Emilie Houssart

SUNY New Paltz MFA Sculpture Thesis
Spring 2022

PLAIN SIGHT

Thesis exhibition card

Thesis Advisors:
Prof. Emily Puthoff, Prof. Michael Asbill, and Linda Weintraub
Abstract: Colonizer legacies in the contemporary Hudson Valley landscape: addressing commerce culture in food systems and the home through absurdist interventions.

Introduction

“Logic reveals itself in the illogicality of the absurd of which we have become aware. Laughter alone does not respect any taboo, laughter alone inhibits the creation of new anti-taboo taboos; the comic alone is capable of giving us the strength to bear the tragedy of existence. The true nature of things, truth itself, can be revealed to us only by fantasy, which is more realistic than all the realisms.”
Eugène Ionesco (Esslin, The Theater of the Absurd 192)

“And fantasy it was, for we were not strong, only aggressive; we were not free, merely licensed; we were not compassionate, we were polite; not good, but well behaved. We courted death in order to call ourselves brave, and hid like thieves from life. We substituted good grammar for intellect; we switched habits to simulate maturity; we rearranged lies and called it truth, seeing in the new pattern of an old idea the Revelation and the Word.”
Toni Morrison, The Bluest Eye (205-6)

This body of work emerged from an exploration of the legacy of my predecessors in the Hudson Valley landscape. As a Dutch immigrant to this area, born in the UK and bearing a Huguenot last name, I came to realize that I represent a sort of local super-colonizer archetype. Through a series of interventions in public spaces, as well as through public workshops and dialogues, I hope to reignite a sense of interspecies belonging and responsibility that has become lost in Western European-dominated cultures of today’s United States. As part of this endeavor, I try to illuminate normalized instances of violence against parts of our socio-ecological community which occur as a result of that loss, in ways that are accessible, memorable and productive. It is my hope that these will lead to dialogue and forks in regular neural pathways, disrupting established social norms that enable commercial and personal modes of domination.

Research into the mindset of European colonists revealed polarized sets of relationships between humans and the land. In Indigenous cultures of North America, which thrived for thousands of years before European invasions, “spiritual lives and understandings of history were always tied to specific landscapes” (Ghosh, 34).
Humans are considered equal with other life forms, and the task of tribal religions is to “to relate the community of people to each and every facet of creation as they have experienced it” (Vine Deloria Jr., in Ghosh). The landscape, then, is not merely a chance setting for human activity, but an integral, living part of a trans-species collaborative existence. In stark contrast, European Christianity of the 18th century encouraged an anthropocentric view of the world, in which humans resembled God and were superior to other beings. The philosophy of Francis Bacon contributed to a growing assumption that nature was something that could be comprehended by humans, who by implication were separate from it. His “...supremely confident belief that inductive methods can provide us with ultimate and infallible answers concerning the laws and nature of the universe” (Nisbet, 267-283) became a foundation for a vision of the earth as a resource to be harnessed for human gain. In The Nutmeg’s Curse, Amitav Ghosh describes Dutch attitudes in the Indonesian Banda Islands, the world’s only source of sought-after spices nutmeg and mace until the mid-1800s. Arriving colonists attempted to impose a monopoly on the nutmeg trade, and when this failed, forcibly removed or murdered all the island’s inhabitants, burning their villages to the ground. Ghosh writes:

“...the trees, volcanoes, and landscapes of the Bandas had no meaning [for the Dutch] except as resources that could be harnessed to generate profit. This outlook represented a metaphysic that was then emerging in Europe, in which matter was seen as “brute” and “stupid” and hence deserving of conquest. ... Nor, in the eyes of Dutch colonists, was there any intrinsic connection between the Bandanese and the landscape they inhabited – they could simply be replaced by workers and managers who would transform the islands into a nutmeg-producing factory. This was a radically new way of envisioning the Earth...“

Similar behaviors abound in British and Dutch arrivals in the Hudson Valley, displacing Indigenous populations considered inconvenient, and murdering them when resistance was encountered. The landscape, intrinsically bound with its people for millennia in reciprocal relationships, came to be seen largely as a source of material gain for the new occupants of the “New World” – a term that conveniently erased local land history. During the Industrial Revolution, the scale of power held by a few entities could be vastly expanded, using machinery, chemical interventions and enslaved laborers, or by actively disempowering workers. Land ownership, a previously unknown concept on this continent, became a chief source of power-holding.
Similar anthropocentric and dominating behaviors persist today, in contemporary forms. Large swaths of the U.S. are owned by corporations and farmed with industrial methods. Profit-driven logic results in affordable foods that are toxic with pesticides, engineered for branding optics rather than nutrition. Farm workers suffer serious health complaints from chemical exposures, and the earth and local waterways are poisoned and becoming infertile. Low-income communities, near whom water and air quality are often poorest, pay a physical price for commercial practices they do not financially benefit from, and which are often marketed to them. Soil health is also a key factor in carbon sequestration, a process essential in avoiding the worst impacts of rapid climate change (which most greatly endangers those who contribute to it least).

My research has been rooted in the commercial sites that exist around me, where colonial ideals are upheld in spite of bloody associated histories. In examining the narrative of the American Dream, I came to understand commercial influences as not only central to contemporary Euro-American culture, but as active manipulators of it. Grocery store displays perpetuate an idea that one should be able to buy anything, at any time, and that it should look exactly like an advertisement. Foods are manipulated to taste and smell more like the constructed idea of the food, in a warped manifestation of the Platonic ideal form. Home-building materials, unlimited even by a basic digestible prerequisite, can be made of composite wood products and plastics that release toxic vapors into a living environment for years after installation; and yet the home is central to this Dream, fenced off to mark land ownership, perhaps equipped with zero-maintenance wood-look flooring, and finished with elaborate MDF trim and pseudo-brass to complete the look of a colonial success story.

I hope to help to de-normalize this culture in mainstream American society. My set of experimental projects is aimed at illuminating common colonizer domination practices around food, shelter and land by revealing their absurdity. As a methodology I employ Theater of the Absurd strategies from playwrights such as Eugène Ionesco, Samuel Beckett and Dario Fo, who created anti-cathartic humorous scenarios to impart a message that cannot be instantly processed and forgotten. I also coopted some minimalist and Bauhaus canon language through cubic forms to reflect the glorification of human domination in the history of art. For these projects I chose complex sites and
materials of everyday, affordable nature-commerce, introducing industrially farmed potatoes and processed wood into curated areas of forest, or back into the grocery store. I bought – or perhaps rescued – the potatoes from local supermarkets. My house-building materials were all salvaged. Presented in this thesis are four potato-based projects, a performance video work and an installation piece built for the thesis show at the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art. All except Mash Production were presented in the thesis show.

PROJECTS: potatoes

“By feeding rapidly growing populations, [the potato] permitted a handful of European nations to assert dominion over most of the world between 1750 and 1950.” (William H. McNeill, in Mann)

The potato, a humble subterranean vegetable grown widely in the USA and Europe, has become a staple of American cuisine. At the grocery store, the potato is an affordable, filling and nutritious choice. It is listed as the fourth most important global food crop, and the most important vegetable crop in the United States (AGMRC). Brought to Europe by Spanish conquistadors in the mid 1500s, the potato was first planted in North America in 1719. The naturally explosive reproductive capacity of the potato makes it highly desirable as a commercial crop. On average, a potato will produce 25 times its mass in harvest; unhindered by weight, subterranean vegetables can grow freely without collapse. In 2019, the US produced around 42 billion pounds of potatoes (USDA). Around a third of these are eaten fresh, while the rest are processed into frozen or dried foods such as French fries, Tater Tots and chips. Current monocultural farming practices of uniform production on this scale involve significant and repeated chemical interventions, leaving traces of toxic substances in the potato, and poisoning waterways and related communities. As an example of colonizer conceptions of nature as a commodifiable product, potato production is hard to beat. I was drawn to the potato as a material subject for all these reasons, as well as for its appearance (as perhaps the least exciting-looking crop in a world saturated with visual advertising) and for its association with wholesome American ordinariness, as a selectively-bred, toxified, Andean import whose production is rendering large swathes
of the American landscape gradually infertile. The following four projects engaged this politically-loaded vegetable in different contexts.

**Potatocube**

“A fouled primal form is a caricature of the very notion of perfection ... and when we see this, like the children on Double Dare when they see their parents and teachers covered in a disgusting mess, we cannot hold back a shout of glee.” (Kelley 107.)

Following the idea of introducing absurd objects into social spaces, I constructed a pile of potatoes in the impossible form of a cube. This object made appearances in a range of sites in the Hudson Valley and ended up back at its purchase point. The potatoes forming the cube were industrially farmed in the USA and purchased from my local Stop & Shop grocery store in Poughkeepsie. A hidden internal structure made from mud-stained scrap wood, coated screws and bamboo skewers kept it together; the beveled wooden base could be lifted out of the trunk of my car and placed on a dolly for mobility. The cube’s weight was roughly equivalent with mine. I built it inside a three-sided wooden box frame, dropping in the outer layer of potatoes and fixing them into place one by one, so that they could appear to have fallen accidentally into a cubic form; or, more accurately, so that the cube could seem to have formed this way by non-apparent forces. In each location, Potatocube had unique interactions with its surroundings and the community, acting variously as a totem, witness, sculpture and general absurdist reality gauge. I felt it had a quasi-magical agency as a living sculpture in motion – a collection of displaced life forms that vastly outnumbered me, and that had some authority in its interactions with specific examples of land use. Public responses varied widely with context. Some of the key project locations are described here.

**Potatocube** began its journey at a local community supported farm, Poughkeepsie Farm Project, where I am a member. The farm describes itself as a leader in “cutting edge practices in today’s sustainable agriculture” (Poughkeepsie Farm Project), alongside community education projects and considerable local food donations. Members collect vegetables from the farm, help to harvest produce during volunteer hours, and can pick certain crops from the fields as they mature, creating a strong bond
between the food and its public. Discounted memberships are available for residents with lower incomes, and the farm continues efforts to operate inclusively. The cube sat in the evening sunshine on a plot of organic carrots, in dialogue with conditions very different from its provenance. This is healthy soil, with rotating crops, plenty of “weeds” and minimal intervention.

*Potatocube* made an appearance in the gardens of DIA: Beacon – a museum renowned for its American Minimalist collection – framed by Robert Irwin’s tall rectilinear hedges of clipped hornbeams. I was able to hide in plain sight by lingering around with my phone camera to overhear public reactions. Visitors were either enraged or delighted to find a cube of potatoes at the museum, but never questioned its status as a sculptural artwork. Its silent dialogue with canonical cubic works by Minimalist titans such as Robert Morris, Tony Smith, and Donald Judd apparently overrode its diminutive size, unlikely, living medium and lack of labelling. I hope that its presence also served to challenge the triumphant aesthetic of domination and perfection embedded in the “basic unit” of the Minimalist cube, which stemmed in part from late capitalist ideologies (Meyer, 25). *Potatocube* as a DIA installation lives on in an assortment of selfies somewhere in the data clouds. One person asked her boyfriend to photograph her while she knelt next to it and applied lip gloss; groups gathered around it for pictures. First-hand sources inform me that a photograph taken by a surprised DIA gallery attendant still hangs on the wall of the staff lounge.

On the road, *Potatocube* became a totemic witness to a common Anthropocene tragedy, as we passed by a fresh deer carcass on Route 9W in Middle Hope, NY. State Farm Insurance estimates that 63,000 deer are killed by cars annually in New York State. It is impossible to gain accurate statistics for roadkill, though there are attempts such as *Project Splatter* in Cardiff. Conservative estimates place annual US animal road deaths at one million, excluding birds and insects, which number into the multi-trillions. The cube’s own non-human agency felt particularly active in this context, in stark contrast with the museum setting. I observed the absurd arrangement of potatoes sharing space and time with the deer’s transitioning flesh. Both could be identified as potential human food and casualties of aggressive capitalist development; I was aware of other mutualities beyond my comprehension. Alongside a deep sense of sorrow, I noted the carcass shifting at each moment from the category of “resource” towards “trash” in my consciousness; but the potatoes made no such distinction.
We visited Five Guys Burgers & Fries, an award-winning national fast food restaurant chain. The cube lingered next to sacks of industrially farmed potatoes used for decor and pre-cooking storage, while the humans consumed French fries and milkshakes, experiencing the deliberately addictive, gluttonous effect of commercial sugar, salt and fat saturation, and funding it. No one noticed the cube except for a child of perhaps 7 years old at the next table, who kept grinning at us.

The cube returned to Stop 'n' Shop in Poughkeepsie, where I had bought the potatoes. In this large, fluorescent-lit warehouse, shoppers first encounter their food branded, arranged geometrically on shelves and often packaged in plastic; a site of everyday nature-commerce that (in my experience) people visit in a hurry, out of necessity, with little chance to consider it critically as a constructed part of our food system. My five-year-old son requested that he pull the cube around the store in his cape. This created a strange scene that added to the magical realist effect, allowing us greater freedom from supervisor disapproval, and invoking the invisible labor behind displays of pristine vegetables. Among the geometric formations of produce, nobody noticed the cube’s impossible shape. One customer expressed surprise that I would allow my son to pull such a large pile to the checkout, as some of the potatoes might fall off. Potatocube spent some time in the produce section and then visited the chips aisle, where it rolled eerily past rows of plastic-wrapped fried potato slices from vast monocultural farms owned by Pepsi Co. and other huge corporations.

Shortly afterwards, the cube and my 5-year-old encountered the store’s surveillance robot, a 7-foot roving pillar with twelve cameras, large stuck-on googly eyes, and a legal disclaimer printed across its smile sticker. The robot, or “Marty”, emits a series of vintage-style bleeps when it fails to recognize something (sometimes including feet) on the store floor and sets off a prerecorded warning message in English and Spanish that echoes across the supermarket: “Hazard detected! Cleanup required in Aisle [X]!” The project suddenly shifted, as customers who had kept their distance began to approach us to share their discomfort with the new store technology. All were unhappy with being filmed while shopping. Stop & Shop claims the robots help keep the store clean by alerting store workers to spills. Numerous members of staff shared their views anonymously when asked, describing Marty as “useless”, “a pain”, and complaining
that it created extra work due to frequent false alerts, requiring each time that a human come and physically press its reset button. One store worker said that “the only useful thing it can do is charge itself”. I observed it beeping at a box of shiny chocolates on a shelf, and gliding silently past a broken egg on the floor. The introduction of nearly five hundred $35,000 robots in 2019 (totaling $17.5 million) coincided with a strike of around 30,000 employees over unfavorable changes to their union contracts (McKenzie) and unsatisfactory raises; employees I interviewed had just received news of raises ranging from 15-50c per hour.

As the potatoes shrunk, Potatocube became gradually unstable, and it ended its Hudson Valley tour as a ruin at the Poughkeepsie Rural Cemetery. Replacing churchyards and family plots in the mid-19th century, rural cemeteries' "carefully landscaped grounds embodied a respect for nature, and provided a respite from the chaotic bustle of the city" (poughkeepsieruralcemetery.com). The presence of a disintegrating cube of industrially-produced potatoes complicated this bucolic, carefully edited vision, which connects intimately with the Romantic, edited aesthetics of the locally famous Hudson River School paintings, funded by colonial wealth.

*Potatocube* was a first attempt to create a lens for viewing our Hudson Valley landscape in a way that defamiliarized colonial, commercial influences. I hoped to call into question what it means for corporations to assert dominion: where that wealth is ultimately held, how these practices are perpetuated, and the complicated relationships between corporate culture and ordinary people’s choices and aesthetics.
Potatocube, Middle Hope, NY, 2019. Photograph of nomadic performance.
Mash Production

After the Potatocube project was over, the potatoes were disassembled, boiled, and used in the test run of a performance project called Mash Production. I wanted to collide problematic industrial farming practices with the kind of meaningless factory labor I had read about years before in Paul Goodman’s Growing Up Absurd. Studies about worker satisfaction in factories revealed that workers making plastic gimmicks had poor quality of life in relation to workers who produced useful products under worse conditions. Food dissociation is a type of ecological alienation, one devastating result of colonizer influences on land use, that seems to violate a basic right – that to a fundamental relationship between the local earth and our nutrition. In addition, industrial farming precludes any respect for living beings grown for our consumption, subjecting them to mechanical and chemical abuses throughout their brief life cycles. In this performance, a circular factory line of plastic-clad workers performs four basic linear tasks. The workers quickly improve at their simple, repetitive jobs. It may become apparent to them at some point that there is no product. The only records of the work exist in the memories of the workers, and the spattered potato all over everything from the violent smashing process. During the test run, the work atmosphere was slightly frantic at the start, but settled into a steady rhythm. A kind of silent camaraderie developed in the mutual dependency of the roles. The mashed potato became steadily more contaminated with WD-40.
Mash Production manual © Emilie Houssart 2019

Setup: an area for workwear, and an impersonal, large work room. There is an industrial hum. A large clock is hanging on the wall with a framed company logo and an artful display of potatoes. A large industrial table is laid with 8, 12 or 16 workspaces and stools. It almost looks like a dinner party, with a rubber mat and tools at each setting.

Workspaces are arranged as follows (repeated, in circular formation):
1: Scooper Pile of 4 square wooden boards, scoop tool, bucket of mashed potato with lid
2: Cuber Set of two cubing paddles, PAM spray
3: Smasher Mallet
4: Scraper Scraper tool

Each workspace has a laminated label:
1. Scooper:
   Scoop two scoops of mash onto a board. Pass it to the right.

2. Cuber:
   Form mash into a cube with paddles as quickly as you can and pass board to the right.
   Spray paddles as needed to lubricate.

3. Smasher:
   Smash the cube with a mallet. Pass board to the right.

4. Scraper:
   Scrape the mash from the board and put it into the bucket. Pass board to the right.

To be assembled: a queue of volunteers and an actor, who will be the manager. The manager also has a work uniform, perhaps a blue shirt with logo. The manager takes the lead, directing the group and creating an atmosphere of quiet subordination and focus on the tasks. Volunteers in multiples of four are directed to put on workwear: white plastic coveralls with logos, white plastic shower caps, safety glasses and green nitrile gloves. They are assigned numbers from 1-4. They are led to the workspace by the manager, and instructed to find their places by number and sit and read the instructions.

When the beep is heard, the workers start performing their tasks. The boards are continuously passed to the right. The manager patrols around the workspace ensuring the workers are efficient, remaining helpful, calm and detached. The manager has been doing the job for long enough not to seek human connection. It is clear that the manager is also subordinate to an invisible higher power; their words are almost automatic after countless repetitions. There are several cube cycles of perhaps four minutes with one-minute breaks. The manager announces the time remaining in an arbitrary way. The last cube cycle before the breaks and finish time is marked by another beep. During the short breaks workers are asked whether they would like to continue; if yes, they move one place to the right; if they decline they are replaced by another worker from the queue.
Columbian X-change

“In what [Alfred W.] Crosby called the Columbian Exchange, the world’s long-separate ecosystems abruptly collided and mixed in a biological bedlam that underlies much of the history we learn in school” (Mann). Along with an intercontinental mixing of edible plants such as the potato – permanently altering native ecosystems – came diseases brought by explorers to the New World, decimating Indigenous populations with smallpox and other viral newcomers. The arrival of Columbus in the Americas in 1492 had such a significant impact that it ended what is now referred to as the pre-Columbian era, ushering in a time of exploitation and brutality. Statues commemorating the ingenuity of the renowned explorer are common in public sites throughout the United States.

A portrait of Columbus was commissioned by Italian Neoclassicist Antonio Canova as part of a series of busts to adorn the Pantheon chapels in Rome. Originally carved by Raimondo Trentanove in 1817, British artist Joseph Gott sculpted a copy around two decades later (Caproni). This work in turn can be found in plaster reproductions across the country. At the time of writing, the bust is available online for $980. Continuing the lineage of altered reproductions, I sculpted a clay version of the bust, loosely modelled after images of the plaster cast from the purchase website, and embedded industrially-farmed potatoes in the head. From this work I fabricated an eight-part plaster piece mold in order to be able to reproduce multiples that could sprout. Columbian X-change is made from mold-pressed red clay and industrially farmed potatoes, and is designed as an alternative monument for outdoor public spaces.

The potato, a post-Columbian import from Bolivia and Peru, played an integral role in colonialism. Brought to Europe by Spanish conquistadors in the mid 16th century, the potato became widespread in the late 1700s. European royalty such as Marie Antionette wore potato blossoms to encourage peasants to adopt this new, exponentially-reproductive vegetable, which was planted across the continent. The campaign was successful: the economical tuber led to population explosions, powering the workforce of the Industrial Revolution in Europe (Mann). Before long, demand for more materials led to countless global abuses in the name of progress, and the hoarding of wealth by the upper classes of a few European nations.
Potatoes are susceptible to blight and other infestations. The first pesticides in the form of guano (seagull droppings) were imported to farm potatoes, soon followed by strong doses of arsenic. Today, huge swathes of the USA are farmed with just five main varieties of potato for commercial purposes. The length of the perfect French fry to emerge from a red McDonald’s box, attainable only with the Russet Burbank variety, dictates land uses across many thousands of acres. In order to farm monoculturally, potatoes must be subjected to a barrage of chemicals throughout their life cycle, with a final spritz of sprout retardant for grocery shelf optics (Pollan). As a direct result, earth microbes and insects are undergoing a vast extinction; farm workers are subjected to high levels of toxins; and local waterways are becoming poisoned. Despite extensive studies, these inequitable and unsustainable practices persist, driven by corporate interests. Pesticide data studies on farmland rely on voluntary participation (PDP), and farmers receive growing information from the chemical companies in a transparent conflict of interest, while still failing to make a living wage (Pollan). Traces of chemicals remain in the potatoes, transferring into human bodies on consumption.

In their Andean home, wild potatoes are toxic to humans. They can, however, be digested if consumed with clay. This incredible material, a source of nutrients for some pregnant mothers and also used in soil remediation, attaches to toxins when ingested, removing them harmlessly from the body. These resilient potatoes have a second chance at life beyond the supermarket. They will root and sprout in the clay, destroying an American monument to colonialism and transforming it into a tiny restorative farm. Fermented horse manure may be mixed into the clay as fertilizer. The living sculpture is designed to exist outside, and to be reproduced widely.
Columbian X-change, 2021 (detail).
Co-co-codac!

I designed an installation in response to an open call for outdoor artworks on the theme of land domination: Owning Earth at Unison Arts Center, curated by Tal Beery and Erin Lee Antonak. Viruses were on my mind, since COVID-19 had efficiently upended the usual functioning of the world. I made a network of rectilinear growths that seemed to have risen from the forest floor. I hoped they might appear to be symptoms of some troubling viral intruder in the woods – almost like finding square warts on the body – since to me, the appearance of geometry in a forest full of complex irregular forms seemed highly disturbing. Building on my printmaking experiments from 2018-19, I was interested in revealing rectilinear shapes (the marks of profit-driven human intervention on the planet) as absurdly simplistic; and to show complex, interdependent shapes that contemporary humans might dismiss as mere chaos – such as those made by crushing a sheet of paper, or the individual growth responses of a tree – as sophisticated beyond our comprehension. The appearance of square-topped growths, the fruit of some invasive Anthropocene fungal body with the choreography of an elevator, was intended as a type of red flag. By extension, the piece invited contemplation of the living earth, as the protrusions confronted visitors with billions of subterranean microorganisms at body level. This staggeringly complex ecosystem underfoot may be the easiest to ignore and the most regularly abused by commercial forces, while also the most crucial for future planetary health.

Framed as a corruption in a place often viewed as a sanctuary from modern life, the work also challenges a trope of “wildness” in a landscape cross-contaminated in much more entangled ways. Unison’s managed forest sits on the border of non-organic farmland, and in the shadow of the iconic skyline of the private Mohonk tourist estate. Considering the Hudson Valley’s famed vistas and farmland, I wanted to probe at the psychic separation embedded in colonizer culture that allows someone to hike to the top of a mountain to view the landscape from above while eating a bag of chips, the production of which destroys that same landscape, or (more likely) a similar one out of sight. I decided to embed the forms with industrially farmed potatoes to complicate the forest floor in evident living, physical ways. Each contained about 20 pounds of potatoes bought in 5-pound plastic sacks from local supermarkets. A series of guests was invited to join me in the absurd act of imposing geometry in a “wild” site. We
made potting mix from the forest floor, mixing it by hand with local town compost, sand and fermented horse manure. As we conversed about our relationships with food, land and complicity, we rammed the mix into rectilinear molds, embedding potatoes between the layers. Before the opening of the show some weeks later, the molds were removed and a set of strange geometric earthworks remained. Futile attempts at control in an area of curated wilderness, mini industrial farms in the woods, or retirement homes for abused tubers; these earthworks were also monuments to communal labor and dialogue.

Out in the woods, potatoes doused with the most potent sprout-retardants were unable to root. Their forms collapsed quickly, and they rotted among the leaves. Others were able to take advantage of fertile conditions to sprout and flower, though they were no longer required to. Their root-bound ecosystems re-arranged themselves more gently into sustainable forms. They had babies and continue their displaced lives undisturbed by the logic and aesthetics of commerce. Cycles of growth and collapse are still in progress and will continue throughout the course of the show (until September 2022). The title of this work is taken from Eugène Ionesco’s absurdist play The Future Is In Eggs. Characters who have become obsessed with producing more and more of their own kind squawk “Co-co-codac!”, as a newly-matched couple produces batches of eggs on demand, ensuring the future of the white race. It should be pronounced as though by a human chicken.
Co-co-codac! Ephemeral installation, Unison Arts Center, 2021 (installation views).
Co-co-codac! Ephemeral installation, Unison Arts Center, 2021 (installation views).
Co-co-codac! Ephemeral installation, Unison Arts Center, 2021 (detail).
Projects: hybrids

Anomalia: House

Commercial colonizer forces are active locally in affordable construction practices. Toxic materials such as MDF, adhesives, plastics and carpets cause extensive environmental harm in production and beyond installation. Off-gassing from these materials can continue for years, with adverse effects on human hormone regulation, lung function and more, particularly affecting children (Grey). These materials do not easily biodegrade, and will continue to cause damage to interspecies communities for centuries to come. Home redesign has become an industry akin to fast fashion, encouraging regular remodeling by aggressively marketing temporary trends linked to perceptions of success and luxury. In 2020, as home improvement markets spiked with people spending more time at home, Lowe’s officially partnered with New York Fashion Week to boost sales. Ad Age announced Lowes’ as the “winner” of the event for gaining more social media mentions than any other designer or brand (shortyawards.com). Industries such as these perpetuate and exploit social insecurities about comparative appearances, building on the legacy of profit-motivated colonizer culture that has become internalized across most of the USA.

While my printmaking practice since 2018 was already based in performance, and the potato works more overtly so, Anomalia: House marked a new area of exploration for me in engaging my own body as a medium in the landscape. Much like the potato, my own body is a loaded, living material, inextricably bound up with a history of domination and with modern day tensions. I conceived of this as the first of an Anomalia series of ‘suits’; though really, they are strange hybrid creatures, imagined evolutionary offshoots that result from a social smashing-together of opposed elements. In this case my starting points were the complex forms of the body and the forest, merged with industrially produced geometric house-building materials.

For Anomalia: House I focused on mass-produced items signifying colonizer aesthetics of success and ecological dissociation, based on my own family history, shopping experiences and local observations. Suit materials included repurposed air conditioning pipes, MDF trim, vinyl fake wood flooring, a flexible fake marble floor tile, and an IKEA
shelf with wood veneer over composite wood. Other parts were made from found pieces of industrial lumber, a fancy stair banister, and old electrical wiring. At the joints, all parts were attached with hinges so that I would be limited to basic uni-directional movements. About half of my body remained visible to allow for a comparison of complex anatomical forms with simplistic shapes, synonymous with impositions on the landscape and modern sophistication. A section of guttering forced my wrist into a 90 degree bend, and a dangling steel pipe served as a swinging masculine appendage.

I also hoped to use my physical presence as a tool to induce a visceral experience of the work in witnesses. As they watched me walk through the woods, struggling to step over fallen branches and wade through a vernal pond, viewers could make multiple associations. The difficulty of basic activities such as walking and bending down were evident, along with a high level of physical discomfort, emphasized by the loud clanging of parts as I moved. A long piece of trim attached to my shin would crash against the air conditioning vent pipe around my neck each time I straightened my leg. The suit also creaked as I turned; the wide range of noises only stopped when I was motionless, and created a jarring counter-soundscape to the spring peepers and birds of the forest. Inducing discomfort in witnesses and possibly hilarity, connections might also be made with Oskar Schlemmer’s Bauhaus theater performers, who danced in androgynous geometric suits in joyful celebration of the merging of industrial and natural spheres (Koss). The white cis-female body in the landscape has been romanticized by countless art-historical titans. Giorgione’s _Sleeping Venus_ (1510), is said to be the earliest example in the classical Western painting tradition. Rubens, Corot and Bouguereau followed; and (according to fineartamerica.com) scores of contemporary brush-twiddlers continue to fetishize sensual, slim white women’s bodies in fields, forests and streams, representing them either as passive or vixen-like – either way, as a desirable scene for a traditional male art consumer, with space for him to insert himself into a victorious narrative. As the hybrid creature wanders across artificial borders, in this case between the woods and the adjacent, manicured golf course, it challenges our psychic categories of the romantically unspoiled and the neatly maintained. The cis-female body represents both an ideal of colonizer aesthetics and a perpetuator, the slim white suburban stereotype intimately connected with a toxic American Dream.
The wandering, accidental hybrid of Anomaly: House is deeply unsustainable. It does not belong in any conceivable environment, nor is it equipped to survive anywhere. The work is designed to be experienced through YouTube and other video channels, discovered by accident while browsing other people’s wildlife camera footage. Surveillance is another theme of the work, as some visible human nudity prompts questions of privacy in the ‘wild’ that animal footage may not. Anomaly: House is filmed with wildlife cameras and on a cellphone. The subtle differences between the two become obvious after sundown, as the wildlife cameras switch to infrared and the cellphone footage fades to grainy darkness. There appear to be several layers of witnessing: the anonymous owner of the cameras; the invisible cellphone holder; and the audience of the video, who become implicated as they view documentation of an apparent physical symptom of consumerist lifestyles in their local landscape. I hope that the experience challenges new witnesses to hold this imaginary victim in their minds as a premonition, perhaps like a Ghost of Christmas of the Near-Future. By highlighting ubiquitous materials, I hope to illuminate opportunities for choice, both around the materials we purchase new from big box stores without consideration of their origins and eventual destiny; and around the types of nests we construct to shelter our bodies. I hope to place pressure on corporations to change practices by helping to destabilize a culture of thoughtless consumerism and its colonial symbols. For example, if wall trim originated as a subconscious response to the harshness of a corner, and elaborate trim became a colonial symbol of wealth, then affordable toxic composite trim represents exactly the kind of complicated material that I am interested in to expose the problematics of commercialized life in the Hudson Valley today. In a region currently abundant with fallen wood from an invasive insect tree extinction, alternatives must be found.
When my installations are physically encountered, whether in the forest or the supermarket, I hope that people will experience an odd sense of duality. Clearly there has been an absurd intervention of some kind; but nonetheless they have witnessed a physical anomaly in their everyday surroundings, with their own eyes. There is also a visceral experience of the work in relation to the viewer’s own body in the particular disrupted space. These factors serve as prompts to think about surrounding landscapes (in the broadest sense) with a fresh perspective. Displaying documentation of these projects as artwork, particularly in a museum or gallery context, is therefore always problematic. I struggled with how to show ephemeral works that no longer exist in the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art, which also prohibits living plants and animals in its galleries (besides humans, and the billions of invisible organisms we carry, or that float in the air). My work is rooted in the lives of microorganisms, plants and human communities that suffer abuses as a result of colonial wealth-gathering; and in celebrating the complexity of living communities of various kinds. Moreover, museums have historically presented and elevated the treasures of this same wealth. As a contemporary socio-ecological artist with a background in classical portrait and landscape painting, and considering my own Dutch-British-Huguenot heritage as an immigrant to the Hudson Valley, I feel the discord deeply and personally. For the thesis exhibition, I wanted to find a way to extend the experience of active witnessing into the museum. Since photographs at least provide a visual idea of the works and their context, I decided to build a structure through which the works can be experienced in more particular ways.

The Blind is made from repurposed materials of various kinds. I set some principles for building, and decided to allow the rest to evolve as I assumed the character of the fictional builder and tried to follow their logic. This character is a kind of curious opportunist, not wealthy, but with a taste for feminine colonial refinement and a keen eye for free materials — selected detritus of contemporary life. The outside of the structure is made largely of recycled drywall, with some scrap wood. It is roughly put together and there are gaps. The exterior has been roughly painted with Zurich White, the Dorsky’s wall color, to become (absurdly) inconspicuous. It is clear that someone has been nesting a little inside the blind, spends time there and is house-proud; they
are comfortable concealed within their tiny geometric hide. From the inside there are
target points to look out in all four directions. For museum traffic I decided to keep
the doorway open, but there is the implication of a curtain with a gold-colored rail
haphazardly installed in the doorway.

The choice to enter is the first step in involving oneself personally with the works. You
become further implicated when you choose to look through the blind’s viewing holes,
which give you a private experience of the anomalies on view, and of the museum
audience outside the blind. Square steel and plastic tubes provide limited, geometric
windows through which to examine selected parts of the works, as the viewer chooses.
These are crudely attached with wire and tape to a sawn-down antique gold frame that
forms a narrow, horizontal blind window. Four doorbell peepholes allow privacy in
examining exterior surroundings. Net curtains further invoke home privacy measures
and decor; a flowered one provides a window from the exterior onto inhabitants spying
on wall works, and a narrow piece of mesh with stapled pleats conceals interior
peepers through the gold frame, with the square pipes slightly obscenely poking out
from under its ruffled edge. Lustrous gold flowery wallpaper has been used to cover an
elementary structure of uneven scrap wood and sheetrock. There are two lamps, one
with a pastel-dressed ceramic lady with dripping blue eye paint (found this way), and a
white porcelain lamp with sculpted cherubs holding garlands of morning glory, their
bodys covered with a spray of flowers. Two landscape prints in fake gold and green
marble frames flank the doorway; one (a Winslow Homer painting of a logging scene
on the Hudson River) has a peephole drilled through it. Gold plastic plates hold the
lamps and a crumpled show card, which shows a witness video still of Anomalia: House
live filmed on a cellphone through infrared binoculars. Various styles of trim have been
nailed all around the top and bottom framing of the blind, covering the construction,
and painted bright gloss white. Fake wood flooring is laid at the edges of the walls.
One corner has been made into a tool section with a diagonal strip of trim, and
contains objects for maintaining order over the unruly living: a hedge trimmer, a lawn
edging tool and an empty packet of Gilette Venus disposable razors.

Visitors may have noticed these details; might have recognized some of them from
their own lives; were able to observe selectively, and to leave at any time. I hope that
the actions of entering a concealed space and choosing to look at specific parts of
symptom images as though through binoculars or the sights of a rifle, or watching the video of *Anomalia: House* through the slats of a plastic colonial blind, helped to embed these imaginary symptoms into the memory as though they had been witnessed first-hand. By defamiliarizing elements from colonizer homes, I aim to rupture the normalcy of the colonizer aesthetic, which is relatively new to this land, and to suggest associations with domination, complicity, and inaction in the face of witnessed inequity and toxic practices. Imbued with strangeness and humor, this playful structure aims to enable open questioning of the norms of colonizer culture, in which so many of us are immersed to the point of blindness.

*Blind*, found materials, 2022
Blind, found materials, 2022
"Blind, found materials, 2022"
Blind (detail), 2022
Blind (detail), 2022
Blind (detail), 2022
Conclusion

These works are the beginning of an exploration into colonizer influences in the local landscape, using fantastical symptoms of problematic practices as a language. During my MFA, I have studied related instances of language (DIRT: Inside Landscapes as Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art 2021 Artist in Residence), and looked for examples of colonizer aesthetics in my own life (which abound), perpetuated in contemporary commerce. Culturally, the colonizer superiority complex that allowed for genocide and the attempted erasure of Indigenous histories allows us today to ignore the devastating results of our lifestyles in plain sight. We may be able to present perfect green lawns (or timely art projects) while at the same time – and often in the same gesture – poisoning unseen neighbors at home and abroad. Practices of environmental racism and perpetuation of related unsustainable behaviors are often protected and enabled by their packaging, presented as civilized standards with the manners and politeness I recognize in Toni Morrison’s powerful words. Commercially, the complex manifests itself assertively in industrialized food and shelter norms, where colonizer optics of success – including blemish-free, predictably uniform products available on demand – supercede the health of the recipient, community and planet.

My thesis work addresses the voluntary blindness of people who have been exposed to information about intersectionally-unsustainable practices, and who are in a position to make choices. Absurdism has proved to be a useful tool for starting dialogue, and for making difficult subjects accessible and memorable. I have more to do in designing work for complicit audiences never previously exposed to conversations on ecological ethics. I will also continue the generative arm of my work, which is not described in this document, but which directly addresses colonizer legacies of ecological dissociation and isolation as transgressions of a fundamental right as living beings, and works to restore those relationships. A blind was exciting both in name and concept, invoking wildlife observation, hunting and surveillance as well as the aesthetics of homes and privacy. As a general group, I came to focus increasingly on privileged white women like myself who benefit every day from past colonial violence and from fitting colonial ideals, and who also suffer from pressure to conform to those same ideals, or carry those actions out as their own ideals, and perpetuate them. These projects are my
contributions to a sea change, operating largely out of art world constraints, and my first serious endeavors into socially-engaged installation and performance.

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Acknowledgements

The past three years provided the structure for a huge transition in my work which I would never have been able to manage without support. I would like to extend enormous thanks to the following people, who nurtured me from all angles during a very non-linear journey: to Prof. Emily Puthoff whose mentorship anchored my explorations in sculpture with insight and enthusiastic support; to Prof. Michael Asbill whose unparalleled openness and generosity infused all our interactions; and to both these people for their trust, and their vision in building a department that prioritizes communities of all kinds; to Professors Jill Parisi and Nadia Sablin for invaluable personalized support, and Beth Wilson for classroom fireworks; to Linda Weintraub for her integrity and X-ray vision; to Matthew Friday for shepherding our cohort wisely and making it fun; to Anna Conlan and Zach Bowman at the Dorsky Museum for encouragement and free rein during my residency; and to Chris Petrone at Women’s Studio Workshop for being a multifaceted studio ally.

I am grateful to two groups at SUNY for extracurricular richness. As a member of the Sustainability Faculty Fellows Learning Community I came to understand how environmental sustainability and social justice are essentially interwoven, and to take my artistic practice seriously as a tool for change. I was welcomed into Eddy @ New Paltz, a non-hierarchical group whose curiosity and innovative process recently resulted in two remarkable events: Sound Your Truth, and the Health, Wellness and Environmental Justice Symposium as part of a collaboration with the Newburgh Clean Water Project. These experiences have been some of my most valuable at New Paltz and, along with the Sculpture department, provided the communities where I felt most at home.

Several friends were crucial on this journey: thank you especially to Xuewu Zheng, Kyle Cottier and Sariah Park. I wouldn’t have got here without you. Debra Broz and Amitava Kumar were key sources of inspiration and cheer. My mother Marion Neyens, my son Charlie and most of all my partner Chris Raymond have been the most supportive and loving team a displaced returning parent grad student could ask for.