TO ASH:
THE DEVELOPMENT OF CONVERSE LANDSCAPE

by

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ABSTRACT

To Ash: The Development of Converse Landscape

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In response to theorists' position that ecology is undergoing accelerating transformation due

to planetary urbanism, *converse landscape* is positioned as a visual art and design practice. The

intention is to disrupt the aesthetic and conceptual standardization of space through embodying

a conceptual outside to a dominant ideology that promotes efficiency and competition as

paramount. This post-disciplinary approach was developed as a result of the intersection between

my graduate studies in fine art, my professional practice as a landscape architect and through the

creation and implementation of three site sculptures during the same time period.

Keywords:

Site Sculpture, Landscape Architecture, Planetary Urbanism, Installation, Converse Landscape

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

DEDICATION

For Joan, the grand marshal.

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1.0   PROLOGUE

I present you here a kaleidoscope, nothing more. A history would be well researched, this is not. A study would necessarily be backed by informed opinion, this is not.
Joan Smith (2015, p.3)

This is not a research paper. It hints at questions beyond its scope. It embraces

contradiction and poetic expression as primary. Like the kaleidoscope, it is a exploratory

alignment providing a singular viewshed from a near infinite number of possibilities. The

kaleidoscope is a colourful melange; splendour from chaos.

2.0   INTRODUCTION

2.1   POSITION

In deep sleep man continues to be influenced by his environment but loses his world; he is a body occupying space.
Yi Fu Tuan (1977, p. 35)

In 2002, Nobel Prize winning scientist Paul Crutzen proposed a new epoch be placed in the geological record. His argument was that there were clear indicators present within our soil and sediment showing that the planets ecology had transitioned into a new era. He proposed the introduction of the Anthropocene. (Chung, 2016) His observation largely evidences the physical manifestation of planetary urbanization and the consequences of two intertwined discourses of belief: neo-liberalism and positivism. Never before have the impacts of an ideology been evident in the geologic record.

These accelerating processes in ecology demand antithetical responses within art, design and theoretical practices. To disrupt and soften the aesthetic and spatial outcomes of a transitioning environment, the development of *converse landscape* as a methodological art and design practice is proposed, to extend conceptions of community, encourage dialogue and provide solution-driven responses through site sculpture and performance. *Converse landscape* represents both a verb and a noun, it is a practice which produces products. The works utilize the products and processes of urban standardization through parody, satire and metaphor. They do this through enlivening ubiquitous standardized materials and standardizing processes inherent to planetary urbanism. The intention is to embody an ideological outside to planetary urbanism through a post-disciplinary approach that infuses art, landscape architecture and philosophy. This largely builds on Rosalind Krauss' *Sculpture in the Expanded Field* (1979), where she explored

the disciplinary boundaries of architecture, art and landscape. *Converse landscape* was developed through the infusion of my contradictory experience as a practicing landscape architect and visual artist. *Converse landscape* utilizes a methodology of bricolage, play, and exploration to encourage reflexive interpretation and responses to a transitioning ecology. It seeks to reconcile how a deeper understanding of critical philosophy and artistic methodology can encourage more thoughtful landscape architecture and how the dominant knowledge systems of landscape architecture can provide an extension to artistic practice through strong adherence to social and 'natural' context, community building, and solution driven responses. The practice embodies the irrational and celebrates inefficient and explorative performative labour. *Converse landscape* aims to create landscapes that promote critical thinking, serve as an interruption to the everyday and conserve venues for wildness and expression.

The emergence of this methodology, practice and outcome was developed across the conceptualization, implementation and reflection of three works: *Orange Crush* (2015), *Wreck to the Seaman, Tempest to the Field* (2015) and *To Ash* (2016). These site-specific explorations investigated conceptions of planetary urbanism, neo-liberalism and positivism through the methodologies of artistic and design practice. These works constructed venues to inspire imagination and community agitation. They represent a thought process towards the construction of *converse landscape*.

Planetary urbanization is utilized as a term not only representing the processes confined to city boundaries, but an all encompassing ideology of spatial organization and thinking. Ecology is entangled in this process and like urbanization, its implications transcendent to human understanding. This thinking is largely indebted to the writings of Henri Lefebvre, new

urban sociology, radical geography and the growing field of planetary urbanism. Henri Lefebvre, during his extensive 20th century career, intertwined conceptions of space with critical theories such as Marxism, Structuralism and Existentialism. All of which reject the nature/city dichotomy and instead position urbanity as a global process intertwined with systems of capital. Planetary urbanism is a process of total transformation whereby human needs transfigure the organization and function of environment. Urbanity becomes synonymous with ecology, as, like ecology, it is all-encompassing. The intention is to activate and vivify these processes through site-based approaches that pursue solution-driven responses.

Public sites offer significant opportunities to reach large audiences and participants to pose questions and create moments of *resinguralization*, as positioned by Felix Guattari (1989), the celebrated French theorist. *Resingularalization* aims at addressing questions of ecology, agency and homogenization rooted in human subjectivity and is the process whereby, "individuals must become both more united and increasingly different." (p. 45)

3.0   THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

3.1   ECOLOGY

Ecology is the discovery of the decade.
The Invisible Committee (2009, p. 73)

Conceptualizations of ecology often invoke the imagery of a grass meadow, fish habitat, bird sanctuary, old growth forest or dark-sky preserve. My career was originally driven by wanting to protect and enhance these places. My focus shifted, where conceptualizations of ecology were no longer infused with the undertone of a gentle babbling brook. The second most important bird sanctuary in Ontario is a garbage dump. This unintentional habitat was a mistake. Over 300 bird species now reside in Tommy Thompson Park, a spit created from construction debris. This is ecology, unknowable and transformative, beautiful and chaotic.

Ecology is conceptualized as a trans-disciplinary science that explores the relationship between living organisms and the environments they inhabit. (Lister & Reed, 2013, p. 23) The field emerged in the early twentieth century due to scientific inquiries being undertaken by American and British botanists and zoologists who studied the interactions of animal and plant communities. (Lister & Reed, 2013, p. 23) Since then, as noted by Lister & Reed (2013), the term has been co-opted and harnessed to align with varying and contradictory conceptualizations, rendering the signifier "essentially meaningless." (p. 23) For Felix Guattari, the term has come to question "the whole of subjectivity." (Lister & Reed, 2013, p. 13) Daniel Botkin, a prominent ecologist, defines ecology as:

> Discordant, created from the simultaneous movements of many tones, the combination of many processes flowing at the same time along various scales, leading not to a simple melody but to a symphony at some times harsh and at some times pleasing. (Corner, 2013, p. 43)

As suggested by Gregory Bateson (1972), a social scientist who extended the ideas of systems theory – the interdisciplinary study of patterns within systems: "We are not outside the ecology for which we plan-we are always and inevitably a part of it. Herein lies the charm and terror of ecology". (p. 512) As noted by Karen Barad (2007), a practicing theoretical physicist and critical theorist, we cannot move beyond discursive and material diffractions to observe or subjectively intervene on nature: "we are a part of that nature that we seek to understand." (p. 67) James Corner (2013), a prominent landscape architect (designer of New York's High Line Park) and theorist at Harvard University, suggests that conceptualizations of the term ecology or nature often adhere either to the cultural construction of nature as an other to be observed, or, an "amorphous and unmediated flux that is the 'actual' cosmos, that which always escapes or exceeds human understanding." (p. 43) This study at its most simplistic is rooted in conceptions of ecology, it seeks to discuss the cloudy malaise surrounding humans and their transformative habitat.

3.2 NEO-LIBERALISM

There can be little doubt that around the world increased pollution, global warming, deforestation, desertification and the loss of biodiversity are anthropogenic, or that the motor of this generalized impoverishment of the biosphere is capitalism.
Felix Guattari (1989, p. 3)

It would be difficult to discuss the standardization and homogenization of space without acknowledging the global monarch. Planetary urbanism is the by-product of neo-liberalism, it is the spatial outcome of our ideological paradigm. From a political-economic perspective, neo-liberalism could be defined as a system that "privileges free trade and open markets, resulting in maximizing the role of the private sector in determining priorities and deemphasizing the role of

the public and the state's function in protecting and supporting them." (Thompson, 2012, p. 29)

Neo-liberalism is capitalism; it is our most recent reiteration of it, as like any discourse, capitalism

has continued to warp and contort in response to relations of power. Capitalism is founded on

growth, and with this, spaces are privatized, cities expand and populations appreciate. As noted

by James Corner (2013), unfortunately "advances in technology and productivity have not led to

an equivalent growth in either moral or ecological consciousness." (p. 48) The failures of neo-

liberalism are known, we speak of them, but we hesitate to refute it as a whole. The aesthetics

and functionality of spatial organization are dictated by the commodified archetypes of neo-

liberalism.

3.3   POSITIVISM

*The social practice of science is conceptually, methodologically, and epistemologically
allied along particular axes of power.*
Karen Barad (2007, p. 40)

In Karen Barad's *Meeting the Universe Halfway* facts are products of our socio-political

system and always reflect them. Barad sees positivist scholars as largely unaware that the

"nature-culture dichotomy has been challenged vigorously on multiple grounds by feminist,

post-structuralist, post-colonialist, queer and other critical social theorists." (p. 87) This relates

here, as positivism is largely intertwined with neo-liberalism, forming a dominant ideology from

which most knowledge flows. Positivism is the rational method of scientific inquiry that positions

reality as an observable other. It is rejected that positivist approaches can fully reflect ecological

truths nor make pronouncements about solving them. Positivist dogma has landed a man on the

moon, split atoms and recently 'discovered' gravitational waves, yet it has done little to address

the negative outcomes of its approaches nor combat environmental degradation, inequality or

exploitation. Instead it has allied itself with neo-liberal ideology, rapidly creating more efficient

tools for consumption, commodification and standardization. As stated by Karen Barad (2007),

"objectivity is about being accountable to the specific materializations of which we are a part." (p.

91) Due to this, *converse landscape* builds on spatial poetics and expression as primary, utilizing

the positivist rational method as a tool and not a dogmatic methodology.

3.4   PLANETARY URBANISM

Does culture replace nature?
Karen Barad (2007, p. 61)

Urbanization here is not synonymous with what occurs within city boundaries, instead it

is presented as a totalizing process. For Henri Lefebrve, this phenomenon was seen as a "process

stretching out in time and space, transforming all aspects of society and having planetary reach;

the city attacks the countryside, corrodes and dissolves it." (Schmid, Stanek & Moravanszky,

2014, p. 1) This process is not viewed as being inherent or entrenched in the human psyche,

instead being a reflection of neo-liberal ideology. This idea has been advanced in recent years by

the conception of planetary urbanism, defined as:

> The end of the "wilderness." In every region of the globe, erstwhile "wilderness" spaces
> are being transformed and degraded through the cumulative socio-ecological
> consequences of unfettered worldwide urbanization. In this way, the world's
> oceans, alpine regions, the equatorial rainforests, major deserts, the arctic and
> polar zones, and even the earth's atmosphere itself, are increasingly interconnected
> with the rhythms of planetary urbanization at every geographical scale from the local to
> the global.
> (Brenner and Schmid, 2011, p. 12)

These forces are seen as dominant in shaping spatial organization, creating environments that

respond to an ideology and not actual needs. (Corner, 2006, p. 28) Planetary urbanism depicts

the global encroachment of a paradigm that celebrates efficiency, growth and competition as the

founding drivers of spatial organization.

4.0   THEORETICAL OUTCOMES

4.1   STANDARDIZED AESTHETICS

To express their everlasting gratitude the voluntary prisoners sing an ode to the architecture that forever encloses them.
Rem Koolhaus (1995, p. 20)

In the professional practice of landscape architecture, there is a hesitance to move away from standard practices due to two major drivers: liability and cost-efficiency. Rational actors are failure adverse and seek precedents before the acceptance of materiality or form. Request for proposal documents for public projects grow in size every year to reflect increasing regulation and stringent accountability. The neo-liberal model demands that as creative practitioners we become both more efficient and conform to increasingly standardized practices.

Our environments are a by-product of this collision between culture, capitalism and efficiency though none of these categories are mutually exclusive. They overlap and twist. Unfortunately, efficiency leads to largely simplified environments that are increasingly less diverse. Neo-liberal systems of standardization and homogenization celebrate order as a central organizing feature. Cost-effective materials such as concrete, asphalt and sod, dominate within urban centres while agriculture on the periphery becomes increasingly limited to mono-crop production. Concrete and sweet corn mirroring each other across the defined boundaries of city sprawl. Forms and arrangements too are increasingly limited by the constraints offered by efficient building techniques and software programming. This process towards increasingly efficient design and implementation can be evidenced by the fact that municipalities, institutions and residents now are increasingly utilizing manufactured products representative of things (and not the things themselves) to avoid the inefficiencies and variability offered by original products.

Increasingly natural products are substituted by plastic alternatives, as the variability inherent to

living and organic systems becomes recognized as inefficient and prone to failure. The anarchic

native grass meadow is replaced with sod. As sod no longer offers the efficiency or homogenized

aesthetic to compete with an innovative new product, artificial turf then is implemented

in substitution. Wood products have shared a similar trajectory. Organic compositions are

substituted for standardized products that attempt to harness their symbolism.

The overarching ideology that dictates spatial organization is rarely recognized as

problematic, instead the individual entities are targeted. International experts and complicated

systems are introduced to ensure the survival of metropolitan street trees, when they fail (as

they often do), individual attributes are addressed such as salt intake, planting depth and

species selection without addressing the overarching dogma that encourages the production of

inhospitable environments. Trees are reduced to commodities, products to enliven the standard

city form and disguise its increasing homogeneity. Neil Smith (2003) extends this thought,

whereby nature erodes while its symbolism proliferates:

> The transition to urbanization brings a further shrinkage of nature, while the signs of
> nature, by contrast, proliferate; the steady, violent death of nature is matched by an
> obsessive "ideological naturalization" of society and the parodic reproduction of nature
> as denatured "open spaces," parks, gardens, images of femininity.
> (p. xv)

Within our modern economy, ecology becomes standardized, efficient and reproducible.

The symbolism of planetary urbanization here substitutes native habitats for bronze wildlife;

decomposing leaves for leaf patterned sidewalks; muskeg for a neatly landscaped retention pond.

City blocks of standardized rectilinear granite adjacent storefronts embody little resemblance to

the voids left in the Quebec landscape from which they were extracted. In Southwestern Ontario,

our drumlin landforms are being depleted at an accelerating rate for gravel to construct and ever

maintain the city grid sidewalk. This mass reorganization and standardization of resources is

planetary urbanism. Urban centres demand efficient modes of transport and construction, and

the neo-liberal model endlessly promotes this through increased efficiency and competition.

Condominium towers are no longer constructed of brick but standard panels representative of

them. The symbolism of masonry brick remains, though its functionality abandoned; brick is

no longer efficient enough, it must be standardized further to mirror the accelerating discourse.

Nature is constructed as a conceptual product to be efficiently reproduced and consumed

within a spatial organization that largely contradicts it. The homogenized city is a landscape of

symbolism, gestures to the constructed wild to veil its disappearance. Within urban-centres we

oppose the disorder and inefficiencies of natural systems in favour of organized and standardized

environmental aesthetics. The aesthetics of the city is determined by efficiency, to juxtapose this,

converse landscape offers customization and the aesthetics of compromised efficiency.

Yi-Fu Tuan (1977), a humanistic geographer who was an early pioneer focusing on the

poetics of space, asserts that "the modern architectural environment may cater to the eye, but it

often lacks the pungent personality that varied and pleasant odors can give." (p. 11) Like Henri

Lefebrve, The Invisible Committee (2009) acknowledges this process as total, suggesting "it is one

single urban cloth." (p. 52) Customization and expression move counter to this trend. As James

Corner (2006) suggests, "the architecture of the city becomes commodified as a cultural product,

ironically rendering many cities less and less distinguishable from one another." (p. 15) The works

presented here investigate this process through parody, satire and vivification. They embody

these processes through material usage, context and form. They are a rejection of a "impersonal

world, a domain in which the potential creativity of both nature and culture is diminished to

dull equations of utility, production, commodity, and consumption." (Corner, 2013, p. 48) The accelerating aesthetics of standardization and homogenization are synonymous with the rise of neo-liberalism and depictions of planetary urbanism.

4.2   COLLAPSE

It seems easier to imagine the 'end of the world' than a far more modest change in the mode of production.
Slavoj Zizek (1994, pp. 49)

The implications of planetary urbanism are not only aesthetic. Kevin Anderson, a leading climate scientist, suggests that the current ecological crisis is far worse then what is being purported by the media. (Goodman & Anderson, 2015) Leading scientist Frank Fenner suggests that any human attempt to reverse ecologic collapse is irrelevant, as humans will not likely survive the century. (Edwards, 2015) In 2008, a group of leading positivist experts from various fields gathered at Oxford University to calculate the chance of the catastrophic extinction of Homo sapiens over the next 100 years. As a group, they settled on 19%. (Sandberg & Bostrom, 2008) The discussion of ecologic collapse or climate change is often introduced as a political issue rooted in positivist science. Instead, as Am Johal (2015) suggests:

Climate crises propose a challenge not just to a form of human living, but to what it means to be human, forcing humanity to relearn how to experience the techniques of living within this accelerated state of permanent flux.
(p. 33)

The artworks and practice presented here attempt to awaken questions of how we got here, what we can do and how we should move forward. They answer none of them but that does not make the discussion any less worthwhile. *Uncivilisation* (2009) suggests "The machine's need for permanent growth will require us to destroy ourselves in its name." (p.11) The implications of planetary urbanism are a product of our dominant ideology. If our world is

collapsing, it is a reflection of our reasoning. The *converse landscapes* presented are reactionary

to this transitioning ecology in both aesthetics and functionality. As a practice, it harnesses the

aesthetics of standardization to inspire a communal outside to a transitioning system.

5.0   PRAGMATIC RESPONSE

5.1   METHODOLOGY

As Bacon once remarked, 'I always think of myself not so much as a painter but as a medium for accident and chance.'
Felix Guattari (1989, p. 8)

Defining a structured methodology is problematic and hinders exploration. I am a trained and licensed landscape architect, a discipline with a rich methodological history. In its most simplistic, the methodology is founded on: a positivist approach to research and analysis; the development of opportunities, constraints and goals; conceptual development; design and implementation. This process within the profession is iterative and ongoing, stages often overlap and contradictions often emerge. The intention is to build on this tradition and infuse it with artistic approaches to production. Artistic approaches often invoke irrational pursuits to labour,[1] exploring theoretical positions and honouring the poetic as paramount. Infusing these two processes is the methodological practice of *converse landscape*.

The research and practice methodology being utilized here are founded on approaches developed by three authors. The installation artist, designer and researcher Rachel Philpott (2012) and Mats Alvensson and Kaj Skoldberg (2000), both Swedish business professors, are harnessed as springboards to both launch and ground the methodological practice of *converse landscape*.

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[1]   In the fall of 2014, I began conceptualizing a piece for placement at the Gladstone Hotel for *Come Up To My Room 2015*. The intention was to drape the hotel in a standard construction material. Experimentations were undertaken in my basement and documented utilizing Rachel Philpott's technique of reflection in action. See *Figure 5.1.1: Wrestling fence in the basement.*
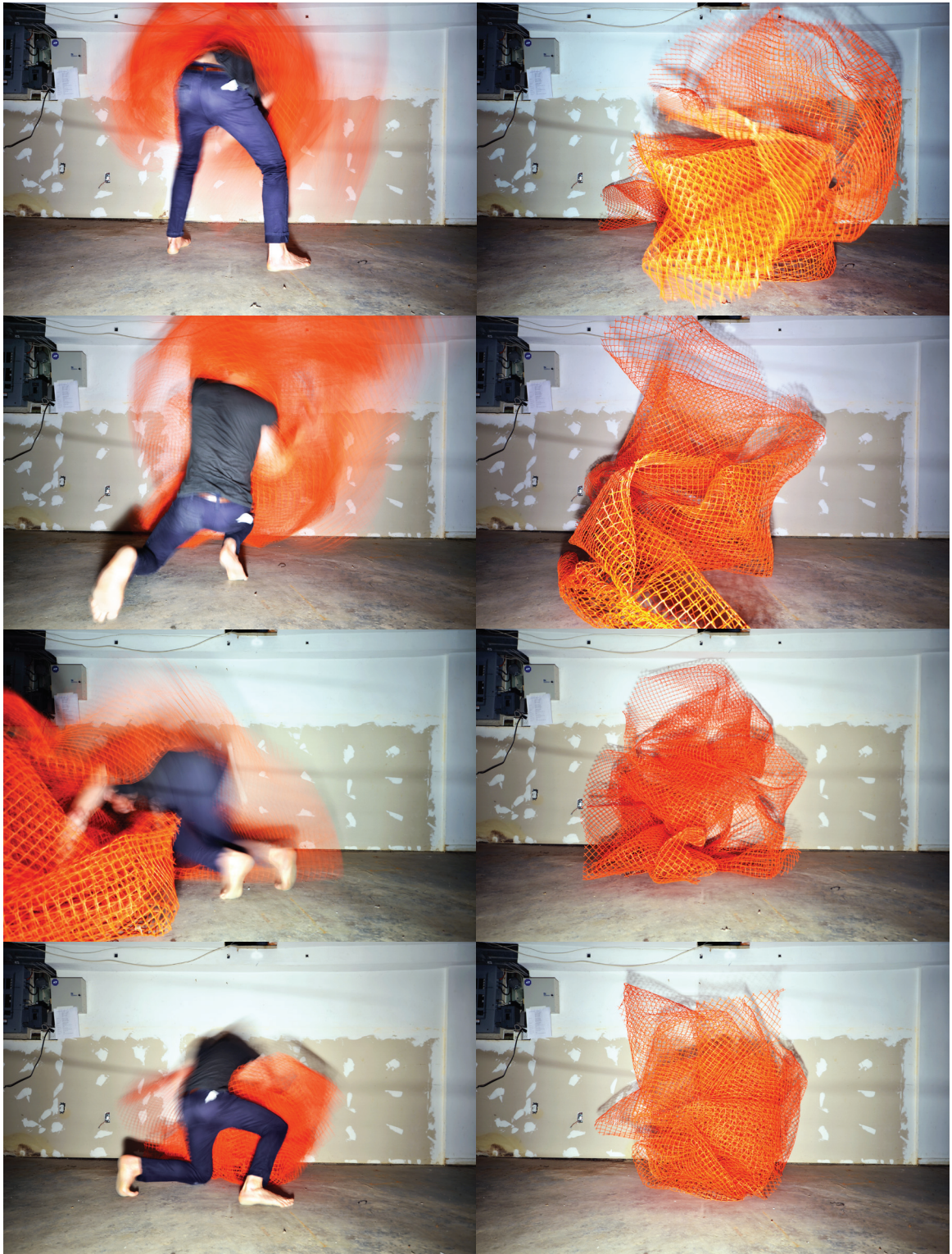
Figure 5.1.1 Wrestling fence in the basement

Mats Alvensson and Kaj Skoldberg (2000) conclude their book *Reflexive Methodology: New Vistas for Qualitative Research* with a chapter titled "On Reflexive Interpretation: The Play of Interpretive Levels." The final section serves to summarize the major findings of the volume. The authors offer the following conclusive stance to frame their central arguments:

> Here we make a demand for reflection in research in conjunction with interpretation at several levels: contact with the empirical material, awareness of the interpretative act, clarification of political-ideological contexts, and the handling of the question of representation." (p. 238)

They offer intentionally ambiguous and varying degrees of contempt for grounded theory, hermeneutics, critical theory and post-modernism in an attempt to vivify their prescriptive approach to research methodology. Their methods rely on the flexibility,[2] iteration and the open-mindedness of the researcher and his/her ability to utilize a range of theoretical positions (or interpretations) as opposed to narrowly employing one. As a starting point Mats Alvensson

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[2]   In the summer of 2015, I cycled from Yellowknife, NWT to Banff, AB. During this journey I erected the same structure on a new site everyday for 14 days, until the structure was bent, broken, twisted and essential elements were lost. The weight of the structure on the bicycle caused the back tire to continually fail and 4 spokes were lost. The fabric ripped, the poles flattened and twisted and essential joints tore. My intentions eroded as the sites and materials played off one another. The structure was fabricated from copper piping and Tyvek, both standard materials in construction. The form was determined by the ratio of Mies van der Rohe's Toronto Dominion Tower, a pioneering precedent in early modernist form. Upon reviewing the documented images at the Banff Centre, the images were utilized to create a slide show exhibiting the common causes for the structural collapse. These causes were fictitiously created, though inspired by engineering textbooks. See *Figure 5.1.2: A combination of common causes.*

Common Causes for Structural Collapse		1. Carrying capacity unable to support load stresses.
	2. Foundation compromised due to settlement, expansion and heaving.	
3. Improper material use and selection causing tearing, breaking or fragmentation.		4. Defects emerging over time due to vandalism, sabotage or attack.
	5. Failure due to compromises in ethics and responsibility.	
6. Errors incurred from unwarranted beliefs and confidence in calculation.		7. Instability due to fatigue and deterioration from cyclic pressure.
	8. A combination of common causes.	

Figure 5.1.2: A combination of common causes

and Kaj Skoldberg (2000) suggest, as researchers we should modify collecting objective information and instead adopt a process more weighted on interpretation and reflection. Positioning themselves largely in the traditions of critical theory and post-structuralism, the authors recognize how language cannot be separated from relationships of power and cultural interpretation. (p. 243) Mats Alvensson and Kaj Skoldberg go on to deduce that research should not wholly focus on issues associated with linguistics. (p. 245) Instead they suggest that the researcher must breakdown and explore a range of meta-theoretical positions to open up new avenues of dialogue and perspective. (p. 247) They attempt to transcend this common methodological strategy by stressing that research should be based on "reflection across various levels of interpretation" (p. 248)[3] The authors' premise is that meaning can be produced that responds to the impediments unearthed by post-structuralist and critical thinkers, and that these findings can be constructed and presented in ways that acknowledge systems of language and power. (p. 257) For Alvensson and Skoldberg, researchers should recognize themselves and

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[3]   *To Ash* (2016) traveled from the shores of Lake Huron to downtown Toronto to showcase the connectedness of ecology as a whole through total urbanization. *To Ash* is constructed from an entire Ash tree (minus roots) that died in the summer of 2015 from an Emerald Ash Borer infestation. The Emerald Ash Borer is an insect that is devastating Ash tree populations in Southern Ontario. It is thought to have arrived here through international commerce shipping vessels. In the winter of 2015-2016, the tree was felled and standardized to replicate nominal lumber through repetitive labour. The tree was reduced to 2" X 4". The form was determined by the constraints of the instruments of labour, each leaving a distinct pattern language on the form. See *Figure 5.1.3: 2" x 4"*.

Figure 5.1.3: 2" x 4"

the attributes that define their "political, ideological, metatheoretical and linguistic context" as central to any findings or conclusions. (p. 241)

Simon Starling offers an appropriate example to showcase their approach. For his piece *Autoxylopyrocycloboros* (2006), Simon Starling purchased a salvaged boat that was previously sunken in Long Loch, Scotland. He re-instated a steam engine on the boat and proceeded to drive the boat in circles for approximately four hours on Long Loch, powering the boat only on the energy produced by its own destruction through burning its wood structure to power the steam engine. This example should be contrasted with Starling's proclamation in 2013: "Of course, there are strategies, there are methods that I've used time and again – but I like to keep the form of the work very flexible and responsive to the context". (Stech, 2013)

The second method utilized here was advanced by Rachel Philpott in her two essays titled *Entwined Approaches: Integrating Design, Art and Science in Design Research-By-Practice* (2012) and *Engineering Opportunities for Originality and Invention: The Importance of Playful Making as Development Method in Practice-Led Design Research* (2012). Rachel Philpott's intention within these articles is to fuse "creative and poetic approaches" with dominant institutional paradigms of knowledge creation. (2012, p. 1) Exploratory practice within this approach informs research and vice versa creating an iterative relationship between the two traditionally opposing approaches. (2012, p. 4) Rachel Philpott refers to this methodology as bricolage, where multiple approaches to knowledge creation and discourse are folded together to create new vantage points of interaction between materials and processes. (2012, p. 5) Reflection-in-action is central to this approach, where constant process documentation is utilized to ensure that the researcher remains in constant conversation with ongoing processes. (2012, p. 6-8) For Rachel Philpott, intuition and play are recognized as suitable venues for the creation of new meaning and knowledge exploration. (2012, p. 1) Play, iteration and exploration for her offer "opportunities to break out of linear patterns of thought and established ways of working ingrained by institutional education and years of professional practice." (2012, p. 2) This research methodology follows this overall exercise in its disregard for neo-positivism and the goals of "controlled, scientific research methods used in isolation." (2012, p. 2) Risk, exploration and expression become as highly regarded as the practices utilized in traditional ethnography and the scientific method. For Rachel Philpott, unrestricted play and irrational labour are essential to creation, allowing researchers to break away from established norms and "externally imposed order." (2012, p. 6) The processes presented throughout this section mirror Rachel Philpott's contention of

"privileging unintended effects where appropriate, allowing them to supersede original intentions and embracing error as part of the progression of the work." (2012, p. 7)

5.2   POST-DISCIPLINARY

Certainly we know that landscape architects bear environmental and social responsibilities with which artists need not be burdened.
Marc Trieb (2004, p. xvi)

The opening quote is a testament to the idea that constructed disciplinary divisions often encourage offensive generalizations and ill-fated expert paradigms. The practice of *converse landscape* attempts to align with American visual art, feminist and urban theorist Rosalyn Deutsche's urban aesthetic or spatial discourse, which fuses "ideas about art, architecture, and urban design, on the one hand, with theories of the city, social space, and public space, on the other." (Kwon, 2004, p. 2-3) This practice is post-disciplinary, and is a fusion of art and design,[4] a synergy that utilizes a visual arts methodology to construct critical approaches to problem-based design practices. The practice of *converse landscape* follows Nato Thompson's (2012) assertion that instead of focusing on disciplinary boundaries, practitioners should strive for "ways of life that emphasize participation, challenge power, and span disciplines ranging from urban planning and community work to theater and the visual arts." (p. 19) The practice of creating *converse*

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[4]   *Orange Crush* (2015) was installed in collaboration with Megan Torza (DTAH) utilizing construction fencing to create an emergent wave spilling over an iconic Toronto heritage building, which increasingly stands in contrast to its emerging adjacent towers. The installation reflects on the moment when the boom swings overhead, casting shadows of transformation below. See *Figure 5.2.1: Orange Crush (photography credit: Gladstone Hotel)*

Figure 5.2.1: Orange Crush (Photography credit: Gladstone Hotel)

landscape is an exercise in non-exclusivity.

In the recent publication *Projective Ecologies*, James Corner (2013) suggests that the practice of landscape architecture has been reduced to "dimensions of environmental problem solving (know-how) and aesthetic appearance (scenery)." (p. 41) It is continued within this statement that this deduction of practice is counter to original proclamations in the discipline that "ecology and artistic creativity might together help develop new and alternative forms of landscape." (p. 41) Instead today, the practice seems too often accepting of the reduction of landscape as "escape" through harnessing the aesthetic appeal of the rural pastoral, such as gently sloping mounds, a visually open ground plane and clustered trees to offset surrounding homogeneous environments. This sentiment is elsewhere further advanced by James Corner (2006):

Landscape is employed here as a bourgeois aesthetic, or naturalized veil. Moreover, it is increasingly the case that vast developer-engineering corporations are constructing today's world with such pace, efficiency, and profit that all of the traditional design disciplines (and not only landscape) are marginalized as mere decorative practices, literally disenfranchised from the work of spatial formation.
(p. 27)

This sentiment could just as easily be applied to visual art. It is not suggested here that the inabilities of the discipline of landscape architecture can be attributed to the "evil genius of capitalism and the traditional hegemony of engineering and architecture." (Weller, 2006, p. 71) Instead it is suggested that the discipline has to properly synthesize and reproduce the lessons of scientific and artistic practice.[5] However, it should be cautioned within this undertaking that sites should not emerge, as Richard Weller (2006), an Australian landscape architect and theorist, suggests, as places where only "the connoisseurs and the intelligentsia enjoy the associative play of narrative references." (p. 71) The practice of *converse landscape* aims to move beyond and transition through the traditional discipline of landscape architecture to embrace conceptions

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[5]   *Wreck to the Seaman, Tempest to the Field* (2015) was created in conjunction with Nathaniel Wong utilizing exclusively standard construction materials. The sunken ship was erected in Fort McMurray in the fall of 2015 as part of *Ignight Festival*. It was constructed from nominal lumber, Tyvek, and salvaged utility poles. Fort McMurray is a primary node for oil extraction and commerce. Many of its residents are from the eastern coast of Canada and came to the area for employment in the oil industry following the collapse of the fisheries. Stan Rogers' Canadian folk classic *Free in the Harbour* (1981) was an early influence on the work. The form of a merchant ship was selected to invoke the ever-present quest for resource extraction. See *Figure 5.2.2: Wreck to the Seaman, Tempest to the Field.*

Figure 5.2.2: Wreck to the Seaman, Tempest to the Field

and practices inherent to the visual arts. This approach contradicts Canadian graphic designer

Bruce Mau's (2003) position that: "The secret ambition of design is to become invisible, to be

taken up into culture, absorbed into the background… The highest order of success in design

is to achieve ubiquity, to become banal." (p. 3-4) The intention within the practice of *converse*

landscape is to do the opposite and be seen, agitate and stimulate.

Speaking about the visual arts as a whole is entirely problematic. Instead it is proposed

that some of the general principles of visual art methodology should be intertwined with

the solution/outcome driven approach of design practice. Visual arts methodology often is

re-iterative, open and driven through *singularization* where it is focused on individual and

communal spirit. Philosophy is central to this process of exploring individual experience and

discerning the poetic, through processes of undoing and recognizing the dimming effect of

dominant ideological apparatuses. This important division can be most succinctly evidenced by the fact that most design programs do not require students to take courses such as critical theory, as they do within visual arts education. *Converse landscape* proposes the introduction of these methodologies into practices typically associated with solution-driven design. It is a fusion of artistic methodology with the goals of outcome-driven design practice. It is a spatial process and an outcome nestled in the post-disciplinary landscape.[6]

5.2 THE DEVELOPMENT OF CONVERSE LANDSCAPE

I don't want an art that points at a thing, I want an art that is the thing.
Tania Bruguera (In Thompson, 2012, p. 21)

The practitioners of landscape architecture will often enact spatial change utilizing the merits of positivist 'ecology' as defense for their actions, positioning findings as objective and not housed within the confines of culture. As suggested by James Corner (2006), "the complexity of interaction between elements within ecological systems is such that linear, mechanistic models prove to be markedly inadequate to describe them." (p. 29) Mirrored is the proclamation made within *Uncivilized* (2009), largely penned by Paul Kingsnorth, the former deputy editor of the

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[6]   *To Ash* (2015) consisted of five sculptures that were constructed from an entire 95' tall Ash tree. The tree was stacked akin to a standard wood skid. It was exhibited at the OCAD Student Gallery. This show was one of the last for the OCAD Student Gallery at 52 McCaul St. as the building is being demolished for a large residential tower. The work attempted to harness this relationship between the site and the original tree, both of which were/will be felled due to processes of total urbanization. Following the show the work was transported back to Lake Huron, rebuilt and set on fire. See *Figure 5.2.3: To Ash.*

Figure 5.2.3: To Ash

Ecologist, though anonymously published: "We reject the faith which holds that the converging crises of our times can be reduced to a set of 'problems' in need of technological or political 'solutions.'" (p. 30)[7] Landscape architecture often aligns the scope of its practice with solving these problems, though to do address them, it must acknowledge the implications of culture and relations of power inherent to positivism and neo-liberalism. *Converse landscape* responds to the poetic in conjunction with scientific dogma. The goal is to create temporary or transitioning spaces for people to explore ideas about where we are and where we may be headed. (p. 126) Yi-Fu Tuan's (1977) lyrical proclamation has importance here: "Place is security, space is freedom: we are attached to the one and long for the other." (p. 3) The goal is to create space; spatial organizations conducive to expression and disorder. This impulse is reflective of a current artistic trend, where, a number of artists have decided to depart from traditional artistic realms to showcase sanctioned and unsanctioned work within the public realm. (Pasternak, 2012, p. 16) These public gatherings are filling a void left by the privatization of public space, as parks and

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[7]　　*Orange Crush* (2015) was installed to coincide with *Come Up To My Room* (CUTMR) 2015. I was a curator for this event. As part of this event, Zahra Ebrahim, Kaleb Robertson and myself created the community event *Design Pirates: Practicing on the Fringe*. This event offered a talk-show style discussion on traditional approaches to careers in design versus taking less structured paths. Designers and artists were invited to share their trials and tribulations with the crowd. The talk was hosted by Ebrahim and featured guests Justin Broadbent (artist), Luigi Ferrara (Dean, Arts & Design, George Brown College), Tommy Smythe (Interior Designer) and Nerupa Somasale (Artist – Mammalian Diving Reflex). See *Figure 5.3.1: Design Pirates: Practicing on the Fringe (photography credit: Gladstone Hotel).*

Figure 5.3.1: Design Pirates: Practicing on the Fringe (photography credit: Gladstone Hotel)

other traditionally "public" spaces are now maintained and policed by municipal corporations which uphold and enforce codified behavior. As stated by art and critical theorist Carol Becker (2012):

> Because artists often gravitate to what is missing, many have committed themselves to creating events that connect people and ideas in the public sphere because they discern that what is missing now is public discourse about the relationship of individuals to society. (p. 67)

These *converse landscapes* are not suggested as being works of aesthetic mastery nor eloquent representations, instead they hope to provide linkages and agitations to the social arrangements of place. (Doherty, 2015, p. 35) They are places that construct communal openness and expression and offer forms and platforms for seeing our world anew. (Doherty, 2015, p. 14) *Converse landscapes* attempt to embody, as suggested by The Invisible Committee (2012): "An

assembly […] not a place for decisions but for talk, for free speech exercised without a goal." (p. 122) Christine Tohme (In Doherty, 2015) has been essential in advancing this perspective: "I am interested in these small pockets that exist outside of the system and outside of the public spaces where national discourses dominate; where you find a seepage between the artistic and the civic."[8] (p. 122) The three works presented throughout this exercise attempt to provide an opposition to the encroachment of privatization and diminishing spaces for expression and social interaction. (p. 15) The intention here is to create moments through emphasizing the unplanned, flexibility and failure in site-based art. Utilizing this approach, it is hoped that new vantage points of knowledge production will emerge. These moments do more than reflect on potential truths, instead they offer as a solution the promotion of community, *singularity* and interaction.

Performance is central to *converse landscape* as the process and outcomes attempt to embody an irrational outside to traditional conceptions of labour, value and efficiency. The performative aspects emerge across the conceptualization, construction, implementation and outcomes of the practice. The works and processes strive to encourage confused and inquisitive

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[8]   *For Wreck to Seaman, Tempest to Field* (2015), Wong and I lived in a cargo van for three and a half weeks, in order to reside adjacent the site and conduct nightly performances that featured a violinist from the Vancouver Symphony (Erin Wong), an electric guitar made on-site from a broken skid, local field recordings and vocals created impromptu. The scheduled community events ended in both cheers and jeers: engagement was the intention. Fort McMurray was undergoing massive disinvestment and instead of offering a distraction, we intended to invoke discussion around it. See *Figure 5.3.2: Fort McMurray nightly performance (video still credit: Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo).*

Figure 5.3.2: Fort McMurray nightly performance (video still credit: Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo).

responses. Repetitive labour, endurance and techniques of construction are harnessed beyond traditional boundaries to embody an irrational outside to a neo-liberal economy that demands efficiency and rational thinking. The practice harnesses a methodology of absurdity and expression as performance.

To Ash (2016), *Wreck to the Seaman, Tempest to Field* (2015) and *Orange Crush* (2015) are explorations that utilize the processes of standardization and homogenization to invoke and vivify conceptions of planetary urbanism. They constructed venues for dialogue, interaction and community building while harnessing the aesthetic of the homogeneous city. These experiments in site-based art are not destinations but launching points. They attempt to construct moments for community building in transitioning landscapes. These works celebrate context and social

integration as central tenets to creating a *converse landscape*. In future works, the intention

will be to extend concepts further, utilizing techniques for solution-driven responses. Thomas

Hirschhorn's *Gramsci Monument* (2013) offers an example of this technique, where the Swiss

artist erected a public sculpture in a Bronx housing project in celebration of Antonio Gramsci

that contained a library, classroom, an operating radio station and other community facilities.

James Corner (2013) introduces this point succinctly:

> The popular notion that subjectivity, poetry, and art are welcome in the private domains
> of the gallery or the library, but are no match for the power of "rational" instrumentality
> in "solving" the real problems of the world is to understand these problems in terms that
> are somehow external to the world of symbolic communication and cultural values.
> (p. 46)

Converse landscapes infuse the realities of planetary urbanism with the methodologies of artistic

practice, creating sites that disrupt and challenge dominant conceptions of spatial organization

through solution driven practices that promote communication, expression and an outside to

traditional fields of knowledge production.[9]

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[9]   *To Ash* (2015) was constructed to correspond with *Outwash Plain*: A night of art, talk

and music. As opposed to showcasing the art exclusively, it was connected to a larger show

about landscape, art and urbanism titled *Grow Op* (Gladstone Hotel). The musical bands *Loom*,

Canyun and *Cairo* played within the gallery dismantling traditional boundaries between artistic

disciplines. The intention being to attract a larger community, especially those not familiar with

the visual arts or design. The event was open to the pubic. See *Figure 5.3.3: Outwash Plain: Cram,*

Canyun, Loom, Cairo (photography credit: Karen Abel)

Figure 5.3.3: Outwash Plain: Cram, Canyun, Loom, Cairo (photography credit: Karen Abel)

6.0 CONCLUSIONS

There is no end, no grand scheme for the agents of change, just a cumulative directionality toward further becoming.
(Corner, 2013, p. 41)

As expressed by The Invisible Committee (2009) "We have to see that the economy is not 'in' crisis, the economy is itself the crisis. It's not that there's not enough work, it's that there is too much of it." (p. 63) The overarching dominance of neo-liberalism and positivism has lead to the rise of planetary urbanism. This phenomenon provides a unique set of emerging challenges that designers and artists can point to, react to and soften. To locate an outside to dominant ideology is problematic and unlikely, but nonetheless worth the strife and energy. These works sought to enliven and discredit accelerating processes of efficiency and standardization. *Orange Crush* (2015), *Wreck to the Seaman, Tempest to Field* (2015) and *To Ash* (2016) utilize the vernacular of standardized materials and form while constructing large community events that encouraged dialogue and agitation. These works and happenings are positioned as *converse landscapes*, and equally infuse lessons from critical theory with a solution-driven art and design methodology that rejects the primacy of the rational method. These public spaces provide platforms for expression to propose an outside to the everyday. The conclusions derived here are embedded in the basement findings where those pieces were conceptualized. A reoccurring thought that emerged throughout the creation of the works follows what American artist and community organizer Rick Lowe (In Thompson, 2012) questioned: "Why didn't I come up with some kind of creative solution to issues instead of just telling people [...] what they already knew?" (p. 26) The ambition is to construct places akin to the open plain, embody the irrational and challenge dominant spatial ideology.

7.0   BIBLIOGRAPHY

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