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Land Alive!, or metamorphosis in the sportsman's paradise

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LAND ALIVE!,
OR
METAMORPHOSIS IN THE SPORTSMAN'S PARADISE

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

In

The School of Art

By

Adam Tourek
B.F.A., University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2005
May 2008
Hobbes: Why are you digging a hole?
Calvin: I'm looking for buried treasure!
Hobbes: What have you found?
Calvin: A few dirty rocks, a weird root, and some disgusting grubs.
Hobbes: On your first try??
Calvin: There's treasure everywhere!

Bill Waterson,
There's Treasure Everywhere

When I first wake, I administer the usual morning walk through death.
   No sense in abusing your lungs with pepper,
   I go straight for a high-grade phencyclidine with all the extras.
   Then I like to open all the walls in the house,
   And since it's never mine, I start immediately.
   I can destroy an entire upstairs, six-bedroom penthouse in under 15 minutes,
   And after this one, I'll be up to a thousand

   For a rush, some jump from planes or fly them into buildings;
   I blackmail the wives of broadcast gods.
   And every quarter moon it seems,
   The situation asks for a bit of the old
   Demolition.

   Since none of you can see, I won't waste your time with special effects,
   For these are the hateful and shered-out adventures
   Of a child, who dared defy a conformist lifestyle.

Cage,
"Movies for the Blind"
Acknowledgements

This work was a manifold collaboration, and I cannot imagine it without the expert advice, friendship, and elbow grease of the following supportive individuals. As for the success of these two evenings, I owe it in great part to the volunteers pictured in this document: Suedee Hall, Nyssa Juneau, Richard Simmons, Lisa Haefner, John LeBret, Mallory Feltz, Skye Erie, and Josh Mayoral, for their commitment to following a sometimes uncertain lead. Their enthusiasm and critical thought propelled this show, and my only regret is that I did not ask for their help earlier. And to our audience turned participants, you really made this happen.

I was fortunate to have arrived in Baton Rouge at the same time as someone who was willing to jump off he deep end with me. Sharing an art making and living space with New Style has always been the sugary icing on this grad school shitcake; he is the best buddy a Skinny Bear could ask for. I could not have made some of my travels with out companions Michael, Richard, and Tiffany. Thank you for keeping us in line when we had somewhere to be, and for allowing us to drift when the wind blew the right way.

Many of the difficulties I encountered were worked though in small moments, with the help of friends and colleagues, who were wholeheartedly honest. Kenny, David, Cody, and Mallory chose to see possibilities, and were a wonderful sounding board. There were times I found myself out to sea; thanks, Holly, for cultivating amity on a long drive to Dallas, for helping me sort out so much confusion, and for captain. I was glad to have my mom in town during the show, it wouldn't have been the same without her; I also owe the rest of my family a big thanks, for always supporting my endeavors, and for teaching me about recognizing treasure.

I would also like to thank the members of my faculty committee: Professors Malcolm McClay, Susan Ryan, Kelley Kelli, Wei He, and Loren Schwerd, for failing me during that one review, for pressing me for answers, and for consenting to an endeavor that meandered far and wide. I owe a special thanks to Professors Ruth and Michael Bowman, and to the performance studies department, for generously inviting me into their community. I have never met a more open-minded group of scholars; so much of this project was built on what I learned from my time with them. Thanks also to Ms. Dixon at the graduate school for seeing to it that this document reached you as an orderly arrangement.

Thanks to the kind folks at State Lumber for keeping that little hardware store in my neighborhood, and to the late night crew at Kinko's for all the glossy cardstock. To the many anonymous proprietors of sporting good stores and gas stations, thank you for carrying on at the end of the world, a treasure hunter needs quality sundries. And to anyone I encountered on an adventure, that sat and talked to me, offered me a plate of spaghetti, pointed me in the right direction, or, just waved to me, this project would lack so much without your intervention, cheers to you!
Preface

I would like to introduce you to a thesis; it details the processes and products of a project called "Land Alive!" The way I've arranged it, the beginning illuminates research in the form of traveling, through landscapes and literature. The end is a log of two occasions; their location and activities are elaborated in as much detail as possible. In the middle, there is a transfer between what I learned and what we did.

As to your choice of beginning or end, I suppose it depends on your interests. If you study rocks, culture, or bureaucracy, see chapter 1. If you enjoy adventure or literary theory, read chapter 2. If you frequent theaters, galleries, or other peculiar places, chapter 3 is for you. See chapter 4 for the details on what you would call the "show," or "performance" or part of this thesis. I tie up a couple of loose ends in chapter 5.

These chapters are assembled as clusters of ideas, subtitles are used as landmarks within the text and images are incorporated where they are useful. This document is a record of events and ideas; there are points to be discussed beyond it. It is also a reference for artists and other explorers, so I have included details about my processes and results.

This project began with a proposal for a treasure hunt, and stipulated that a gathering of friends and neighbors would occur. Shortly after acquiring a canoe in trade for some big, old sculptures, having heard fantastic tales of locations, and with high hopes of recovering all manners of discarded chairs and other detritus; I set out first for the town of Chauvin, home to the sculptural grotto of outsider artist Kenny Hill.

What I found on the way to my destination, at the counter of the Harbor Light Inn, was a book published by two residents of Terrebonne Parish. A quick read opened my eyes to the complex social, political, ecological, and economic situations that, not only residents of coastal Louisiana, but the American population and its policymakers face at the time of this writing.

As I sat and read, the innkeeper inquired about my boat and introduced me to the world of laminated, post-Katrina satellite imagery. With the pink and turquoise maps spread out on the pool table at the Harbor Light, I was approached by a group of biology students from Nicholls State University in Thibodeaux, Louisiana. They explained their work, invited me to their research bunker, fed me raw oysters, and satisfied my curiosity. I did eventually make it to Mr. Hill's former residence; it was a compelling display of artistic vision. But I had already been gifted the seeds that would sprout into twining vines of an investigation into the Mississippi River Delta. The months following were full of treasure hunting; I soon found myself full of stories and my studio full of abandoned chairs.

As for the problem of communicating my findings to an audience, it is with the highest confidence in the buoyancy of acute sensory experiences in human memory, that I undertook the challenges inherent in the work this document describes.
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Abstract

"Land Alive!" is best described a multimedia work. The produce of travels to the area of the Mississippi River delta, along with text-based research, formed the materials from which two evenings of participative performance at the Backyard Gallery were crafted. Personal narratives were used alongside evaluations of administrative programs, and the space in the gallery was transformed using shovels, buckets, and teamwork. Found chairs, rope, and other objects, through a ritualized interface, became an aesthetic formation; everyone present worked together in the assembly of a boat, which contained the results of these interactions between myself, six volunteers, and an audience turned participants. The evenings were an opportunity for individuals to come together, connect to each other, and share a different kind of encounter with the Mississippi River delta. This was an interdisciplinary undertaking; my training as a studio artist was complemented with the study of performance, physical science, and sociology. The goal of this project was to propel new ideas, not solutions, into old and difficult problems.
Chapter One: Toward an Overview of Delta

"Being able to look...and envision the dynamic forces that have shaped these landscapes is a distinct achievement of human understanding"
- Darwin Spearing, 1995

Verge

The term delta refers to any interface a river has with a body of water or desert. A river does not simply pour straight out into this other body, it creates a complex landscape; beginning with one main channel, it spreads out as it tries to find the shortest route. The result is a particular and recognizable shape. The third letter of the Greek alphabet, delta, (Δ) is triangular in shape. The association between the terminology used to describe a river outlet and the Greek letter is credited to Herodotus, who noticed that the Nile River had a triangular shape at its end. The Mississippi River's delta makes up the southeast portion of the state of Louisiana, which is customarily known as the "toe of the boot."

The years 2005, 2006, and 2007 in southeast Louisiana were complicated, to say the least. The problems addressed in this writing have been around for as long as anyone can remember, but the acute devastation caused by hurricanes Katrina and Rita has brought to light a lack of viable solutions. To assess the situation summarily is futile; no single report or account contains all of the considerations necessary. The first part of my project, then, was to elaborate a model of the Mississippi River delta synthesized from variety of sources.

Because this delta is part of the state of Louisiana, it falls under the jurisdiction and maintenance of the United States government. The changes occurring on the Delta are an administrative nightmare. There are so many considerations; it is a habitat, a residence, and an industrial hub. Strategies seem to fall into three steps: diagnosis, planning, and execution. Numerous diagnostic and executive reports are available, published by agencies such as Louisiana Coastal Area, Breaux Act Task Force, State Wetlands Authority, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Department of Wildlife and Fisheries...The list goes on and on.

Figure 1. Administrative Coordination Chart, from Coast 2050.
An overall diagnosis taken from Coast 2050: Toward a Sustainable Coastal Louisiana:

The effects of natural processes like subsidence and storms have combined with human actions at large and small scales to produce a system on the verge of collapse. (1)

That is the situation in a nutshell; natural processes have been around for a long time, but human actions are fairly new to the landscape. The report goes on to demonstrate its process, in an outline of complex interaction between citizens, engineers, and bureaucrats. Coastal Louisiana is divided into distinct regions, which are further divided into units, and each region is addressed with its unique concerns in mind. The main problem is the rapid disappearance of land area; this condition is popularly known as coastal erosion.

42 Years

I've been told by some, that it is a hopeless case to try to take action against the erosion eating away at our parish's coast. Nevertheless, I believe something can be done about it. (Adair, 7)

So begins Joseph and Angela Adair's essay on the state of Terrebonne Parish, published shortly after the floodwaters from hurricane Rita had slipped back into the Gulf of Mexico. The authors describe the particular sensitivity of this parish to erosion, but sight a "glimmer of hope," present in rebuilding and prevention efforts (20). Some of the projects proposed in Coast 2050 have been initiated, but the land is quickly vanishing, and they put the need for intervention in tangible form: "urgent" (7).

The Adair's argument for urgency resides in a bent toward preservation, specifically the preservation of "native" cultures, which have had to "forcibly disperse" (13). We should temper the word "native" here with the years 1682 and 1761, when members of the Houmas tribe were "found," and the first immigrant from Nova Scotia "signed his name in a cattle brand book" (Adair, 37). Perhaps we can use "native" in a relative sense here; these are people who have lived here as long as anyone can remember.

At any rate, every year finds the delta with less square mileage than the previous, and every hurricane drives residents out which do not return. The erosion problem, then, is not just of the soil variety, but is a disappearance of people and their values: "If we lose our coastline, we lose our culture" (Adair, 12). Referencing the often-made prediction that Terrebonne Parish will be eroded out of existence in 50 years if action is not taken, the Adairs' plea is based on the desire to have their culture exist as more than stories about a "lost civilization" (15). They are not content to settle on relocation as a solution; they say Southeast Louisiana is no more prone to natural disaster than many other areas in the country, and it deserves attention.
Tenuous

What course of events brought coastal land such as Terrebonne parish toward this precarious situation? The answer is not simple, but perhaps we can work from the ground up. Geologist Darwin Spearing offers a perspective fit for "people who are not geologists," and neatly outlines the deltaic process (ix). This publication was particularly useful to me, as I am indeed, not a geologist. The Mississippi River, as demonstrated by Spearing, has switched its course several times over the past 7,500 years "furiously building deltas" across what came to be Southeast Louisiana (37). As we understand it geologically, there have been six major courses of the river. Floods brought about changes in the course of the Mississippi River; water escaped the channel and sought a shorter way to the Gulf of Mexico.

As a consequence, stability is not a feature of this landscape, and that assertion moves us toward a provisional answer to our question. Spearing offers the "life cycle" of a delta: repetitions of "occupation," "abandonment," and "subsidence" (36). While this cycle happens on a scale of time almost imperceptible to humans, intensive geological survey is making this kind of observation possible. The precarious situation that Terrebonne Parish, among other locations, faces is due in part to the very nature of living on a land in flux. In older human arrangements, people moved with these shifts, but now we have what we call infrastructure.

Figure 2. Roadblock found on Louisiana Highway 46, east St. Bernard Parish, 2007.

All of the information presented here, and more, corresponds to a category of site proposed by art historian Miwon Kwon. The discursive site, "delineated by a field of knowledge, intellectual exchange, or cultural debate," for this project is the discussion that residents, administrators, ecologists, geologists, and businesses are (or are not) having (26).

Spearing declares the Mississippi River Delta "one of the most dynamic landscapes in the world," and imbues the process with "drama" (49). At this point, Herodotus' comparison may be expanded. He noticed a similarity in shape, but there is also a similarity in meaning. When used to solve a physical problem, or mathematically, the symbol $\Delta$ (delta), placed in front of a property, such as temperature, or in our case,
land area, denotes a change in said property; it is a difference operator. A river delta is shaped like a triangle, like the letter $\Delta$, which indicates change. A change in the course of a river is the process by which a delta forms, so the delta is a land that is changing.

**Amble**

But documents, photographs, and maps can only do so much to give a picture of the delta. Essential to this project was the act of confronting this landscape, and the people who call it home, in person. French philosopher Michel deCerteau, in his 1984 collection of essays, "The Practice of Everyday Life," highlights the difference between looking down from above (as when consulting a map), and traveling through physical landscapes at ground level. The section entitled "Walking in the City" begins with a view of New York City from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center. He describes the "voluptuous pleasure" available from such a view (92).

![Figure 3.6 Lobes of the Mississippi River Delta, from Spearing.](image)

DeCerteau says, "this elevation...transforms the bewitching world...into a text that lies before our eyes," and it is from here that I begin a loose comparison to the view that one is often presented with when attempting to assess the complexities of the Mississippi River delta. Agencies such as United States Army Corps of Engineers, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, etc., are in part, responsible for the manufacture of this viewpoint, which deCerteau would describe as, "Disentangled from the murky, intertwining daily behaviors" (93). Maps, color-coded with evaluations of, and predictions for, the coastal land area, transform the delta into a model of itself.
Major decisions in engineering are made in committee meetings held in offices and boardrooms, far from their impact. deCerteau gives us the name "panorama-city" (we'll use panorama-delta), and calls it a "theoretical simulacrum," and "optical artifact" (92, 93). These, says deCerteau, are ways of "Keeping aloof, by the city planner or cartographer" (93). Certainly, this aloofness affords a planning protocol, which, for all of its optimism, often neglects some basic and obvious concerns.

The "culture" that Jospeh and Angela Adair speak of is what is lost in the mountains of data, and deCerteau calls this a "Projection of an opaque past and an uncertain future onto a surface that can be dealt with" (93). "Dealing with," the issues that the residents of the delta face is, the stance taken by administrative bodies; this is a problem in itself. Planners on one side of a line are afforded a "Panoptic view of situations they have to deal with" (94). These situations involve real people, though, and should not be described in "theories of misfortune" (96).

A vital facet of this project, then, was to move beyond this limited and distant viewpoint into a more personal and subjective dimension of life on the delta, into a land alive with natural, and social interaction. DeCerteau terms it, "analyzing the microbe-like, singular, and plural practices," or "following the swarming activity" (96). In short, I left the administrative capitol city, Baton Rouge, to set my own two feet upon the changing physical and cultural landscape. I left to see what was actually happening, what people were doing, and what their names were.
Chapter Two: Treasure Everywhere

"Some people may call it luck, but I think this experience represents a good example of the advantages of diversifying your activities when it can be sensibly done."

-Karl von Mueller, 1972

Diligence

The Mississippi River's extension into the Gulf of Mexico is, what Kwon would call the site of "intervention," or the physical location of "site-specific" research, which propels this project (26). This is where a confrontation with "swarming activity" was had. It was my hope that a collection of first-hand accounts, filled with the details of lifestyle and personality, would lend an extra dimension lacking in many efforts to describe the delta. I considered myself a good treasure hunter, but for this project, I consulted an expert in the field.

"There is treasure lost, buried, or hidden in every county and parish of these United States and some of it is found every day" (25), reads the section called "Treasure Everywhere" in Karl von Mueller's Treasure Hunter's Manual #7. Let me say that KvonM is talking about "anything of cash or convertible value" (3), and that I was definitely not looking for cash. I was, perhaps looking for things of convertible value; stories, chairs, rope, and any other treasures that could help me tell a story.

But how does one hunt for treasure? To begin, says KvonM, one must have an idea of where one is going, and at least a hunch of what might be there. He calls this phase "research" and proclaims it the "Most tedious part of a treasure hunting project" (80). It was, on several occasions, a tedious process; satellite imagery was obtained from the United States Geological Survey website, printed, and compiled. Other kinds of maps were used; laminated satellite imagery and line drawings were available from sporting goods stores. I am the kind of person who likes to just go out and see what I can find, but In order to make some journeys successful, I had to decide on viable possibilities, and assemble a definite route long before leaving Baton Rouge.

Figure 5. Map Assembled from Printed Satellite Images, 2007.
Appropriation

Even with all of this preparation, there was always the fact of getting out into the world and its immediate reality. When approached in an urban context, ("the city"), deCerteau calls this counter-panoptic activity "walking," and describes it as a "process of appropriation," of a topographical system on the part of the pedestrian (97). The walker takes bits of the landscape and puts it to his/her own use. For this project, I was using the land for its chances to meet people, and its deposits of abandoned chairs.

Von Mueller designates this phase "the search," and says it is "usually the most exciting element of a treasure hunt" (82). He is absolutely right, though I will disagree with him when he says the search should be a "brief " event (82); again, I was not searching for a designated cache, but whatever happened to be out there. Every day away from Baton Rouge was full of unexpected finds, and I often postponed my return as long as possible. I stretched out my time as long as possible to ensure maximum exposure to the opportunity of the landscape.

While I did a fair share of walking, and driving, one trip to the coastal areas of the Mississippi River delta was enough to realize that those methods of transport wouldn't get me too far. More appropriate to my endeavor was travel on the water, specifically by canoe. I will, for the sake of argument, equate paddling a canoe to walking. The speed of a canoe paddled by one or two people closely approximates that of a walker, the proximity to the topographic features is also closely analogous, and one is able to navigate smaller channels (deCerteau would say alleys), due to its shallow draft. We could say that I was not walking in the city, but canoeing on the delta.

Figure 6. Outfit for Traverse of the Atchafalaya Basin, packed, 2007.

I would like to put this method of transport into a context of sorts, that of the age of the outboard motor. With this context, I can highlight advantages, particular to my mission, provided by the slow, quiet movement across the water as compared to the noise and speed of a gas-powered craft. The Boy Scouts of America canoeing merit badge pamphlet describes canoeing as a "wonderful world," and states that one of the benefits of adventure in this style is "being in and observing nature...experiencing the ecology of lakes and rivers, which will help you understand why it is important to
preserve these resources for future generations" (8,9). To this I will add that it is very
difficult to meet and talk to people over the roar of an engine, and that treasure is easier
to find at a slower speed.

There are many ways to canoe; I adapted this means to suit my needs. It may be
useful to consider what deCerteau calls the "style," that is, "the singular and
fundamental way of being in the world," in which I did my hunting. To be more specific
about my method, I was "canoe camping," which "allowed me to carry plenty of cargo"
(BSA, 35). This phrase became particularly useful on expeditions because, as a collector
of objects, I needed a way to recover my treasures. We will ask: what was my style,
"Rhetoric of walking" (deCerteau, 98)?

The Red Rum

First, modifications were made to my vehicle to enable the loading and
unloading of the canoe by a single person. The boat itself is a seventeen-foot aluminum-
reinforced fiberglass craft with a raked stem, v-shaped hull, and tumblehome sides.
Dubbed the Red Rum, this red canoe is rated by the U.S. Coast Guard for 796 pounds,
persons and gear included. The "cargo space" is the eight-foot long by two-foot wide
area amidships, between the forward and aft thwarts. The standard gear included on all
expeditions: two aluminum paddles with plastic blades and handles, two plastic buckets
with strainers for collection and bailing, two life preservers (which turned out to be
excellent seat cushions), two steel anchors fabricated from scrap and found parts, several
lengths of rope with clips attached, cooking stove and utensils, compass, maps, knife,
clothes, food, and water, or water purifier.

For shorter trips, where landing was allowed, a tent was included with the gear,
and after an acceptable site was located, was pitched. One interesting feature of the
landscape of Southeast Louisiana, as I came to find out, is that much of the land is
owned by the state and leased out to hunters, harvesters, etc., but the vast areas of river,
bayou, swamp, and marsh water are, for the most part, open for use. Several of my
treasure hunts required the use of special rigs for the canoe to enable sleeping on the
water. These expeditions gave "Canoe camping" a new meaning.

Figure 7. Cooking on a Trunk in the Red Rum, East St. Bernard Parish, 2007.
For a five-day traverse of the Atchafalaya Basin, my traveling partner and I engineered a six-foot by eight-foot platform that could be stored in the boat, assembled on the boat, and provide the necessary square footage to erect a tent. This platform was constructed from salvaged aluminum automobile running boards, 2x4" lumber, and modular sections of 3/8" plywood. Simple connections were made with carriage bolts and wing nuts. Extra buoyancy and balance were provided by oversized rubber balls, which were secured to the underside of the out-rigged sections by pieces of salvaged shrimp net.

Figure 8. Cooking in a Tent on the Platform, Atchafalaya Basin, 2007.

The assembly process took approximately one hour, and once complete, provided us with a small island on which to take care of bodily needs, such as sleep. This space also served as our daily office; we consulted maps, dumped our digital camera, digested the day's travel, and plan the next day's route. To keep weight to a minimum, gear was often used in multiple ways. For instance, a beam flashlight was turned into a lantern in combination with a strainer and a plastic bag, or an opaque water bottle. Paddles were used to secure tent lines, and the cooking pot was filled with utensils and stove when not in use; every bit of equipment had to "Pack light and tight" (BSA, 35). I do not think that this rigging and the extra weight it added followed the U.S. Coast Guard guideline for 6" of height above water, nor can I say that the craft was level with the water, but it allowed us the self-supported tour we needed.

For solo canoe camping, the boat was outfitted with a plywood panel, cut to the shape of the bottom of the boat; this elevated shelf kept my sleeping gear above the ever-present puddle of water, and provided a flat surface. The Red Rum is difficult to maneuver solo, from the stern, if the bow is not weighted as well.. A heavy steamer trunk was placed behind the forward seat; this provided a place to store gear, a flat table-like surface to cook and roll out maps, and when filled, provided weight similar to a second person. These were "styles" of canoeing, and overcoming technical failure was a trial and error process.
Figure 9. Flashlight Lantern, 2007.  Figure 10. Sleeping in the Red Rum, 2007.

Figure 11. Weight at the Bow, Waterproof Bags, 2007.

Touring

But what was I, a resident of Baton Rouge, actually doing on the delta? Let us examine my investigative actions from another perspective, that of tourism. According to popular theory, the act of touring is in itself a performance, or set of performances. Michael Bowman, in his 2006 essay, "Looking for Stonewall's Arm: Tourism as Performance Method," surveys different perspectives on tourism and performance, calling on a long history of tourists as performers. He relates his own experience at Civil War battlefields to "An emerging body of research where the interests of scholars in performance, communication, and cultural studies intersect" (102). This essay was particularly useful to me; this project moved me further into this body of research, this discursive site.
It is not a stretch to examine my travels as a set of performances; they were enacted in a particular place, within a particular time, and I used my body to move about. Bowman highlights "conventions and shared norms that govern the tourist's self-presentation in order both to manage other's impressions of them and to achieve certain instrumental goals" (115). In light of my use of the canoe, I would say that my performance operated against the norm of the motorboat, but that it did achieve instrumental goals. On a more tangible level, Bowman demonstrates how the performance of tourism makes "Everyday habits tough to maintain...even sleeping can become difficult when one is on tour" (117). I would say, for the sake of example, that sleeping on water is not an easy thing to do.

Yes

Pre-expedition research has its uses, but plans do not always go accordingly, nor are they always necessary. In "Looking for Stonewall's arm, Bowmann also details "a chance encounter with a postcard...and allowing [him]self to exist for a day in a state of distractedness. This allowed [him] to map a new relation to the U.S. Civil War" (128). These words resonated greatly with me as I traveled, as I also had a chance encounter with a book (the Adairs' "Eroding Treasures"), which enabled an additional layer of mapping to occur over the administrative documents I had read. Bowman states, "Some tourist performances resemble a research method of simulation and experiment...that has as its goal the staging of knowledge" (123). He references the works of Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, the surrealists, and feminist film critics, declaring that "[their] method of producing relied heavily on fragmentation, the interruption of narratives, habits, routines, by allowing oneself to follow random or chance encounters with whatever objects, images, gesture, or petty details one might be drawn to at a given moment" (124). There are features of the landscape that cannot be seen on any map, no matter how detailed; by allowing myself to be distracted by new sights and sounds, I absorbed experiences with a land and people that is not otherwise possible.

Another articulation of this travel protocol can be found in Al Burian's "Burn Collector 13." Burian remembers a successful adventure based on a premise suggested by his friend "Nick Holzgum, inventor of the 'non-stop party wagon;'' it is simple: "You just say yes to everything" (page unnumbered). The land-, water-, and social-scapes of the delta are such that following this advice is nearly effortless; there are infinite possibilities in the form of canals, bays, bayous, abandoned property, bars, fill stations, and all of this on more square miles than anyone in a canoe could hope to explore. DeCerteau calls this an "Ensemble of possibilities," and says that, "The walker actualizes some of these possibilities...he makes them exist as well as emerge" (98). Saying yes to opportunities as they arose provided me experiences that could not have been planned, and stories that could not be invented.
To be honest, I'm no purist; my travels fell on a continuum between rigorously planned and completely random. Sometimes research was unnecessary before treasure hunting, and sometimes it proved completely useless. Either way, there is something to be said for both preparation and wandering, and I have found that a good plan with flexibility is the best option for being able to get around, as well as engage in the unexpected. After a while, I found the studio filling up with treasures, and the fruits of these adventures were put to use in the production of two evenings.
Chapter 3: Metamorphosis in the Backyard Paradise

"It matters not only that we birth and die, but how we birth and die"
-Donald Grimes, 2000

Where

The culmination of this project took place on Friday, March 28 and Saturday, March 29, 2008. When I say, "took place" I am referring to the fact that these evenings were comprised actions within specific periods of time. There were inherent and intentional differences between the two; the differences were brought about through discussion between the two evenings with peers. Despite these, there were elements that were necessary to both evenings; I will indicate differences as necessary.

The venue used for "Land Alive!" was The Backyard Gallery; this gallery is simply a house located near Louisiana State University with a tradition of quarterly art exhibitions. With the erection of walls on two sides, crafted from recycled wooden doors, and the addition of lights, the backyard has been tailored for these exhibitions. The gallery was started in the summer of 2005, and operates on a simple premise; a theme is chosen a month before the date of the exhibition, usually a single word or phrase (a color, a person's name, etc), and local artists create artwork for the specific theme. The Backyard Gallery has been a place that has welcomed experiment; I had a long-standing relationship with the resident curators, and they allowed me to take chances.

The decision to produce this show for the Backyard Gallery was an easy one; after all, I took up residence in the house in the fall of 2007, promote and curate exhibitions, and am familiar with the place. From a production standpoint, I had the opportunity for to work in the space for an extended period of time. "Land Alive!" was a site-specific work not only in terms of subjects, but also its place of realization.

Figure 13. Testing in the Backyard, Baton Rouge, 2008.
Dirt

While this familiarity and proximity made some of my tasks easier, there are aspects of The Backyard gallery, and of a backyard, which were indispensable. The floor in the backyard is dirt, and an essential component of "Land Alive!" was the ability to bury objects, which were recovered throughout the course of the evening. The action of unearthing is not only a direct reference to treasure hunting, but causes a metamorphosis within the space. The dirt itself was used during the performance; it was removed from certain areas and moved to others, it collected on the volunteers' clothing and bodies, and when trenches were excavated, channels were created for the introduction of water.

Water, you say? Well, water was both a matter of representation and an imperative to the audience to act urgently, to use the Adair's word. Throughout the course of the evenings, it was stated that "water was taking over the land of the delta," and, "there is more water than land in some places;" using water allowed me to create a simulation, of the environment I described orally. I cannot imagine a better place to make such a watery scene than a backyard, and the sheer amount of water I wanted, along with the dirt necessary, is simply not welcome in a traditional gallery, or on a traditional stage.

Beyond the symbolism and metaphor enacted in "Land Alive!," I have come to observe, through conversation with gallery attendees, the comfort that people feel when gathered on this dirt floor. This is a place where jokes are told, friendships are made, and conversations continue long into the night. A backyard is a place where people feel a comfortable connection to those around them. The Backyard Gallery is not a white-walled sterile space, nor is it a Broadway stage; it is, as I have mentioned, a place where people have chances to present their work to a community of friends and colleagues. This work was created for a specific audience, those I could, from my experience, expect to be present at The Backyard Gallery.

Welcome

It was not my intention for this project to resemble a typical exhibition at The Backyard Gallery, so I should spend a little time describing some important differences. "Land Alive!" was two evenings of performative and participative action, which addressed a specific set of issues (not themes), so certain protocols were disabled and others put into effect. This is where my treasure, the physical and narrative items of "convertible value" I recovered on my tours came in.

I can begin with the entrance itself. Typically, attendees are invited to walk from the street, up the driveway on the side of the house, straight to the backyard through the gate. An interesting feature of Violet Street (the gallery is located at 870 Violet) is the lack of proper drainage. I learned, through talking to my neighbors, that there was a collapse in the underground gutter system several years ago. Instead of being properly repaired, the sinkhole was filled with concrete, effectively blocking off any hope of drainage for an entire side of the block. During periods of rainfall, the street fills with water, sometimes all the way across, creating a condition I have affectionately dubbed
"Lake Violet." In order to make the crossing from house to street navigable, wooden planks are laid across the gap; the only other way to prevent foot wetness is with a good jump (with a running start). The first manufactured space in this work that confronted attendees was the bridge across Lake Violet.

Figure 14. Lake Violet, 870 Violet Street, Baton Rouge, 2008.

This circumstance presents an interesting parallel to many of the places I traveled to; these are both places where the water is always near, so bridges are a regular feature, and places where difficulty is overcome by any means necessary. I wanted Lake Violet to be filled during the time of the show, rain or not. Friday saw no rain, so the lake was filled artificially with a hose, but Saturday morning and afternoon brought brief and torrential rain; the bridge had to be extended far beyond normal.

Figure 15. Driveway Installation, 870 Violet Street, Baton Rouge, 2008.
Once across the bridge, visitors faced a complete blockade of the driveway, assembled from tree limbs, an overturned pedestal, various items of furniture in various states of repair, and clusters of smaller found objects. This was another simulation of the landscape of the delta; the process of hurricane cleanup is still underway, and I often happened across large piles of refuse. This installation was completed with a sign that read "Private Property, No Trespassing, Keep Out" in bright orange letters. If I had a nickel for every similar sign I saw while traveling, I would buy myself a yacht. This intervention forced visitors to enter the house at the front door.

Each evening, the front door was open an hour before the scheduled start of the show. Just inside the door, stretched from the front of the living room into the dining room and dominating the interior space, was the canoe I used to travel, complete with camping platform, tent, and gear. Also in the living room was a large shelving unit divided into small cubbies. On the shelves were some of the objects found while traveling, books that appear in the references section of this document, and a large tablet of maps of Louisiana, printed in 1953 (donated to the show by a fellow map enthusiast). There was no explanation provided for these objects, and I was not present in the house.

![Figure 16. Red Rum, Platform, and Gear, 2008.](image)

![Figure 17. Surplus Treasure, 2008.](image)

The walls of the dining room were hung with maps used on treasure hunts, several state maps of Louisiana, marked to document my travels, as well as laminated satellite imagery. Hung next to these maps were corresponding typewritten pages, detailing some of the experiences I had, with important words and phrases circled. Pins and thread were used to make connections between key words and locations. The door to the backyard remained closed with a "Keep Out" sign until the time of the show.
By forcing visitors to enter through the front door, I derailed their expectations of what a show at the Backyard Gallery could be, and offered them a visual introduction to the experience they would be having. This was an opportunity for to converse, make acquaintances, and enjoy a beverage. While people gathered inside, I waited in the backyard with the six volunteers who would enact the performance with me; we talked, stretched, laughed, got comfortable and warmed up. This was similar to what one expects to find in the green room at a theater.

Shortly before the show was to begin, the six volunteers, dressed in blue jeans and white tee shirts, entered the house to mingle with the crowd. At the time of show, the back door was opened, and friend Ezra Kellerman, who had been watching the back door, flushed everyone into the backyard. The deliberate division into the house allowed visitors to create an initial impression, of my process, and of the landscape of the delta, based on static objects and images before the events took place.

Passageway

What they saw when they entered the backyard: the floor of the gallery was prepared with fresh dirt, and had a clean and level appearance; small patches of grass lined the edges of the space, untrimmed and slightly overgrown. Because of the rain prior to the show on Saturday, planks of wood were placed in a circle around the towers and central space, allowing the audience to stand above the sloppy, muddy ground. This forced everyone to stand a little closer to the middle. This setting also provided a change in the posture of the audience, which stood as far back as possible during Friday evening's show.
In the center of the backyard, two towers, approximately nine feet tall, stood facing each other approximately nineteen feet apart; these towers were fabricated from salvaged wood, steel and nails. Stilted buildings, as well as the ramshackle appearance of pier architecture I saw frequently on the coast, influenced their design. Stretched between the towers, at a height of six feet, was a loop of tugboat rope, spread slightly apart by two lengths of pipe. This rope was found during a treasure hunt, and was described as such in my performance.

The towers were stabilized with chunks of concrete piled in an open space at the bottom; piles of concrete were also a common sight on my journeys, and I talked about concrete as a water-control strategy during the show. For safety, the towers were tied off to strategic points with found ropes. This installation appeared tenuous, as if it could
be brought down with a good push; again, representation and simulation as a strategy. Also stretched between the towers was a strand of light bulbs. During Friday's show, these lights added a drama to the space. As Saturday's events wrapped up, the sun set over the levee, and the quality of light gradually changed.

Placed symmetrically on either side of the ropes were six chair assemblages; each chair had containers attached: a bowling ball case, a crab trap, an oyster bucket, a concrete mix bucket, a paper towel dispenser, a water jug. These chairs and their containers were found, or crafted from objects found on treasure hunts. These assemblages were symbols for and metaphors of, people and places described during the performance; sometimes the reference was direct and overt, sometimes concealed. Each chair represented a specific geographical area of the delta, a past or present course of the Mississippi River; they also functioned, on a performative level, as discrete locations within the backyard, places where volunteers sat and conducted specific interactions with the audience and each other. They housed the trappings of the performance to come, and on the seat of each chair was a brightly colored hard hat.
Chapter Four: A Journey in Cooperation

"What memories crowd in upon you! Nothing highlights the fascination of unpacking more than the difficulty of stopping this activity"
Walter Benjamin, c. 1940

Endorsement

I was not present in the gallery proper, but behind the garage with a ladder and an air horn. Upon text message signal from Kellerman I climbed the ladder and sounded a danger signal on the horn. I appeared over the top of the roof, clean-shaven black dress pants, a white collared shirt, and black tie. I made an introduction, "Hello everyone, and welcome to the backyard. This is a thesis show, I would like to call it mine, but it also belongs to the people that have helped, and it will belong to you as well. We should get started!" I jumped off of the roof to the dirt below. This action fulfilled my own attraction to jumping, and set a tone for the show. This jump was, on one hand, symbolic of my own research process; I had just "jumped into it." On the other hand, it was representative of the way I hoped for visitors to engage in the action of the show; I wanted people to "jump in," as well. As a side note, Friday's jump was easy, but I had to jump over people on Saturday.

Figure 21. Jump From the Roof, Saturday, March 29, 2008.

Once on the ground, I introduced photographer Adam Rogers. I cited one of my own inspirations, photographer Fonville Winans, who began his work in the early 1900s, and traveled to many of the same places I did, to take photographs. I introduced Rogers as the "ghost" of this photographer, and explained that he would be taking pictures during the show. I chose Rogers because his work often takes him to live shows; he is adept at capturing candid action, and he is not afraid to get in the middle of
something to get an image. Coincidentally, he looks enough like Winans to pass for a "ghost." He was present throughout the course of the evenings, in the middle of the action, behind the walls, on the roof; his presence lent an element of ceremony.

Ritual

The choices I employed to make this particular event at the Backyard Gallery out of the ordinary, the importance of comfort, and desire to symbolically enact experience, can be explained in terms of some human inclinations toward ritual. Ronald Grimes, cultural anthropologist and religious studies scholar, says, "Ritual is one of the oldest forms of human activity we know. It may have been the original multimedia performance" (13). This clear comparison guided much of my planning; I am, after all, a multimedia artist who was trying to figure out a method for bringing diverse information about, and experiences of the delta, to an audience in an interactive form.

But why has ritual been around so long, and what does it do for us? It seems that making activities special or memorable help us to make sense of them. My experience with the delta was confusing and exciting, and when I spoke with individuals about what is happening there, I encountered confusion and frustration, as well. What I organized was a way to encapsulate my research and experience into a form that was not only easier to digest, but was physically enacted, with the hope that participants could leave the backyard with concrete memories.

Grimes elucidates ritual as, "symbol-laden actions by means of which one passes through a dangerous zone, negotiating it safely and memorably" (6). The dangerous zone here was apathy; simply telling or representing with a passive medium, what is happening on the delta, would risk leaving attendees the option of being inattentive. Ritual helps us engage as we pass through, and "Land Alive!" was engineered to assist in passing through confusion, frustration, and bewilderment. But rituals are not givens; they have to be constructed, and this project, as a ritual, was assembled from bits and pieces: my favorite memories, found treasure, and simple materials.

Ritual, "happens on specific dates in actual places...not in general but among discrete human beings" (Grimes, 9). Ritual is a social form, and this presents inherent difficulties. Before these evenings, before I had gathered people together, I had only a general idea of what would happen, and this was one of the greatest challenges I encountered during production. Grimes can deftly identify my frustration, "ritual cannot transpire merely in the head, but is necessarily embodied" (4). This is the reason for many of the differences between Friday and Saturday evening; once it was made social, it could be worked on.

Relation

A look at a recent theory of artistic form will reveal the prominence of social interaction in contemporary artwork as well. In his collection of essays, "Relational Aesthetics," critic and curator Nicholas Bourriaud says that "the contemporary work...is presented as a period of time to be lived through" (15). What he is suggesting, is that there a form not based on traditional objects, to be "looked at;" he is stressing the
relationship that these works have to their audience (15). They are not solely visual; they require the presence of bodies to be actualized. We can at this point question the idea of audience; a painting on a wall has a viewer, a performance has an audience, but what, are people that become, in some way, the artwork? Participants.

Bourriaud calls works that dissolve image/viewer and performance/audience boundaries, "relational art (an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context)" (14). To extend this, we'll say that the enactment of ritual also requires the interaction of humans; it is nothing without active bodies and aware minds. In this case there were six informed volunteers, a body of people, and I. The course of "Land Alive!" saw the transformation of volunteers into experienced workers, and of an audience into participants. The show was comprised of formal and conceptual elements, which would not have existed without the presence and interaction of people. This project resulted in a particular set of interactive forms; it worked only because people engaged in them.

**Storytelling**

Another brief definition of ritual activity is useful here. Our friend Grimes proffers, "a symbolic reenactment of a cultural belief or value" (24). "Land Alive" was a gathering of people; not only as audience for an art show at the Backyard Gallery, but as audience to an adventurer back from travels. My previous experiences with adventure, and the results of this show, have informed me that returning to a community with stories and curiosities is appreciated and indeed held as culturally valuable. Performance scholar Michael Bowman asserts that this is a very old tradition:

The ancient Greek practice of *theoria* involved travel to foreign places, to oracles, to sites where strange or marvelous objects, people, or activities were rumored to be. The *theros* would venture to such places in order to see what could be seen, to get the lay of the land, to investigate the rumors, and so forth, and he would return home and appear before the public to give an account of his travels (105).

After introducing myself, and Rogers, I explained that I was a treasure hunter and traveler. I said, "I have some stories to tell about some people I met and the places I met them." I also explained to my audience that, "The objects (rope, chairs, containers), they saw in front of them were treasures, which I found and brought back for them." This was an occasion; they were in the presence of a collection, and were given an opportunity to experience it together.

Walter Benjamin, in his essay, "The Storyteller," quotes an "Old German saying...when one takes a trip, one has something to tell" (84). So it is that humans are programmed to gather and delight in that which is foreign and fantastic. I relied heavily on the familiarity of my audience with this form, and during these evenings, we enacted the tradition of theoria and the values of the theros.
We must clarify, that when Benjamin says "storyteller," he is referring to an oral tradition. "Experience which is passed from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn" (84). He draws a contrast between people who tell stories with their mouths and those who write, specifically novels.

The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale. The novelist has isolated himself. The solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounseled and cannot counsel others (84).

What I told during "Land Alive!" were my own personal experiences on the delta; they were a unique set of tales, obtained by actions of my own design, and descriptive of encounters with inimitable people and places. I should mention that these were only six of many, many stories I have. I chose six stories for six chairs for six areas of the delta. I told the audience, "These stories are mine, but they are yours as well, now." It worth noting that I had told some of these stories before, that I was familiar with them, and was able to deliver them comfortably orally; this provided a contrast to the typewritten sheets available inside the house.

**Metamorphoses**

![Image of a person digging]

Figure 22. Unearthing a Hard Hat Transformation From Venice, Friday.

As I told these stories, I dug with my hands into specific places in the ground, marked by surveyor's flags, and uncovered the parts of an adventurer's outfit: a pair of jeans, a pair of hip waders, a knife, compass, a hard hat, and a waterproof bag. These dress elements were introduced by making reference to advice I had received about their use, or were directly referential to the content of a story. For example, Karl von Mueller recommends a "pair of comfortable jeans" (44), and a compass saved me from getting lost in a marsh. Throughout the course of my storytelling, I transformed my appearance from my initial finery into that of an explorer, a treasure hunter.
A metamorphosis occurred upon the physical landscape of the backyard as well; the parts of my new outfit were buried at the end of six lengths of rope, and as I finished each story, I pulled a rope out of the ground, which created a small trench. I then introduced a volunteer, "I would like to introduce my friend Josh, who will be a kind of placeholder for Cocodrie, and for Norman, whom I met there," etc. There was a difference between the events of Friday and Saturday; on Friday, I introduced the volunteers, gave them a hard hat, called them captain, and seated them. On Saturday, I gave them a shovel to begin excavating each small trench. This small change added extra action during the storytelling, and it decreased the time of the show significantly. It can be noted here that the volunteers were instructed beforehand to address everyone present in the backyard, as "captain."

Information

To produce a ritual with objectives familiar to its participants, as with a wedding or funeral, is one thing, but a portion of my challenge was to supply a factual background to an audience, who may or may not have had it. My stories provided a personal view, but I also needed to present the information contained in chapter 1 of this document, that is, the synthesis of my text-based research; I wanted put everyone on the same page, so to speak.

One way to supply a factual background is the lecture format. Throughout the course of this project, I attended several lectures on assorted topics pertaining to the delta by prominent individuals in their respective fields. Unfortunately, I found these lectures to be nearly intolerable; excessive amounts of information were given in a very organized fashion, but there is no room for feedback from a passive audience.

One such lecture was entitled "Coastal Resiliency," and was delivered by Vice Admiral Lautenbacher, secretary for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric
Administration. The focus of this lecture was explaining all of the agencies and sub-agencies that make up NOAA, and the way they (attempted!) to function together. At the end of the talk, one of the attendees asked, "You mentioned coastal resiliency, but you didn't talk about any particular strategies to accomplish that...could you be more specific?" Lautenbacher couldn't. Though there are useful and beneficial elements contained in this format, by itself it seems to be a one-way street.

Recently, difficult topics have been approached using a website format. There are a wide variety of sites that address deltaic issues; they are hosted by individuals and organizations such as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Chambers of Commerce, photographers, bloggers, and volunteer organizations. There is a vast and varied amount of information available, which was helpful to a certain extent. But this is a part of the problem as well; a day spent following links left me feeling smothered and a bit hopeless. Websites are like books and newspapers; there is a sentiment of permanence about them. It is easy to feel that they will always be there to refer to if the information is forgotten.

**Counsel**

![Image](image.png)

Figure 25. Captain Josh Makes a Trench, Six Ends of Rope , Six Chairs, Friday.

I can sample newspaper articles, search websites, and attend lectures, but as an artist, I am dissatisfied with the results. My experiment, then, was to present what I have learned to an audience with different levels of understanding, and in an accessible and mnemonic way. Perhaps we can look to our old friend Walter Benjamin for some advice.

Every morning brings news of the globe, and yet we are poor in noteworthy stories. This is because no event any longer comes to us without being shot through with explanation. In other words, by now almost nothing that
happens benefits storytelling; everything benefits information (89).

There were no websites in Benjamin's day, but his thoughts remain relevant. What we have is an immense magnification of information and a multiplication of the ways it can be obtained. This is not to say that information is not at all important, or that stories are merely the child of fantasy or self-indulgence; Benjamin tells us that, "An orientation toward practical interests is characteristic of many born storytellers," and, "every real story...contains, openly or covertly, something useful" (86). This useful something could be a "moral," some "practical advice," a "proverb or maxim," but what it comes down to for Benjamin is "counsel" (86). It is not so much what is told, but how it is told, and its impression as being constructive, that is crucial to an idea's durability in the memory of its receivers.

Figure 26. (Left) The Dump. Figure 27. (Right) Captains Meghan and Jesse Pass the Bucket.

The notion of "counsel" was valuable to this project, as a work that addressed an ongoing situation. Benjamin's explanation: "Counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding" (86). This story, on several levels, is developing; this delta is a mere 7500 years old, a geologic child, and recent storms have brought to light many flaws in planning and engineering. The rebuilding process is far from complete, but it is important to note that "Land Alive!" did not advise with detailed plans; instead it offered counsel.
The volunteers used shovels, hoes, and buckets to carry dirt from the trenches to a designated pile on the outside of the space. They were instructed to use the audience for this, to pass them a bucket of dirt if they were near, and to pass their hard hats on to the audience. This was the beginning of a physical interaction, it created a chaotic space, and it decreased the time it took to dig out the trenches. By the end of this segment, it was visually apparent that these six trenches coalesced along a larger central trench, created by the removal of a piece of the same tugboat rope that hung above. The system of ropes was recovered from the ground and rotated in line with the towers; it took all six volunteers to do so. The counsel offered was a proposal for cooperation.
The word symbolic is again central here; information was amalgamated with action. A new story unfolded in the backyard. As the volunteers picked up the system of ropes and moved it, I told the audience about the geologic process of delta building and the natural shift in the course of the Mississippi River. As the volunteers dug out trenches, I explained that there was a lot of dirt-moving happening on the delta, and that levees were being made, and that plans such as Coast 2050 were being implemented. What was represented and enacted during this segment of the show was, on the one hand, a metaphor of a geologic process, and on the other, an allegory of a bureaucratic process.

**Game**

When all of the dirt was moved, and the trenches cleared, I explained, "A backyard is not a place for a lecture, or for too much information. There are other places to find these." The six ropes remained on the ground, and one was stretched out next to each chair. As soon as the ropes were in position, water was introduced into the trench system with a hose. As the water rushed in, I explained, "Backyards are places for telling stories and meeting people and playing games. What we came here to do this evening is play a kind of game; these captains and I need all you captains' help to make it work." I asked the six volunteers to be seated and produced from my waterproof bag six spools of brightly colored mason twine, wound on pieces of colored broom handles, sealed with colored electrical tape. The volunteers were instructed to pass out these spools, and make sure that everyone in the audience got each spool passed to them.

Figure 31. Captain Nyssa, Counting Lines Between Hands, Friday.

Perhaps I could be more explicit concerning my use of the word game. The promise of a game gave the audience, as a whole, a means of crossing the threshold into participation. Leo Tolstoy, in his essay "Art as Expression," speaks of good art being capable of transmitting a "higher comprehension of the meaning of life," to its viewer in the form of "the religious consciousness" (10). This sounds like a very lofty goal for a work of art, but he uses an analogy to bring it down to earth.
The religious consciousness in a society is the same as the direction of flowing water. If the water runs, there is a direction which it flows. If a society lives, there is a religious consciousness, which indicates the direction along which all men of that society are tending more or less consciously (11).

Simple enough, maybe a bit oversimplified; we are in the midst of many religious consciousnesses at the moment, but I bet we can single out one to illuminate the function of this show. In order to do this, let us look at that celebrated social barometer of greater American culture: television programming. A quick flip through the channels demonstrates a society (to use Tolstoy's word) thirsty for reality. Unless you don't turn on a television, it is difficult to avoid this movement. From dating to dancing to home renovation, the "flow of water" is toward the candid, unscripted program, which results in an uncertain outcome, even for the producers.

Reality programs operate on a simple premise; the producers develop a topic, choose participants, give them a set of rules, and a prize for their effort (or penalty for failure). These serially presented shows are not games in the same way that a soccer match, or a chess battle, or game show is; here the ego is the fundamental operator. It is this combination of simplicity and personality, which allows reality to take center stage. There are, to be sure, varying degrees of authenticity and design present, but reality TV is human hullabaloo on an extraordinary scale.

The first direct invitation for the audience to participate in this game was simple: they asked to grab the lines in their palm and close their hand when they had all six. It was iterated by me that "we need to solve these problems, all of them, and we need you all to help us now!" each of the volunteers pulled on the end of the twine, bringing the audience closer, and creating a bit of confusion; it was impossible for anyone to separate from the larger group because they were all connected. The audience was told that this "wouldn't work, we need to try something else," and they "should turn their hands upside down and drop their twine."
What we were enacting, symbolically, was the interconnectivity of ecological and social systems. The pulling done by the volunteers brought the ring of people closer together, and a brightly colored ring of twine was created around the central space when the threads were dropped. This development illustrated the difficulty of approaching these complex issues all at once, en masse. It was a planned failure, though; and was analogous to the sort of strategies used by television producers to displace the expectations of participants and viewers alike.

Mason twine was chosen not only for its bright colors, which contrasted the general brown and green of the backyard, but because of its connotation as a construction and layout material. Furthermore, it was a reference to events told in the stories such as fishing, and "threading" my way through the landscape. The fact of a continuous line was useful as well; the audience could be connected and reeled in to the volunteers as needed.

I then explained that one strategy used on an administrative level, was the division of the delta into six distinct geographic areas; using the twine, I divided the backyard into six areas. Six more spools of twine were produced from my bag, as well as six oyster shells sealed with electrical tape from one of the chairs. The oysters sealed with electrical tape were a direct reference to one of the stories told earlier; inside these shells were six different questions typewritten on paper.

Volunteers were asked to open their shell, read the question silently, and memorize it. This activity echoes an element found in reality television; contestants are given sealed envelopes, or are given a directive that operates contradictory to the expected flow of events. While volunteers passed out the twine, I burned the pieces of paper. This was a reference to another specific story, and underscored the importance of memory. With the space divided into districts, we were able to use the twine in a more organized, linear manner.
The participants were reeled in one by one, asked a question, and volunteers recorded the answer on a triangular piece of canvas; triangular pieces of wood were used as writing surfaces. Triangle canvases put the answers in the framework of delta, of change. An answer was a change in one's life, or something that needed to, or will be changed. The audience was asked to tie each piece of canvas onto the rope next to each chair. When the ropes were filled, they were raised off of the ground by myself, and the volunteers, and were hung between the towers, creating the skeleton form of a canoe. Here was a symbolic reenactment of a town hall meeting.

The questions were not directly related to issues of the delta, but referenced parts of the stories told. The question, "Where was the last place you used a map?" was
asked by the volunteer sitting in the chair that held a place for Cocodrie; my story about Cocodrie included maps. This roundabout approach was used to create mnemonic associations between the previous experience of the participants, and the new experiences they were offered. A noteworthy by-product of spatial division and destruction of evidence was, people who answered a question from one section could only view the answers from another section. It was suggested by me, "this method of problem solving is useful, but it is limited; people in one section don't know what was being asked of everyone else."

"What was really important this evening," I said, was that "you are all present; you heard stories, which are now a part of your experience." I exclaimed, "A backyard is not a place for a town hall meeting, either, but a place for getting together and getting dirty!" Two volunteers passed out two spools of white twine, one on either side of the boat form, and two other volunteers made buckets of mud using water from the channels.

![Figure 39. (Left) Handprint Machine, Captain, Chair, Towel Dispenser, Fabric, Mud. Figure 40. (Right) A Visit to the River.](image)

As the participants were reeled in, they were asked to dip their hands in the mud, and make a print on a piece of white fabric, which was pulled from a chair on each side. The audience was encouraged to wash their hands in the channels, and each person was given a towel to dry his/her hand. The fabric had been cut to fit the length of the boat, and after it was filled with handprints, it was hung at the top. This enactment was metaphor for involvement in issues presented; the participants were asked to "get their hands dirty." This also served as a record of attendance; we were here, this happened. Again, this was a roundabout approach; people did not sign their names, but showed
that they used their hands. In terms of the assembly of a sculptural form, the banner created capped the boat and displayed a ritualized repetition.

Figure 41. Captain Suedee Facilitates a Feat.

The last part of the game was similar to the first; six spools were passed out so that every attendee had his/her hand on six different lines. At this point, on Saturday specifically, the hose had been filling the channels long enough to begin breaching the surface. I told everyone, quoting the Adairs, "I know we can do this, but it is urgent! The water is taking over!" The difficulty experienced during the beginning of the game was dealt with here, and was transformed into an opportunity for cooperation.

The participants were asked to take all six lines and pinch them between their forefinger and thumb, so it would be easier to pass on to someone else. They passed the bundle of twine to the volunteers, who hung them in a continuous line on the rope boat. This happened just in time to stop the influx of water before it spilled out into the greater area of the backyard. The appearance of an assembled boat was evidence of this success.

Figure 42. Everyone Made This Boat.
Chapter Five: Conclusions

"Beneath the discourses that ideologize the city, the ruses and combinations of powers that have no readable identity proliferate; without points where one can take hold of them, without rational transparency, they are impossible to administer."

-Michel deCerteau, 1984

Interstice

A brief return to the writings of Nicholas Bourriaud is appropriate at this point. Storytellers, producers of reality television, creators of ritual all create specific "spheres of human relations" (44), and organize "cultures of interactivity" (25). Storytellers have something to share, and need an audience; television producers make programs with room for individuality; ritual inventors use symbols to execute passages. Karl Marx (as quoted by Bourriaud) used the term interstice to describe "trading communities that elude the capitalist economic context by being removed from the law of profit" (16). Now, I have not spent a single word on the topic of money, and I don't intend to. I bring this into the discussion because Bourriaud borrows and extends Marx's term:

"The interstice is a space in human relations which fits more or less harmoniously and openly into the overall system, but suggests other possibilities than those in effect in the system" (16).

It has been the task of artists, for as long as anyone can remember, to examine overall systems and propose new prospects. We seek out problems, difficulties, and predicaments, and find fresh ways to approach them. The conclusions we draw, and the resolutions that arise are fed back into the general arrangement with the hope that they might catch on. To quote Leo Tolstoy once more, "It is on this property of men to be infected by the feelings of other men that the activity of art is based" (5).

Figure 43. Spooled Twine, Proposal for Participation.
Grimes posits that, "ceremonial occasions inscribe images into the memories of participants, and etch values into the cornerstones of social institutions" (5). I relied on subjective experience, social interaction, and patterned performance; it is my hope that what I arranged inscribed and etched. I created a passage within a span of time, toward engagement, and the use of ritual ensured that we "attended to such events fully" (Grimes, 50). There is turmoil on the delta, and the first and most important step in overcoming the obstacles is recognizing, them.

"Land Alive!" was an interstice, a new way into old problems; the act of taking a canoe into a culture of motorboats was a start. The Backyard Gallery functions as a gallery, but evades the inherent etiquette. This project opened an interstice in that backyard; chances were taken to amplify creative leeway. Ritualized collaboration became a promising alternative to dreary newspapers and dry documents. This was a rare occasion, marked by symbolic acts and objects; it was a tiny opening into cooperation, and urgent concerns were visible as surmountable.

Figure 44. Pinched Lines. Figure 45. All the Way Around.

Figure 46. Metamorphosis (see Figure 20.)
Figure 44. Top of the Boat, Bundled Twine and Printed Banner.

Enigma

When the boat was finished, I told a short story: "I went back to Old Shell Beach where there are the remains of a pier. Pots full of fabric flowers adorned a stone memorial to everyone that died in east St. Bernard Parish. It got chilly, so I got my sweatshirt out of the truck; I noticed something in the pocket when I put it on, and when I stuck my hand in, an image of those flowers came to mind. I pulled out this red flower. I do not know how it got there." This was a way to revisit the beginning of the evening, but it provided a different outlook; it was filled with strange coincidence and possibility, not explicable experiences and reliable facts. "I always thought this was a kind of thank you for coming back, and I want to pass this to you. Thank you for being here."
References


Appendix: Outline Script

I. Introductions
   A. Personal: air horn-rooftop-thesis-jump
   B. Adam Rogers: Fonville-ghost-photographer

II. Stories
   Volunteers begin digging out trenches as stories are told; buckets and hard hats are passed on to audience members

   A. Cocodrie: Norman-satellite maps-oysters-20 foot building stilts (unearth jeans)
   B. Burns Point: Wade-dogs-fire-electricity-generosity (unearth hip waders)
   C. Port Fourchon:: fishermen-axe-big rope-help-not state park (unearth waterproof bag)
   D. Venice: Cupid Shuffle-J.J.-crack-levee-tower-cranes-wind (unearth hard hat)
   E. Atchafalaya Basin: Private property-mud-hunter-life on water (unearth knife)
   F. Treasure Bay: MRGO-Miss Annie-isolation-danger-return (unearth compass)

III. Game
   Volunteers pass out spools of twine, oysters, and are seated in chairs when questions are asked

   A. Twine I: Everyone gets all six lines-planned failure-drop twine
   B. Division: Backyard in 6 sections-6 lines out-oyster shells and questions-memorize-burn-answers on triangle canvas-attach to ropes-ropes raised to form boat.
      Questions:
      1. Cocodrie: Where was the last place you used a map?
      2. Burns Point: What is your favorite recreation?
      3. Port Fourchon: How big was the largest fish you’ve caught?
      4. Venice:Who was the last person you danced with?
      5. Atchafalaya Basin: Why do you think your property is private?
      6. Treasure Bay: When was the last time you felt your life in danger?
   C. Mud: Prepared by volunters-white twine-2 sides-reel in and print-hang by clips on boat
   D. Twine 2: Everyone gets all six lines-gather between finger and thumb-pass to volunteers-hang on boat

IV. Outro
   Single, short story, thanks, goodbye
   Old Shell Beach: revisit-memorial-red flower-thanks
Vita

Adam Tourek was born in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1981, and graduated from Creighton Preparatory High School, class of 2000. While studying at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Adam received an Undergraduate Creative Activities Research Experience grant and the Francis William Vreeland Award. He earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts, with a minor in art history, in 2005. He has participated in the University of Minnesota Spark Festival of Electronic Music and Art, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and his video work has been screened internationally. In March 2007, he participated in the Across Disciplines program, directed by the communication studies department, and performed at the Mary Frances Hopkins Black Box Theater at Louisiana State University. He is currently an instructor of sculpture at Louisiana State University; he resides at, and operates the Backyard Gallery in Baton Rouge.