

**Becoming Human | Artist: Humans Moving in Accord with the Change that
Makes the World**

**An Ecological Performance by smudge
(Elizabeth Ellsworth and Jamie Kruse)**

In the spring of 2007 we staged an ecological performance piece throughout the American Southwest entitled *28 days*. As an art collaboration of two, based in Brooklyn, NY, we had been engaged in a series of projects that responded to forces (tides, wind, light, time) that compose urban landscapes and human environments. We had used media such as photography and video, and signaling devices such as orange flagging tape, to make these forces visible and palpable. We had been contextualizing our work within ideas associated with relational aesthetics.

We felt the urgency to draw connections among natural and social/cultural forces that extend across great distances and shape vastly different landscapes and built environments. We invented *28 days* as a way to expose our bodies and imaginations directly to sites and moments at which natural and constructed spheres of intensity come vividly and critically into play. We would pause at each apex to feel the reality of relation. We would make and create responsively there, with the intention to move accordingly with the change that makes the world. Our series of interconnected gestures of response became the ecological performance of *28 days*.

Over the course of the 28-day journey we traveled 3700 miles. We intentionally chose to visit sites that would offer us experiences of intensity: intensity of landscape, color, climate, remoteness, forms, histories, and site-responsive built environments.

Nevertheless, each day surprised us with unexpected encounters with intensity. We found ourselves passing through sites where humans, the landscape and the built environment converged to create what we came to understand as *exquisitely concentrated zones of contact*. State borderlines converged with deep economic

divisions; remote desert “wasteland” converged with garish tourist attractions; a quonset hut used to develop the first atomic bomb converged with present day efforts to redesign it for sustainable living practices in the desert. Extremity extended across the vastly disparate and singularly unique sites, creating a commonality of sheer intensity.

As our experiences compounded, we began to regard the sites we passed through as ‘limit cases’: moments when natural and built forces mutually contaminate (Haraway, 2003) as they play out to their most extreme forms, levels, and junctures. Within these limit cases, natural and built forces have, as Brian Massumi says, ‘gone critical’:

A singular point occurs when a system enters a peculiar state of indecision, where what its next state will be turns entirely unpredictable. ... the system momentarily suspends itself. It has not become inactive. Rather, it is in ferment. It has gone “critical.” This “chaotic” interlude is ... the literal co-presence of all the possible paths the system may take ... their physical inclusion in one another. ... Which transformation actually occurs, what the next outward connection will be, cannot be predicted by extrapolating from physical laws. Possibility has, *in effect*, materialized. (Massumi, 2002, 109-110)

Unpredictable according to ‘physical laws,’ limit zones of contact become situations that ‘challenge the logics which determine the course of events.’

We felt compelled to respond, *both* as humans and as artists, to these materializations of possibility as such. As humans, we felt deeply entwined and implicated in the historical and currently unfolding forces and junctures that had already shaped the ferment we were encountering.

As artists, we felt the need and the potential to create performative responses to the limit zones that we passed through—that is, to make something of and at their forces

and junctures in ways that might open them and us to becoming qualitatively different. By this, we mean the qualitative difference that Massumi speaks of: 'The world is in a condition of constant qualitative growth...with every move, with every change, there is something new to the world, an added reality' (Massumi, 2002, 12). We sought such a qualitative growth in our own senses of agency. We sought ways of responding that would enable us to sense that we were able to act (*at all*) at the confluence of extreme forces *and* that humans acting in response to limit zones of contact could actually add potential for more life—as in, more potential for surprise, more unpredictability, eventfulness, relationality, sensation, variation, participation (Massumi, 2002, 220-221).

We began to practice a form of improvisation. As in various improvisational forms, we sought ways to continue to move forward, to act as artists, within and in creative response to stark parameters or limits.

Art ... can push further to the indeterminate but relationally potentialized fringes of existing situations, beyond the limits of current framings or regulatory principles. It is the suspensive aspect of it that gives it this freedom. ...The suspension of the most available potentials, the potentials already comfortingly embodied, well housed and usefully institutionalized, give a chance for more far-fetched potentials to ripple up. (Massumi, 2007, 79)

We attempted, as improvisational actors do, to suspend the need to predetermine or predict our actions in response to unfamiliar situations. We sought to locate our actions at the place where our experiences of ourselves 'as human' and our experiences of ourselves 'as artists' meet and smudge into one another, demarcating a continuously shifting and unfolding zone of action: the human | artist.

For the "lines" of which our lives are composed are always more complicated and more free than the more or less rigid "segmentations" into which a society tries to sort them, and so they may be used to draw or 'diagram' other spaces, other times of living. (Rajchman, 2000, 83)

Here, we present ten performative responses that resulted from *28 days*. They model the travel postcard. However, these cards challenge the imagery and descriptions typically conveyed through souvenir postcards. As we encountered and passed through limit zones of contact, we did not attempt to document them or our experiences 'as they were.' Rather, in response to each juncture of forces and events, we created a *postcard-as-gesture*. As a signal of the mutual contamination that takes place at converging edges, each postcard compiles multiple gestures (aesthetic, visual, verbal, bodily, conceptual) into one compound expression. In the presence of forces that require us to invoke a plurality of the senses of intensity, our strategy is to make intensity intense. [1]

Taking up this strategy, we stage postcards and words to evoke not only sensations of passing through the sites, but also sensations of humans, the landscape, and the built environment themselves converging and compounding—reaching their limits and passing into something else.

That 'something else,' the state of the earth as we experienced it on *28 days*, now necessitates extraordinary acts of improvisation with an urgency that is new on this planet.

Through the work that follows, we respond inventively and imaginatively to limit zones of contact now proliferating planet-wide. We do so by enacting ways of moving in and with the world as 'human | artist.' We explore the human | artist gesture of 'moving in accord with the change that makes the world,' and how such a gesture might inflect possible paths of change.

SETTING THE STAGE

IMPROVISATIONAL PRACTICE: TEA

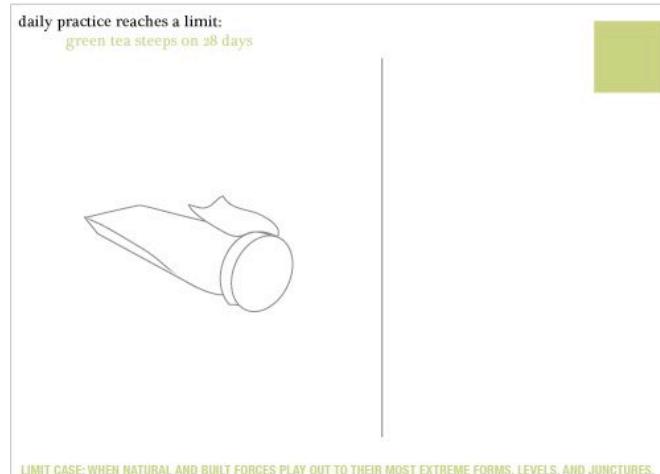


Image 1: daily practice reaches a limit: green tea steeps on 28 days; limit case: when natural and built forces play out to their most extreme forms, levels, and junctures

The human /artist opens daily practice to reinvention.

For 28 days we prepared and drank green tea.

It became a through-line that connected the various sites and our continuous movement.

It was an experiment in performative response: how might each particular condition and context we encountered require us to (re)shape the ways we made and experienced the tea?

The course of *28 days* indeed necessitated that the tea practice transform. Its methods and our enactments required reinvention in order to survive: from sun-steeping tea on the roof of the moving car to whisking matcha into hot water poured from a thermos in an Anasazi ruin.

The continuous re-invention of our tea practice became a signal performed each day: of the inventiveness required to maintain a daily practice while in continuous movement—the current state of increasing numbers of places and peoples on the planet.

What reaches its limit is no longer “sustainable.”

Limits are not sustainable.

But at the limits, we confront opportunities that cannot be sensed when we are preoccupied by merely trying to conserve or be sustainable.

A limit demands that humans become massively creative about how they respond to and contribute to the ways it plays out as it passes into something else.

Globally, we have reached an apex of limits.

We are alive at that apex.

There is still time to experiment and play.

Taking innovative action and imagination to the limit is the new “green.”

IMPROVISATIONAL EMBODIMENT: BONNEVILLE SALT FLATS, UT

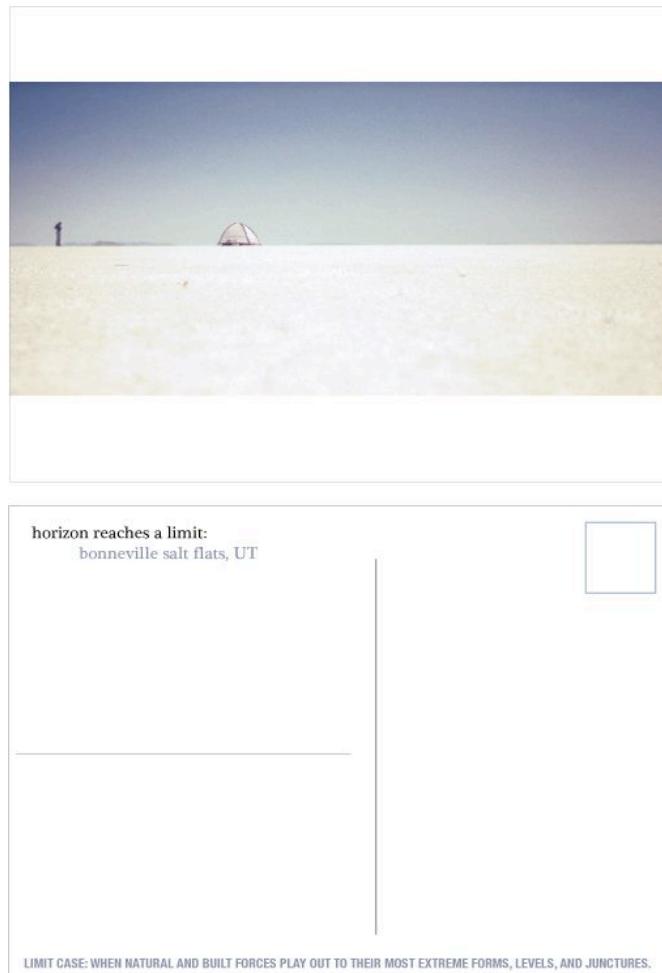


Image 2: horizon reaches a limit: Bonneville salt flats, UT; limit case: when natural and built forces play out to their most extreme forms, levels, and junctures

The human /artist senses that the planet does not exist for humans alone.

white crust, breaking.

spring pools.

blinding crystals of white extending.

a matte sky unlike any blue.

open-monochrome

in all directions.

linear.

flat.

sheet.

flat.

aliens, we.

sheer intensity of line, color, and landscape.

convergence of forces in play, ancient and contemporary,

playing out with,

and without,

us.

Humans are attracted to limits. Like many humans, we were drawn to the edge known as the Salt Flats. We inserted our bodies into its limit case landscape.

Intentionally visiting a place where human life is not supported by the planet.

The value of your body

knowing this place doesn't support human life,

experiencing the earth as independent from you even as you depend on it,

plumbing the earth's deep and changing history that humans figure into only partially,

sensing it as a deeply aesthetic experience because the human does not factor into its reality or making,

learning from visiting life's limits while it's still a choice.

Our postcard attempts to give this sense: neither our survival nor our trace as human figures into the Salt Flats.

Open-sided tent on salt flats

human habitation in an uninhabitable place.

PASSING THROUGH
ENCOUNTER 1: ROADSIDE EXPLOSION, UT

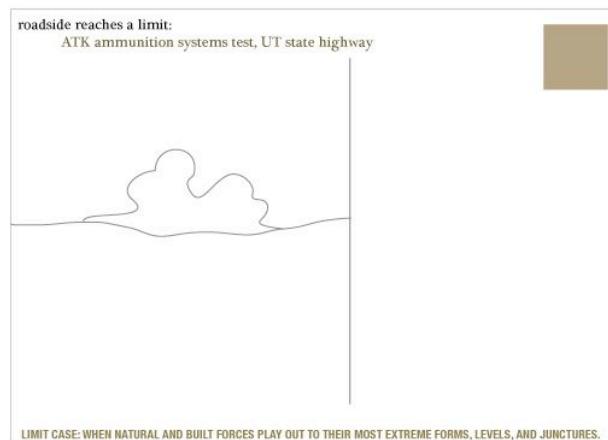


Image 3: roadside reaches a limit: ATK ammunition systems test, UT state highway; limit case: when natural and built forces play out to their most extreme forms, levels, and junctures.

The human /artist has the capacity to respond to what's unexpected.

Limit zone forces come up and meet us as much as we have driven to meet them.

On our journey to the Spiral Jetty, a “roadside” reaches a limit.

What could be a roadside picnic space becomes minefield
when the ‘private’ testing of ammunition contaminates public space.
We can see, hear, smell, feel, inhale it.

This corporation is working for our government.

Making it a public test of ammunition after all.

ENCOUNTER 2: THE CASINO, WEST WENDOVER, NV

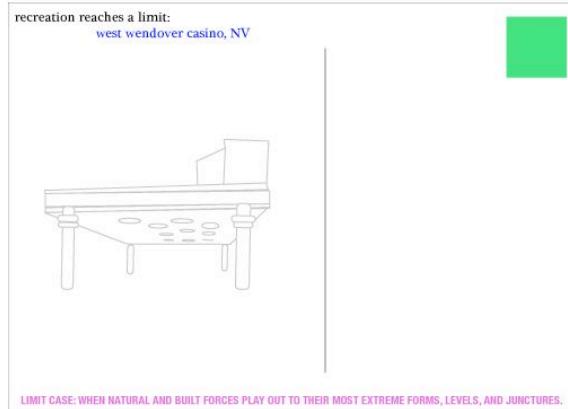


Image 4: recreation reaches a limit: west wendover casino, NV; limit case: when natural and built forces play out to their most extreme forms, levels, and junctures.

The human /artist inhabits the edges of extreme borders.

Extreme border.

Nevada, West Wendover | Wendover, Utah

extreme inside | outside extreme

| inside: casino. stage sets. space constructed for particular performances. tinted

or windowless. manufactured air and season. neon. a certain kind of abundance. stimulants. escape. rituals. utopian projections. suspension. mythic possibilities. buffered. A mirage casting shadows.

Nevada | Utah

| outside: raw desert. blinding brightness. heat. dust. breaking down. abandoned hangers. military museum. charter buses passing through without stopping. the set for maneuvers and trainings. history playing out. left-behind. used to be. dead-end. grounded. tumble weed. A small border town existing in shadows.

Extreme border.

ENCOUNTER 3: LITTER BULLET, WENDOVER, UT

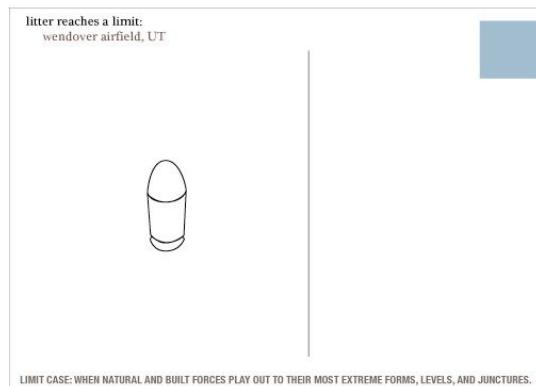


Image 5: litter reaches a limit: wendover airfield, UT; limit case: when natural and built forces play out to their most extreme forms, levels, and junctures.

The human /artist is not desensitized, play is sacred.

We take up residency as artists in a quonset hut on an abandoned military base. A barbed wire fence separates our living space from historic WWII bunkers and contemporary target practice. Yards from our doorstep: we find a prop in the game predicated on the idea that military might is/was necessary.

For a live bullet to be tossed aside, it must become normalized. Or the human who drops it desensitized. Bullet-as-litter signals the degree of desensitization and normalization in which the theater of war plays out—upon a landscape that has been and continues to be its staging area, and within the humans who execute its demands. This leakage signals the carelessness of the play. It signals both disaster and the presence of humanity.

childhood stories, fantasies, movies, games.

WWII was their fresh memory.

just yesterday.

I grew up imagining fighting their WWII

as a bomber pilot

soldier

liberator

movies

LIFE magazines

piercing photos

as a kid I probably watched a movie

shot right here

at the Wendover airfield

about training that prepared and inspired

about ingenuity and invention and loyalty and never giving up

and being in the right

and sacrificing for others

and innocence

simple

clean

right

ending in

gratitude

relief

it was over

we were safe

always had been

because of what went on at Wendover

thank God it did

they did

we did

what if we hadn't?

we're living in a quonset hut

as artists

it's within sight of the Enola Gay hanger

in the movie he hand painted his mother's name on the nose of his airplane

Enola Gay.

the landscape around Clean Livin' looks like

Hiroshima

Auschwitz

every Glenn Ford

Jimmy Stewart

Roz Russell

Why We Fight documentary-propaganda

every movie set in every childhood film

black and white

still

especially at dawn

ENCOUNTER 4: PICNIC TABLES, WHITE SANDS NATIONAL MONUMENT, NM

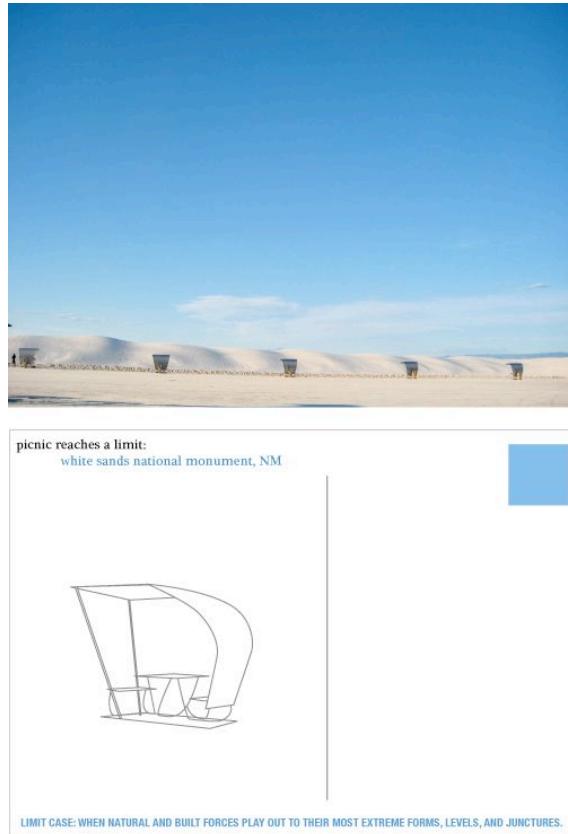


Image 6: picnic reaches a limit: white sands national monument, NM; limit case: when natural and built forces play out to their most extreme forms, levels, and junctures.

The human /artist adapts without denial.

White Sands National Park | White Sands Missile Testing Range

We arrive at an apex of human adaptation to a limit zone of contact. Here, humans learn to 'make peace' with the fact that they are living alongside | inside the largest military installation in the United States.

The complexity of what humans have to do,
in order to be able to do the most human of actions:
adapt.

Just over the dune from the picnic tables: 3200 square miles of missile testing

grounds lie—active. Three times the size of Rhode Island.

Adding more life here requires what is also the most human of actions: not adapting in order to open space for change.

White Sands National Monument website:

Park Closures

Due to missile testing on the adjacent White Sands Missile Range, it is occasionally necessary, for visitor safety, to close the Dunes Drive for periods of up to three hours. The park Visitor Center and Gift Shop remain open during missile range closures. Visitors on a tight schedule should contact the park the day before arriving to check on closures (575) 679-2599.

U.S. Highway 70 between White Sands National Monument and Las Cruces may also be closed during times of missile testing. For US 70 closure information, call (505) 678-1178.

White Sands National Monument Visitor Center Sign:

Welcome to White Sands National Monument.

Visitor enter open 8 AM to 6 PM

Entrance to dunes drive closes at sunset

Park closes at 9 PM

SUNSET TODAY 7:45 PM

No overnight parking

Park fees \$3 per person 12 and over

Pay AT ENTRANCE STATION

GOLDEN eagle/golden age/ golden access passports accepted

TUNE YOUR RADIO TO 1610 AM for park information

← Restrooms –to your left

DRIVE CLOSURE FOR MISSLE RANGE TESTING

DATE:

TIME:

ENCOUNTER 5: BINGHAM COPPER PIT, UT

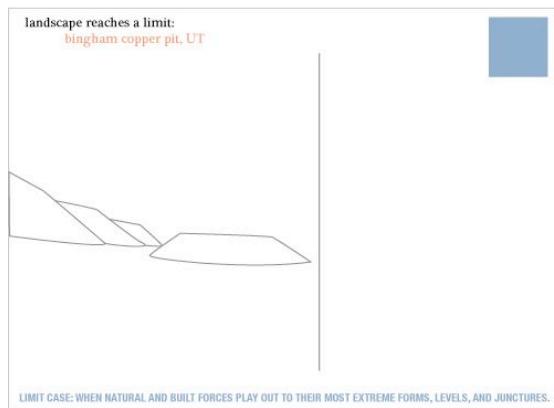


Image 7: landscape reaches a limit: bingham copper pit, UT; limit case: when natural and built forces play out to their most extreme forms, levels, and junctures,

The human /artist has the capacity to experience the aesthetic in the profane.

Driving up to it:

looming on the horizon.

color.

forms.

shapes.

massive.

eerie

beyond words.

mammoth Richard Serras.

inverted mountain.

humans remodeling the earth

24 hours a day, 7 days a week for over 100 years.

the earth has its own rhythm

and this is not it.

The mine has been in production since 1906. The pit is 2.5 miles wide, .75 miles deep, and covers 1,900 acres. According to Kennecott, it is the world's largest man-made excavation.

As humans, we know it has environmental cost, political cost, economic cost. We have been trained to respond with horror to the thought of an inverted mountain and all the pollution its manufacture releases into the world.

But the sheer extremeness of this place takes it beyond any single category.

Categories explode here, creating sensations that tap and overwhelm multiple human sensing capacities simultaneously.

To the human | artist clothed in sensation, this limit zone feels like form, line, color, mass, intensity.

To the human | artist, it presents a new threshold. Performatively responding to the monumental complexity of this edge opens up potential spaces of relationality between the human | artist and those shaping what we witness here.

Survival and the capacity to live responsively require an ability to see and be with ambiguity—especially in moments that desire over-simplification and reach for a simple right or wrong.

What version of “human” will go forward from here? Which version will we add to through our actions in response to this exact moment?

Daring to see ambiguity even in the face of the Bingham Copper Pit.

Seeking a capacity for what escapes language and category: thresholding into the

aesthetic.

ENCOUNTER 6: MONUMENT VALLEY TRIBAL PARK, AZ

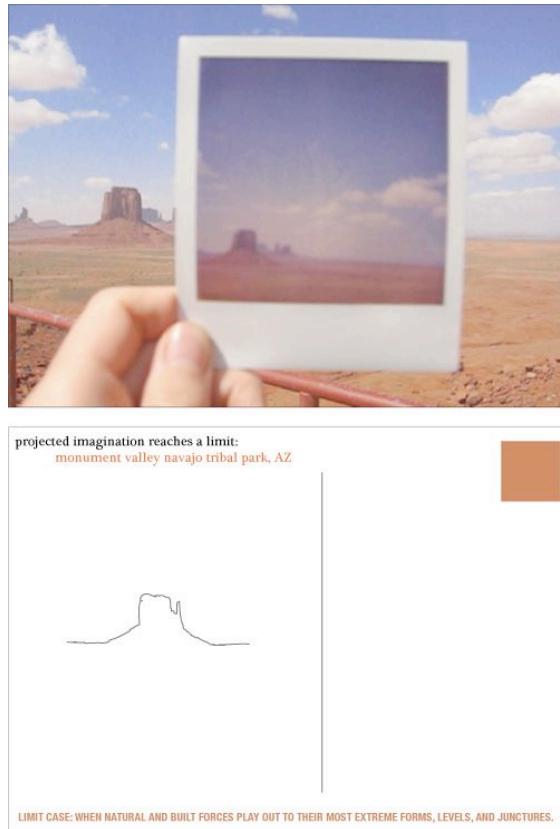


Image 8: projected imagination reaches a limit: monument valley navajo tribal park, AZ; limit case: when natural and built forces play out to their most extreme forms, levels, and junctures.

The human /artist remembers to be human (as in, existing in relation).

Navajo Lands, John Ford Country, movie set, postcard, sacred site, trading post, tourist draw, 17 mile driving loop that took four hours, forms of monumental weight, pinnacles toward earth and sky.

*This place pre-exists
as cinematic
in mind's eye.*

*The camera must be put down so that one can 'be here.'
We teeter on the thin line of responsiveness.*

*Missing our arrival for lack of any sense of how,
we pack up to leave.*

And he walks up to the car window.

Quiet voice, offering silver turquoise necklaces.

Mustering the approach day after day.

A young Navajo artist who has been told 'no' before.

Responding habitually, we ask each other if we want one, ask him 'did you make them?'

After hesitation, we say 'no thank you.'

He turns away.

Our urge to depart.

Our urge to act differently.

A rupture...a coming into focus.

'We have been approached by a human'.

Quickly, we gather something to offer back, artist to artist. One of our blue extension cards: cards we created and carried with us to pass off to those who moved in relation to us.

The card we choose reads: 'Life force as texture, color, shape, edge, surface, depth, form.'

And a hand-filled bag of green leaf tea.

We tell him 'we drink it when we are trying to get inspired'.

His quiet smile cracks the universe open, 'You're artists? I am an artist too'.

A pause.

An arrival.

A departure.

MOVING ACCORDINGLY
AESTHETIC RESPONSIVENESS 1: NANCY HOLT'S SUN TUNNELS, LUCIN, UT

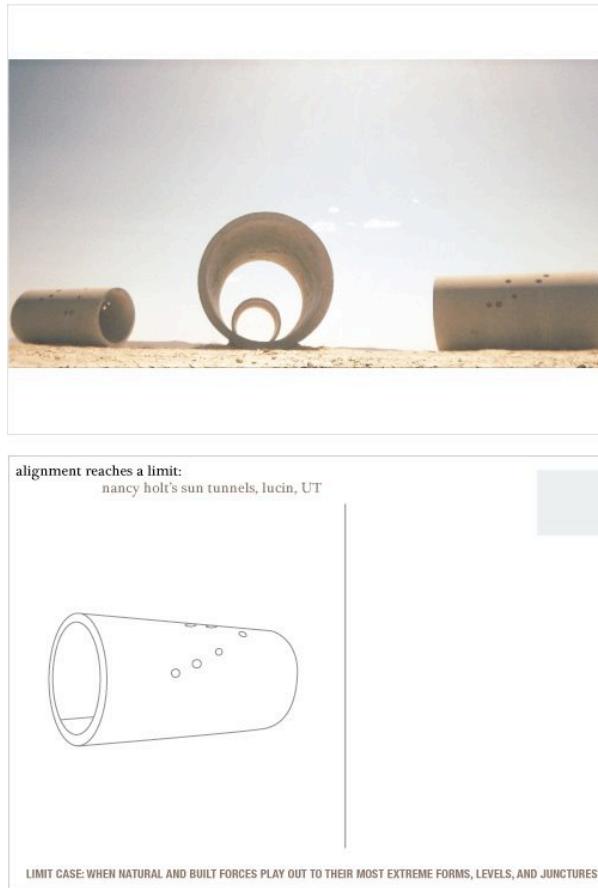


Image 9: alignment reaches a limit: nancy holt's sun tunnels, lucin, UT; limit case: when natural and built forces play out to their most extreme forms, levels, and junctures.

The human /artist has no destination, but lives in the process—that is life.

Unassuming, not marked on a map, no signage.

Nancy Holt's Sun Tunnels, like other Land Art, involves the process of getting there, suspension of destination, the great sensation of discovery.

Such work sets us in motion through the world in order to arrive at the continuous process of arrival here.

‘Passing through’ with the intention of arriving at or into an aesthetic experience, we are moving with and in relation to the world differently. We are moving accordingly.

arrived at the 'remote'.

Lucin, UT.

Down dirt roads.

Bumping for miles.

Just us.

No direction.

This is 'it'.

What we imagined would be giant shapes, become small, dwarfed by the extending landscape.

It has to be here, to be anything, and it is.

A full silence rounds across the land.

Interactive.

We move about.

360 degrees.

A rotation that connects and passes, between and though, heavens and earth a conversation between bodies.

A slowing down.

There is just nothing out there

but mass and void.

Flat cracking land.

Cow pies.

More land.

The wind.

We are rounding, up, over, through, with the sun.

AESTHETIC RESPONSIVENESS 2:

COMPOSTING TOILET, BY SIMPARCH, AT CLUI'S SOUTH BASE, WENDOVER,
UT

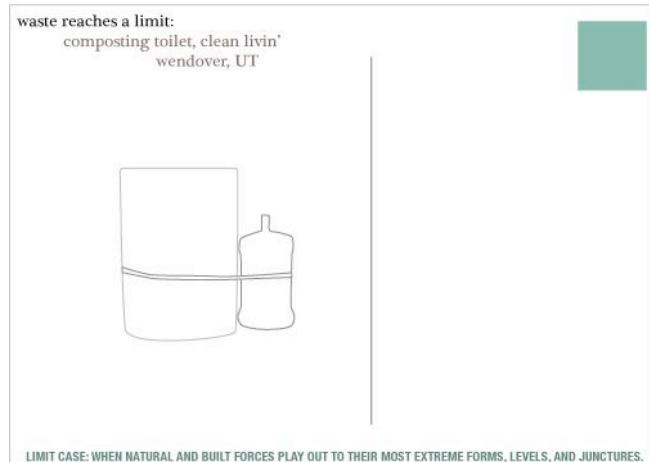


Image 10: waste reaches a limit: composting toilet clean livin' wendover, UT; limit case: when natural and built forces play out to their most extreme forms, levels, and junctures.

The human /artist moves in accord with the change that makes the world.

We arrive at a non-violent zone of proximity: Clean Livin', designed by SIMPARCH. Clean Livin' is 'an autonomous living system that formally and conceptually engages notions of sustainability, industrial-military legacy, and myths of the frontier.'

(www.simparch.org/cleanlivin.html)

Contributing to Clean Livin's autonomy: a solar panel, outdoor shower, solar-distilled recycled water, and a composting toilet.

Camouflaged as a cabana, the composting toilet overlooks a field of WWII bunkers. It serves the artists-in-residence at the Center for Land Use Interpretation's South Base Station, Wendover Airfield.

Clean Livin' is an anomaly, an exception. Its context necessitates a more intense form of play. Oasis in camouflage. A quonset hut made something else in the face of the entrenched realities radiating from desert debris, abandoned lookout towers, and flashing casino neon. Clean Livin' riffs into play and irony as it bears down to meet the dry land on its own terms. It becomes a participant with a twist as it exists alongside, outside, within multiple contexts simultaneously. solar. design genius. 'burn it up' indeed. life-force situated within. porous and self-contained. transitional space of the future sitting in the landscape of the past. connector for those who come and go. hybridity for survival.

As artist residency, Clean Livin' sets the stage for people to encounter one another at the edges of their respective scripts which we so often mistakenly believe to be essentially "our selves", our beliefs, humanness, identity, duty etc.

One big social experiment.

Here, we co-contaminate—artist-sheriff; civilian women-military officers; pacifist-target shooter.

Sharing the same setting creates limit zones of contact. Within them, our respective 'essential' scripts cannot co-exist.

In the moment, a new script must be improvised.

This is, 'moving accordingly.'

This is relational aesthetics.

EXIT

We found that moving accordingly is not about moving passively or agreeably.

Accord may entail disjunction, moving obliquely, indirectly. At times moving in

accord might mean modulating movement in ways that create more possibilities for variation.

Moving in accord acknowledges the presence of end games and takes part in the shaping of new trajectories.

Moving in accord embraces the uncertainty and unknowability of solutions. Not seeking to fix, it seeks to inflect a new direction, to catalyze a way out of habitual sameness.

Through our performance, we deeply embodied the reality that humans now face urgent environmental challenges and opportunities that are global in scale. To meet them, we will need to perform unprecedented feats of imagination, innovation, and responsiveness to each other and to the environment.

28 days provides us with the means to sustain our focus on and at the apex. From here, we can embody and (re)imagine spheres of intensity in fluid, vivid relation. Such a massively creative act might be the most powerful, urgent, and necessary response we can make as humans and as artists.

Chronicle of *28 days*:

http://movingaccordingly.blogspot.com/2007_04_16_archive.html

smudge studio website:

www.smudgestudio.org

NOTES

[1] Meridith Kruse offered this insight in personal correspondence (January 3, 2008).

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Smudge is a collaborative art practice between Elizabeth Ellsworth and Jamie Kruse. Humans, the landscape, and the built environment are forces in play. At times their relationality create intense points of contact that necessitate extraordinary acts of creativity and invention. Our practice uses media to locate and pass through these "limit cases".