austin. They squat cell phone towers electricity poles as nesting sites, a practice that has sparked controversies in other cities between parrot people and utility companies that tear down the nests. In Connecticut, the parrot people's solution has been to build nesting aeries in their backyards where monks can safely make their homes.

Without anthropomorphizing the parrots, I think of their squawks as questions – “can we live here too?” Will the City or house be kind enough to make room for them? Can the City become a coral reef that multiplies houses, nests them one in the other so the garbage of one becomes the food or habitat of the next? It's not only up to humans, as the nonhumans are doing more than their share of the ecological work. As Bruno Latour puts it, “The human is not a constitutional pole to be opposed to that of the nonhuman... The expression ‘anthropomorphic’ considerably underestimates our humanity. We should be talking about *morphism*. Morphism is the place where technomorphisms, zoomorphisms, ... sociomorphisms, psychomorphisms, all come together. Their alliance and their exchange, taken together, are what define the *anthropos*. A weaver of morphisms - isn't that enough of a definition?”<sup>12</sup> For anthropology, the challenge is to open our human-centered habits of thought to the swarm of artful *morphies* and ecological beings seeking our transversal collaborations.



<sup>12</sup> Latour, Bruno. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Trans. by Catherine Porter. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993, p.137.