

SOMETHING OUT OF NOTHING: A CONVERSATION ON WASTE

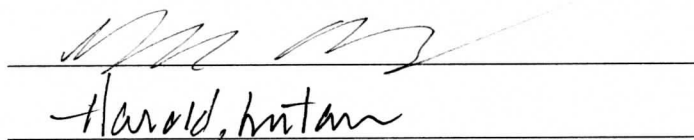
by

Olivier Giron
A Thesis
Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty
of
George Mason University
in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree
of
Master of Fine Arts
Art and Visual Technology

Committee:



Director



Harold Brittan

Director of the School of Art



Ann Luder

Dean, College of Visual and
Performing Arts

Date: July 27, 2012

Summer Semester 2012
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

Something Out of Nothing: A Conversation on Waste

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

by

Olivier Giron
Bachelor of Science
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 2006

Director: Peggy Feerick, Associate Professor
School of Art

Summer Semester 2012
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA



This work is licensed under a [creative commons attribution-noncommercial 3.0 unported license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/).

DEDICATION

To my family for their unconditional support, and to Eily.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When I think about my education, it makes me extremely grateful to have been surrounded by so many talented people. There were so many countless teachers who filled me with inspiration every step along the way; you have been a tremendous influence. Without you my curiosity would be more easily appeased. For all of you responsible for my unquenchable desire to turn things upside down and examine them from every conceivable angle, I thank you. To my father, who has instilled in me a great desire to learn, I am grateful for every opportunity you have given me. To my mother, who gave me an appreciation for the things that truly matter in my life. To my brother, who has never settled for not following his dreams, you have given me tremendous courage to reach for my own dreams. To my sister, who always listened to my crazy ideas, and talked me out of some of them. To all the graduate students who debated and argued with me, thank you for making my ideas stronger. To Stephanie Booth, who shared a desire to explore those things that are not so easily explored. To Sean Salyards, who brought me to a new level of workmanship; thank you for your dedication, and your tremendous work ethic. To Deborah Lash, without whom I would have felt just a little more lost in the scary halls of graduate school. To Tom Ashcraft, for encouraging me to explore ideas without a preconceived product. Lastly, I want to thank my committee. To Mark Cooley, for his wealth of knowledge, and passion for the environment. To Edgar Endress, whose critical eye made me look at things with more scrutiny. To Peggy Feerick, who was a mountain of support, knowledge and encouragement, and who allowed me to indulge the “perpetual explorer” inside me.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | Page |
|--|------|
| List of Figures | vi |
| Abstract | viii |
| Central and South America | 2 |
| Waste: Where does it all come from? | 6 |
| Mapping | 13 |
| Experimental Geography: Social Interventions | 21 |
| Observation and Concealment | 45 |
| What does it all add up to? | 55 |
| Works Cited | 62 |

LIST OF FIGURES

| Figure | Page |
|--|------|
| Figure 1: Waste pile at a hot spring frequented by tourists in a remote part of the mountains of Coconuco, Colombia..... | 2 |
| Figure 2: Hundreds of red trash bags overflowing into the ecosystem from the town landfill at Machu Picchu, Peru..... | 4 |
| Figure 3: A global comparison garbage map by The Economist magazine. | 6 |
| Figure 4: Litter in a tree planter in Columbia Heights, Washington, D.C..... | 7 |
| Figure 5: Pile of women's dress shoes located in Springfield, VA, ID #39801. They could have easily been disposed of through curbside disposal pickup..... | 9 |
| Figure 6: Dumpsite directly adjacent to a community garden in Washington, D.C., ID #39800..... | 10 |
| Figure 7: Illegal dumpsite located in Springfield, VA, ID #39798. | 12 |
| Figure 8: Illegal dumpsite located in Annandale, VA, ID #42571. | 13 |
| Figure 9: <i>Let's Do It! World Wastemap</i> of illegal dumpsites found in Springfield, VA. . | 15 |
| Figure 10: Formal bench, Burke, VA. | 17 |
| Figure 11: Woman's dress and a man's suit in the middle of the woods in Springfield, Virginia. | 18 |
| Figure 12: Idea sketch after encountering discarded objects in Springfield, Virginia..... | 19 |
| Figure 13: Mapping on an abandoned farm in Centerville, Virginia, which has been recently purchased by the Fairfax County Park Authority | 20 |
| Figure 14: Idea sketch for <i>Something out of Nothing</i> , the first spatial intervention. | 21 |
| Figure 15: Original condition of dumpsite where the first intervention took place in Springfield, VA, ID #39808..... | 24 |
| Figure 16: Trash organized into categories at dumpsite #39808. | 25 |
| Figure 17: Video stills from <i>When Faith Moves Mountains</i> , a film by Francis Alÿs..... | 27 |
| Figure 18: Material study built on the tension created by the weight of the materials.... | 28 |
| Figure 19 Location for <i>Something Out of Nothing</i> , my first performance piece. Site ID #39807..... | 29 |
| Figure 20: Thoughts and figure ground diagram studies for walls of <i>Something Out of Nothing</i> | 30 |
| Figure 21: Thoughts and schematics for first intervention performance, <i>Something Out of Nothing</i> | 31 |
| Figure 22: Prefabrication of sculpture <i>Something Out of Nothing</i> before install on location..... | 32 |
| Figure 23: Work in progress for <i>Something Out of Nothing</i> | 33 |
| Figure 24: Video stills from <i>Something Out of Nothing</i> | 34 |

| | |
|---|----|
| Figure 25: <i>Something Out of Nothing</i> after installation, Site ID #39807..... | 35 |
| Figure 26: Map of camera locations where <i>Something Out of Nothing</i> was performed... 37 | |
| Figure 27: Video still of man dumping thirty-six bumpers: the beginning of my new intervention. | 38 |
| Figure 28: Material for new performance, <i>36 Bumpers</i> , Site ID #39807. | 39 |
| Figure 29: Thoughts and schematics for second intervention performance, <i>36 Bumpers</i> .40 | |
| Figure 30: Thoughts and schematics for <i>36 Bumpers</i> | 41 |
| Figure 31: Video stills from <i>36 Bumpers</i> | 42 |
| Figure 32: Video stills from <i>36 Bumpers</i> | 43 |
| Figure 33: Idea sketch of for <i>Observations</i> , a video depicting encounters during my interventions..... | 45 |
| Figure 34: Obscured footage leads to partial revelations..... | 48 |
| Figure 35: Video still from <i>Observations</i> | 49 |
| Figure 36: Video stills from encounters..... | 50 |
| Figure 37: Ricardo and me, video still..... | 51 |
| Figure 38: Boy using the stall, video still. | 52 |
| Figure 39: Mattress dumper, video still. | 53 |
| Figure 40: Phytoremediation of Site # 43273. | 55 |
| Figure 41: Phytoremediation of Site # 40379. | 56 |
| Figure 42: Phytoremediation of Site # 43074. | 58 |
| Figure 43: Cartoon by Richard McMurphy in the <i>Fairfax County Times</i> | 60 |

ABSTRACT

SOMETHING OUT OF NOTHING: A CONVERSATION ON WASTE

Olivier Giron, MFA

George Mason University, 2012

Thesis Director: Peggy Feerick

Something Out of Nothing developed out of a growing curiosity to explore the margins between public and private space. The spaces that surround us can be defined through our relationship to the landscape. This definition goes beyond ephemeral property boundaries, and more in the direction of how we emotionally consider location, adjacencies, land use, ecology, and the architecture of a space. Certain cultural, economic, and legal designations exist to dictate what can happen in these spaces. These conditions dictate an individual's behavior within the umbrella of society. The ambiguities within these fragmented spaces, however, create circumstances that allow individuals to act outside of what society expects. The work in *Something Out of Nothing* examines the cultural conditions that preface how we experience space by seeing what can happen when our connection to the landscape is severed and our behavior falls outside of the reach of society.

*Intoxicated with a sense of his own power [mankind] seems
to be going farther and farther into more experiments for
the destruction of himself and his World.*

— Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*

CENTRAL AND SOUTH AMERICA



Figure 1: Waste pile at a hot spring frequented by tourists in a remote part of the mountains of Coconuco, Colombia.

My entire life I have marveled at natural selection. For millennia, it has been working towards ecological symbiosis. Balances have formed that are in complete harmony with their ecosystem. When an organism or system does not work, it is simply phased out. It is a system based on trial and error, yet each trial fits within the framework without causing irreparable harm. Before modernization, we too fit into this carefully constructed equation. People lived by using local resources without exhausting their habitat. Today, as we strive for economic prosperity, coexistence with our environment is an afterthought. Rachel Carson describes man's heedless pace as a situation that our modern ecology cannot adjust to. Our current model of growth is in direct contrast to nature's model of progression, where changes have occurred at a deliberate pace over millions of years (Carson 8). What will we do with a robust Gross Domestic Product (GDP) if we have no place to live? There is no reason why we have to accept this economic view of growth as the only viable answer. We need to find an intersection between the economy and environmental stewardship, where both can benefit from each other. William McDonough and Michael Braungart in their book *Cradle to Cradle* talk about just such a possibility; one that is "founded on nature's surprisingly effective design principles, on human creativity and prosperity, and on respect, fair play, and good will" (McDonough, Braungart 6). Imagine if everything in our society incorporated the end-life of each object as an integral part of its design in order to have complete effectiveness of resources without waste.

In the summer of 2010, as I traveled through Central and South America, I stayed in a remote village in Honduras where a small Catholic organization had a volunteer

orphanage program. The area was very isolated, with little infrastructure of any kind. When I walked around the town – located on a beautiful mountaintop – I saw impromptu dumpsites all along the road. The gray water drained to a swell along the side that eventually led to the nearby river. Having been immersed in environmental science in my undergraduate studies, I was shocked to see the living conditions of the people there. When I inquired about the conditions, I was told that quite frankly, in this town it was a luxury to think of the environment. Due to the lack of infrastructure, these citizens had to burn their trash or use one of the nearby dumpsites to dispose of their waste. When faced with the immediate issue of waste management, people in this community had little choice but to dispose of their waste in the ecosystem.



Figure 2: Hundreds of red trash bags overflowing into the ecosystem from the town landfill at Machu Picchu, Peru.

As I continued to South America, I encountered more sites with waste problems. One location in particular I will remember above all the rest: Machu Picchu. Seeing that an ancient civilization was capable of building this magnificent place left me completely breathless. Unfortunately, its beauty has come with some damaging side effects. Every year, the large amounts of people that flock here overburden the existing waste management system, forcing the neighboring town of Aguas Calientes (the town that supports Machu Picchu) to find temporary waste locations. I encountered one on a hike to a nearby waterfall. It was an unexpected sight, and it shook me from my feelings of wonderment after descending from Machu Picchu. In this dumpsite I found hundreds of red bags, all coming from Aguas Calientes. The coordination of the bags made me think that this pile was different from other dumpsites I had encountered along my trip. I realized that this pile was sanctioned and organized by the township. Due to the transitional status of this dumpsite, no protective ecological strategies had been implemented. Any hazardous chemicals that were contained within those bags would eventually leach into the ecosystem. What was worse was the realization that my participation in visiting Machu Picchu had contributed to this pile.

This moment changed my approach to my work. It made me wonder how my waste might be impacting my own community's ecosystem. Upon returning to Fairfax, Virginia, I set out to find locations such as the one I encountered in Peru, and explore illegal dumping from a social and psychological standpoint.

WASTE: WHERE DOES IT ALL COME FROM?

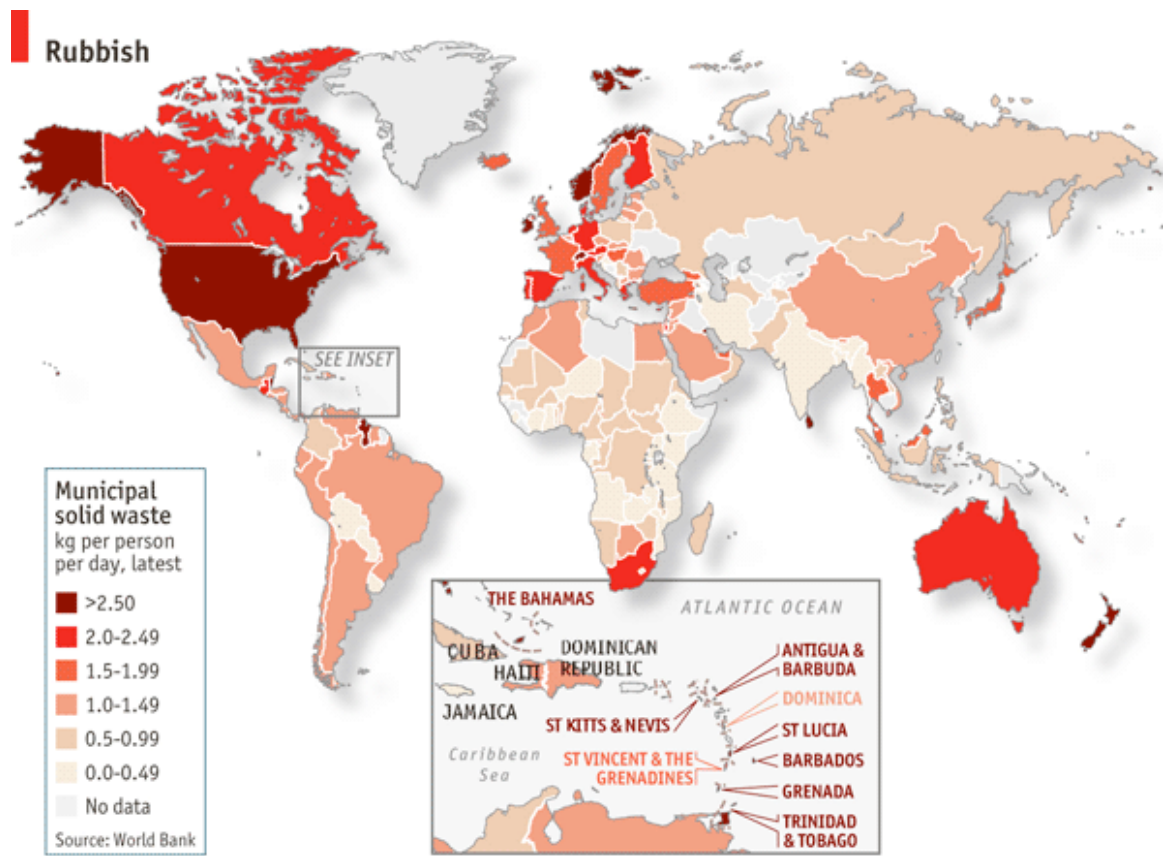


Figure 3: A global comparison garbage map by The Economist magazine.



Figure 4: Litter in a tree planter in Columbia Heights, Washington, D.C.

Waste in our society is pervasive. Surprisingly, the majority of waste and greenhouse gases are generated by the wealthiest 1 to 5 percent of the world's population (Leonard ix). In our everyday lives, litter has become part of our culture, the ubiquity of waste lining our streets desensitizing us to larger waste problems. The consumption of consumer goods is saturating us to the point where we accept this excess waste as commonplace. Stephen Johnstone, editor of the MIT Press Documents of Contemporary Art titled *The Everyday*, describes this condition as the “sense that the everyday...exists below the threshold of the noticed and is everywhere and nowhere at the same time”

(Johnstone 13). In order for this “everyday” behavior to become a thing of the past, we must begin to be critical of our actions. We must shift our values to a new paradigm of effective design where our consumer goods can be “upcycled” into new products with zero waste (McDonough, Braungart 72).

There is great inequity across the globe in how resources are allocated and used. The consumption rates of Japan, Australia, and countries in North America and Western Europe are 32 times higher than that of developing countries. This means 25% of the world’s population uses 75% of all global resources (Diamond). Overconsumption in developed nations has become a way of life, reaching to the top of societies and their power structures. After the attacks of September 11th, President George W. Bush told the American public that the “ultimate repudiation of terrorism” was to go out and shop, to tell the world “America is open for business” (Leonard 147). In a time of such great loss and anguish, how can overconsumption be the way to denounce terrorism? How can we place more value on consumer goods than on education, health care, or even food production?

In the post-war economic boom of the 1950s, our attitude towards consumption went into overdrive. Retailing analyst Victor Lebow stated that a productive economy “demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction, our ego satisfaction, in consumption... we need things consumed, burned up, replaced and discarded at an ever-accelerating rate” (Leonard 160). This focus on the turnover of consumable goods can be directly tied to planned obsolescence: a company designs a lower quality product to

motivate consumers to want its newer iteration sooner than necessary. In an economy of abundance, we've entered into a system that demands waste in order to stay profitable. The problem with this economic model is that it utilizes more resources than the earth annually generates, putting us on a direct collision course with disaster.



Figure 5: Pile of women's dress shoes located in Springfield, VA, ID #39801. They could have easily been disposed of through curbside disposal pickup.



Figure 6: Dumpsite directly adjacent to a community garden in Washington, D.C., ID #39800.

According to a report by the World Bank on Solid Waste Management, the average amount of waste generated daily by a single person in the United States is 5.5 lbs. Globally, the report considered the main waste contributors to be urban centers, estimating that today 3 billion residents are generating 2.6 lbs. per person per day (1.43 billion tons per year). By 2025 this will likely increase to 4.3 billion urban residents generating about 3.13 lbs. per person per day of municipal solid waste (2.43 billion tons per year). Surprisingly, the United States is not the world leader in waste production; that

title belongs to China, which surpassed the United States in 2004 (Hoornweg, Bhada-Tata 1). From an economic perspective, Americans are spending more on waste management than on parks and recreation, libraries, and fire protection. Our trash is our leading export (Humes). How did our legacy become the waste we are leaving behind?

A Fairfax County resident generates 6.3 lbs. of waste per person per day (Solid Waste Management Plan). This number is 14% higher than the national average, and 138% higher than the global average. Fairfax County primarily funds its waste management system with the sale of energy from the county's waste-to-energy program, and their tipping fees from landfills. Very little of its funding comes from the county's general fund. Waste management is simply not a priority. In a county as wealthy as Fairfax County, why not innovate solutions to deal with the problem instead of being reactive?

The national and local waste production numbers mentioned here are based on data provided by municipal waste management programs. These numbers do not reflect waste that is disposed of illegally by individuals. Waste is an issue all over the world, but typically countries with little to no waste management infrastructure have more severe problems. People have been dumping their waste into the environment long before the implementation of sanitation systems. In older generations, objects consisted of organic materials that could biodegrade and integrate back into the ecosystems. Recently, as synthetic materials have become ubiquitous, the danger of environmental and human contamination has increased. As synthetic compounds degrade, they emit ("off-gas") harmful toxins that can affect sensitive ecosystems, and put our health at risk. The

Environmental Protection Agency defines illegal dumping as “disposal of waste in an unpermitted area” (EPA 2). Material is typically dumped at night or in the early morning, more often in the warmer months. Locations vary, but sites generally meet the following criteria:

- Abandoned industrial, residential, or commercial property.
- Infrequently used alleys or roadways.
- Poor lighting and easy accessibility, such as rural roads and railways.



Figure 7: Illegal dumpsite located in Springfield, VA, ID #39798.

MAPPING



Figure 8: Illegal dumpsite located in Annandale, VA, ID #42571.

In September of 2010, I filed a Request for Information (RFI) with the Fairfax County Health Department to find out how pervasive illegal dumping was in my own community. In Fairfax County, the Health Department is in charge of investigating citizen reports of illegal dumping. I met with the Environmental Health Supervisor from the Health Department, who clearly stated that due to budgetary reasons, if a threat to citizens was not present, the priority was not to clean up the waste. In our current economy, the lack of focus on this issue goes beyond the Health Department. The lack of attention is a cultural symptom resulting from the fact that illegal dumping occurs on the peripheries of the spaces we inhabit.

The RFI, with its reports of existing dumpsite locations, was the basis for my photographic documentation. Although the locations varied, they all possessed characteristics that enabled the sites to exist. Regardless of the specifics of each site, these marginal spaces have fallen out of the visual psyche of the public, becoming ordinary and forgotten. Finding one of these sites is only a matter of knowing what geographic conditions to look for. To say that this behavioral disregard towards the environment is dependent on demographics, socioeconomics, or zoning designation would be a misconception. Typically, illegal dumping happens in areas with “limited access to convenient, affordable waste disposal facilities or services and recycling programs” (EPA 4). Fairfax County does not suffer from any of these symptoms. In 2011, Forbes magazine named it the third richest county in the United States (Vardi). Fairfax County has curbside pickup and recycling throughout the county. Yet in 2011 alone, the Health Department responded to 300 reports of illegal dumping.

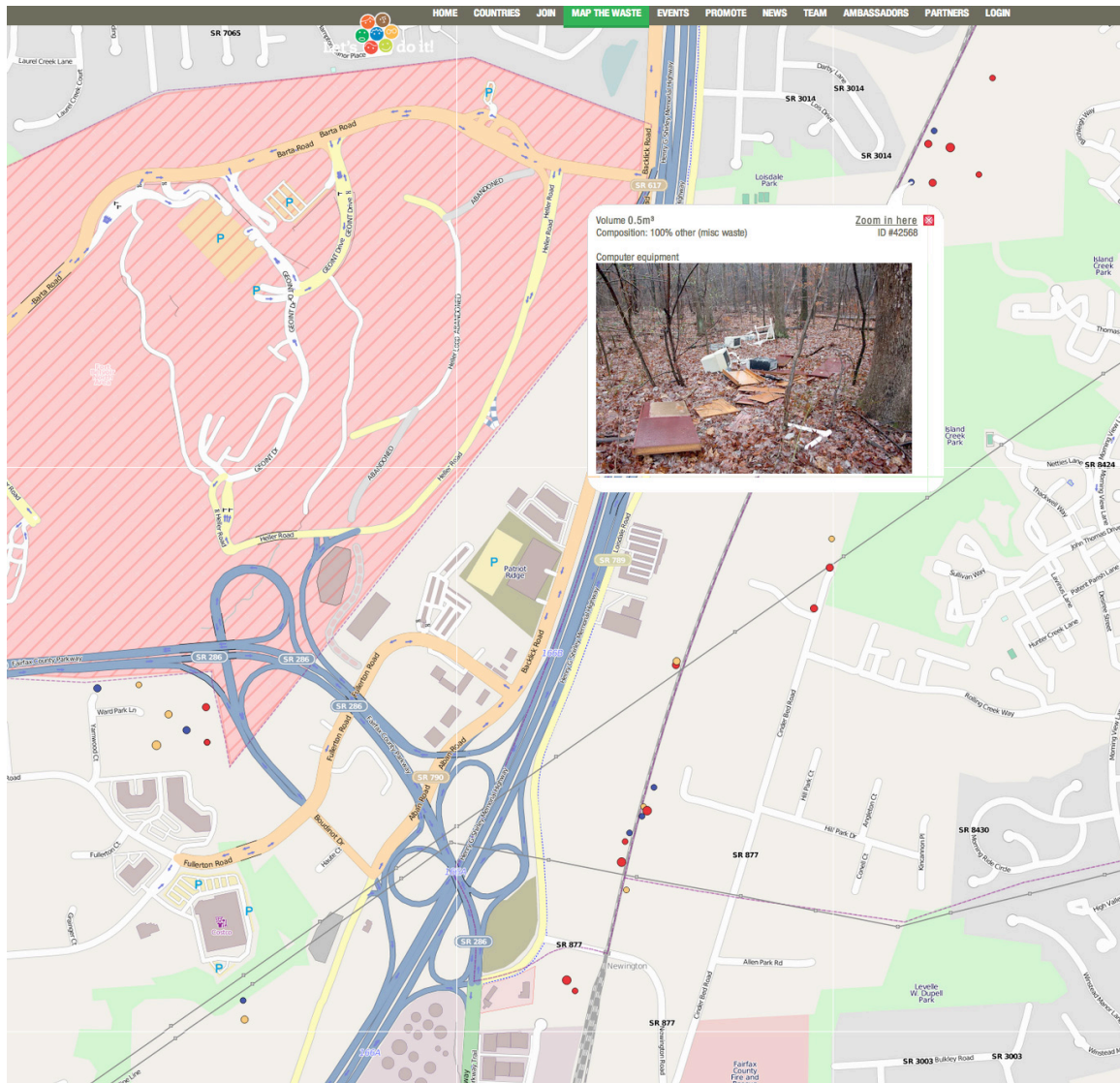


Figure 9: Let's Do It! World Wastemap of illegal dumpsites found in Springfield, VA.

Soon after I started mapping, I realized the need to make my findings available to the public. I started working with the Estonian non-profit organization *Let's Do It! World*. They have been raising awareness about the problem of waste in our environment since 2008, when they embarked on their seemingly impossible mission to clean up their country. With fifty thousand volunteers, they were able to cleanup ten thousand tons of

trash. They had the support of a large portion of their society, including opinion leaders, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), politicians, the media, and even the president. The technology they developed made it possible for me to map my findings on their *World Wastemap*, using waste points that contained global positioning system coordinates (GPS), waste type, quantity, and my photographs of the dumpsites. I posted my progress periodically on the website created for *Let's Do It! Virginia*, a group I initiated with the hope of generating more awareness surrounding the issue of waste in our ecosystem.

The mapping process became about wandering through the landscape, relying on my intuition to lead me off my original path. Traces of possible dumpsites would catch my attention and make me waver from my destinations. I tried to envision the mindset of someone trying to conceal his or her behavior. If I was entering an isolated space or trespassing into private property, I would wait until I could enter unseen. During these searches I would find myself in spaces absent of all ambient noise, on quiet winter days, where I could hear the sound of my footsteps reverberating through the woods with every step. The possibility of encountering illegal dumpers haunted my thoughts as I investigated lost and forgotten objects. As I would go deeper into the woods, I could see a distinct transition in objects from older generations to the materials of today. Glass mason jars became plastic single-use bottles; leather shoes were replaced by those made with synthetic materials, becoming archeological records of our mismanaged resources.



Figure 10: Formal bench, Burke, VA.

The personal items I encountered would immediately spark my imagination to think of how the objects might have gotten there. Sometimes I found the scenes to be so outrageous that I would try to think of even more ridiculous possibilities. I found a woman's dress and a man's suit on a young sapling tree and imagined a couple coming there to change their outfits before going out for the night. On that same walk I encountered an entire office, complete with two monitors and furniture. I started to construct a scene in my mind of a businessman hard at work.



Figure 11: Woman's dress and a man's suit in the middle of the woods in Springfield, Virginia.

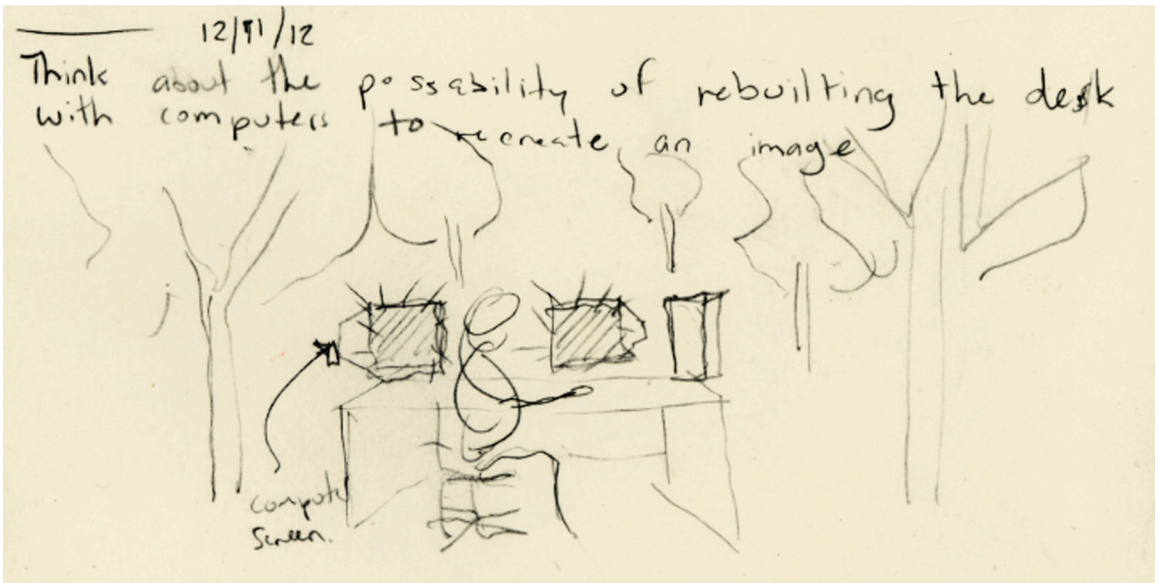


Figure 12: Idea sketch after encountering discarded objects in Springfield, Virginia.

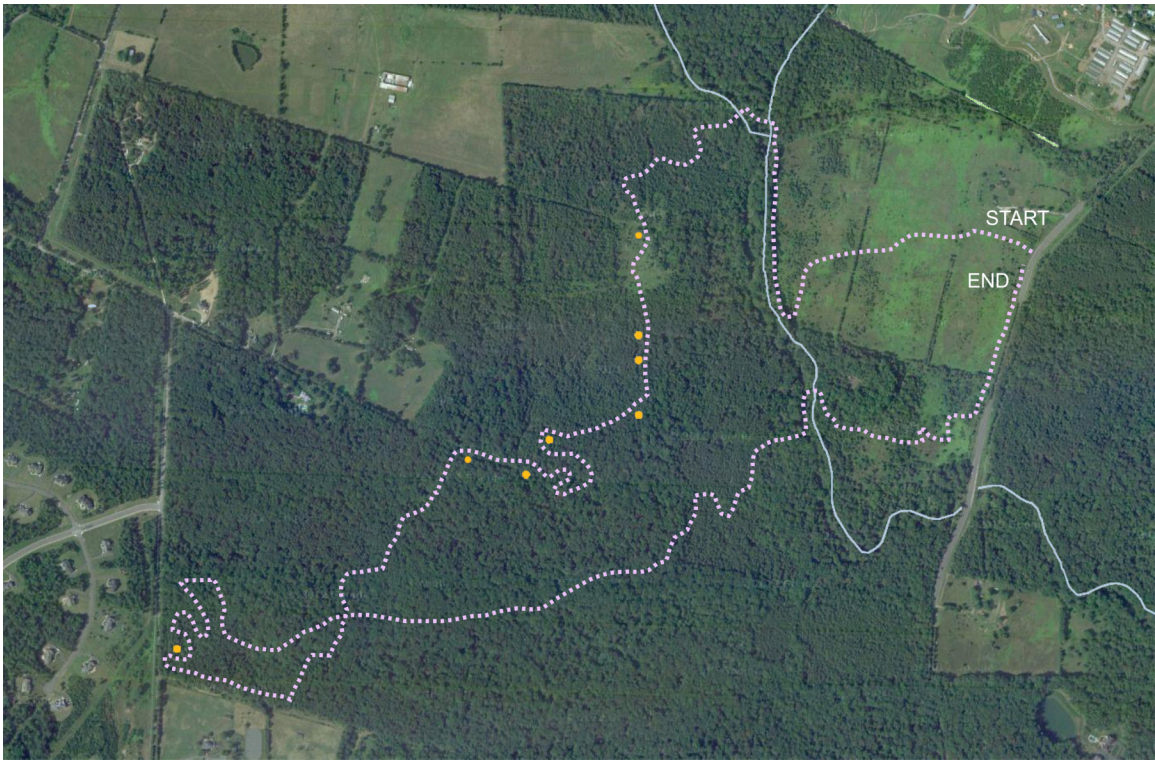


Figure 13: Mapping on an abandoned farm in Centerville, Virginia, which has been recently purchased by the Fairfax County Park Authority

I began to pull together my findings, and chart the proximity of these spaces. I wanted people to realize how generic they are. Any neighborhood, any state, any overlooked and forgotten space can fall victim to this act of indifference. The simple juxtapositions within my photographs were meant to draw out the contrast between society's current waste problem and the environment. However, it soon became apparent that this would not be enough. I started investigating the potential occurrences within a given space, and looking at them from a behavioral standpoint in order to engage people that were less interested in the environmental dialogue. How could a space be changed to shift how it is being utilized?

EXPERIMENTAL GEOGRAPHY: SOCIAL INTERVENTIONS

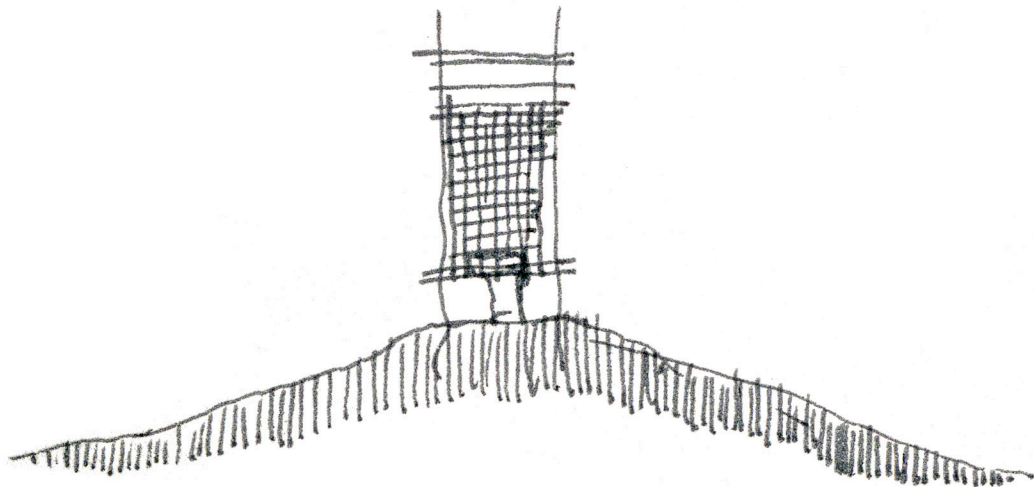


Figure 14: Idea sketch for *Something out of Nothing*, the first spatial intervention.

Charting my “psychogeographical” reaction to the impact we are having on our environment can best be described by the Situationist Internationalist credo of the “*dérive*.” This organization of artists and philosophers describes this mode of drifting as an inventive strategy for exploring geographical space. Subtle cues of the surrounding architecture and geography subconsciously direct the wanderer, and affect the emotions and behavior of individuals. The ultimate goal is to develop an entirely new awareness of the landscape (Thompson 18). Encountering these scarred spaces, my thoughts would drift to the circumstantial set of cues that brought me to the specific space I occupied; together culminating and intersecting my path with that of the illegal dumper. The objects I found were my only clues to their identity. I would try to envision who these individuals were and wondered what prompted them to arrive at the same location. What would the two converging path lines look like cartographically? What would a conversation between us sound like if we surreptitiously arrived at the space at the same time?

My undergraduate degree in landscape architecture encouraged me to look critically at how spaces are apportioned, utilized, and perceived. Having an understanding behind the production of space allowed me to recognize the simultaneous effect space has on the production of culture. In a sense, the forces that produce geographic conditions produce our understanding of ourselves. When deliberately creating the foundation layers of spatial meaning – upon which culture is built – an architect has to consider several characteristics in order to create a successful space (usability being the measure of success). The most important factor to consider, above all, is spatial context (adjacencies). From here you proceed by examining the social and economic factors. At a

municipal level, you must consider how the zoning ordinance sees the plot of land (residential, commercial, industrial, etc.). Lastly, you consider the user group. Only once you have this understanding can you embark on a design scheme to deliberately mold the space into the desired outcome. When pedestrians use a newly designed space, they are directly influenced by the architect's decisions, and they in turn, add their own layer of context by the manner in which they use it. A feedback loop develops between our spaces and our sense of who are.

Fragmented spaces where illegal dumping occurs are created in a similar fashion. The user group here, however, has a much bigger role in the ultimate definition of the space when they set out to ignore all social norms in place. Because these designations exist primarily cartographically (zoning, ownership, property lines, etc.), a vacant property without physical markers is not as obviously defined as an urban space. Due to the lack of definition, absence of community, or stewardship of space, these properties hold a social stigma of neglect. As a result, norm-violations – such as illegal dumping – become more prevalent.

Guy Debord — founder of the Situationist Internationalist — correlates our understanding of the world to the “determinant actions of general natural forces on the economic structures of a society... Psychogeography could set for itself the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviors of individuals” (Thomson 16). All culminating factors that produce space are merely a reflection of ourselves, and in the case of leftover

space between carefully constructed contexts, we start to see glimpses of our collective consciousness towards nature.



Figure 15: Original condition of dumpsite where the first intervention took place in Springfield, VA, ID #39808.

My spatial interventions started by looking back at the photograph of trash bags I shot in Machu Picchu, Peru. What had I found so visually interesting? I concluded that it was the contrast of organized chaos, depicted by the hundreds of red trash bags with the jungle as a backdrop. I wanted to recreate the absurdity of this condition at one of the found dumpsites by categorizing the items of waste into neat piles that illegal dumpers could continue to separate based on material. The first intervention took place at a site in

Springfield, Virginia. I began to think of the space the way an archaeologist thinks of “middens,” a historical refuse pile that enables you to piece information back together based on findings. I separated tires, metal, plastic, wires, wood, appliances, and even car bumpers.



Figure 16: Trash organized into categories at dumpsite #39808.

Very soon after embarking on the execution of this idea, I hit a wall, becoming overwhelmed by the amount of trash at the site. It dawned on me that I would have to

shift almost everything in order to even remotely change the space. It was extremely time consuming. Would a person entering the space even notice the difference? I quickly abandoned this approach. I wanted one that would be more immediately obvious, with a more articulated design, not to be confused with cleanup efforts.

This experiment became an exercise in stubbornness and failure, with no apparent successful outcome. One particular rainy day as I found myself working out possible ideas at the site, I wondered about the futility of what I was doing. Would countless hours displacing and arranging waste amount to anything? Why not just dispose of the trash? If I removed it, all record of what had been done to the space would be erased, leading to the possibility of dumping once more. I was conflicted. Trained as a landscape architect, I have always been more of a logical thinker, with every decision having a practical implication. This approach was going against the core of how I normally operated. It proved difficult to allow myself the freedom to let the idea unravel into uncertainty.

In his performance piece, *When Faith Moves Mountains*, artist Francis Alÿs orchestrated 500 volunteers with shovels to move a sand dune 10cm from its original position. The focus was in the futility of such an undertaking; the resulting 10cm becoming lost in the massive effort as the group – no longer individuals – reached for a unified goal. The performance raised questions about the potential for change. Without action, even the smallest chance of change is impossible.



Figure 17: Video stills from *When Faith Moves Mountains*, a film by Francis Alÿs.

The motivation for my project came from a similar place. My efforts faced an entire population of illegal dumpers, yet my actions within this ambiguous space could provide an interruption. Once sculptures were built, the space would be charged with possible outcomes, and I would respond to the reactions they sparked. This process became the most important aspect of the project, leaving me without expectations. I grew comfortable working within these parameters, where my creativity could work unhindered by my practical inhibitions.



Figure 18: Material study built on the tension created by the weight of the materials.



Figure 19 Location for *Something Out of Nothing*, my first performance piece. Site ID #39807.

Instead of attempting to organize the chaos, I decided to repurpose materials from the site into sculptures and focus on the topic of reuse. I chose a site containing the remains of bathroom construction. I decided to build a sculpture that focused on the margins between public and private space. To relate back to the source material, I began to build a bathroom stall with transparent walls. I utilized screen material – found at the site – and a mosaic pattern based on the conventional tile patterns used in bathroom design. Using transparent walls altered the conventional function of a bathroom, in much the same way that dumpers had altered the function of this part of our ecosystem.

5/9 Think about tracing the licence plates
back to the person's home that dumped
and dump back into their backyard.

5/10

went to site to switch bushnell cameras
and it was gone. Someone stole my camera.

- who is it?
- why would they still it?
- Did they set it up to watch me?
- is surveillance being done on me?
- do I need to hide my identity? wear things to hide my identity?

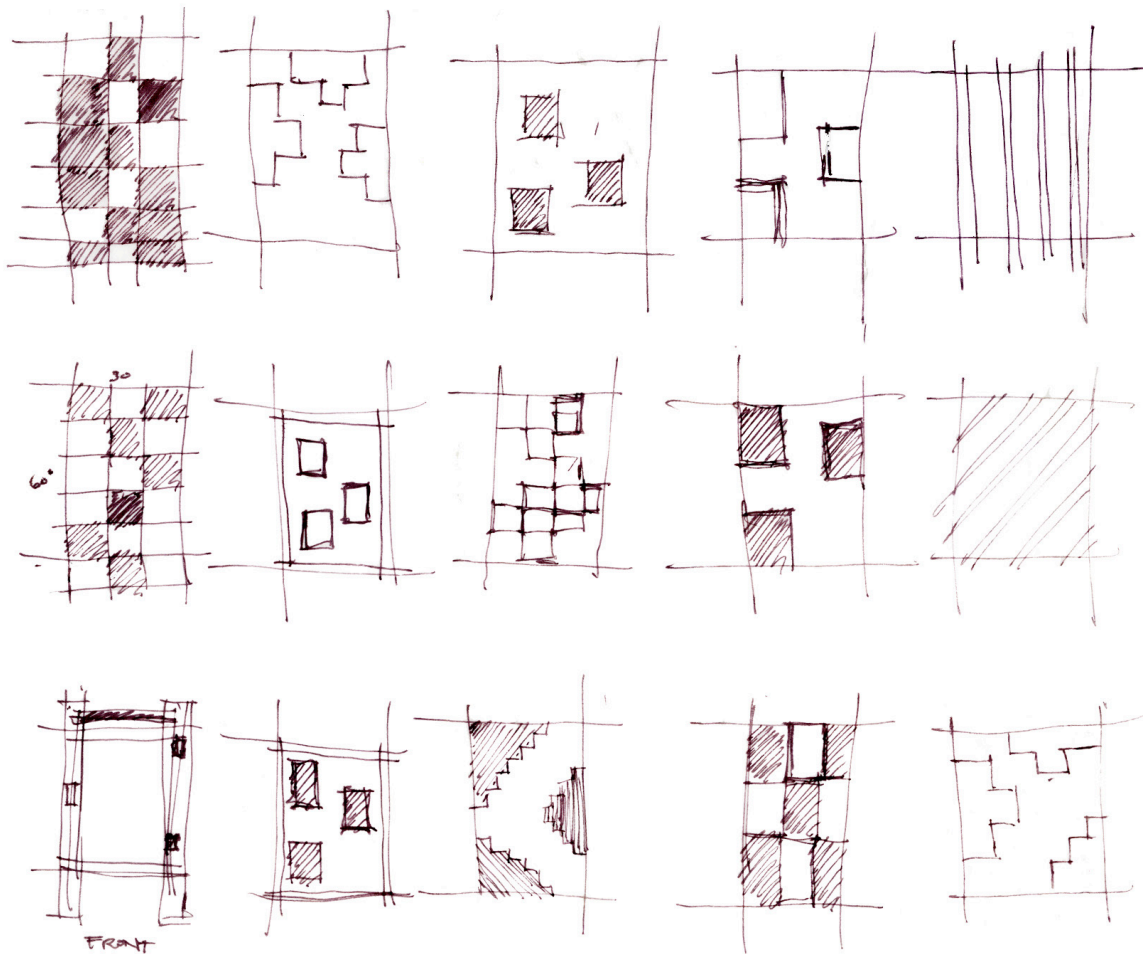
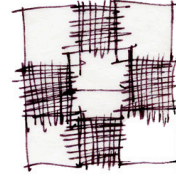


Figure 20: Thoughts and figure ground diagram studies for walls of *Something Out of Nothing*.

Site 2 "Broken" Materials

- 1) Screen 29.5" x 13"
- 2) Screen 69" x 29"
- 3) Screen 37" x 25"
- 4) Screen 69" x 29"
- 5) metal 31" x 11"
- 6) metal 31" x 11"
- 7) metal 61 x 28
- 8) metal 61 x 28
- 9) metal 61 x 28

- Creation of objects ~~beyond~~ with objects that have been discarded
- we all don't value our possessions. Nothing is made to last. Everything is meant to be discarded.
- we have all been desensitized to fact that the things we use can be discarded with effect.
- What is the importance of space. Margins Between Spaces.



How do CITIES work?

11/2/10

- 51% of planet is urbanized
- is there some organic logic that holds ~~everything~~ ^{people} together?
- are cities tumors on the landscape? → ~~James~~ ^{Jonael} Arab Writer
- Chris ~~Perkel~~ "The town that was"

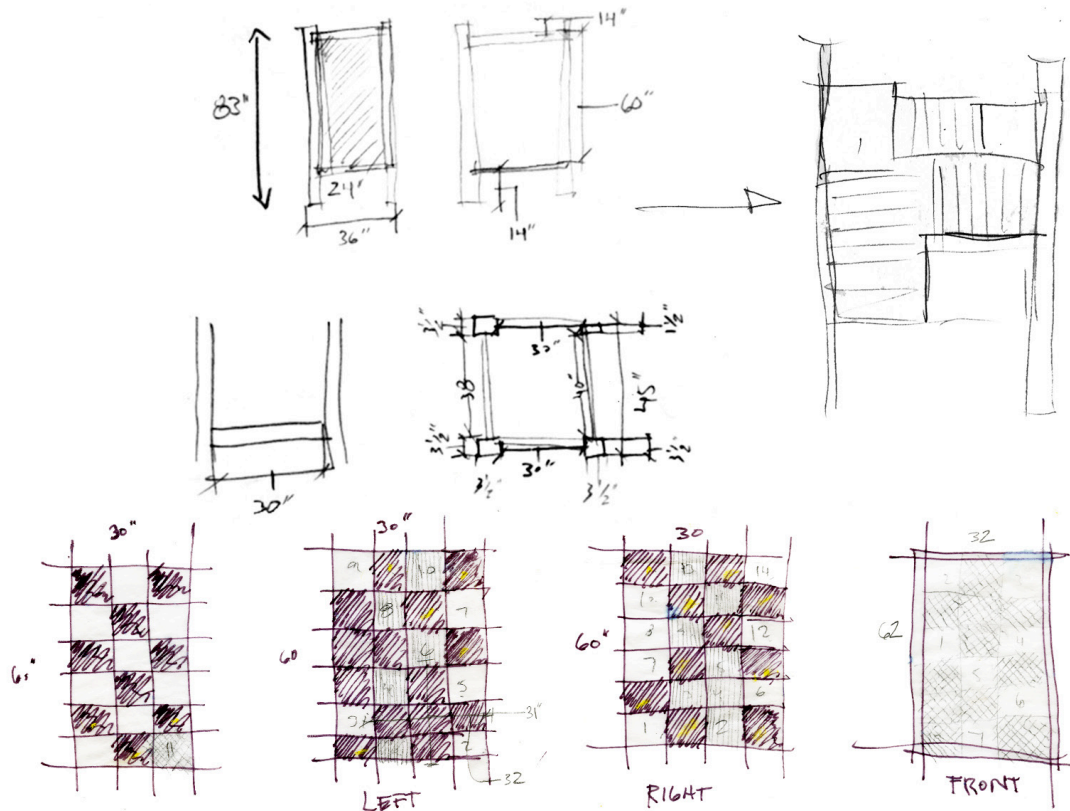


Figure 21: Thoughts and schematics for first intervention performance, *Something Out of Nothing*.

After my first material studies on site, I decided not to limit myself to working on location. I wanted the freedom to use pneumatic tools and saws, and needed space in which to work. I brought back materials to the sculpture yard and worked them into a meticulous design. At first, I had hesitated to take materials off site. By removing the materials, working on them and then returning them to the site, I would technically be contributing to the very problem I was hoping to combat. Then I decided that taking materials off site would further inform my interventions. Once I had prefabricated the sculpture, I had to put myself in the shoes of an illegal dumper in order to return the materials back to the site.



Figure 22: Prefabrication of sculpture *Something Out of Nothing* before install on location.



Figure 23: Work in progress for *Something Out of Nothing*.

Something Out of Nothing was a performance over the course of five hours on May 3rd, 2011. During the performance I wore a white jumpsuit to accent my actions by taking myself out of my ordinary “everyday” attire, and to make myself more visible. I wanted to draw the attention of the general public, in hopes that I would be approached during the performance.



Figure 24: Video stills from *Something Out of Nothing*.



Figure 25: *Something Out of Nothing* after installation, Site ID #39807.

In order to gather information about my interventions and people's reactions to them, I needed a way to continuously observe the space. I will go into more detail about my observations in the *Observation and Concealment* chapter. For now, I will merely touch on the subject to discuss how it informed the development of the idea. I used wildlife cameras with motion sensors that, when triggered, caused the camera to capture 1 minute of video. Typically, hunters use them to study the behavior patterns of the wildlife they hunt. I used them to study the behavior of people. This was the only way to record the reactions of encounters with my sculptures in my absence.

The location of *Something out of Nothing* was an industrial area of Springfield, Virginia, devoid of neighborhoods. It is zoned Residential, a fact the property owner is trying to change by appealing the zoning board. An agent of the owner told me that the original intent of the property was to use it as a stockyard, but because of the zoning designation they had been unable to sell the property. It has remained vacant since 2005, when a fire destroyed the existing buildings. Most likely the leftover debris from the fire attracted people to add to the detritus that started to accumulate.

Shortly after building *Something Out of Nothing*, I placed a wildlife camera on a nearby tree to observe the sculpture. I assumed – wrongly – that illegal dumpers were the only people using this space. I later found out that there was an assortment of people that traverse this space. One of them must have seen the camera and took it. This instantly made me think that they had relocated the camera somewhere on the property and were now monitoring me. I was not very careful when I originally set up the camera, so it is safe to assume that the camera had images of me when it was taken. Whoever has it now knows what I look like. From then on I was particularly cautious as I entered and left the site, in case the person that has the camera recognized me. The next cameras were hidden from view. The locations were placed on tree branches – 15 feet in the air – that could only hold the weight of someone lighter than me.



Figure 26: Map of camera locations where *Something Out of Nothing* was performed.

For my second performance, I placed three cameras on site. The first couple of months of observation were relatively quiet with little to no activity. On July 5th, 2011, someone drove onto the site – a Steelers fan, according to the bumper sticker on his car – with thirty-six car bumpers. They had little to no reaction to my original sculpture. They

got out of their car, briefly glanced at my sculpture, and proceeded to dump the contents of their truck. They were gone within six minutes. My first sculpture was built as a reaction to found material. After seeing the lack of response from the person that dumped the thirty-six bumpers, I felt there was no connection between what I built and the individual dumping. I needed to find out more about those I was trying to engage in order to better inform the next sculpture.



Figure 27: Video still of man dumping thirty-six bumpers: the beginning of my new intervention.

I became obsessed with finding who this person was. Based on information I gathered from the video, I was able to deduce that this individual worked at a junkyard – from a sign on his rear window – and could make out a partial phone number. Attempts at locating the individual by phone number or license plate proved to be extremely difficult,

due to the illegality of tracing license plates in Virginia. I imagined walking into his shop and trying to talk to him in order to better understand who he was and why he dumps his trash. I briefly played with the idea of depositing his material back onto his property, but this quickly faded as I realized the danger behind such an idea. He would probably respond aggressively if confronted; a desire I did not want to perpetuate. Aggression is typically only met by more aggression. I wanted to direct my engagement in a positive direction by allowing the new sculpture to be approachable without being condescending. I was more interested in seeing what would happen if they were presented with an alternative use for their waste.



Figure 28: Material for new performance, *36 Bumpers*, Site ID #39807.

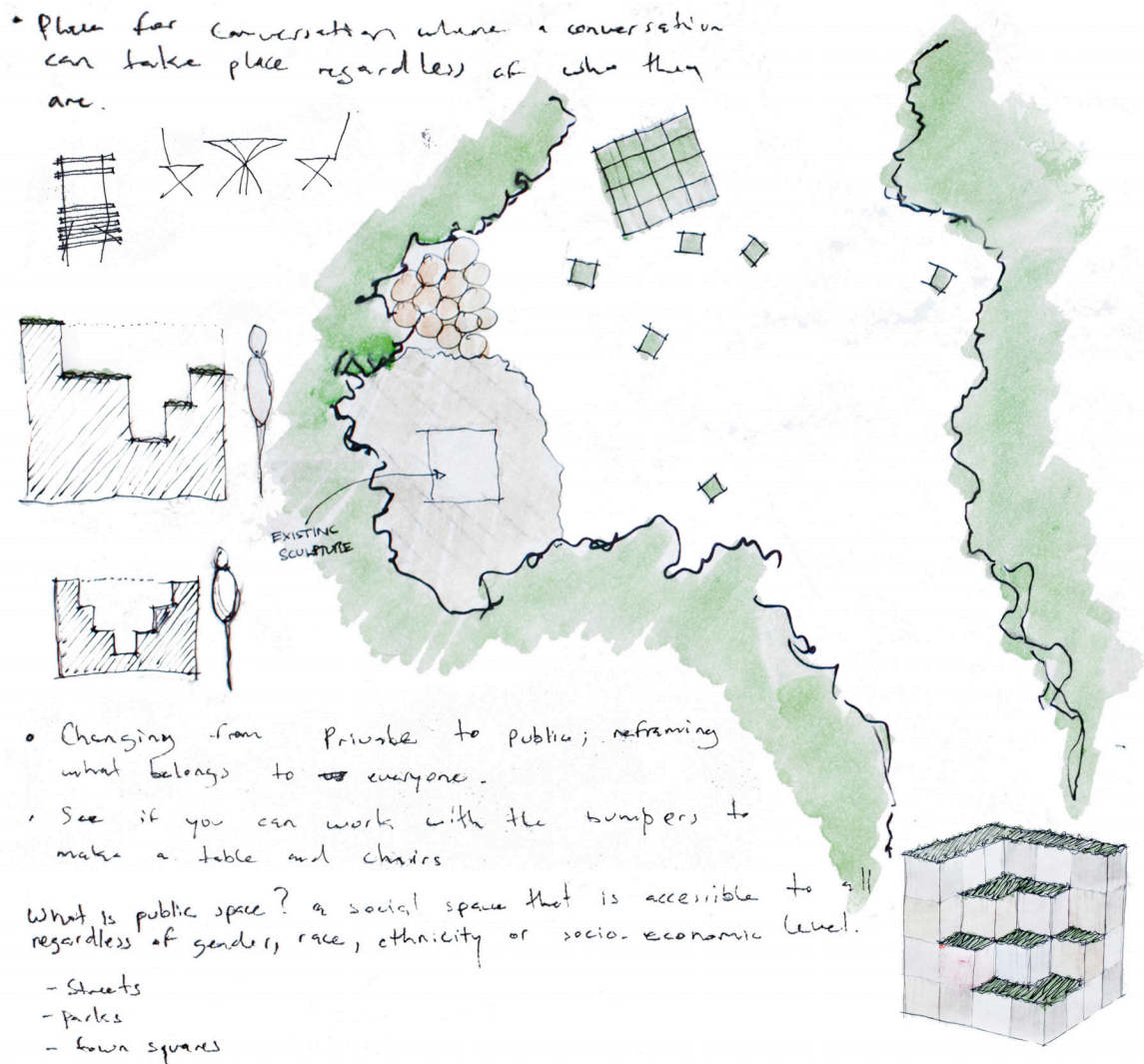


Figure 29: Thoughts and schematics for second intervention performance, *36 Bumpers*.

Continuing with the theme of public versus private, I focused on the idea of creating something that could be seen as public in this private space. I explored the idea of community space, and settled on creating a garden that included edible plants. At the most fundamental level we all value food. Why not here, in this non-space? In making *36 Bumpers* I considered the wildlife that utilized the space. Illegal dumping affects their

food supply as plants absorb the chemicals that are deposited on site. I wanted to provide plants that could offer sustenance for the wildlife that populated this place. The design was inspired by the origins of the building material: junkyards. Junkyards organize chaos into categories. Materials are haphazardly placed into makeshift order. To contrast the chaotic placement of the bumpers as I encountered them, I shaped and molded them into a strict 8-inch system. This became the underlying frame behind the planter. Each bumper was riveted into cube shapes, filled with soil, and stacked to form an incomplete larger cube. The incomplete shape is meant to reference the design of *Something Out of Nothing*, where the missing pieces provide partial information of what is inside.

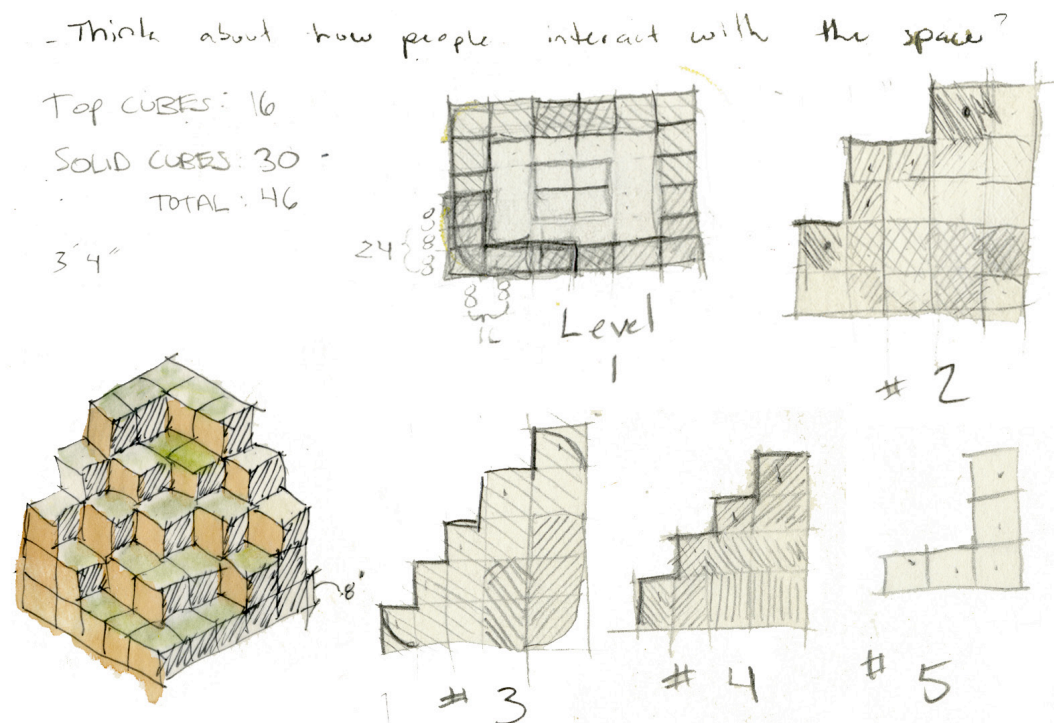


Figure 30: Thoughts and schematics for 36 Bumpers.



Figure 31: Video stills from *36 Bumpers*.



Figure 32: Video stills from *36 Bumpers*.

Video documentation of *36 Bumpers* began with the collection of material from the site, focusing on the visual contrast of removing all the bumpers until the landscape was vacant once more. The second half of the performance consisted of infusing this empty landscape with a new purpose: a communal garden. The sculpture was left at the site along with a sign with a simple message:

I made this planter for you from the bumpers you placed here.

sight.response@gmail.com

The message was meant to be open ended, without direction or judgment. The email address was included with the hopes of being contacted. The sculpture is not obstructing pedestrian or vehicular traffic. People can ignore it and pass through the space without a second glance, but for those that do see it and are engaged by it, I hoped they start to look at this place in a different way.

OBSERVATION AND CONCEALMENT

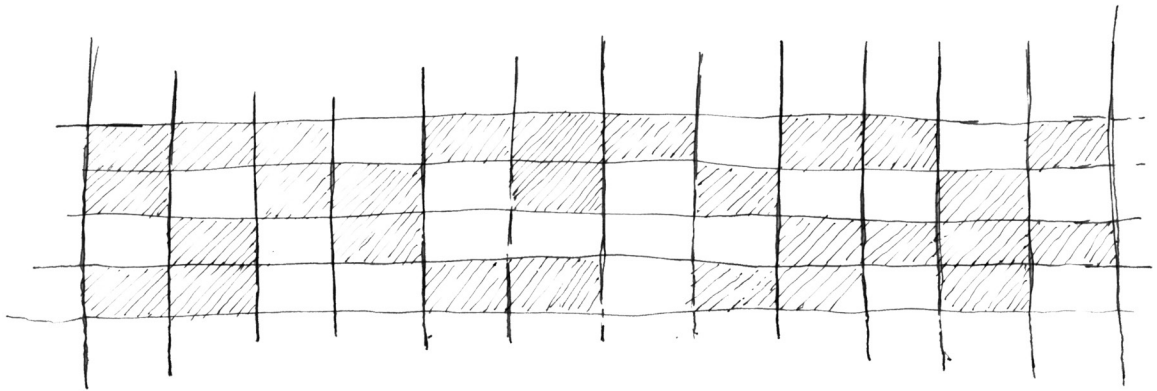


Figure 33: Idea sketch of for *Observations*, a video depicting encounters during my interventions.

In a social experiment published in *Science Magazine* in 2008, a group of social scientists constructed a set of controlled field experiments in public spaces where ordinary “broken window” patterns of disorder could be observed. The “broken window” theory suggests that signs of disorder — such as broken windows, litter, and graffiti — promote more disorder. The experimenters observed people – without their knowledge – within public spaces as they responded to the social cues set up for the experiment. The results revealed that spaces that had preexisting signs of disorder, significantly induced more disorder (Keizer, Lindenberg, Steg 1682). Similar to this social experiment, I was interested in capturing genuine reactions. Above all, the interventions were meant to question existing perceptions of vacant spaces.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault describes modern society’s use of surveillance to normalize people’s behavior under threat of punishment. In this “disciplinary” system, everyone becomes an observer, making society a self-policing state. If people know they are being watched, they act within the socially accepted norms (Foucault 195-210). Surveillance here is analogous to power, and power can be a great motivator. Yet this model can only be effective if an individual thinks he or she is being watched. It is impossible for everyone to be constantly under surveillance, making it inevitable that there will always be outliers within this system.

In my observation of the spaces, I was after the opposite condition. I wanted individuals to feel they could act naturally without repercussions. My intent was to question their actions, and pose an alternative. I am not an authority, and did not want to

build my project around power and conflict. I wanted my presence to be felt through the use of satire. Humor can be a better critic than authority.

In watching the footage I was capturing, I became intrigued with knowing what was happening off screen as much as what was happening on screen. People would enter the frame briefly before walking out again. There could never be enough information for me to know the entire story. My observations were turning out to be more assumptions than verifiable truths. As Bruce Nauman describes, the act of observation unwillingly produces the opposite condition: concealment (Levin, Frohne, Weibel 53). Regardless of whether these individuals were illegally dumping or just walking through, the partialness of what could be observed immediately made anyone that came into view suspect for observation.

In her project *The Shadow (Detective)*, Sophie Calle gets her mother to hire a private detective to follow her around Paris, report her daily activities, and provide photographic evidence of her experience. Calle leads the detective to her favorite places in Paris in an effort to get him to experience the places that are personally significant to her. Calle and the detective take notes on the activities on the day in questions. When the notes are compared, discrepancies in the notes result in different versions of how the artist spent her day (Levin, Frohne, Weibel 410). Calle looks at the “myth of information” that transpired during her exchange with the detective, emphasizing that pure observation does not equate to personal insights (Levin, Frohne, Weibel 415). When I started my project, I considered that someone’s reaction would give me some understanding into their thoughts, and there were instances where body language and

things they said gave me some understanding. Mostly I was left wondering what they walked away with.



Figure 34: Obscured footage leads to partial revelations.

The first time I caught an illegal dumper on camera, there was a leaf that obscured the view from the camera. I could barely make out that it was a truck with something in the back, but could not piece together the whole picture. After searching the site, I was unable to locate the contents of what he dumped. In this instance the video footage provided me with more questions than it revealed. This moment was bittersweet. I was excited to find that somebody had seen my sculpture, but had no way of knowing what

his reaction was. This was the case in a lot of situations; the partialness of information only fueled my curiosity. Months later – when the same individual returned – I was able to tell from a new camera position that he was dumping yard waste.

In order to portray the “myth of information” I encountered during my surveillance, I created a video piece titled *Observations*. The video utilizes the design vocabulary found in *Something Out of Nothing*, and *36 Bumpers*. This video is a record of all significant observations during my intervention; overlaying my own actions with that of others, and showing how my subtle changes affected their path. The grid of videos is broken up to represent holes of missing information, making the viewer feel that they are not getting everything that transpired, only glimpses of moments. As the video progresses, slowly each one of the squares on the screen goes black, leaving the viewer with less and less information.



Figure 35: Video still from *Observations*.

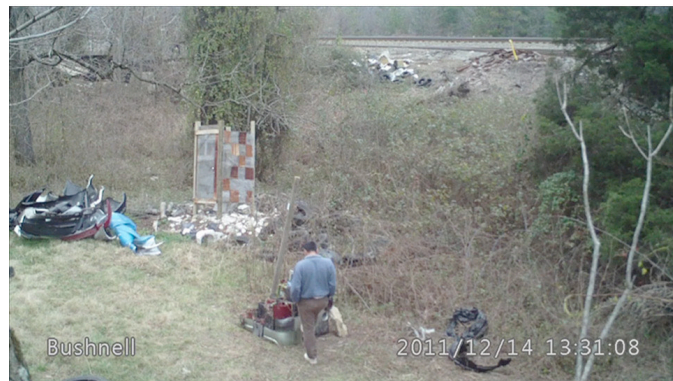


Figure 36: Video stills from encounters.



Figure 37: Ricardo and me, video still.

There are three moments during my time within the space that stand out above the others. The first is the only encounter I ever had with another person within the space, with a man named Ricardo. When I noticed there was someone else on the property, I was startled. I had grown accustomed to being alone at the site, always thinking that running into someone at the site would be confrontational. This was not the case with Ricardo, who happened to be from Mexico City, Mexico. He had moved to the U.S. only recently, and he likes to go for walks in the woods. He told me that he often encounters spaces such as this on his walks, places where people had degraded the space, but that this space was different. He told me that it was obvious that someone had spent a lot of

time building these sculptures through the garden that was created. I never told him I had made them. I gave him my contact information and asked him to call me to talk more about his walks, which I immediately related to my own encounters with the landscape. I wanted to hear about his “psychogeography.” He never called.



Figure 38: Boy using the stall, video still.

The second moment was a time when two teenagers encountered my sculptures. It was not the first time I had seen them there; they happened to be regulars there. They – like me – had started to shift things around, almost as if responding to my subtle cues. On this particular day, one of the boys decided to use the bathroom stall. Out of all the places he could have relieved himself, why the sculpture? The space, after all, is more metaphor than functional. Would it not have been easier to just use any other space but the stall?



Figure 39: Mattress dumper, video still.

The last out of the three moments left me a little perturbed. On this particular instance, an illegal dumper dumped a bed in the space. He was not like most people who dump, who exit the space as fast as they can. He looked around the space before deciding to deposit his mattress, box spring, and frame. It was obvious that for this particular person my sculpture changed nothing. He – unlike the man with the 36 bumpers – returned, making me want to incorporate his materials into my sculptures. A possible response could be to make a bedroom in the middle of the woods with a nice bedspread, including a night table and lamp.

Regardless of the limitations behind the surveillance, I was able to get a good sense of what happened on site. My actions were never supposed to provide a clear

definition; they were intended to provide the potential for change. Since I began this paper, the individual that dumped the thirty-six bumpers has not returned (nearly a year later). I initially made the sculpture for him. Since then, the intervention has become more about the numerous others that have seen, examined the space, and puzzled at the origins of the sculptures. Perhaps he was not meant to see it. Was he was just supposed to be the impetus that gave this space new meaning? Maybe the message I left beside the sculpture is for all of us that have forgotten these places.

WHAT DOES IT ALL ADD UP TO?



Figure 40: Phytoremediation of Site # 43273.

This project was not solely focused on the negative aspects of our impact on the environment. It was also an exploration of innovative solution strategies to our waste problems. The issues we face today are daunting, but if you consider what we have been able to accomplish, all is not lost. When considering the shift in thinking we will have to undergo to head in a new direction – one that is more aligned with a lifestyle the earth can support – we will have to use nature’s model of effectiveness. In our obsession to command nature, we end up fighting the physical forces in place. What if we looked at the design solutions nature sets forth as an example?



Figure 41: Phytoremediation of Site # 40379.

“Reduce. Reuse. Recycle.” Most of us are familiar with this traditional environmental slogan. The truth is that our current model of recycling only temporarily alleviates the larger problem: ineffective design. On a grander scale, the reduction of our environmental impact will not come from increasing recycling, but from design solutions that will result in producing and disposing less. (McDonough, Braungart 50). Very little of our products are designed to incorporate the end-life phase of a product into its inception; making the disposal process extremely problematic. We are stockpiling mounds of valuable resources all over the world – legally and illegally – where we cannot access them. If we shifted our thinking to “eliminate the concept of waste – not reduce, minimize, or avoid waste – but eliminate the very concept by design,” we can start to change our waste into a resource (McDonough, Braungart 15). William McDonough and Michael Braungart, in their book *Cradle to Cradle*, propose a strategic shift in our production cycle; a change in philosophy where materials retain their performance quality through the process of “upcycling.” This model incorporates the very molecular level of a product as an integral part of the design stage, allowing the material to retain the ability to become something else without loss of quality (McDonough, Braungart 15). Currently our products are designed in a way that reduces the quality of the material – with some exceptions – as they are mixed into new hybrids of lower quality through the process of recycling.



Figure 42: Phytoremediation of Site # 43074.

Thinking on a molecular level made me curious about the hidden side of dumpsites, where chemical pollutants are off-gassing into the environment. This led me to explore bioremediation of contaminated soil through the use of “phytoremediation” and “mycoremediation.” Phytoremediation uses plants, while mycoremediation utilizes fungi to remove heavy metals and toxins from the ground without the need to remove the soil from its original location. Paul Stamets – an American mycologist and advocate of bioremediation – has been working with the EPA to degrade or remove toxins from soil and water in environmental disasters such as the most recent Gulf of Mexico oil spill. In his book, *Mycelium Running*, Stamets explains how fungi break down the molecular

structure of toxic chemicals, making them less harmful to the environment (Stamets 86). In my work, I explored creative ways that I could use bioremediation to relate back to the dumpsites I was finding. For my thesis exhibit *Something Out of Nothing: A Conversation on Waste*, I created seven terrariums that contained the soil from dumpsites found during my mapping process. Each terrarium was housed in a glass container found at the dumpsite where the soil originated. The containers were vessels, containing discarded objects, plants, and mushrooms that were selected specifically for their bioremediation qualities. They were a metaphor for change, where nature can help us deal with our impact.

This conversation took me outside of the social interventions I was doing in Springfield, Virginia, and allowed me to reach out to community organizations focused on environmental stewardship. One of the main goals during my project was to bring this problem to the attention of as many people as possible: even joining *Let's Do It! World* at the 2ND Intercessional Meeting of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development on December 15th, 2011 to get their support. This led to my online map – where I was documenting my photographs – being noticed by a reporter who published an article about my work in *The Washington Post*. Momentum started to build as more people started to become interested in the issue of illegal dumping. Eventually there was even a television broadcast including an interview with the director of the Fairfax County Health Department, asking him about the severity of the problem. As the issue percolated further into the community, people started e-mailing to tell me about how often they would encounter sites like these. One of my favorite results from the conversation was a

cartoon in the weekend section of the *Fairfax County Times* about illegal dumping, printed on the 24th of February, 2012. This entire process has left me with a lot of questions about where we – as a species – are headed, but it has also left me inspired with the effect of the actions of one person. The possibility of change and an incredibly stubborn outlook can cast a wide shadow. One thing is for sure: if I had done nothing at all, there would have been a 100% probability that nothing would have occurred.

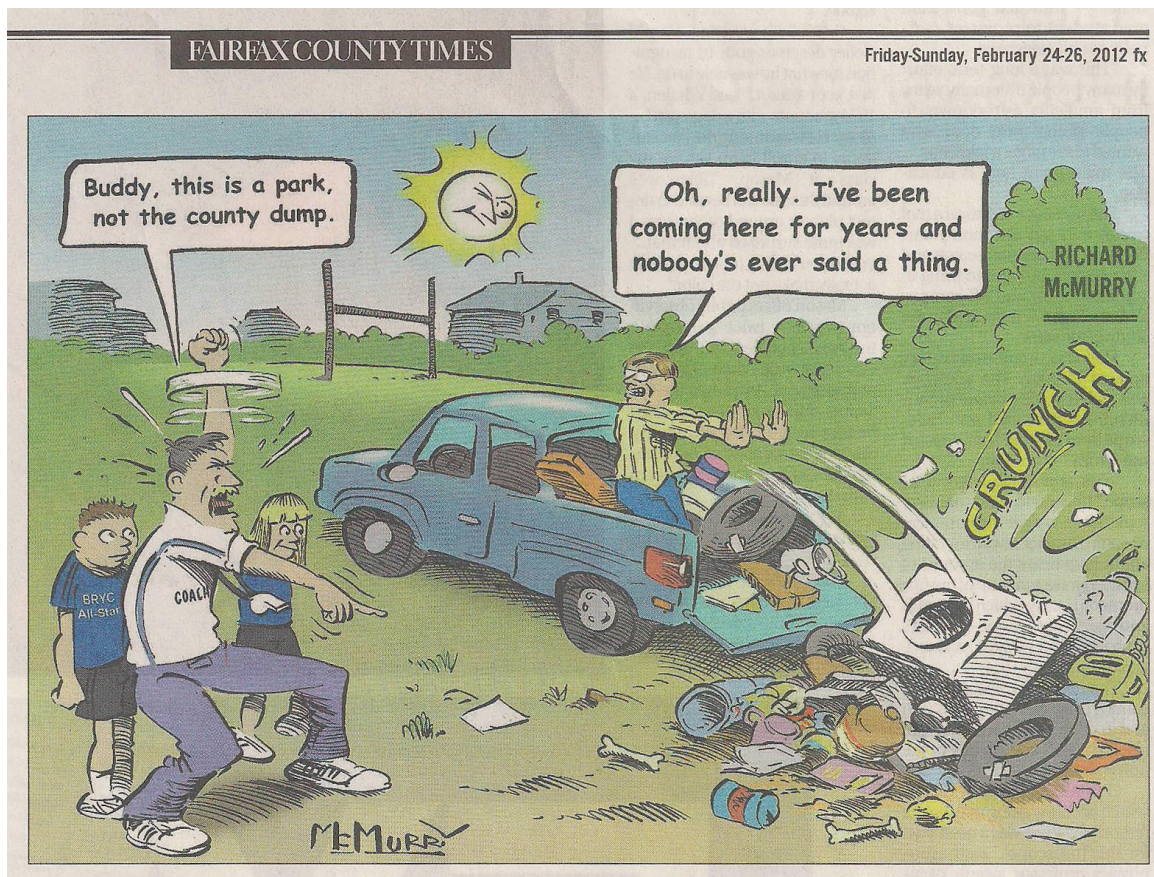


Figure 43: Cartoon by Richard McMurry in the *Fairfax County Times*.

WORKS CITED

WORKS CITED

- Carson, R. *Silent Spring*. Boston: Mariner, 2002. Print.
- Diamond, Jared. "What's Your Consumption Factor?" Editorial. n.d.: n. pag. *The New York Times: Opinion*. 2 Jan. 2008. Web. 20 Nov. 2011.
- The Economist. *A Rubbish Map*. Digital image. *The Economist: Daily Chart*. N.p., 7 June 2012. Web. 8 June 2012.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage, 1995. Print.
- Hoornweg, Daniel, and Perinaz Bhada-Tata. Rep. no. 15. Washington D.C.: World Bank, 2012. *What a Waste: A Global Review of Solid Waste Management*. Mar. 2012. Web. 8 May 2012.
- Humes, Edward. "Grappling With a Garbage Glut." Editorial. n.d.: n. pag. *The Wall Street Journal*. 18 Apr. 2012. Web. 22 Apr. 2012.
- Illegal Dumping Prevention Guidebook*. Rep. Chicago: U.S. EPA, 1998. Print.
- Johnstone, Stephen. *The Everyday*. London: Whitechapel, 2008. Print.
- Keizer, K., S. Lindenberg, and L. Steg. "The Spreading of Disorder." *Science* 322.5908 (2008): 1681-685. Print.
- Leonard, Annie. *The Story of Stuff: How Our Obsession With Stuff Is Trashing the Planet, Our Communities, and Our Health--and a Vision for Change*. New York: Free, 2010. Print.
- Levin, Thomas Y., Ursula Frohne, and Peter Weibel. Ctrl [space]: *Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother*. Karlsruhe, Germany: ZKM Center for Art and Media, 2002. Print.
- McDonough, William, and Michael Braungart. *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things*. New York: North Point, 2002. Print.

McMurry, Richard. "Illegal Dumping." Cartoon. *Fairfax County Times*. 24 Feb. 2012, Weekend ed., Opinion sec.: n. pag. Print.

Solid Waste Management Plan 2004-2024. Rep. Fairfax: Fairfax County Government, 2004. 1 July 2004. Web. 26 May 2012.

Stamets, Paul. *Mycelium Running: How Mushrooms Can Help save the World*. Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed, 2005. Print.

Thompson, Nato. *Experimental Geography*. Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2008. Print.

Vardi, Nathan. "America's Richest Counties." *Forbes Magazine*. N.p., 11 Apr. 2011. Web. 8 June 2012.

When Faith Moves Mountains. Dir. Francis Alÿs. 2002. Film.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Olivier Giron graduated from Robinson High School, Fairfax, Virginia, with his International Baccalaureate diploma in 2002. He received his Bachelor of Science in Landscape Architecture from Rutgers University in 2006. He worked as a landscape architect in Alexandria, Virginia for three years before pursuing his Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University, which he received in 2012.