

COLLISION

Vol. 2, No. 2 (2013)
Animals and Aesthetics

A new genre of speculative writing created by the Editors of *Evental Aesthetics*, the Collision is a concise but pointed essay that introduces philosophical questions raised by a specific aesthetic experience. A Collision is not an entire, expository journey; not a full-fledged argument but the potential of an argument. A Collision is an encounter that is also a point of departure: the impact of a striking confrontation between experience, thought, and writing may propel later inquiries into being.



Griggs, J. Marie. "Failed Aesthetics: Life as a Rupturing Narrative."
Evental Aesthetics 2, no. 2 (2013): 64-77.

ABSTRACT

For this collision, the role of nonhuman animals as woodland theater and naturalizing agents is questioned. In remediated sites, animals are actors that legitimize everyday pollution, oppression and violence. How can the lived realities of nonhuman animals be embraced without naturalizing the discourse that externalizes those lives? As life and industrial-nature cohere, how might aesthetics engender agency in recovery?

KEYWORDS

ruination, animal life, environmental remediation, the everyday, aesthetics

Failed Aesthetics: Life as a Rupturing Narrative

J. Marie Griggs

A colleague recommended a blog post by Jared Green (2013) recounting a tour of Chicago's wildlands that have been ecologically restored and remediated. Restoration practices attempt to reset a ruined landscape to some previous time, usually to just before a place became toxic and degraded. Environmental remediation practices attenuate the accumulation of toxics in water, soil and air. My associate mentioned this post in part because I focus on the life that persists in sites of ruination, but also because she was worried about the birds: Who tells the birds to not eat the toxic fish?

- Ruination and remediation • _____

Laura Ann Stoler (2008) describes ruination as an explicit, capitalist and colonial formation. On multiple spatial and temporal scales, ruination

damages skin tissue, in utero conditions and global industries; it brings about epistemic violence and fragmented communities. Every day, lived ruination is embodied, cohered and transforming. Ruins perpetuate as they are taken up into bodies, soils and water. Life within ruination exists in post-industrial landscapes like those featured in Tim Edensor's (2005) prose on life in abandoned factories. Human and nonhuman life also persists in active sites of ruination.

The toxics of ruination insist that planners, politicians, researchers, designers, corporations and artists consider ecologies rather than sites. Pollutants metabolize in currents and accumulate, causing bodily transformations and epistemological transmutations. This means that ecological remediation as a process is only ever partially complete as toxicity cannot be contained nor made static. When considering ecology rather than form, aesthetics of built environments could lead to other ways of knowing or understanding. Yet restorative design often engages established fictions of wild, unencumbered harmony. Even the toxic wild is a place where we may shed our modern life and, through this change of scene, clear the industrial city from our minds even as we inhale methane fumes.

• Toxic river as theater •

Chicago's Beaubien Woods set a scene of forest, hillocks and a meandering thread of water. Yet the hills are covered trash dumps, the air has a scent of methane, and the river is still so polluted that people are warned not to eat the fish. These woods are at the center of a "toxic donut."¹ There are 180 different avian species in these woods, and it is this population my colleague is concerned about. Birds absorb fishy nutrients as well as an accumulation of fishy chemicals. Yet as long as the toxics don't kill them, birds fulfill the aesthetic and biological functions of restoration. Visitors come to these woods to engage nature, a nature constructed by governments, scientists, planners, designers and management teams even as dynamic processes shape it. Within this framework, each element is an agent fulfilling a role. Trees, rivers and rocks complete the scene; birds add a flutter of excitement and authenticity.

Neil Smith (1990) articulates the ways industrial capitalism defines and produces nature. Summarizing Karl Marx, Smith explains that humans so continuously produce nature that if we stopped the physical world would shift radically and this human, or second, nature would be defunct and something new would emerge.² This extinction is not imminent; in those places where anthropocentric damage is being alleviated, Rebecca Lave explains (2012), neoliberalism produces and commercializes systems of knowledge regarding restoration and remediation. Remediating chemical runoff does not liberate streams or landscapes, but resituates them within different types of human use and need, like fishing or tourism. Instead of alleviating anthropocentric influence the environment must bear more; two decades of restoration work has made the Beaubien Woods's river capable of supporting fish, even as it continues to carry effluent downstream.

In these landscapes, discourse has not been remediated; a scaled nature still places greater value on some humans over others, and on human life over the nonhuman. The other-than-human bodies are but sites to see and a recreational pastime. In this design, we humans are outsiders to the nonhuman animals' lives, bodies, and work. As spectators we can separate human from nonhuman by pretending there is some line of non-affect between the physical world and our cultural relationships. Catherine Ingraham (2006) writes of this externalized space as the "animal-field."³ This field is enacted when place and life are removed from the material environment, at which time the lived world transforms into a space of discourse. Other-than-human animals cannot enter this discourse with their lives fully intact, as the photographs of Chris Jordan (2009) attest.



"Forest Story: The Doe," by J. Marie Griggs, 2013. Modified from "Deer," photograph by Jared Green.

Within this drama, the life of birds is stopped midair, as is the life of fish and metabolism of toxics. Ideologies engender a one-point perspective, whereby the woods are seen through a singular understanding of recovery and life. The Beaubien Woods have their own cadence, a flowing river and trees that change with the seasons. Yet this diorama of activity is set within a staunch metanarrative that continues to perform a story of everyday violence. At issue is a perspective framed by un-remediated neoliberal ideologies set within a continued reality of toxic capitalist industrialization.

We walk to the edge of the pier, sit patiently on a wooden bench, and take in a kinetic diorama. The animals perform the act whereby nature returns and we might all be saved. We collect mementos with our cameras and tally the species we've seen. The sun begins to set and we talk about how smart the actors were, how resilient animals are, the beauty of the scenery, and wonder that they aren't charging admission. No one comments that the fish passing under the pier are fully embodied in our pollution.

What options are available beyond the woodland theater or a biological survey of species? When the choice is between a polluted wastescape and a polluted wildscape, what does agency look like that chooses neither? What unpredictable lives might emerge even as larger structures decide how recovery will function and what it will look like? How might the rolling palisades of garbage and lively imbrication of toxics be imaged differently?

• A response from the fish • _____

... they are "relatively OK to eat given they aren't in there too long."

– Jared Green⁴

We live inside structures that reduce and condense life. The milieu of the body's occupation is simply erased or scribbled over. Hegemonic aesthetics dictate not only the representation of nature, but also our perceptions of the everyday environment. The symbolic forest is capped with the smoke of oil refineries. Forest stories are filled with genetically compromised does. These places do not reflect the sublime landscapes showcased by Edward Burtynsky (2006), but a picturesque design by Capability Brown with latent chemical adaptations.

Fish, as food, is no longer understood without toxics, typically mercury but also PCBs and lead. The Department of Natural Resources restocks the rivers with fish again and again; these fish are unwillingly inserted into our ideological constructs of a restored nature. Their compromised health is a response to this forced imbrication; a hailing, in

the words of Donna Haraway (2008). Their inedible flesh is another effect of the animal-field.

As industrialized theater, remediated land provides that space where we can continue to pretend that the river isn't in our blood stream.

Seeing a young family fishing off an embankment, she turns to her friend and remarks, "I would never eat these fish. I only buy the fresh-caught organic ones at the supermarket." He only has to nod his agreement.

• Put a bird on it!⁵ • _____

Hegemonic processes such as capitalism, industrialization and neoliberalism not only engender ruination, but also already articulate how to attend to the recovery. These processes are sited in a polluted river teeming with schools of fish that are taken up by birds as well as humans. Other-than-human animals play a pivotal role in the biological success of remediation, like oysters used to filter toxins within the water; nonhuman animals also act out human ideas of scenic beauty. The recovery of place requires a cohered involvement with other-than-human life.

While many animals are present, birds are a vital part of how we, human animals, understand our environment. Biologically birds are a keystone species and socially their calls define territories and place. Birds are also "heavily burdened symbolically" as they are part of a long history of representation, standing for freedom, purity, hope, nature, goodness, peace, the soul as well as capturing, collecting, knowing and controlling.⁶ It is difficult to imagine a sky without birds, whether this sky is framed by a painting or remediated forest. In these Chicago woods, life has been becoming-pollution for decades and in this remediated place birds unwillingly naturalize everyday, structural violence. The physical presence of birds evokes an understanding of that space as natural and quotidian; by

naturalizing the current reality of those woods visitors may forget why remediation was, and still is, necessary, and all the life, both human and nonhuman, still being negatively affected.

A bird swooping down and catching a fish demonstrates the transformation of these woods from dead and degraded to a lively, engineered ecology, and the act can be stunning to behold. This act is not a representation; it is the life of the everyday persisting within realities continuously defined by capitalist nature, and neoliberal science and design. "Putting a bird on it" becomes a vulnerable illusion as individual birds plunge through the boundaries of air, land, and water. Birds in remediated landscapes flutter between boundaries of life and symbol, between life and the animal-field. When birds inhabit remediated places, human animals can forget how the landscape became polluted and naturalize how science and engineering made it life sustaining again. Yet, by acknowledging the bird's body as symbol, we can also witness the way birds rupture this representation as they take up toxic fish.

Astrida Neimanis (2007) addresses Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's notion of becoming-animal in a smaller physical form: the molecule. The molecule points to becoming as a comingling, whereby the molecularity of the human and the molecularity of the nonhuman mix and form an irreducible, new singularity. Importantly, becoming dispels a metanarrative of a stable entity, and the molecule lets cohered realities such as "lung-becoming-smog" be articulated.⁷ In this way we may talk about bodies becoming-pollution; a becoming that influences how the individual will engage lived realities of ruination as expressed through environmental degradation. To become-pollution is a mutation of consciousness and body whereby life forcibly responds to the persistent realities of industrialization and markets. Becoming-pollution describes moments wherein the fish and birds that unwillingly engage toxicity may rupture perspectives of the restored animal-field.

- A disrupted experience •

James Corner (1999) describes these hidden hegemonic narratives as overly aestheticized, amnesiac landscapes where the visitor can forget and escape the politics of their construction.⁸ When aesthetic experience focuses on beauty violence is erased. Judith Halberstam (2011) instead searches for practices that embrace failure and fragmentation rather than their reintegration as a way to imagine alternatives to hegemonic systems.⁹ Remediation is an impossible task; pollutants do not disappear, and memories of a scaled nature persist alongside the embodied knowledge of environmental injustices. As remediation and restoration are constructive actions for making degraded places inhabitable, it does not preclude the persistence of everyday violence. This means we cannot relax into the views of a restored river, but must also confront the destruction that continues within and beyond the boundaries of the trees.



**"A Strategic Landscape," by J. Marie Griggs, 2013.
Modified from "Donut2," photograph by Jared Green.**

The hegemonic narrative of healing and recovery needs to fail as it often naturalizes violent realities when communicating stories of resilience, remediation and conservation. One example of this naturalization is discussed in Shiloh Krupar's piece, "Where Eagles Dare: An Ethno-fable with Personal Landfill" (2007). In this article, Krupar denaturalizes the nationalist narrative of what happened to the Rocky Mountain Arsenal when eagles came to roost on a sacrificed piece of land. Never mind the unexploded nerve gas bomblets and eight million cubic yards of contaminated soil, this area is now a refuge, preserve and tourist destination.

Accentuating fragmentation and failure can help express pollution, remediation, violence and place-making while providing a disruption that allows the other-than-human animal to break free from the woodland theater and into life. Kathleen Stewart (1996 & 2007) articulates lived intimacies that point to larger processes and structures. In many cases this connection is not always concrete but oftentimes a feeling or moment of *some-thing* not being quite right. Perspectives and understandings are distinctive and saccadic within a single narrative, and they are essential even as they are subtle.

A failed aesthetic stems from the notion that appreciating a restored scenic view while we stroll down a constructed pathway is not enough. This partial experience is a simulated aesthetic of a strategic landscape; neoliberal markets defined how this place would be remediated as the place was designed to evoke capitalist ideologies of nature. Understanding this aesthetic as a failure, to see beauty as a failed response to everyday violence or to refuse to believe that the woods are somehow set apart from everyday life, opens up the potential to understand how the Beaubien Woods came to be constructed. There can be a full aesthetic experience with this engineered, toxic wildness by understanding the truth of its construction.

There can be a full aesthetic appreciation of bird life as it persists within the animal-field and breaks free within the toxic, physical environment. This aesthetic requires a becoming-with, a living/lived, bursting, saccadic awareness of and appreciation for processes and lives. Pastoral depictions of ruins most often evoke utopia/dystopia; ideally, a full aesthetic experience does not engage either/or dualities. Ruptures do not erase the metanarrative they disrupt, nor does acknowledging a failed aesthetic produce a singular perspective or approach to understanding. Noticing how disruptive practices of violence, injustice and degradation

coexist with rupturing practices of beauty, recovery and life, means recovery cannot exist without being situated within an understanding of violence. Distinctive moments, sometimes dynamic and sometimes ordinary, accumulate into an embodied understanding, an understanding necessary for a full aesthetic experience.

A final response comes from the spiders in Nina Katchadourian's documentation of "The Mended Spiderweb Series" (1998) from the sequence *Uninvited Collaborations with Nature*. Nina spent six weeks trying to repair broken spider webs with segments of red string. The spiders' responses indicate that the desire to fix degraded or ruined places through human-aesthetic interventions means that attempts at recovery will fail. Katchadourian describes the experience:

The morning after the first patch job, I discovered a pile of red threads lying on the ground below the web. At first I assumed the wind had blown them out; on closer inspection it became clear that the spider had repaired the web to perfect condition using its own methods, throwing the threads out in the process. My repairs were always rejected by the spider and discarded, usually during the course of the night, even in webs which looked abandoned.¹⁰

Even as Katchadourian's strings prompted the repair, the spider asserted its own agency in the web's ultimate reparation, creating a rather successful failure.

Methodologies for building awareness make evident the politics of a site's construction, its meanings, present living realities and potential futures; this milieu is absorbed into our perceptions, understandings and imaginings.¹¹ Active participation is a subtle practice, and requires us, humans, to understand the recovery of place as a co-constitutive series of actions of human and nonhuman life and abiotic processes. Such understanding involves remaining open to how full aesthetic experience of toxic and remediated places can re-position values and imaginings for future becomings. In this way, aesthetics is located in an understanding of how other-than-human life persists within and prompts the recovery of places. Building an embodied knowledge of the ways nonhuman life lives within and shapes the everyday opens up a full aesthetic experience, regardless of whether a landscape is sublime, pastoral, picturesque or ruined.



"Fishy Metabolisms," by J. Marie Griggs, 2013. Modified from "Powderhorn," photograph by Jared Green.

• Notes •

¹ Jared Green, "Wilderness South of Chicago: Beauty Amid Industry," Accessed May 22, 2013, <http://dirt.asla.org/2013/05/08/chicagos-wilderness-beauty-amid-industry/>, §7.

² Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 53, 66–67.

³ Catherine Ingraham, *Architecture, Animal, Human: The Asymmetrical Condition* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 201.

⁴ Green, §8.

⁵ Tag line and sketch featured on *Portlandia* on IFC, uploaded to YouTube January 2011. In this satire, two characters place abstract birds on common items to spruce them up. At

the close, a real bird gets into the store, and considering it vermin, the characters beat it to death by throwing their pretty bird objects at it: accessed September 17, 2013, <http://youtu.be/oXM3vWJmpfo>.

⁶ Ingraham, 154.

⁷ Astrida Neimanis, "Becoming-Grizzly: Bodily Molecularity and the Animal that Becomes," *PhaenEx* 2 no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2007): 289.

⁸ James Corner, "Eidetic Operations and New Landscapes," in *Recovering Landscape: Essays in Contemporary Landscape Architecture*, ed. James Corner (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), 156 – 158.

⁹ Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 138, 89.

¹⁰ Nina Katchadourian, "Mended Spiderwebs," Accessed September 11, 2013, <http://www.ninakatchadourian.com/uninvitedcollaborations/spiderwebs.php>

¹¹ Allen Carlson and Barry Sadler, "Towards Models of Environmental Appreciation," in *Environmental Aesthetics: Essays in Interpretation*, ed. Allen Carlson and Barry Sadler, 160 – 162.

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