

STREAM

Stream will take place over a weekend, August 9th & 10th, 2014, near South Windham, VT.

The surrounding Vermont forest where this stream is nestled is a changeable landscape—a site perceived as part of a natural environment, but one that has hardly been untouched by humans. This becomes evident when walking off the trail; one encounters stone walls that enclosed farmer's fields in the 18th and 19th centuries and that are now part of a forest. Further hidden from view are remnants from ancient indigenous communities ploughed over as European settlements sought agricultural dominion over the landscape. We are struck by what art historian Adrian Stokes calls a “realization of the past-living-in-the-present”ⁱ These human markers in the landscape where the stream is situated serve to “keep us in touch with our own development” according to Stokes since “(G)eological time is out of scale with our own weathering, unlike traces of culture.”ⁱⁱ

All the works in the exhibition will be arranged in and around this stream in South Windham, Vermont. Some works may appear to be situated as 'part of nature', others to be 'human detritus' left behind in the natural landscape. Several works will interact performatively with the stream itself.

Allan Kaprow's work *Echo-logy* (1975), establishes a boundary, both art historical and political, that structures the way the works in the exhibition interact with each other as well as with the spectator. *Echo-logy* is a play of actions rather than a performance; no audience or spectator is assumed, and part of the point of the work at the time was a renunciation of the art market and the gallery and museum complex. Kaprow's title plays on the word ecology, which in 1975 was an urgent and hopeful term. *Echo-logy*, with its playful title and simple gestures, exerts what cultural critic Elizabeth Freeman calls “temporal drag—the interesting threat that the genuine past-ness of the past makes to the political present.”ⁱⁱⁱ Kaprow's work reaffirms a pre-existing credibility for the notion of placing art works in this particular environment rather than a gallery or a museum, that the value of this gesture persists in the present. *Echo-logy* is centrally a reflection on ecology and our relationship to the environment played out in a series of scenes and actions. Participants move water upstream in a gesture that in its pointlessness illustrates quite simply the powerlessness of a single human in relation to natural systems, while other actions suggest the opposite—our destructive capacity to contaminate our environment; waving a gasoline soaked piece of fabric until the gasoline evaporates also quite simply illustrates our toxic impact, though a hopeful viewer of the piece might also note that the pollutant introduced does, in fact, dissipate. All of these actions, including speaking words to one another against the sound of the rushing water, are reminders that what we put into the environment is absorbed there even if we don't notice where it goes.

Echo-logy was “carried out” in 1975, the same year as Ernst Callenbach's popular utopian fiction *Ecotopia*, was published. What is striking is that the tenets suggested by *Echo-logy* echo Ecotopian principles and behaviors: performing actions or rituals that produce nothing, allocating time to interact with the environment that is not purposeful or merely recreational; in both *Echo-logy* and *Ecotopia* these actions increase what Lawrence Buell

refers to as “place attachment”— what many eco-critics and environmental activists believe is necessary to achieve in order to counter human-made environmental crises. With the waning of the more utopian visions of the 1960s and 1970s, focus has shifted to our destruction of the environment with little hope of recovery; utopia is displaced by dystopia.

Works in the exhibition combine aspects hinted at in *Echo-logy* ranging from the poetic to the political and, finally, the dystopian.

Like Kaprow’s *Echo-logy* Edward Allington’s piece *River Ring, Vermont* (2014) interacts with the stream while directing the viewer’s attention to conventional uses for the stream such as fishing and contemplation. Through the symbolism of a facsimile of a wedding ring cast in silver and lead, used as “sinker,” Allington shifts points to an expansive and romantic notion of landscape as sublime as well as inward-looking, invoking a sense of personal loss. *River Ring* is related to two public sculpture commissions by Allington, *Lincoln Tree Ring* 2010 located on a tree on the grounds of the Usher Gallery in Lincoln and *Tree Ring/Engagement Tree* 2000, Niehem, Germany. These two public commissions, like artist Peter Coffin’s *Tree Pants* (2007) exert an ironic awareness of the artist’s own use of the natural environment as Coffin states: “as though nature only makes sense the way it relates to us. (The work) reminds us that our perspective is anthropocentric.”^{iv}

With *River Ring, Vermont* Allington replaces the dominant absurdity of the monumental—where the landscape is in fact shackled—with a humble narrative gesture that results in the loss of the sculptural object into the landscape itself.

Patricia Thornley’s engagement with the stream offers the spectator an exaggerated example of place attachment or subject-space connection. In *THE STREAM* (2014), and *THE MAKING OF THE STREAM* (2014) Thornley makes the stream the “star” of her two videos taking the anthropomorphization of nature to the extreme. Featuring the stream as filmic/video/audio subject and placing her videos on YouTube challenges structures of domination in conventional film and video production and dissemination that is primarily focused on the production and reproduction of celebrity. According to Laura Mulvey “the conventions of mainstream cinema focus on the human form...scale, space, stories are all anthropomorphic;” the stream, lacking both gender and language resists our attempts, as viewers, to position ourselves in relation to the image. Thornley challenges the way we experience pleasure in viewing; neither identification with the image seen or viewing as voyeur is possible here as Thornley forces us to contemplate our resistance to attend to nature close-up.

Anthea Behm’s work *Object with the Sound of Its Own Discourse* (2013) uses the ubiquitous Amazon cardboard box to interrogate contemporary issues of environmental crises and the displacement of indigenous populations in Peru while also referencing Robert Morris’ *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* from 1961. The Amazon box is the embodiment of both the overpackaging of American commodity culture and a recurring component of American household waste. On a local level—it is representative of the type of household garbage dumped with regularity into the landscape near this stream and, regrettably, when placed near the stream, does not look out of place. The spectator will hear an

audio, emanating from the box, of voices of indigenous peoples in Peru protesting the deforestation and privatization of traditional lands and natural resources. Behm explains the intention of her work to “discursively connect the global corporation to social and environmental degradation.” The name Amazon, linguistically co-opted to its generalized extreme, made as generic as its material counterpart—the cardboard box, strikes us as a cynical choice in corporate branding.

Ingela Ihrman’s performance *Giant Otter Giving Birth* (2012) refers as well to the environmental crisis in the Amazon region, where the giant otter is an endangered species. Ihrman performs “nature drag” using elaborate and outsized handmade costumes to mimic the intimate spectatorial relationship of wildlife documentaries. In addition to a giant otter giving birth, Ihrman has performed as a blooming water lily, a toad, and a cave goat. Her assortment of “characters” is carefully selected to remind us of our conflicted relationship to nature throughout history and our relentless pursuit of dominion. Habitat destruction and over-trapping in the 19th century have also caused the river otter in Vermont to decline in number. In all cases, the detailed costumes disguise a hilariously clumsy human who fails to approximate the elegant natural processes she attempts to mimic. Through humor and parody, Ihrman demonstrates just how woefully out of step humans are with nature’s fauna and flora. *Giant Otter Giving Birth* can also be seen as building upon a tradition of feminist performance art like Carolee Schneemann’s ‘Interior Scroll’ of 1975. But in Ihrman’s case, the otter costume problematizes our relationship to the female body.

Copper Pyramid Cooler (2013) by Josef Bull looks like a careless remnant of a campsite or fishing day trip left behind—but is actually a hybrid object—a beer cooler designed for camping re-fashioned as a copper pyramid used for meditative and healing purposes. Bull explains that his work often “samples outdoor equipment and explores how materials carry information about and form links between seemingly unrelated cultural phenomena.” Hiking and camping, as well as meditation and spirituality, are “aspirational” activities combining physical and mental challenges with values that should be in conflict with the commodification of such activities. The proliferation of technical gear available to the consumer for both outdoor activities and spiritual pursuits (meditation, yoga etc.) would seem to suggest that self-improvement and recreation are dependent upon financial resources and social privilege. The embroidered patch bears no logo, only an image of sky with planets, landscape and stream suggesting either outdoor adventures or spiritual pursuits. The humor in this piece lies in the relatability of the six pack of beer in the cooler being acted upon by the “healing” forces of the copper pyramid which have been claimed to have an alchemical power to change the molecules of what is underneath to something better.

Rachel Steven’s *Survivalist Cinema* (2014) situated in a rustic lean-to plays on the ubiquity of screens in our environment. Repurposed plywood salvaged from a defunct drive-in movie theatre screen combine with a digital projector and solar panels used to power the entire contraption. Steven’s installation focuses on the materiality of image production and consumption that Hito Steyerl claims demands our attention:

How about acknowledging that this image is not some ideological misconception, but a thing simultaneously couched in affect and availability, a fetish made of crystals and electricity, animated by our wishes and fears—a perfect embodiment of its own conditions of existence.^v

The screened content of survivalist and dystopian films from the 1970s once again tugs us backwards to the time of Kaprow's *Echo-logy*. Like Dan Graham's significant work *Cinema* (1981), Stevens is interested in manipulating viewing conventions. Stevens suggests that the experience of collective viewing prompted in a drive-in or movie theatre, like the films on view from a past era, are irretrievably lost in the deluge of personal screens. But because this installation also embodies a physical signifier of the horror films on view—the viewer huddled in a lean-to in the wild—the isolated viewing experience is met with dread and anxiety.

And finally *The Octopus* (2014), a story by Jack Carr, outlines the birth and education of what might be the last being on earth, a young octopus conceived in a test tube and raised in a tank by what appear to be machines programmed for this purpose. Her educators manage to instill in her *all* human knowledge including eastern religion and Saussurian linguistics. In the world of dystopian fiction, Carr's story falls somewhere between what Fredric Jameson terms a “critical dystopia” which Jameson considers “a negative cousin of the Utopia proper,” still “in the light of some positive conception of human possibilities that its effects are generated” and “apocalyptic”^{vi} fiction, since it would seem that human life on earth is over. Jameson might also approve of the term Carr himself applies to this piece —“post-ironic” since it most aptly describes Carr's earnest yet unrelenting prose.

ⁱ A Stokes, *The Invitation in Art*, 1965, Tavistock Press, London, p. 207.

ⁱⁱ *ibid*, p. 207.

ⁱⁱⁱ E Freeman, ‘Packing History, Count(er)ing Generations’ in *New Literary History*, 31.4, Autumn, 2000 p. 728.

^{iv} P Coffin, magazine.saatchiart.com/culture/.../peter_coffin_at_the_horticultu_1

^v H Steyerl, ‘A Thing Like You and Me’ (2012) in A Hudek (ed.), *The Object*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, 2014, p. 47.

^{vi} F Jameson, *Archeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, 2005, Verso, New York, p. 198-199.

Special thanks:

Robert Bingham
Marshall Blonsky
Ed Brown
E. H. Dalton
Vance Hosford
Jim Jackson
Allan Kaprow Foundation
Chris Keefe
Mike McGrath
Duncan and Lisa Robinson
Jay Warren