

Beyond Recreation: Emerging Concepts of Nature and Public Engagement in Art and Popular Media

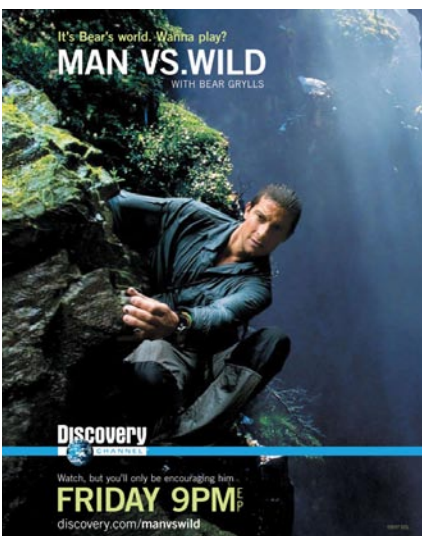
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Let's look outside of the park. If we understand that the National Park Service is for the public, then who is this public? What does it mean to provide for them? And what images of nature and wilderness are circulating in the cities and suburbs? Park Service Director Mary Bomar wrote that “the System continues to evolve, reflecting the progression of history, new understandings of natural systems, and changes in patterns of recreation.” What then are these changing patterns?



A glance of portraits of nature on television, for example, will reveal Bear Grylls parachuting into an inhospitable landscape with a bottle of water, very good hiking boots, and a camera crew. Bear is part wilderness guide and part survival instructor for the Discovery Channel's show Man vs. Wild. Our guide – whose given name Edward evolved into Teddy and then into Bear – engages his environment as a true human animal. He eludes predators and tears into his prey with abandon, all while steeping pine needles in his tea for Vitamin C and a sense of domestic comfort. The show's signature is its over-the-top immersion in the most compromising situations. Bear Grylls reminds us that there are systems at work in the natural world, and that humans, from outdoorsmen to armchair adventurers, are part of them.

While I hesitate to say that Bear Gryll's newly beaten path through the jungle should be a model for any of us, this show reflects and defines a strong popular desire for a sense of connection, comprehension, involvement, and shared consequence in the natural environment.



While the programming of the Park Service has served this desire well, the prominence of the concept of recreation – a term assigned to urban park sites for example – implies that experiences of the environment happen only through leisure and amusement outside of one's work and obligations. If indeed there is a desire among the public for an understanding of their role within the environment, then Nature is not just something we do on the weekends, or when we have time. Nature is something integrated into everyday lives, into cities, and layered into spaces marked by weather, ecology, human desires, and histories. What then can unpack the ethical and ecological relationships among humans, animals, and environment; providing for our enjoyment of and participation in this entanglement?

In the interest of provoking discussion among the participants in this workshop, I will make quick presentations of several contemporary projects, mostly from the visual arts, that offer models of public engagement in the environment beyond recreation. These projects replace the term recreation with engagement ; and visitor with scientist, animal, farmer, geographer, guide, and activist. Although not strictly landscape or architecture projects, this work points to strategies of design, programming, and uses of technology that can broaden and extend the depth of the NPS programs.

Scientist

Lunchbox Lab, 2008

Amy Franceschini and Michael Swaine of Futurefarmer on Nathan Meuser of National Renewable Energy Laboratory

Stijn Schiffeleers of Boutique Vizique



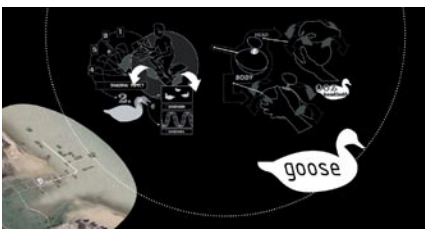
The Lunchbox Lab is a mobile research lab that makes scientists out of high school students. The National Renewable Energy Lab is studying the use of green algae to produce hydrogen, leading to a renewable source of biodiesel or ethanol, but ran into difficulties identifying a strain of algae that could produce enough hydrogen for this process. Looking for the right strain amidst thousands of algae proved to be more than the research group could handle. In response to this problem, the Lunchbox Lab project enlists high school students around the country to fill glass beakers with algae samples into the lunchbox, where they can be exposed to various light and pressure conditions. If hydrogen is produced by the algae, the beakers – equipped with hydrogen sensors in their stoppers – turn blue. The amateur scientists can then contribute their findings back to the research headquarters.

Animal

Ooz, 2003- current

Natalie Jeremijenko

21st Century Lakefront Park Competition with Laura Kurgan and Kate Orff



Ooz is a series of environments, robots, and installations at sites around the world that combine to create a zoo without cages where animals remain by choice. In one project, people in urban sites use an interactive chair or make hand gestures legible to a motion



needs. In regard to Deputy Director Wenk's call for a revisiting of the visitor center, perhaps the flexibility and mobility of the Science Barge could be a model for a lighter cheaper center.

Many of the projects I've shown so far design interfaces between public and environment by involving the public actively in their environment through research, communication, and cultivation. Many use sensing technologies to monitor, record, and make visible aspects of ecosystem function to the public. They demonstrate a relationship of shared consequences and similarities among animals and humans in their biology and behavior. Many are lightweight and responsive to their environment, whether through sensing or mobility or energy production, but operate with systems that work at a large scale. (4 min)

Next I'd like to show a few projects that address the way the public is invited to be an active interpreter, geographer, and activist.

Guide

Center for Land Use Interpretation

director: Matthew Coolidge



The Center for Land Use Interpretation is a non-profit research institution and museum dedicated to “the increase and diffusion of information about how the world's lands are apportioned, utilized, and perceived.” In other words, CLUI focuses on how land is marked by human activity. Sites of interest include post-industrial sites, mining, military, R&D, transportation, waste, water, nuclear testing grounds, and hollywood film settings. CLUI operates what it



calls the Land Use Museum Complex – a network of small galleries in Culver City, CA, Wendover, UT, the Mohave Desert, and Troy, NY. It runs bus tours of these sites, and an extensive database on its website making photographs, directions, and information about each site available to the public for research or self-guided tours. As Director Matt Coolidge says, “The hinterlands are very much related to the cities. They’re the other side of the coin.” Landfills, nuclear power plants, and borate mines may not be visible to an urban dweller, but support the city directly.

Geographer

Earth Sandwich, 2006

Ze Frank



This openness to interpretation and self-guided exploration goes hand in hand with a movement of GPS artists. A lighthearted example comes from Ze Frank, an online performer and blogger, who set up a google earth interface called “Earth Sandwich.” Ze challenges his viewers to make earth sandwiches by putting a piece of bread on the ground and using google maps to locate another piece of bread at its antipodal site, on the other side of the earth. A baguette placed on the ground in Auckland, NZ , was matched when two brothers from London flew to southern Spain to complete the Earth Sandwich.

Migration Mileposts

Lynne Hull

And, in a more ecologically oriented manner, Lynn Hull made mileposts for bird migration. Chunks of discarded highway concrete



are recycled and sandblasted to give information about bird species that migrate along the Atlantic flyway. They are installed at various sites along this path including Quebec, New Jersey, and North Carolina. These mileposts “link communities from Canada to south America through our shared wildlife.”

These projects use databases, GPS navigation, and self-guided tour formats to provide trails of a sort off the beaten path. Here navigation shifts, and paths can emerge or disappear according to interest or changes in ecosystem function. Although we perhaps typically think that GPS navigation can help us find our way, here GPS is also used to help us get lost, or to make present a link among geographic locations far apart. Navigation and interpretation points to systemic relationships among physically distinct places. These projects look at a version of nature that is layered and multiple, involving cities, cultivated and abused lands, and wilderness areas alike, reinforcing the idea that nature and environment are part of everyday life and space.

Activist

Landmark (footprints), 2001

Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla



The openness of these layered readings leads me to the last project, a piece by Allora and Calzadilla on the Island of Vieques in Puerto Rico. In the context of a civil disobedience movement fighting the seizure of land from local fishermen by the US Navy and its use as a bombing range, the artists 2 years before the Navy’s departure, invited activists to design protest graphics. These graphics were cast into rubber and attached to the soles

of normal shoes. Demonstrators walked in the restricted zone of the beach leaving an imprint as a kind of seal. This act of marking the land acknowledges the role of the public in inscribing and reinscribing its voice in the land. The visitors in this case are the actors, expressing their stake in the land in multiple, with an active voice.

Perhaps an expansion of the model of recreation to a model of engagement creates a relationship of consequence among public life and environmental life. In this way we move beyond the model that we in civilization must save this thing outside of ourselves called Nature; and shift to a model in which we and animals alike inhabit urban, rural, and suburban ecosystems.

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